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INTERVIEWEE: Katie Dorsett

INTERVIEWER: Kathy Hoke

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[Begin Side A]

KATHY HOKE: Maybe you can start by telling me a little bit about where you were born and when you moved to Greensboro and a little bit about your education, your various jobs.

KATIE DORSETT: I was born in Mississippi in the Delta section of Mississippi. I was educated there. I received a public education up to the eighth grade and then I went to a private school for high school, went to a state college for the bachelor's degree, Indiana University for the master's degree, attended some other universities in between, the University of Northern Colorado, Columbia University, Rutgers University, in pursuit of the doctoral program, and I ended up getting the doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. So that is my alma mater. I finished in 1975 with a doctorate.

I have spent most of my life in education. I worked at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] from 1955-56 to 1987, so much of my adult life has been spent here, and I came here to work for A&T, came from Indiana University right out of graduate school. Along with that I've spent a number of summers with various corporations. I was in the School of Business and Economics. I spent half-time for the last five or six years doing research in transportation with grants from the federal government, either the office of the Secretary of the Department of Transportation or Urban Mass Transportation Administration, so I was kind of half-time teaching and half-time researcher.

However, I left that in 1987 and since that time I have been just kind of full-time in the role of volunteer. I did serve for two terms on the Greensboro City Council and from 1986 to now I have been a county commissioner. I'm on numerous boards and commissions. Part of it is by virtue of my position as a commissioner. I am on the Board of Health and the Tourism Authority and nationally I am on the National Association of Counties' Health Steering Committee. So that's kind of it as it relates to a commissioner.

KH: Okay. What year did you move to Guilford County?

KD: 1955. I’ve already said that. Yes, to work at A&T I came here.

KH: When you moved here did you find a place to live right away? How did you--

KD: I found a place to live before I got here. A young woman, just in my communication with the president’s office, was a sorority sister of mine found a place for me to stay, so I came from an Indiana graduate school right here with a master’s of graduate school. I had a place to stay.

KH: How did you find Greensboro in 1955, socially and racially?

KD: Very divided. I guess that I had probably only been here two months maybe when the then Governor [Luther] Hodges came to speak at A&T and I don’t recall the exact expression, but it might have been the pronunciation of the word “negro” which was very common there, but whatever he said was very insulting to the student audience at A&T and they booed him and that became kind of the focal issue at that time. And right after that the president, which was Dr. [Ferdinand D.] Bluford, died. So there was a lot of divisiveness and perhaps at that time a lot of tension that was perhaps building up with young people, but that was kind of the mood of which I found Greensboro in 1955.

KH: Do you recall the 1960 sit-ins?

KD: Yes, I do. I was not particularly that involved, but yes, I do recall. I was teaching at A&T at the time and I recall the momentum. I don’t recall any specific detail but it certainly involved so many of our young people. I remember a number of them being in jail. I can remember the president, Dr. [Warmoth T.] Gibbs, and his kind of famous words of “We teach our young people how to think, and not what to think” when some of the law enforcement people expressed the feeling that they wanted him to get the students more in line.

I can remember the momentum of the sit-ins when students were sort of scheduled to go so that they were sitting-in kind of throughout the day. I was not particularly affected by it as a faculty member because that activity involved--really related primarily to the students. But it affected our class attendance to some extent, but the students were extremely mature in that effort in that they tried to work around students’ schedules so that they did not have any excuse for the administration or others to say that they were cutting class to do that. So, yes, I recall that.

KH: It must have been a pretty exciting time at A&T. How involved were faculty in talking to students about--?

KD: Supportive. I think very supportive, and I guess there was a lot of community support. Perhaps as a very young person, because I was like 23 or 24 myself, I had not seen any issue that had brought together people in the black community, that brought people across all socio-economic lines, all ages, and all philosophies, I would guess, so there was the kind of a single issue of racial injustice and inequality that really people rallied around and supported the young people because they recognized that these were the people who were courageous enough to do whatever was necessary to make things happen.

KH: And that was a unity you hadn't seen in the years before?

KD: Well, I had not seen it and I was, of course, not far different in age from the people who were out there, and so I had not seen this before. While I was maybe a couple years younger, I was also in a different position and, of course, categorized as more faculty as compared with students, but I had not seen that before.

KH: I guess the massive jailing started after, I believe, the silent march.

KD: I don't recall the chronology of events, I just remember the massive jailings. I remember the marches and, you know, that kind of thing. I cannot give you the chronology of how they happened.

KH: But some of your students, I guess, were missing class because of--

KD: And that part I don't remember. I just remember that many, many students were jailed. They had so many they couldn't accommodate them at the regular jail so they were out at the Agriculture Center, I believe, or some place out East Market Street.

KH: The old polio hospital?

KD: Yes, I think that's where it was. But now I don't recall specifically who was out, I just know that we felt it.

KH: How involved were women students at A&T in the sit-ins?

KD: I don't recall any breakout of male/female, as I can remember. I mean, students were involved, period, whether they be male or female. So I cannot say, because I don't recall that.

KH: Your own family, I suppose, was affected by this?

KD: Well, you see my family was not here. I came here as a single person. My family was in Mississippi.

KH: Okay. You married at some point around that time?

KD: Yes. When you say my family, I was married but I thought you meant my sisters and brothers and parents. I had young children. My daughter was born in '59 and my son was born in 1963, so I did have small children which prohibited my being that involved. I remember being once in the march. My husband was far more active than I because I was home babysitting and I didn't get out there too much with it. I did some.

KH: What do you recall about the way the press covered that period?

KD: You know, here again I think I said to you I probably would not be able to give you any specifics. I don't remember as much about the press as I remember about the officials. And I can remember from the state level down to the local level there was the mentality and the philosophy that, you know, "We've got to restore law and order." I don't recall there being a great sensitivity and regard for what the purpose was behind this.

I don't recall there being any sensitivity to the fact that here is an injustice that people feel very strongly and there's a need to do something about it. All I could recall hearing from our elected officials from the state on down is that we have to restore some order to our community. That is the environment in which I think we were operating. Press coverage I don't remember.

KH: Could you talk a little bit about the way Greensboro was divided in the late fifties and early sixties, socially by residence, and--

KD: Not entirely different from the way it's still divided. But as I can recall, there was movement though to try to bring people together. I believe since the '54 decision, that was even prior to my coming to Greensboro, I think there were several people in the chamber who took very pro-active roles in trying to prepare people for desegregation in the school system, so there were perhaps dialogue groups. I can remember very early in the sixties a Pastor Illich [?], who was a member of the Lutheran Church, had a project where they matched a black church with a white church where people would bring couples, two couples from the white church and two couples from the black church, and just sort of build a sensitivity to people who were different, to have some degree of respect, and it felt with the philosophy that if you really got to know people and understand them, you'd have a greater appreciation and respect, and a lot of the fear would not be there. So that was activity.

But in terms of actual living accommodations, I can recall that he lived in Benbow Park at some point in the late sixties, but he was probably the exception. But at the same time, he was a minister at a black church which is the [Grace] Lutheran Church at the corner of Washington and East Market Street. But aside from that, I mean, clearly people in the black community were on the east side of town and mostly southeast, and the rest of it was more reserved for whites.

There was class, in terms of the white community, because the blue-collar workers were in southwest Greensboro and the more affluent were northwest with the probably in-between in northeast Greensboro. I can recall very strong efforts for a number of years to change our way of selecting people to represent us, because they all came from one section of our community, and so, therefore, the divisiveness in terms of where the black community lived and where blue-collar whites lived, we had no input into the political process. I guess you had input, but we were never able--because of our recognition of the importance of the vote, were not in a position to put anybody in office. And so we were always getting people to represent us with all six or seven of those people, mayor and six others, coming from one little section and perhaps all one little street. That's kind of how it was. People lived there. People--there was--the school system was, I believe it was a choice plan at the time--

KH: Freedom of choice? Pearsall Plan?

KD: Yes. Well, we didn't necessarily call it the Pearsall Plan, but I guess it was a "friends of the Pearsall Plan." But if you've got your own transportation, you could take your children wherever you choose, and that went on for some period of time. People in higher education--A&T was probably 99 percent black and UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] was probably 99 percent white. It was during that time, and I don't recall what year in the sixties, that HEW [the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], when [Joseph] Califano was secretary, was challenging the University of North Carolina to do something about this, and they settled with a court decree that spoke to duplication of efforts in new programs, and you're probably as familiar with that as I. And that perhaps started a little bit of movement. Not a whole lot. I'm not familiar with many programs where there's the element of cooperation. In Greensboro, UNCG and A&T are probably in as close a proximity than any of the other schools in the system. But perhaps the department that started more and did more was social work, and they probably still are. But that's what I can remember about the times.

KH: Was your church involved in one of those--

KD: Yes, my church was.

KH: And what was that like? How did it work?

KD: Well, believe it or not, the group is still meeting, probably 25 or 30 years later. We were paired with, I believe it was Trinity Church, which was the other black church, and Saint Paul Presbyterian Church and the Catholic church up there across from--

KH: Benedict's?

KD: No. What's the one across from the shopping center over there on Cornwallis? [St. Pius X]

KH: Is that the one that's been getting all the letters to the editor about the priest?

KD: I don't remember that. Was it Our Lady of Grace? Anyway, Dolick--Dolan, Hugh Dolan was the person at that time. But as far as I know it's probably the largest--but there's the shopping center--it's Northeast Shopping Center [Golden Gate Shopping Center] over there on Cornwallis and Cone Boulevard [Church Street], I believe. But now the church over there right on the corner of Elm and Cornwallis [St. Pius X], that church was paired with it, with ours, so there were two churches and we met in homes, and it really did take some time, I think, for people to relax. I think the second effort, it was probably started by a ministerial group, I imagine. But anyway, a second phase of that was intended to be a pulpit exchange. I think that probably did not get as far as the dialogue with the parishioners.

KH: Where the ministers would change places, or the congregation?

KD: That was it, the ministers, I think. And here that didn't ever really get off the ground floor. But I think that was the second phase of it. But in terms of the congregations and starting with couples, and to get others and then expand on this, I don't know, it looked like to me there might have been sixteen or so such groups. And then the group that we started with, probably the others sort of fizzled out, and our group named itself the United Dialogue Group and still is meeting. It has nothing to do with a particular church, although the membership is probably more from two churches, Saint Paul [Presbyterian] and my church. But people come from other churches and it's a small group and we meet once a month in a very informal sort of dialogue. After a few years, maybe ten or fifteen or even twenty years, we had a cookout where all of those dialogue groups kind of had a reunion, and that was kind of the end of that, except that one group stayed together and they are still meeting.

KH: What--I don't know if your children, let's see, they would have been--

KD: My daughter is 31.

KH: Okay, so they would have attended--I guess she would have been about the seventh grade in '71? Seventh or eighth grade? What can you tell me about the--

KD: She went to Aycock, I just remember that, and my son went to Aycock too. And from Aycock then they went to Lincoln and then they went to Dudley, both of them.

KH: Was there any point where you tried to get them into white schools through the Pearsall Plan? Why was that not a choice?

KD: Well, I really looked at what was convenient for me. I believe that I chose Aycock because my son went to Charles Moore, and I looked more at what was convenient in terms of where I was, and then I chose Aycock because it was right up the street. And from there I don't remember what motivated me to send them to Lincoln and Dudley except that my husband had gone to Dudley.

KH: How did the discussions on desegregation--when the court order finally came down in April of 1971, what do you recall about how that all came together?

KD: I don't, I really don't, other than as I said to you that it was the preparation for attitudes to assure that we had a smooth transition. The only thing that I recall was meetings in the summer by groups of people, black and white, so that there was a feeling and a level of comfort and a relieving of fear. That's the only thing that I remember about it, I mean, aside from that, I don't remember any specific details.

KH: Was it--well, I'll just ask another question on that subject. Your children, did they--was it a different day for them in the fall of '71?

KD: I don't recall it being any different for them. No, I don't recall it being any big deal. I mean, they weren't like you saw in the paper with, in Arkansas where everybody's scared for the children to get on the bus. No, I didn't go through any of that.

KH: Some people find some irony in that Greensboro was the first city where the school board announced, the city officials announced immediately after the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*] decision that the schools—--

KD: --that they were going to do that.

KH: --would integrate, and then it became one of the last cities in the nation, seventeen years later, where there was any substantial integration.

KD: Yes, I can't answer that. I have no idea other than I think that people felt that the school board was courageous in their position and was very strong in it, that "This is what the law says and this is what we're going to do." I probably heard more, I mean just what I can remember, of the problems of teachers not wanting to move than I remember with students. So, you know, because it did impact the black schools quite a lot--because what happened was we had one high school and that was Dudley and as I can recall it took about 25 percent of the faculty members were left at Dudley, and 25 percent were sent to Smith, and 25 percent went to Page, and 25 percent sent to Grimsley, and I can remember hearing discussions of that perhaps more so than students.

KH: It was unsettling for some teachers?

KD: I don't know whether it was particularly unsettling. I think they might have felt, yeah, that it left them going into a new situation, not so much because it was predominately white but just, I mean, if you'd been in a place where you felt a level of comfort and all of the sudden you're thrust into a new place where you're smaller in number of knowing each other, having nothing to do with race, yeah, I think there was some level of discomfort.

KH: Okay. I'm going to switch to another subject and ask you what you recall about the feelings and thoughts in 1969 when the high school students at Dudley protested a high school decision that kept a student from being elected class president.

KD: My husband worked at Dudley at that time. I remember--

KH: Claude Barnes is the student.

KD: Yes. He and--my husband, I think, during that time was student council advisor and I don't, by my not being in the public schools, I don't think that I remember enough about it to comment.

KH: Well, you may remember about the city uproar that happened. I mean, it wasn't because of--

KD: I remember hearing something about it.

KH: Things sort of spilled--

KD: Yeah, and they had some police officers down at Dudley, but I don't remember. It was probably high on my list of concern at that time but so far away from it that I don't remember enough about it to comment.

KH: Well, shortly after that the National Guard raided, invaded A&T--

KD: Now, I remember that incident. I believe it was during that time that Willy Grimes was--

KH: --shot and killed.

KD: --killed and I can recall that we had a--I remember more things that were closer to me. The fringes of what took place at Dudley, as I said, it was important then, but my memory is not good on that, but I do recall the National Guard coming on A&T's campus. And at that time we had a young man who had come to recruit students from some agency of the federal government, and I recall some concern for his safety in getting him off campus before all of this activity took place. Yes, I remember that very well. I think perhaps the thing that I remember was that I believe that faculty and students both felt that they were being invaded in a way that was not positive, not for protection but more for law and order, to keep people in their places. And I think very innocent people felt that they were caught up in something that perhaps they were not directly involved in, and while everybody was concerned about justice and equality, they felt that it was not being played out.

KH: The atmosphere at this time was very different than in the early sixties. Could you compare the late sixties to the early sixties?

KD: Not really. I think maybe if there was anything at that time, there probably was not as much in terms of the more professional, of the more middle-class blacks actively involved. I think they had relegated to their typical roles of lack of involvement, and that this activity was probably taking place more with young people than all age levels. I mean, that's the only thing that I probably remember about it.

KH: There was an inter-generational gap.

KD: Well, I don't know that it was such a gap, as people had relegated themselves to doing what they had to do to make a living, and while this was a concern and a priority, and they encouraged young people, perhaps it had probably taken on a more militant role then, and so you found that people who were within their jobs and their homes just kind of encouraging from a distance and not yet continuing to be involved. And that was

perhaps out of fear more than anything else. They didn't want to be caught up in it.

KH: Did you know Willy Grimes?

KD: No, I did not. I just know that he was a student at A&T. I did not know him.

KH: I imagine there was quite a bit of distress about his death at that time.

KD: I can recall there being people considering it being an invasion, it being unfair. I don't even recall remembering at that time his name. He was kind of an unknown student but, you know, when you're looking at thousands, people may not know him. A very small group knew him but it was the fact that here was someone who killed a very innocent young man, and who shortened his life for no apparent reason.

KH: Gee, I'm not sure what to tackle next. Well, why don't we talk about the thesis in the book *Civilities and Civil Rights* where William Chafe argues that Greensboro had a progressive mystique, one that fostered communication, that allowed a setting for communication, but that also prevented any meaningful change from occurring, that there is a paternalism here in Greensboro that is very good at keeping things as they were. How did that fit into all the things that we've been talking about so far? Would you agree with that?

KD: I think that paternalism still exists, yes. I believe that, and I believe if you go back and you look at how activity has taken place, every bit of progress in race relations has come with a great deal of strain and a great deal of effort. While we have prepared people for and attempted to prepare people for change, change has come very slowly. And when I say that, I do believe very strongly that people are not willing to relinquish power, and I think I said to you some time ago that when you found the decision-makers and policy-makers being friends and in a closely-knit group, it was difficult for those individuals to relinquish any of that.

Our greatest effort--and perhaps we had four referenda--to try to change our form of government to have more diversity, and that was fought at every level. And I do believe that people think they are doing what is in your best interest. Therein lies the paternalism. I believe that the people who were sitting as elected officials did in all their heart and soul what they thought was in our best interest, but if you have not been exposed to any other community other than that little circle of friends, to me it's awfully difficult for you to know what my needs are. You may be trying very hard to respond, but our experience is no broader than the community where we operate. So I think that was the problem.

It was not, I don't believe, an intended form of paternalism, but it was a protection

kind of thing that I think we all experience, just as we try to protect our children. I think that those people made every honest attempt to protect all the citizens, but it's difficult to do that if you have had no exposure. If you have not walked in their shoes, it's very difficult.

The other thing that I think took place at that time was--I've forgotten my thought--about the communication, I think that we've had historically, and that has not changed, in addition to looking at the form of government, we have always made people believe, we sit and we talk kind of over in a surface like, that everything's fine, because we're very sensitive to tackling issues that we know are emotional issues.

And I think that's a continuing problem. We've said so much to ourselves and to others that everything is well in terms of race relations until we begin to believe that, without actually digging under to understand that things are not well. I can recall the many problems that we had, and we're still having, trying to enact, and this is eighties, and you don't want to talk about it, but I think it kind of proves the point, where we never wanted to attack the fact that we do very little business with women and minorities, and trying to establish some sort of affirmative action program that gave a fair opportunity to minorities. We wanted to think that everybody has an equal chance, which is not true.

I think therein lies another form of paternalism. So yes, I do believe that on the surface we try to believe honestly that things, if you just leave it alone, it will be just fine, when underneath I think there are serious communication gaps. I think there's a serious disregard and--respect for the rights of another individual, and when I say that I do mean that I think that people, if you give another person an opportunity to be different and yet respect his or her right to be different, there's a difference between that and just saying that "My way is the only way."

And I think that has always been and continues to be a problem. We were the last to get a district form of government. We were the last to get a minority and women's business enterprise program, and this is getting into the eighties. But it speaks about the fact that we were the first to start, but we're always coming in last in a challenge, and whether or not what we are going to do for change is going to be in our best interest.

KH: Well, all of that I guess raises a lot of issues. I guess on thing I'd ask is to what extent did the civil rights movement here in Greensboro address issues other than segregation or, you know, desegregation of public facilities and desegregation and integration of the schools? To what extent did it get to other issues like jobs and housing and basic issues of equality?

KD: Well, perhaps basic issues of equality as it relates to the human spirit and as it relates to treating other people as you would expect to be treated, I don't think it addressed that at all. I think if we're talking about the areas of housing and the areas of employment there was an attempt to give lip service to it. I think you'll find most organizations--and

Greensboro's no different--who will affirm the fact that we're an Equal Opportunity Employer when in fact we find that if you look at our areas of government--and my dissertation was done on job satisfaction in county government, well, not county but in governments of Greensboro and Guilford County, city and county government.

So when you look at that, we give a lot of lip service to equality of employment. But when you begin to look at the workforce--and I would challenge you to look at public and private--and you see minorities, overall the percentage may be equal to the population of the county or the city or the whole community, [but] it does not reflect minorities in any place other than at the bottom level, at the bottom rung. So I think that as it addressed that, here again we're saying that things are well, we don't discriminate, but the facts don't bear that out, particularly when you look at any workforce in any organization.

I would believe that that's true in any workforce, particularly in government, and I found that to be true, as my dissertation points out. That was done in 1974. And I looked at the workforce, I looked primarily at clerical but that represented clerical and, I didn't include them, but clerical and maintenance and support people represented the largest segment of county and city government. That has not changed in all those years. When we look at housing, here again you had real estate people who gave lip service to the fact that we are doing the same thing, when at the same time they are doing what you call "red lining." They would go in and upset all the neighbors that "We are going to have a black to move in," so you'd see these wholesale signs going up.

So I think that we attempted to do what the law said in terms of being equal, but we really didn't do that in deed or in action, so I don't know that Greensboro has changed tremendously. I think that when you find the communities, I'm not sure of where in our area we have truly integrated communities. Probably very little. We haven't touched much with respect to churches. That's been one that people, a few people, made overtures to go to other churches, but that has been one that people have not really bothered too much. They've kind of settled into staying in your own church. We haven't done much with that.

KH: Well, I thank you for talking with me and I guess we'll close here.

[End of Interview]