

Interview of Mrs. Lynne Jordan Turley. Interviewed by Francesca Davis and Rebecca Williams of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mrs. Lynne Jordan Turley was an Orff Music teacher with Memphis City Schools for 22 years. She was a member of the original team of teachers who created a music curriculum which included African-American folk songs and spirituals for the first time. She traveled between two schools in the segregated school district, one predominately Caucasian and the other predominately African-American. She was teaching on April 4, 1968, the day Dr. Martin Luther King Junior was assassinated in the city.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

*Lynne Turley:* That's what I'm about.

*Francesca Davis:* And we just wanted to begin by thanking you for taking time out of your schedule to come and interview with us, and we're going to start off very general. So could you tell us a little bit about yourself, your name, where you were born, your age, and your current occupation?

*Lynne Turley:* Lynne Jordan Turley is my name. I was born in Selmer, Tennessee which is about 100 miles east of Memphis, a small town of 1,800 and it really was true about it takes a village because the whole town took care of all the children and paid attention to them. I went to elementary school, high school there. When I left Selmer I went to the St. Louis Institute of Music to study piano and then I finished at the University of Memphis with a music degree, undergraduate degree and I pursued a master's in curriculum and instruction at University of Memphis and then I taught in the Memphis City Schools for 22 years in various situations before I went away to New York to work for a publishing company who marketed text books nationally and internationally.

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*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* That's a pretty broad overview.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay, could you tell us a little bit about your parents, what were their names and what did they do for a living?

*Lynne Turley:* My mother was named Louise and my father was named Tedford Jordan, and they bought a business when I was four, which was 1945, and it was what might be called at that time a dry goods

store because they sold clothing, work clothes, work shoes, sheets, towels, blankets, thread, needle, fabric, zippers. Everything that people might need in the country to wear or to sew.

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They also, unusually I guess, unusual for a dry goods store, sold text books, because at that time no, text books weren't provided in public schools free of charge to the children, so people across the county had to come and buy the text books at my dad's store. That changed soon after he opened that store and text books became free to students from the state.

My mom and dad were musicians. They were church going people and they came to Memphis a lot to shop for their store so I had the opportunity of visiting Memphis a lot when I was a child.

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They sang at church, solos and duets, and my father had a quartet which my mother sang in also and they performed at funerals, believe it or not, when there was a death in the small community and they needed special music; my mom and dad had their tenor and bass, no their tenor and lead singer would slip behind the flowers in the church and sing a couple of hymns at the appropriate time and go back to work at their store.

*Lynne Turley:* Okay. *(Laughter)*

*Francesca Davis:* Were you allowed to work in the store with your parents and –

*Lynne Turley:* I was, forced is too strong a word, but I was encouraged so I started learning to make change at the cash register at about eight and, you know, to count it out like, ten, twenty five, fifty, a dollar, and all that stuff. Then I had to, the pants at the store that the men bought were unfinished and often had to be hemmed, so my mother did that on a sewing machine in the back of the store, and then I delivered the store to the cleaners, just around the corner to be pressed.

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So I did that and at Christmas I wrapped packages and other sorts of odd jobs like that. I have one brother; I had one brother who is no longer living. He did all the same things. He worked in the store as well and it was a great education, customer service.

My dad always said if a man asks for a shirt, offer him a tie. If he buys a pair of slacks, offer him a pair of socks. So that was a great education in dealing with people. They were our customers and everybody in the county shopped there, McNairy County was the name of the country. All of the farmers and other merchants shopped at our store and so they knew us, they knew our family, we knew them, and they were our friends and our customers. So the idea of good customer service was well developed in my mind at an early age.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* It has served me well.

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*Rebecca Williams:* Okay, we're just going to talk a little bit more about your life growing up; share some of the memories that stand out in your mind about your childhood, your home life and your school life, and different things like that.

*Lynne Turley:* I didn't tell you this, but three grandparents lived with me also.

*Rebecca Williams:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* My mother's parents moved in when I was about four, I think, when they bought, when my mother and dad bought the store. They had lived previously on a farm in a tiny town called Guys, Tennessee. So they moved in with us and then my father's mother also moved in. His father died in a wagon accident when he was two. So she moved in. So there was seven of us in there.

So, as you can imagine, I got a lot of attention. I was the younger child and these three grandparents just kept me, they babysat with me as my mom and dad worked at the store.

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They taught me a lot of things. They indulged me, and that gave me a great deal of self-confidence. Also, my grandmother taught me to read by accident when I was four. She read to me all the time, one of my grandmothers. So I learned to read early and it was a bit of a problem when I moved into the first grade, there was no kindergarten then. The first grade teacher wanted me to move

to the second grade and my mom didn't want her to do that because she thought I, I guess she thought I wasn't mature enough, which was probably right. So I'm sure I created a lot of problems in the first grade by talking a lot (*Laughter*) because I could read all the books so fast, and I was reading third grade books.

A third grade teacher lived behind me and she supplied me with books all the time so I read books that were way past the first grade.

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Having three grandparents live with you is, is a tremendous advantage in life. They love you so much and teach you so many things and also you observe people growing old and dying and that is, that's a real blessing because you're with them with they, as they become infirm. You help take care of them. So it creates a gentleness in you and knowledge of what death is going to be like as you watch other people or as you prepare for your own death.

The town was fun. I wanted to escape as fast as I could, though. I wanted to get out of Selmer, Tennessee. It was, I wanted to get to the big city, I guess, Memphis. Which was really not such a big city, but everybody knew everybody, so you couldn't be bad. (*Laughter*) Even though you really wanted to be bad, you couldn't, but also the people were good people, really fine people. Good hearted, spiritual people who believed in the basic values of life and treated each other that way.

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So it was really, as much as I wanted to escape, it was really quite an advantage to grow up in a, an environment like that.

*Francesca Davis:* So close a community.

*Rebecca Williams:* So you talked about your grandparent's influence in your life and also it takes a village. So a lot of people in the town, were these some of your role models, or can you share who some of your role models were?

*Lynne Turley:* Well my parents, probably, and my grandparents were my first role models, and most important role models. I do remember though, one woman from Memphis who inspired me. Her name was Joy Weiner and she's still living now. She is a fine violin player and used to play first violin in the Memphis Symphony before she

retired and she came to Selmer for a concert once and I was so inspired by her to continue the study of piano. My father encouraged me to and my mom, but for a woman to come and play violin and she performed in the church I attended, so it was a full church, that was very inspiring to me. It made me realize I could continue my musical education and maybe one of the days, one, someday in the future perform.

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That was an inspiring experience. Other role models in the town were certainly ministers, teachers, teachers in the elementary school; they were all really fine, fine people, and cared about children and then the high school teachers too. They were all role models. I think those were the most important ones; my mom and dad, my grandparents, the leaders of the community and my parents, and my teachers.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay, you seem to be talking about your experiences with music a lot and the influence of you family and that sort of thing, could you talk about that a little bit more?

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(10:07:00)

*Lynne Turley:* A lot of children don't like to practice, they want to take music lessons, but they don't want to practice. Well my practice was a natural practice. My dad sang all the time so I was always on the piano bench, my mom and dad, they sang together. He sang as a soloist, they sang duets, so it wasn't like practice. It was performing and then for the quartet, I always played for the quartet and I went on the piano bench at church at a young age; I'm sure eight or nine years, I can't really remember, but I began to play piano for Sunday School and church and Wednesday night service and Sunday night service and anytime there was a special event, and I did it at school too. I played for all the graduation ceremonies and any time somebody needed to play piano at church, I mean at school, I was always drafted.

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So it wasn't like I was really, I had to practice; the practice was presented to me in situations where it was so natural and so much fun. So that was a huge, another huge benefit. I had a lot of benefits in my life (*Laughter*) as I look back.

*Francesca Davis:* That's good. Well, we're going to jump a little bit, so we're going to move to our target period from about the 1950's to the 1970's and I take it you were at the University of Memphis during this time?

*Lynne Turley:* I was. I began at the university in '59.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* And I graduated in '63 and began to, and got a job with the Memphis City Schools teaching and that was, I was the youngest person in the school, the youngest teacher, and so I, I was moved around in that school.

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I started at the fifth grade and the next year they needed a third grade teacher and didn't need a fifth grade teacher so I moved to third grade. Then the next year they needed a first grade teacher, and not a third grade teacher, so they moved me to first grade. So I, I had a lot of, a variety of experiences. Teaching first grade is very hard. I would say to the kids, because I was so young myself, "Okay, let's everybody form a line." They didn't know how to form a line, (*Laughter*) or how to sharpen their pencil. I had no idea that you had to teach first graders everything.

Then an interesting thing happened in the Memphis City Schools, a group, a couple of music, I don't know how this happened for sure, but I guess because the federal government issued some enrichment grants that were called Title Three Grants, and they were for arts programs across the country, and the Memphis City Schools decided they would submit a grant for a music program, an elementary music program, and they hired two people to be the co-directors, Nancy Ferguson and Connie Koontz, and then they, they auditioned, I will say, teachers in the Memphis City Schools who were in regular classrooms, but had a music degree.

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And they chose six teachers to do that and we were assigned to schools and then we met together every Friday afternoon as a group, the six of us and the two co-directors, and an assistant, the secretary, and we really developed a music curriculum for the Memphis City Schools in that first year. Because we, we were really working hard to incorporate every child in the city in the curriculum, we included a lot of African American folk songs because we wanted to have music that represented our population.

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The first year that I was in that program I was assigned to Lincoln Elementary which was an inner city school in South Memphis and it was an all black school. Previously I had been in an East Memphis school which was an all white school with a lot of Jewish children, very, well it was an economically advantaged school, and Lincoln fairly disadvantaged in an economic way. So I was assigned to Lincoln and Avon, Avon was the white school in East Memphis. So I spent three days at Avon and two days at Lincoln.

That was a huge, oh, remarkable experience for me because, because of the grant we had to have a team teaching team, one who was black and one who was white. So I was one half of that team.

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And I worked with a woman name of Anita Suggs who was a little older than I and she was teaching sixth grade in Lincoln previously, but we were paired to then to experiment and begin the Orff music program.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* We got the largest grant the federal government had ever given before for enrichment, it was, believe it or not, \$109,500.00 a year. That seems like nothing now because grants are in the millions, but we got \$109,500.00 a year for three years to begin the Orff music program, to develop the curriculum, to get trained so we could train other teachers, and to experiment with these folk songs and use them in singing, moving, and playing instruments.

So I went to Lincoln, it was quite an experience for me, and I think it was quite an experience for them because it was so much fun.

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I was in a whole new environment and the cultural environment so I learned so much from them. I'm not sure everybody was happy about my being there because I think some of the black teachers might have thought, uh oh, we're beginning to integrate the schools now, some of the jobs might be lost for African American teachers. So some of them weren't terribly thrilled to see me, but most of them were happy to have a music program and to, to have me there and they treated me like I was their child. I was still

young, 26, maybe 26 years old, 25 years old, and they were so thrilled that the music program came to Lincoln. That was a real benefit for that area and for that school.

So I would go to Avon by myself for two and a half days a week and then go to Lincoln with Anita for two days, and we had so much fun, and the children were so eager to learn. And they were so musical, pretty much all children are musical anyway, we just inhibit that by habits that we don't realize that we do.

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But they were so musical and we started the program in 1967, then in '68 Martin Luther King was killed and so the school was closed for two days, I think, at least, maybe three days, then it was reopened, and so I was driving every morning from my mid-town environment to what could have been a hostile environment, I suppose, but none of the teachers treated me that way at all, and the, the day he was killed, it was a very emotional experience. We all assembled in the cafetorium, a cafetorium is, of course, a cross between a cafeteria and an auditorium, and we all gathered there, all the teachers and all the students, and it was, we sang.

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We sang We Shall Overcome. It seems like hundreds of times to me. We just sang it over and over and over and there were verses I'd never even heard, you know, and so Mrs. Brisco, one of the sixth grade teachers also, she played piano while the children sang, but we sang so long that she wanted me to play too, because she was tired and so I played and it was just quite an emotional, emotional day.

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I'm not sure how much the young children knew of what had happened, but certainly the teachers knew, we all knew and we were very affected, and we ended the day and the children went home after that, and so then when I came back to school a few days later my, my mom and dad were nervous about my being in that environment. There were four white people and a thousand African American people, so my mom and dad were worried it was a volatile situation so, but I, there was no reason to worry about me, they, none of these teachers or principal, Mr. Benny Bats, were going to let anything happen to me. They, they really loved me and so to help me feel more comfortable, they found a really tall,



mature looking sixth grade boy, and when I would turn the corner from South Parkway onto Gabbay, that was the street that the school was on, I can't remember his name, but he, he met me there in the morning and as I drove down Gabbay just a short distance to the school, he walked along beside my car, to make sure that if anything happened he would be right there.

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And then in the afternoon when I left, he was out there beside my car, ready to escort me back to South Parkway to turn, to go back to my home.

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*Rebecca Williams:* That's nice. Wow.

*Lynne Turley:* But nobody was I don't think anybody would have hurt me anyway. No one in the neighborhood or certainly no one in the school, but it was quite an experience in my life to be able, it was a blessing to be in that situation when that terrible deed happened because I experienced their emotion and was a part of it, and I was a part of them.

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It was, I was one of them, and that was, that was an interesting day.

*Francesca Davis:* Wow.

*Lynne Turley:* Very interesting day.

*Rebecca Williams:* So, you described yourself as an activist. I thought that was really interesting, did these experiences kind of play a role in your idea of yourself as an activist? Can you just kind of elaborate on that and your feelings about that?

*Lynne Turley:* Well, I of course, had friends away from the school who were not about, well integration even, before that, and I was constantly defending and spouting the benefits of school integration.

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And then I, I continued to go, I didn't march in the marches for the strike for the sanitation workers, but I was involved in helping

people who were organizing around those marches, and then it, I think it made me more into a political person, a political being. From that time on, of course, I was fighting for women's issues, for the issues of integration every, everywhere I went it was like I was a witness. I didn't get there to say we have to integrate or women have to have certain benefits that they don't have, but it just seemed like naturally I was a witness all of the sudden for all of these issues; the changing of the societal norms, and it was the 60's and early 70's so I, my husband now calls me a hippie (*Laughter*) because I think that I was a hippie.

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I dressed in a, a, jeans and I was always at political events carrying a sign or on the front row, or just talking to people and handing out flyers. So I think that is why I called myself an activist because that changed my way of thinking about what I should do to help make things happen, and oddly enough in my home, there was none of that bigotry. So I had a foundation of no bigotry in my home already. An African American woman worked in my home to help take care of my grandparents as they got older, because my mom and dad had the store, so I certainly had to treat her with great respect and be polite, and couldn't say the N word ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, in my life.

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So I had the foundation for being an activist anyway, but that, that event, all those events: teaching there, the death of Martin Luther King just strengthened my resolve and moved me into, and I still do it now. I'm working in the political campaign right now for the August 3 primary in Memphis.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Rebecca Williams:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* I'm not out in front making speeches, but certainly I'm encouraging people to vote and talking about why I like the candidates I do. So –

*Rebecca Williams:* Okay, so you kind of already discussed the things that helped you get involved, did you see people around you getting involved and joining organizations and did that encourage you as well?

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*Lynne Turley:* Absolutely. Absolutely. Late 60's a lot of my friends gravitated to, to organizing events and executing those events and always talking to their friends like I did who didn't agree with some of the things that we were doing, but not in an angry way necessarily, more in a persuasive way to try to persuade them to come along with us and make these changes happen in a peaceful way.

**VIDEO CUT (.flv)**

(25:21:00)

*Rebecca Williams:* Okay. You talked a little bit before about women's issues, do you think that gender played a big role in your experiences during this time, and how so?

*Lynne Turley:* I think that I had strong female role models, my grandmothers, and my mother. My father never treated my mother as a, an employee in the store. She was his partner and the teachers I felt in the community were strong leaders, so that was an influence.

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Then I was very confident. I gained confidence at an early age so I was, I was very confident in myself as a woman and I thought I could do anything. My father had always treated me that I could do anything that my brother could; I could play ball, which I did, I was quite a tomboy. So I just had that confidence and I'd been on the piano bench at the church, I was always comfortable in front of people so I think that that led me to be a strong leader about women's issues and then the friends that I had were like me. They felt women should have a role and they were willing to fight for it and to be activists around the women's movement and, you asked me something else, ask me that question again about the influences and, and what else did you ask?

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*Rebecca Williams:* Just how did the gender play a role in your experiences during that time?

*Lynne Turley:* Okay, I had another thought I wanted to tell you, but I lost that one, but anyway my background of strong women and then gravitating to friends who also had the same notions I did about women in the workplace or women's rights, we, we all influenced each other a lot.

*Rebecca Williams:* Okay. So in your, in your kind of career, in your working at the school did you every experience any issues with gender from administration or anyone? Did you have an issue?

*Lynne Turley:* All the time.

*Rebecca Williams:* Oh, really? Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* Subtle. Subtle issues, but even in New York and I left to go to New York in '88 and there still were issues for women in the workplace, and we're still fighting.

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I know what I was going to tell you, a young woman candidate approached me for one of the seats, positions in this next election and so she was telling me about her background and where she was brought up and what her home life was like, and it was limited, and this was all the information she was telling me about her past, and why she wanted to run for this political office because of her past, and I said, "What's your platform? I want to know about your platform. What are the three issues that you want to make happen if you win this office?" And she had no platform. So I said, "It's not okay for women anymore just to say, 'We weren't given everything we should have been given.' We have to have issues. We have to have our platform. We have to believe in it and we have to be able to describe it, and it has to be a benefit to everyone."

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So that was, that was an interesting experience I had recently about women's issues.

*Rebecca Williams:* You're obviously very involved it seems like, so what were, did you notice any immediate changes as a result of your participation, others participation?

*Lynne Turley:* A lot of jokes. There were a lot of jokes about women's issues. I guess that's good. When the comedians start making jokes, it's a political thing and it means you've made step forward. So I think that was the first step I saw that was positive, and then of course, people had to change. It became so obvious that there were subtle changes and nobody was, I like men, so I don't want to say that they were negative, but some of them were. They, they weren't

ready to accept the fact that a woman could be a principal or a woman could be the CEO of a major corporation.

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Even now I think sometimes people are a little hesitant to agree with that, but I think the first evidence was the jokes. We'd arrived. *(Laughter)* People were making jokes about us.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Francesca Davis:* So you do feel as if you've seen a lot of changes from, in the earlier days, or up till now.

*Lynne Turley:* Absolutely. Absolutely. So, so much progress. There's still a lot of progress to be made, but an enormous amount of progress has been made in women's lives. Remember the last study where they said how much a housewife should be making a year, it was over \$100,000.00 after they evaluated how many hours she spent and all the tasks, the multi-tasking that she did.

*Francesca Davis:* I didn't see that.

*Lynne Turley:* All of that's interesting.

**VIDEO CUT (.flv)**

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*Rebecca Williams:* What are some of the things, the biggest things that you think you've learned from your experienced?

*Lynne Turley:* To be less critical. To give more love. To be, to have fun. To have fun, no matter what you're doing, to have fun. Live, love, laugh, I guess. *(Laughter)* \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

*Francesca Davis:* Absolutely. I guess starting to wrap up again –

*Lynne Turley:* Yes.

*Francesca Davis:* You did talk about how you have seen things change over time and how wonderful of an experience it has been for you in terms of discrimination and women's rights and that sort of thing so we, I guess, could you explain a little bit more about your specifically in terms of how things have changed, either in Memphis specifically or with your friends.

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*Lynne Turley:* One of my friends, an African American, a beautiful African American woman who was a close friend of mine, this is a very specific example. She and I tried to rent an apartment together once in the late 60's and we couldn't. The people wouldn't rent to me and her in the same apartment. So that is an example of a major change now in Memphis and across the country. We live, we want to and we hopefully do live with diversity, and she and I, I would go to the apartment and fill out the application and say I have a roommate and say she as coming later, and then when she would show up it was a different story. So that was interesting.

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You all have been great.

*Francesca Davis:* Thank you.

*Rebecca Williams:* Thank you.

*Lynne Turley:* Thank you, I hope I did what you wanted.

*Francesca Davis:* No, you definitely did.

*Rebecca Williams:* Absolutely.

*Rebecca Williams:* I just wanted to kind of ask one more thing about the difference because you have lived in both Memphis and New York which are very different environments, so what were some of the biggest differences you would say specifically I guess with racial and women's issues that you would see between Memphis and New York?

*Lynne Turley:* Okay, first I want to say a funny one.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay.

*Lynne Turley:* In Memphis we have corn bread and biscuits. *(Laughter)* In New York they have every kind of bread you can imagine, it's all delicious. *(Laughter)* Diversity, okay, so in New York I didn't have a car there and very, some people have cars, but you're on the subways, you're on the streets, you're on the buses, you're in line at the movies, you're at the theater, you're at lectures, there are all

kinds of people there. I, I would say to my friends in New York, "You know in Memphis we have black and white, and that's it."

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But there are all kinds of people and there are all kinds of events that are, are about all different kinds of people. Lectures or one woman shows, or one man shows and they're from every country on the globe and they're on the streets too. And they bring their own style and their own languages, but everybody assimilates. It's, New York gets a bad wrap. It's, it's not, people aren't rude and mean and brusque. They, they would kill each other if they were, because they're all thrown, packed together in the subways (*Laughter*) and you can't help but get along with everybody there. I mean you choose your own small, close circle of friends, but you're thrown with everybody.

I could be sitting at the movie next to somebody I have no idea what language he speaks or what country he's from, but I'm arm to arm with him.

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So that's a difference. There are a lot of opportunities, intellectual and cultural opportunities in New York that I miss. Women's rights, they're still fighting. Still fighting for certain positions, but not so much, I think everybody at least now has to be interviewed. I mean, at one point, nobody, everybody didn't have to be interviewed, but women are moving into the higher level positions, the highest level positions, and New York gives them the opportunities.

You know every country, every company, every corporation is evaluated now about how many have the most women at the highest level of executive positions, and they're rated. So that's a difference.

I hope I did what you guys wanted.

*Francesca Davis:* No, you definitely did.

*Rebecca Williams:* Absolutely.

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