

Gwendolyn VanSant – NAACP

Audited by GV, 2019

JM: So I'm Judith Monachina, and I'm here with Gwendolyn VanSant. It's a pretty name.

GV: Thank you.

JM: So Gwendolyn VanSant, we're interviewing her as part of the NAACP Oral History Project, and it's December 19, 2017, and also in the room is Wendy Germain, who's doing sound, and Len Kates, who is the liaison to the NAACP and the Oral History Center. I work for the Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College, and we are in the *Berkshire Eagle* podcast studio. We got all the facts. So Gwendolyn, as we discussed, this is a biographical interview, so we're going to go more or less in some kind of order of your life. We obviously will jump around here and there, but that's the sort of structure that we're going to kind of stick to. We'll start at the beginning. Can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

GV: I saw these questions, and now I have to pick what I want to talk about. So I was born October 11, 1971, and I was born to my mother, Annie Johnson, at the time; she was a single mom, and she and her three sisters had left a rural farm in South Carolina to go to Philadelphia for a different life in the city, and then she married my father, William Hampton, and he was in the Navy, and that meant that I traveled around. I was what they called a Navy brat, and I traveled quite a bit. I was in 13 elementary schools, so from Philly to Florida to New Jersey, and just at the time of a young in-love family, they

wanted to move wherever he was. My mom wanted to be with him, so that was interesting for me. I really cherish it now, because I got to meet people from all different backgrounds, and I learned some skills of moving in and out of neighborhoods.

JM: So what did it feel like, at the time, all that moving around?

GV: I was incredibly shy, and I'm still shy. I do all these Myers & Briggs tests and all these things, and, despite my work, I'm very much an introvert and shy, so I think it was really hard for me. I was a bookworm. I was always smart. That was an important part of racial justice, but I was always assumed from my quietness not to be smart, and then they found out that I was a gifted child. So I would go from being in remedial classes to enrichment or gifted and talented classes every school. It was like the thing that happened.

A lot of that moving happened in my first eight years, because when my sister—we lived in three places, but all in the state of Virginia, and she's eight years younger than I am, so she only lived in Virginia until three years ago. She's been all over Virginia, but we lived by naval bases, and then she went off to UVA, so a lot of that moving happened as a young child, and I just remember trying to figure out how to get into new communities, be educated the way I needed to be educated. So that was my first part.

And then when we landed in Virginia Beach, which was the last place I lived before I came to the Berkshires, I was in advanced classes. I was a spelling bee champion. That was the thing that people knew me for in the city, and I got a big scholarship, a Du Bois scholarship to go to Simon's Rock at 15, so at 15 I started my college career and came up to the Berkshires.

JM: So how did you know about the Du Bois scholarship?

GV: Brian Hopewell, who was the admissions counselor, at the time, showed up at my school, and I had taken—I was a very good test-taker, so I had taken PSATs, and my scores were up there, so when he came recruiting in Virginia Beach, I was in this small group of people, the spelling bee champion and all that, that he met. From military bases in suburbia/cities to finally moving into a neighborhood in Virginia Beach, which was nice—my parents got us in good neighborhood public schools. Brian came, and I was there, and then I just was intrigued by the place in the mountains, so I ended up at Simon's Rock.

JM: So would you rather talk a little bit more about the elementary experience, like Virginia Beach, or would you rather go right to Simon's Rock?

GV: I think Simon's Rock. I realize I've had two-thirds of my life in the Berkshires, which is a lot.

JM: But let me just ask quick questions. Siblings, you have a younger sister. You mentioned a sister.

GV: Yes, my sister, Barbara Hampton, who is just a powerhouse, a single woman, very much a career person. She's in career services, and now she's at Princeton, but she went to UVA's undergrad, grad, worked as a dean, directors of career services and public policy schools, and then Princeton recruited her, so I'm very proud. So I'm a proud big sister of her. So she's now at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy. And then my brother, he lives with me part-time and with her part-time. He has a seizure disorder and other medical issues, so he needs to be with family, so he's either with me or with her.

JM: What's his name?

GV: William Hampton, Jr., so after Dad, and he's an amazing, gifted, intelligent person. He just has these physical disabilities.

JM: So he goes back and forth between New Jersey.

GV: (0647). My mom had an illness this last year, so we moved out of Virginia, so Virginia's chapter has just now closed, and so now we're in New Jersey and Massachusetts, but before that it was—

JM: Much easier to go back and forth.

GV: She's not feeling well too, so between my sister and I, we take care of my mom and my brother.

JM: Where does your mom live now?

GV: We just moved her out of Virginia Beach, and she now lives at my sister's, but six months ago she was with me for six months, and she loves the Berkshires. The Berkshires is her second home. She's with us a lot.

JM: Nice.

GV: My house is always full. There's six to eight people in my house at any given point, living.

JM: So Simon's Rock, so you land at Simon's Rock, and what is your first impression?

GV: I thought 20 people lived in the town of Great Barrington. It was so different from what I knew. I can't believe what I didn't see. I didn't see the houses. We live there, so now I can never imagine thinking that, but it seemed really small.

JM: Especially where Simon's Rock is located.

GV: Yeah, and what was really funny is I had a cousin on my father's side who had gone up to somewhere at school in the mountains, and then when I got there, he was there. So my cousin, Frank, we ended up in the same place. I'd heard about him being in some school for smart kids.

JM: He was at Simon's Rock?

GV: Yeah, so that was really fun, so then the first week I'm like, "Oh, look," or when the returning students came back. So that was fun to find him there, because there's 300 students.

JM: That's pretty amazing.

GV: Spelling bee champion, I feel very proud of that. I was also a math and science person. That was my thing. So I came to Simon's Rock with that and thought I was going to be an engineer, and I discovered humanities and liberal arts, and so my life changed a lot in that way.

JM: So how did you discover humanities?

GV: I found it, where you're doing your counseling, and they said you have to take history, and I found history really boring the way they taught it, and superior classes in Virginia Beach; it was just bad. And so I was like, oh, I don't want to do that, and they said, "Well, try art history. You can do both," and then I fell in love with art history, so actually my major was art history. And then there was a minor in women's studies and a minor in Latin American studies. What else?

JM: Who was your professor?

GV: For my thesis advisor, Joan DelPlato, who just retired. She was more like a family member for me, at the time. So I switched. I did math and science all the time,

and my fun class ended up becoming my major. I loved Spanish too, and I was on the Spanish forensics team back in high school too, so when I came here, I would always take a Spanish class. I'd always make sure I had an art history class and women's studies class, and so those things ended up becoming my major, because I realized all my passion lived with that stuff more than the math. And I liked math, I think, because it was structured enough and gave me a blueprint through some challenging parts of my childhood and life.

JM: That's an interesting comment, because I was just thinking it before you said it: math doesn't change from town to town.

GV: Exactly. So that part, and there were other family issues, and so literally at Simon's Rock, when I turned 16, I became an emancipated minor, so I had to be independent and put myself through the rest of school to stay there.

JM: So you could get financial aid kind of thing? Is that why?

GV: Uh-huh, some separation from my family that I needed, at the time.

JM: That was a big move.

GV: Uh-huh.

JM: How did you know to do that? Did you have an advisor?

GV: I don't really remember. I was quiet. I just figured some things out on my own.

JM: So Joan Del Plato. Who else at Simon's Rock?

GV: So in the end, Edgar Chamorro. What's devastating to me this week is it is the anniversary of the shooting at Simon's Rock—Nacunan Saenz who was also like another family member. He was killed in the shooting.

JM: Which was what, a year after you left?

GV: No, no, no. The 25th anniversary was this week, and he was my department chair, but remember, because I didn't like studying history as it was told I took Art History and Edgar was the steady Spanish teacher, and there were others...different people over many years. So Edgar was the last one, who's still there, but Nacunan was the department chair.

JM: And he died just after you left, right?

GV: Just after I left, yeah. Literally, at that point, and Simon's Rock being a small community, we did dinner parties together. My best friend, at the time, Luz dated his younger brother, who was a student, who was an alum too. So we were all sort of like a family unit; so they were close. I'm trying to think who else. I feel bad. I love John Myers. I babysat a lot, because I worked a lot, so I babysat a lot of staff and faculty kids.

JM: So the Myers kids?

GV: Uh-huh. They've all grown up. John's daughter worked with me for a short time. Dorothy, who worked in the library, one of her kids, is a Miss Hall's teacher now. So I see them, and I feel like they're like my first generation of children around here. It was fun to babysit them.

JM: So Simon's Rock, now did you know who Du Bois was before the scholarship?

GV: Not before I had to write the essay. They had a quote in the application, and if you flash-forward to last year when I started the Equity & Inclusion Department at Simon's Rock, I just got to help to redo the application and pick new Du Bois quotes. So that was really amazing, because I had been introduced to Du Bois through that

application, and then there was an extra scholarship that I applied for and got as well, so that's how I learned about Du Bois.

JM: So when you learned about him, what did you think? Was it a big eye-opener?

GV: Virginia Beach, and especially in Princess Anne High School, there was no African-American history. It opened up a whole world to me, other than my parents at Christmastime, we either got the big posters of African-American women—we had those kind of books at home, like the *20 Most Famous Historical Figures*. He wasn't in any of those, so I didn't know. But Booker T. Washington was, MLK was, so it was just a learning connection that way. I'd heard about some of these people on my own or on my family's initiative, and so it was neat to know and that he came from this town that I had come to interview at.

JM: Seven people live there.

GV: What? So that was really exciting. I feel like it's been a part obviously of my whole Berkshire existence before I got here. So it's cool that it's its 150th and this tenth anniversary in the same year. It's a fun time.

JM: So how did you become interested in multicultural communications relations?

GV: I think it came from high school, again, Spanish. I loved my high school Spanish teacher, and there weren't many teachers I loved in that school. And she just seemed to see me as a student and really encourage me. I was competing, at that time, in Spanish forensics. I don't know how I did that.

JM: Tell us about Spanish forensics.

GV: It was so funny. I've never seen it since. We had to memorize poetry and who could read it with the most—I was reading Pablo Neruda love poems and things like

that— with the best accent and fluidity and all that, and then also then we had topics to debate, but not in your native language, so that was fun.

JM: And they call it forensics. That's so interesting.

GV: That was fun. So there's the National Honor Society, National Spanish Honor Society. There was the Future Business Makers of America, which I'd forgotten about for 30 years, and then my mom reminded me that we used to drive to the adjacent city to go to the Future Business Makers of America, because I'd never seen myself as a businessperson or an entrepreneur, and I said that once to my mom in the last year, but she said, "But I put you in that class." I said, "Well, you did do that."

My first college courses were in Virginia Beach too. So there were summer programs at Virginia Wesleyan College and I had taken college credit courses even before Simon's Rock. So I think I started when I was 13, in the summer when I was 14.

JM: You were ready to get out of the Virginia Beach High School. What was the name of the high school?

GV: Princess Anne.

JM: Princess Anne, of all things. So Simon's Rock really sort of had a lot of impact.

GV: Yeah. It was really an alternate place to be and always academically just where I needed to be for my next phase.

JM: The getting started on the community relations, the communications multicultural thing: So there was the Spanish teacher and loving that, and the Spanish forensics, and then how else would you say—

GV: The military, because my best friend was from the Philippines. And so just the smell of the food, walking into the house, learning about the food, learning about their history. Again, in the classes I was in they were predominately white, but Maria was also in them, so having another comrade in that scenario was good. So I think having that cross-cultural experience was really good.

JM: So that was important, that relationship, Maria.

GV: Uh-huh.

JM: And so in the military, you were on these bases, and there were people of other—

GV: Everybody was always moving. There were different backgrounds; also community and neighborhood that also was there. The military gets a lot of flack, but I feel like I'm a champion, in a way, because it does provide education for people that otherwise can't access it. And somehow I feel like I knew some of those things. You have your own department store, your own grocery store, your own health clinic, the schools, because when my father was still with us, he taught in the engineering school, and you can advance your degree. They pay for it, and he rose up as an officer in his field. So I saw all that, and it gave people lots of opportunity and stability in that way that you don't otherwise get. But when you get deployed, that's hard; but then the mothers and the women made a different kind of community.

It would shift, the culture of a neighborhood when the boat was out in the Navy and when they came back. I don't know. It's hard for me to discern what I knew then, or maybe what I had words for then and what I have context for now, but I definitely think as far as access and understanding there was difference there, and also

being a community on the outside. We were the Navy kids in the high schools, because we didn't have our own schools, so we had to integrate as students into these other schools. It's harder for transient populations who are not known to the teachers and things like that, so we had that piece too.

JM: Very interesting.

GV: I lived that more than my siblings, because in Virginia they had been more stable than when I was younger as any growing family would be.

JM: So, in a way, like you said earlier, all that moving and all that sort of gave you a sensitivity, and also an interest in sort of bridging things. That's what you call your organization, and how did that happen?

GV: So if you flash-forward, I was doing sort of the Berkshire shuffle, always teaching all different types of places, and then as a medical interpreter. I was a certified medical and mental health interpreter, always still searching for communities that I could connect with, so I felt like I had a really good sense of the immigrant population in South County. It didn't feel like there was a really big African-American community in South County, and I would always ask, and they would say—my generation had moved out, because you can't afford to live here. So there weren't a lot of people in my age group 15 years ago; there still isn't.

JM: That's interesting, because there used to be.

GV: I didn't know Pittsfield, at that point, other than shopping. I didn't know people up here, so that all came along with starting BRIDGE. So, I was much more isolated in South County, at the time, and so there was an immigrant population, and I spoke Spanish so that I was always in those communities, and I thought I knew them; so

when I was on my last pregnancy and I had to be on bedrest, and I've been working since I was 13, I was not pleasant to be around, I think, because I just didn't know what it was to not be working.

So I was like, what can I do? What can I do from home? That's when I got certified as an interpreter and translator, so I was translating schools' IEPs and interpreting for VIM and CHP, because I'd been working and helping with other projects, teaching Spanish classes and things like that. I then met all these people that I didn't know were in the community that I thought I was connected with. And then they wanted more things from me and my co-founder, Marta. So they wanted to help signing up their bank accounts, how to do this. How do you save money? Who can buy a house?

When you're actually an interpreter, you're not allowed to talk about anything but what you're there for, so it was interesting. What can we build that we can help serve this population better, and also help the agency serve these people better? So that's where the thought started, and then as we were developing the thought, I became more aware of the diversity in southern Berkshire interpreting them. People would get upset if they were white native-born people that were illiterate. And say why are you helping these people? I need help. So BRIDGE became immediately—we're going to be accessible to all vs. an immigrant advocacy program, and that just built from there.

JM: So it started really as immigrant advocacy.

GV: As a thought, because Marthe is a Dutch immigrant married into the Latino community, and I was interpreting. So the experiences came out of that; and then when I was going to help people as an interpreter, often people reacted to me like, what are you going to do for us? As a black woman, they'd never seen that --as offering them help and

education, so that bridge was like, oh, we can help the individuals and also go back to the agencies and say, this is why this person was falling through the cracks, and also this is something we can do to improve, which is where the cultural competence piece got built in or built up.

JM: It's interesting, so you were interpreting. You're sitting there and you're telling what this one said to this one and what this one said to this one, but you can't interject anything like, you shouldn't be doing that.

GV: No, or, please trust the doctor and tell them what you said to me in the waiting room, because often with cultural things for women, talking to doctors for different cultural norms around who knows what, like the authority of a doctor or not. Then also women, what they could say and what they would say with their family members in the room, and they wanted all their family members in the room. It was really hard. I kept my husband up lots of nights, and really hard stories, human trafficking stories, domestic violence, just hard things that you didn't think were in the Berkshires, and so I was like, oh, this is what I studied in my languages and literature, women's studies.

I traveled to Mexico to interview photographers for my thesis, and Simon's Rock and really got interested in images of women and western feminism vs. matriarchies that existed still in spite of colonialism, so that's what my thesis was on. So when it became real life, that's sort of the foundation and the vision of BRIDGE and it's sort of everything that I'd been doing from the military through now

JM: So now tell us what BRIDGE is doing and, if you can, think about how you keep reminding yourself, if you have to do this, what you're doing, what your roots are,

what your thing is. What's your goal? What was your dream, and how are you doing it, and how do you remind yourself?

GV: So, again, it was really, I can be of service in two ways. I'm an educator. I amassed a lot of group experience, and I also was an advocate and had been living my own single-mother experience, and I was an African-American woman in the Berkshires, but I realized I had something with the language access even that these people that I was trying to support didn't have.

The vision was to be a support, the same mission we still had for mutual respect and understanding through education, fellowship, advocacy, and training. And that mission still holds true, and basically it's a desire to educate and help them bridge the gap. My tagline, the very first excitement of the founding was, "Shed light on invisible communities and give voice to unheard communities." That was the heart in what I was trying to do, and Marthe was going to be that cultural broker, because she had the Dutch experience. She had the Mexican experience and the American experience, so she could really help bridge those gaps and was doing a lot of for CHP through the WIC program.

JM: Could you tell us Marthe's last name?

GV: Bourdon, and Bob Norris was—when we pitched this to him as our seed donor, he said, "Oh, this is a catalyst for change," and that's what we're doing still. I feel like we're really living into the catalyst for change in all the ways that are challenging and good. Sometimes it's hard for us to be at the center of what we've been working really hard to get done, and you don't see catalysts all the time, so that's something that's taken me a decade to live into and understand.

Really I think Bob saw it clearly the thought that's what we would be, and he has been incredibly supportive for the ten years in different ways, and so that vision, that's still there. Governor Patrick really helped and guided me—former Governor Patrick, but he'll always be Governor Patrick to me—he helped me think about being a minority-women-run nonprofit organization when I talked to him about BRIDGE, and he had been revamping that program that used to be **SOMBA** to the now what's called the Supplier Diversity Program, so he really pushed me to do that, because he felt like BRIDGE could be a service across the Commonwealth from what he had seen, so we are still that too, minority- and women-run, which makes it super clear again who we are and what we're doing.

JM: Could you tell me what Supplier Diversity is?

GV: It's the Affirmative Market Program of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and they have a status. You can have designation as a veteran-run, women-run, minority-run. There's probably one for the protected class of LGBTQ. If not, I'm sure it's in the works, but we went after both minority- and women-run nonprofit, because that's who we are.

JM: And is there a benefit to having this designation?

GV: Well, there is a benefit if people follow the compliance guidelines, which is that if you receive federal or state money, you're supposed to search out and use vendors of any of those designations first, if their service is quality and can meet your needs.

What the governor and this office likes about BRIDGE is that we provide a service that's within the essence of what the Affirmative Market Program's about, because I could just be selling staples, and they could hire us to be their vendor for staples, but we actually are

doing cultural competence training and antiracism and justice training, so it really fits the Affirmative Market purpose, so that's why they're always real excited in supporting us. It's a lot of work. To get certified, it was sending in a Bible-type size packet, and then every two years you get recertified, so we've been doing that.

JM: So a Bible every two years.

GV: That's a little (2757).

JM: Would you tell me what cultural competency training looks like? Can you give me an example?

GV: The Gwendolyn BRIDGE brand of it, there's lots of examples. Ours is really building up cross-cultural communication skills with a really broad sense of diversity and a broad sense of culture, and what was really inspired by the work after we started was a deep sense of privilege and poverty and what that looks like in the Berkshires, and finance is one of ten categories, looking at poverty, which is based on Ruby Payne's work, but then I overlaid that with also privilege. Then what do you have access to?

Any first BRIDGE training we unpack what that looks like. What is diversity from geographical location to race, ethnicity, gender identity, mental health status, substance abuse, because that's a major issue in our area; and then we look at culture, how that all shows up within culture, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, the intersection of those, and then, again, unpacking the definition of poverty, the extent to which an individual does without resources and privileges when you have access to resources, whether you use them or not. So we get everybody understanding all that.

That's institutional-baseline knowledge, plus demographics of whoever's being served by the program we're at, and who is in the Berkshires, or we go to other

communities now, so then it's our job to learn about that community wherever we go. And then we get into the concept of valuing diversity, which is not if you're a nurse, I love all my patients, or a teacher, I love all my students, but really beginning to understand how you demonstrate that you value difference in each of those students, because not everybody walks the same path.

So to be able to really understand and value them, you need to understand who they are, and so we do a lot of exercises in how you can do that. And then we get into self-assessment, which is understanding your own bias, your own cultural context, your own identity, what the community or society tells you is your identity, and then what you hold as your identity, and then what your biases are.

JM: Let's talk about that. So did you find that you had to do this training for yourself too?

GV: I feel like I'm constantly in the training, like every day.

JM: So that identity thing, what part of it is that you sort of put on, because society told you that was what it was, and what part of it did you sort of grow into?

GV: I feel like I actually say a black woman on both sides of that. I think it means different things, so what we talked about where meaning gets applied to those identities. I feel like I've lived into being an African-American woman and in a way that I was sort of avoiding it and wanting to be smart just because, not because I was the black girl in the room as a kid. Or now just what it means to be right in this moment, in solidarity for black women's voices and work being honored. That's right now, so it's very different than trying to just fit in and be honored for just my intrinsic value to see me as this and honor the work and energy it takes to be that.

JM: How does that feel different?

GV: It's very much empowering, and it's very much taking up space in a different way. It's kind of taking up the space that I should and my ancestors should and women coming after me should, so that to me is what's extremely important to me right now.

JM: Could you say a little more about that, how to articulate that?

GV: Well, there are so many ways. It's just the work it takes to show up and have conversations that may be easier for other people. If you use the "Me Too" campaign, the woman that started it and the energy it takes to have that woman get credit, be on the front of *Time* magazine and the oversight there. It's the health disparities for black women that are dying in childbirth, all the health disparities that are attributed to African-American women.

I teach about this all the time, so I have so much data on how that happens, and even if African women come and they're strong, but then the generation, they have the same disparities as African-American women do, another really stark—so just knowing all that and having everybody own that instead of just my mother, my sister, me, and my daughter. Everybody needs to own that.

JM: It seems to me knowing it is the first step, and then how do you help people own it?

GV: Yeah.

JM: That's a hard step.

GV: Yeah, I just want to finish. So then part 1 is institutional knowledge. Part 2 is value and diversity. Part 3 is self-assessment, and then 4 is then navigating difference, so that's how you have these hard conversations and how you manage them and how you

work through them. And then the last one is then how does that inform your program delivery and policy-making or whatever? I'm sort of done with the output and walking you through it, and then you're like, well, this is what we want to do. Let's assess what we're doing, impact vs. intent, and then also how can we modify, and what do we need to do different? So that's my curriculum. Other people do different things, but that's mine.

JM: Can you give an example of a program that really worked, that you really liked doing and how you did it?

GV: I love my work. It's very hard to pick, because there are so many things.

JM: Like a school, or is there any particular—because it's so easy to just sort of hear these words and not really understand them, because they've become familiar, all these words.

GV: I know.

JM: So what do they mean anymore? Give us an example, or even maybe this. One of the things that you said on the LinkedIn page—it was sort of a bio—was that you help make difficult conversations. You facilitate different conversations, but you didn't use the word facilitate. You used something else, and I wondered, wow, that is a really important thing to do. Can you give any examples of difficult conversations?

GV: Well, I feel that I'm gifted with an ability to read people and meet them where they're at and help them still feel safe. So that facilitating is important, and part of it's skill-building that I've done over the years, and part of it is just something that I've been tuned in to do for whatever reason, in a very empathetic way, so there's that piece. I think that no matter where I am in these trainings, you have people that are sometimes mandated to them, and they don't want to be there, and I need to make it as valuable to

them to the people that have had some experience with it, so that's what I feel like my work is in front of everyone is making everybody feel welcome in the space that they're entering and everyone else honor that space without judgment. So that's the frame that I said at the beginning.

It's like, "I know you don't want to be here. I know that I have particular lens, that you're going to hear my bias, and you can call me on it. You can say that's not how I see the world, and we'll have a conversation, because otherwise this is useless for you and for me." Really, that's almost my spiel every time. I don't want to just stand there and you roll your eyes and just be like, oh, my God. I want you to feel like you've put something out, and it's somehow shaped differently, whether it's you formulating your ideas better about what you believe or whether it's you listening to me and thinking a little differently.

I don't have an attachment to what happens. It's just that we are in a workshop working together. So, I feel like that's what I do all the time, and I can give you examples. In the Berkshires, John Bissell at Greylock has made it that all of his supervisors and all of his employees have done minimally now 12 to 16 hours of training with me on the general training I've talked about, then on unpacking systemic racism, unpacking poverty and privilege, and deeper dives. Now every time I go into Greylock, virtually like, when's the next one? To me, that feels so good, and they said, "We have these conversations now all the time," so the watercooler discussions have shifted. It's become part of the culture.

JM: Here's the language. Facilitate tough systems conversations. What does that mean, tough systems conversations?

GV: Well, the biggest thing is that for some time, the U.S. has not educated truthfully about our history. So when I'm standing in a training say, "Race is a political, historical, and social construct that's made to preserve wealth for white people," some people can hear that, and some people are like, "What on earth are you talking about?" I've come from generational poverty in the Berkshires or never have heard anything like that in their entire life. So to kind of bring them into a couple of small historical facts, not small but entry-level historical facts, and have them gnaw on that and talk about how that immediately impacts the work that they're delivering or the way that they interact with someone. That's what I'm talking about. We're living within systems we can't see, that no one educated us about, and then we don't necessarily take time to think about if you don't have to if you're living in that privileged identity.

JM: Or even if you're not.

GV: And then if you're not, you think something's wrong with you. So when you talk a little bit about I work with kids, I would have loved to have a tiny bit of the language and knowledge I have now as a child, that it wasn't my fault that my family didn't have what other people had, or some of the social circumstances that my family had that they were systemic, were just part of the outcome of some systemic structures that have been in place for a long time.

We teach people that, so many different things. My weeks are full. I work with MCLA on the Pittsfield High School and Taconic High School Greylock Teach Fellows team, and the course that MCLA is providing for them is Education in Society, so I'm co-teaching it with the department head of education, and, again, this is the history of education. This is why education was created. This is the history of race and leaving

these high-schoolers, it's like why wasn't I ever taught this? Why don't I know this? I didn't have Japanese internment camps till within the BRIDGE existence, and I had a very good education. I had lots of access, and somehow that might have been a sentence in the history book that I missed, I guess. But it wasn't on a test, because I would have remembered after prepping for it.

JM: Not to mention the Native American plight.

GV: Columbus, I got younger. I got that when my mind was opened up at Simon's Rock, but I didn't get anything about the internment camps. And so my mission is to provide these access points just to open up a little bit for whoever's with me, at the time, and that's really going back to your other question, what my vision is. I'm living proof that if all you have is your education and your knowledge, that that's all you need, because emancipated at 16, I had nothing but me, myself, and I.

I am just convinced that if people have the knowledge and some access point, which might not be the same as mine, but something that they can move forward, which is different than meritocracy. It's opening up windows and removing some barrier so they can see that there's a possibility. So that's really what my hope is. I am definitely thinking about that for women and minorities, and I'm very much thinking about it for white people as well, that they find an entry point into this conversation.

JM: The emancipation thing needs to sort of happen everywhere, right?

GV: Yes. I call it liberation, so that's the systemic—we all have a stake in this getting better, and so you're not going to lose something if we own this. You might actually be freed up a little bit. That's what I really want people to understand.

JM: And maybe somewhere they sort of might know it a little bit. What you're talking about, in some ways, is an anthropological look at our culture, and that's hard to do within your own culture. It's much easier to do in someone else's.

GV: In someone else's. I always say that in the training. I'm like, "Okay, so you might have come here to figure out how to work with the Latino clients that you have or the Muslim clients, and we'll get to that. But the first thing we're going to do is focus on your existence, what you know about yourself, because that'll help inform you, learn about someone else, and you will all be surprised what we don't know about ourselves yet and our existence, and that knowledge even that you need to do for yourself will help you engage with someone else on their journey." That's really my goal. It's interesting to have it codified in a manual and in a training, because there's still so much of it that when you're in a room with people just see the humanity in individuals, and that's the first thing.

JM: Mentors, important people, you mentioned Joan. Anybody else? Anybody in the African-American community? I don't want to put you on the spot?

GV: Here?

JM: Anywhere. You could even say my grandmother or something.

GV: My grandmother was the mother of 12 from the farm in South Carolina. She just passed away three years ago, so the strength that she showed. She divorced my grandfather, at a certain point, but she had been an aide in the classroom, or a CNA, and she'd been putting a little bit of money aside. I was like, "Well, what are you going to do, Josie? You've just been on the farm with Wilbur," she was like, "No." She had

bought a plot of land in the town nearby, and she was all set up to go move into a trailer there and just start growing her food there and having her independence. I don't know.

JM: The wherewithal to do that, that's really strength and discipline.

GV: Things that people didn't necessarily see her having right away. There are so many. I had a 3rd grade literally chorus teacher, and I can't sing, but that also saw me for the gifts that I had and just really encouraged me and pushed me to do things that I was not comfortable. And she said, "If you're going to make it, you're going to be really uncomfortable, so you can sit quiet and get all your As in a corner and you can push." So she pushed me, and it was all about singing. What's the thing, "I am 16 going on 17?" Which one of the movies? And singing, walking across the stage. She just pushed. It was like one of those stand-and-deliver moments of like, "You're going to do this." I'll never forget that, and I did it. That was not comfortable.

Then there are people that I've never met that I feel like are in me, like Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni, Donna Summer. I told you my parents got me those books, but they also used to make—they were life-sized Barbies, at the time, and also life-sized posters, so I had Donna Summer, "On the Radio," and I had Nikki Giovanni * with her books up on my wall as a young girl, so I just feel like I held that, you know, through tough times of like you can make your life what you need it to be. I'm sure there are so many.

Later on, I discovered, who I didn't even know in college, bell hooks. I didn't know bell hooks and Audrey Lord, again, in college. I got that stuff afterwards. I was in a search. You can see in my thesis I was searching for some other idea of feminism that was more inclusive of my experience, and then it was there, but I didn't have teachers, at

the time, that knew to direct me there, but I found that, so all of those are places I go for comfort. I can pick up an Audrey Lord something or a bel hooks anything and just feel filled up. And Du Bois, because, to me, his work is part of my entry point into the Berkshires. Maybe I could have written a different essay and Brian would have still accepted me, but I don't know.

It was really about opening my mind to Du Bois and that excitement and enthusiasm about this new world for my math and science brain and spelling bees, pretty structured. This is how you spell a word. This is how you do a math problem, to humanities, like liberal arts studying.

JM: Expansive, very expansive.

GV: I don't know if I answered your question.

JM: And reading Du Bois, he was such a beautiful writer.

GV: The double consciousness and the veil and revisiting my old papers from then right now, because we're doing the 150th work, and it's just amazing.

JM: What are you doing for the 150th?

GV: That's a whole big question.

JM: Good, because we're dying to know.

GV: Really?

JM: Yeah.

45: 35 Here GV: So originally I was just serving as part of the committee on the W.E.B. Du Bois educational series, along with NAACP, with **John Horan** and celebrating Du Bois' birthday, so that's really exciting, and that day is becoming more and more robust every day, so that will be fun. And then the town of Great Barrington

had enough initiative or insight or something to say, “We need to honor. We need to get ahead of this and think about what we’re going to do,” and they asked Randy Weinstein of the Du Bois Center, and me, of multicultural BRIDGE, to co-chair the town’s 150th celebration, so we have been working on that since April, or maybe March, and it’s great.

We’re kicking off January 18th at the Mahaiwe, with the one-man play about Du Bois’ life, and a community dance and a Jacob’s Pillow dancer, and I imagine a singer and a keynote, and then I am working very hard with National Grid and sign people and town people to get nice banners of Du Bois. So we’ve chosen the four values of progressive education, civil rights, economic justice, racial equality. Those are the four values that are going to be up with Du Bois’s picture up and down the town Main Street for at least the first part of the year.

We are amplifying all organizations that already are living out Du Bois’s work already, so there’s a Dubois150th.com where you can read about all this. So we have a whole list of people that are already partnering or putting up an event in honor of Du Bois in that time period, between January 18th and February 23rd, and also that are already doing the work in the community, like Housatonic Heritage Trail is listed there. So we have interns and stuff as we are able hyperlinking to people’s websites and Facebooks, but at least we have something there.

People like the Clinton Church Restoration Project, NAACP with the Housatonic Heritage Trail, BCC, OLLI, Simon’s Rock, they’re all putting up events in honor of Du Bois or collaborating on some of the kickoff at the birthday, and so my job is to make sure we’re doing it in an equitable, **culturally-competent** manner. Randy is the historian of our team, and we have three pockets we’re trying to do: celebrate Du Bois,

continue to learn about Du Bois, have Du Bois be a household community name, and so celebrate, honor, and legacy projects.

Some of it's controversial. The naming of the school thing, we've been having lots of conversations and meetings about that; still not ready to do that, but they are considering naming a library after him, which is pretty huge, because they have to do some policy changing to be able to name any part of the school after a person. The head of the school committee is willing to do that, and so we're thinking about naming a library after Du Bois.

The mural project is in its tenth year with Railroad Street, but it's grown and expanded, because of this work in coalition. And so now it's not at Carr Hardware anymore. There'll be three murals throughout the area in Great Barrington. Today I'm leaving here to go to continue to advocate for a bust or a statue, or some memorial, and that's controversial, so as many people as you know you could talk to about having that be—

JM: Where are you talking about the bust?

GV: We would like the town to do it, but they're not quite sure, and so if the town doesn't do it, then we are today talking to the First Congregational Church about maybe housing on their property; and we also have talked to the St. James folks who feel like they're not ready for that, but they are willing to put a plaque in the church to say, "Du Bois worshiped here." So we'll ask for the school. We'll take the library. We'll ask for the statue. We'll take a plaque in your church. And this is a lot of the community organizing work that is coming through BRIDGE and all of our racial justice folk and

other people in the community that I'm asking to continue the conversation, write letters, write to Smitty, and write to whoever you need to do.

So we're doing as much legacy work in the most calling and loving educational ways we can to get them to understand that Du Bois should be honored as the global icon that he is. And so we've already held some classes about --some of the pushback is Du Bois was a Communist, so if you pull out Du Bois's letter to the Communist Party of the U.S.A., it is nothing but reflective of the values that we're fighting against right now with our new administration: the same values, the same ones: health care, education, poverty.

Simon's Rock did a data study. I've taken it to our Greylock teaching fellows. Frances Jones-Sneed on her own did a PD with the superintendents, and they felt like that was a part of this. I'm encouraging everyone in every corner to do as much about Du Bois as possible. I love the article that the *Eagle* ran, and the *Record's* written something. *Berkshire* magazine has written something, so as much as we can catalyze happening, we're going to keep going.

JM: Can we talk about the bust a little? Where do you want it to be?

GV: If it's a bust, in Town Hall; if it's a statue, on the land; if it's a monument, somewhere on town property. There's just a lot of concern about it being too political.

JM: Are there other busts or things already there?

GV: Yes. So this is some of the conversation. Well, what about William Stanley, or what about somebody that was born in West Stockbridge, or what about Mumbet. All these people's birthdays, if you'd like me to serve on the committee, I will sign my life away, but right now we're talking about Du Bois' 150th. I mean, I will if we need to do

something for William Stanley. So these are the conversations I'm having constantly. If my hair is all gray by the end of February, I will have earned it.

JM: You'll have earned it. That's what you come to learn when you start getting gray.

GV: So we really want something, and our dream still, why we're going to this meeting this afternoon is to just say, "We've decided this is where this thing is going to be held," and we'll at least, by his birthday, have a marker of some sort. And in that work they're really doing the deeper work that BRIDGE does. We're looking and we've identified eight African-American sculptors in Massachusetts that have already done historical figures so that when we get to this point of a yes, which I'm holding, we will have people picked out to apply and respond to RFPs and stuff, so there's a committee working on all that, so we're doing research.

JM: Great. That's great, because we've been wondering, and I've been hearing little things, so I'm really happy to hear about the Great Barrington piece. I didn't know about the town. That's great.

GV: And that the town is trusting. I mean, they're a little nervous, but they are trusting Randy and me.

JM: Good. That's great. That's a big step.

GV: It's all in coalition. Randy and I are co-chairing, but the whole goal is collaboration and as many voices as possible.

JM: You'll get more done that way.

GV: Many hands, many voices.

JM: So issues that are of concern right now, contemporary issues, things that you are concerned about or that you, as a member of the NAACP or as a leader of multicultural BRIDGE, any of those or all of those together: what's on your mind right now in this very moment of December of 2017? We're in the United States of America. We're in Pittsfield or Great Barrington. What do you see as a big challenge for us, for you?

GV: I'm just going to put it in the context of our President and the leadership and whoever actually is, while he's giving us a reality TV show, whoever's back in the room making all these terrible policies. So one concern is that America can disconnect from media and the antics and really do the work they need to do where it's happening, which are the policies that keep sneaking up. Because he's the TV show that we're all watching. He's terrifying, but he's not the one making all the decisions.

I want people to be smart about where they put their energy and time, because I honestly feel like this is a little Pollyanna, and my husband's just like, "I don't know how you do this," but every day, by the end of the day, I'm crazy, and the next day I wake up and be like, okay, here we go,. Because I honestly believe that our country is at a time of just deciding who we're going to be, and it's time to mature. We're a young country, so we put out all these ideals, and the forefathers were living in their context.

We're living in this context, so it's up to us to make the United States live into the values that it said. We can't keep blaming Lincoln and Jefferson and going back to that. They're not here, and I imagine they were pushing the edge at their time, and I know what that feels like, so they could only get this far. It's our time to take it into the 21st century, so I want people to be courageous and smart, and use whatever resources

they have, and I'm worried about that, that we've kind of been muted by media and muted by comfort or complacency or ignorance. That's what I feel like is the biggest problem, because I think the masses want good, and the masses can create good if they just do it. That's what I feel like.

JM: Very interesting, and hopeful. It's just about turning. What I hear you saying is that we're all sort of tuned into this show, and if we could just turn it off and start doing, we'd probably do a much better job.

GV: Yeah. Just go show up at the State House. I've never written a policy before. When it was time to do the Safe Communities Act, we sat down, and we had, for all the reasons, had only four weeks to get it done, and we did it, and it was passed. One group of people that came together to get our little town to do this trust policy, which really impacted immigrants and ripples out to families all over. So everybody could just go sit in their room and do their part in that way. They're just policies. They were manmade by people living in their time period.

JM: An alumnus of your school said—and I don't know if you were there for that—when Eli Pariser, “It's nothing but us chickens.”

GV: That's great.

JM: He was in awe of people, and then he started testifying before Congress, and he realized, they're really not smarter than I am, in fact, but it's the same sort of thing.

GV: So I believe that, and some people have more reason to be afraid than others, which is a lot of the work I spend a lot of time doing is those people that have that privilege of voice without the negative impact. You need to be the front line, even if they're informed by other people, and they need to be informed. That need is there,

working alongside people that their voices have been marginalized, but you still might have to be the face of it just to get it done, but you can still center the voice and experience of people that have been marginalized. So that's the racial justice and equity work that I'm spending a lot of time doing. I don't know if that answered—it's sort of broad.

JM: It's an answer, and it's what you thought of for the answer, and it's really interesting and hopefully inspires somebody to go make a policy or go get in a group and do something. And it's also very hopeful, the fact that you believe that people—if the masses all got together and did, they would tend toward—I mean, I think Obama said, “The arc of history bends toward justice,” or something, I forget what it's quoted, something like that. That brings us to another question that the NAACP has asked that we ask—there are two of them. One of them is, what was it like for you when Obama was elected?

GV: So the irony is I was actually with Randy Weinstein. We went to his house, and my kids were little, and his kids were still around. Because Randy and I spent time with each other for a few years, so just going back to that moment, we were at Randy's house when Obama was first elected; just kind of some context about Randy, I actually interned at the Du Bois Center when I was a Simon's Rock student, so we've known each other for decades.

It was a hopeful moment and a very scary moment for me. I felt like it was super exciting, and I'm like, I hope people remember what he just inherited, and I hope he's safe. I hope he doesn't get shot. I remember I had all of those feelings. It was all those things. It was hopeful and terrifying, and kind of distrustful, people not realizing

what a _ I'm not going to swear – what an s‘show—I don’t want to swear— that he got from the previous President. We were in shambles financially and just a big mess, and I think it’s typical for people with African-American heritage to do the cleanup and do some of that hard work. That was how I felt, so excited.

JM: Scared.

GV: Scared. We’re living from that fear, so the backlash or white-lash is what we’re living right now, so as soon as he got elected, I think people were planning this, what we’re living right now. We need to get planning right now, two and three years from now, to keep this moving in the right direction. So that’s what I felt. You can’t take away what it’s like for my kids to have seen a president of color. Those things are really real, and with such grace and dignity, I mean, he’s quite amazing. You can’t take that away.

Then we do our intergenerational training, and the millennials get critiqued for so much, so we’ve almost become a millennial champion a lot of times, because their context was us knocking Bush and Monica Lewinsky. That’s what they were brought into as what they were looking at as our leadership of our country, so that cynicism and that kind of attribute that they get of maybe not believing in voting or needing to be convinced of certain things is well earned.

We gave them that show to watch, and people forget that, and there’s a lot of millennial bashing that happens, and they actually are quite socially-justice-minded, but they also grew up in that context. The training I go through, the context for each of the generations, with Obama, that, I think, is super empowering for my younger kids, very

different than my older ones, because they saw Michelle Obama and Barack Obama, and that's their reality.

JM: For eight years. That's a big chunk of time.

GV: I'm hopeful in that regard too.

JM: Another question, you hinted at it before, but as an African-American, what's it like to be in the Berkshires? What is it like to be an African-American in the Berkshires?

GV: So I've chosen to be here and raise my family here with many opportunities to leave, and when I was a single mom I felt like this was the safest place for my young African-American male to be raised with the resources I had, at the time, which is ironic, and I think I was thinking about physical-body safety in a small community and sort of access that you have that way. And there's other costs that I understand more now, and maybe I understood them, but the other ones outweighed the others. So I feel like that's really an important piece, as an African-American woman with two children, one with a major disability. This was a great place to start.

I feel like I have been able to develop relationships, that people know me, and I have an opportunity to build something that actually serves our community, and it also serves so many communities so well in a way that I didn't even understand it would. because of the particular struggles I have in getting to make a case for the work here. When I go to other places, it's easier in some strange ways. I would assume either they would have been well further down the road and wouldn't need something like a BRIDGE or what I had wouldn't be appropriate, because of the community that I've been doing it in, and it's been the complete opposite of that.

So the value I've found as an African-American woman, able to have these conversations in a predominately white area has served me well, in national consulting gigs that I've been doing, especially in the political space, and then places like King Arthur Flour in Vermont, that they're in a similar demographic, and they're like, oh, this lady's courageous enough to do this, so come here. So then I've done it in New Hampshire and Vermont. But then when I get into an urban setting, it's just very interesting, because it's like I almost feel like I have more allies in a room, so I feel more supported, so then I'm stronger in a different way, because there's other people saying some of the things that I am somewhat the only source of that information in a room, so my facilitation skills shift. It immediately feeds me in, so I just kind of am stronger, so that's good. I don't know if I answered your question.

JM: Sort of why you decided to be here.

GV: It's beautiful. There's spots here I find are sanctuaries, and I grew up here. I needed to heal and grow, and this is a place to do that. The Berkshires are amazing.

JM: I've wondered myself. I've wondered many times before I was asked to ask this question, what is it like? I live in Stockbridge, and I rarely see an African-American person, and when I do I think, well, does this person want me to ignore him, acknowledge him? How does it feel to be in a place like Stockbridge?

GV: It's hard. Almost everywhere you could be the only one in a room, all most good intentional spaces about this work, then you might find more people, and that's just hard. It's sort of been my existence being in the military. In the courses that I was in, I was always in that space, so I have a bit of experience just my whole life, so it's hard. For a long time, I was looking to get out of here, and my children, especially my oldest

son, felt like this was home. And then when he went off to college, then I was sort of rooted with my husband and my younger kids, and that was okay, because I'm not going. It took me a while to give up. Next year I'm going. Next year I'm going. Next year I'm going.

What we did was, we always traveled. We went to my mom's in Virginia. We traveled more to get that experience that my kids needed. I would drive all the way up here to get one of Shirley's Rites-of-Passage Steppers to babysit my kids, for my husband and I to go out and drive 45 minutes, go pick up a sitter to come down so my kids would have a role model of somebody in that age, because their older siblings were off to college. So there's weird things. Who would do that? Who would drive an hour to get their babysitter? We have things. You can't get your hair done the way you wanted it to get done around here.

I drive to Brooklyn. I go to Virginia. Now I go to New Jersey. There's just basic things that you don't have to think about if you're not an African-American. There's lots of challenges, and then the Berkshires, I think, generally are filled with white liberal-minded people, and they I find more challenging than having a Trump-voting non-supporter sometimes, because it's hard for them to see the parts of them that they don't want to see. And then I need their support, so that makes it really hard to do that work sometimes. It's the hardest work actually, because if I offend, and then you're gone, then I'm really isolated, because I'm not going to get the support I need from the Trump-voting people. But then I also need the commitment to growth and self-education and self-awareness, which I don't always get, and so that's hard.

JM: So sometimes the liberals, they have their identities so well defined already, they don't really want to—

GV: Right, and they're not that, so that makes them good. All of us have work to do, like I said to you earlier. I'm learning about everything I'm talking about today every day and shifting, so I feel like everybody else should. There's no one that shouldn't feel like they're on that journey. There's a really strong weight defense mechanism in holding on to the liberal ideals that make it okay not to be separate from Trump or whoever, but there's so much work still to unpack and so much work to do, and so getting people to know that and do it, it's hard.

JM: Knowing it's probably the hardest part.

GV: Yeah, and oftentimes they have the language and a concept, but you know you can have a theory of anything, and then actually applying it is a totally different experience, no matter what it is.

JM: Of course. I'm sure you learn that all the time, because you have these wonderful ideas, and then when you go into the place and you have to actually do them, that's got to be challenging sometimes.

GV: Yeah. I forget the phrase, but I have the essence of it. It's like I plan, plan, plan, but then I know when I step into a room that it'll just be what it is, because I really have to respond to the room and the people in the room.

JM: Did we miss anything, Gwendolyn? I got it....

GV: It used to be I was just in trouble with Gwendolyn. I'd tell that story, the full name when you're in trouble and you did something yelling up the stairs. I didn't get in trouble often. And then so people always shorten it naturally. People do it with lots of

names, and I just realized when I turned 35, so it's like ten years now, that I really liked my name and the fullness of it. My grandmother and my grand-aunt chose it for me, and so it has that connection and meaning, so I just have been on a ten-year journey of trying to get people to call me Gwendolyn. It's super hard, because usually when people do it, they're doing it affectionately or for familiarity. It has meaning to use the full name.

JM: Is your name Wendy?

WENDY: My given name is Wendy, but my father used to call me Gwendolyn.

GV: Oh, really?

WENDY: It was my nickname.

JM: I think you did tell me that.

GV: Your nickname? That's so funny.

JM: That's so interesting.

GV: That's nice.

WENDY: And my mother now calls me Gwen.

JM: Interesting.

GV: They must have wanted to do it. They should have gone for it, Gwendolyn.

The Latino community calls me Gwendy, so it's more like Wendy than Gwendolyn, and then I discovered Gwendolyn Brooks. She was on one of my posters when I was young, and I always wondered if my grandmother and grand-aunt had heard about her. I wondered where the name came from for them, but she would have been young in that time.

JM: Names are so interesting, aren't they, what they mean to us? Gwendolyn means something to you.

GV: It's connected to me, my grandmother and grand-aunt.

JM: And you've lived with it for all these years now. It's yours. It's you.

Somebody will name their kid after you.

GV: I don't know. Maybe. It's a good name. I like that. I like it. One of my friends on the military base was Guinevere, and she went by Gwen too. It was fun.

JM: It looks like a Welsh name.

GV: It's funny.

JM: Because it's got that Y in it, and GW.

WENDY: There were a lot of Welsh down in Appalachia.

JM: And that's interesting, because the GW, when I go to Philadelphia—

GV: Where I was born, went to university.

JM: And all of those town names have all of these Ys, Bryn Mawr.

GV: That's right.

JM: These Ws and these Ys. It's pretty. Thank you very much for doing this.

GV: Thank you.

JM: I hope we didn't forget anything.

GV: You asked about my native family. I didn't talk about my family.

WENDY: I know.

JM: Your children, you mean?

GV: Yeah.

WENDY: Your husband.

JM: We've got to go back to your family. Let's do that. We don't want to skip them.

GV: Just their names.

JM: Of course. We would have asked you for that anyway.

GV: Later?

JM: Yeah.

GV: So just really quickly, JV is my oldest.

JM: And your husband.

GV: Samuel, and Sam's a Berkshire native, and he's white, and we could talk a whole other hour-and-a-half about what that's like, but he's so good, and he's such a rock and a support. We're doing some renovation on our house, and so his schoolbooks are now in his office. I was sitting in his office on my phone, and I looked down, and he had this book, *White Women, Race Matters*, and I opened it up, and his college paper was in there about white privilege and growing up in the Berkshires. It had nothing to do with me. It was a college paper, so it meant something to me, and that just happened this past weekend.

JM: Never stops, these revelations.

GV: And then JV, I had when I was still at Simon's Rock. That's the biggest thing about him, and I still finished college, and people thought that that wasn't going to happen, but I did. He's a graduate of Lesley University in holistic psych, and he works with me at BRIDGE, and he works at Simon's Rock where he was born, for all intents and purposes.

JM: How old is he?

GV: He's 27, and he went to Lesley for expressive arts therapy, but he switched to holistic psych in his senior year, and I wanted to kill him, but it was fine. He had enough

credit, like I did, doing enough credit. He just found that holistic psych really fit, and then he still uses all the expressive arts therapy, so now he's actually building a podcast room in the process of the renovation, and he's doing some podcasts about all these issues and his journey.

And then Jess is autistic, and she's 25, and she's now developing her own program for her adult life, so she's doing work at Purradise and Berkshire Humane Society and developing social wellness groups for her and her friend group, because they're sort of a lost group, these 20-something women, and she's been through four programs, and none of them served her well, and so we actually found that DDS] has a program called Participant Directed, and what I'm very happy is that in my journey, she's been trained as a very good advocate, and if you talk to anyone at TDS, she's a really good self-advocate, so she's now building her own program, which is the second person in Berkshire County to do that.

It's a resource that people haven't been using here, so she and I are really working on letting other families know that this is an option that you can create your own life and have the resources you need, so helping her do that. And Sam's helping by helping build a co-living space, because he's a project manager in private construction, and he's helping do the new Berkshire co-op project, and so he's been working on that for a couple of years, and now it's coming to fruition. We're also renovating our garage/barn for Jess to do this co-living thing.

And then Maya's my 14-year-old, and she has type-1 diabetes. I'm telling you all this, because I consider myself a mother of diversity. Every child I have has had their own particular extra challenges. Maya's a type-1 diabetic since age eight, and she's a

powerhouse. She's high honors. She's a really great kid, class president in 4th grade as a little girl.

JM: Maya Angelou, is that who she's named for?

GV: Yes. And then Wesley is 11, and he's just a little rock. He's looks like a 17-year-old football player. He just started football and wrestling. But he's also doing dance. He's just very sweet. He's like his dad. He takes care of people. So that's my tribe. JV's bi-gender, so that's interesting about him. He's gay and bi-gender, so navigating that through his high school was interesting. I just have to say it, because we are quite the crew. We've amassed a lot of skills helping each person live into their life.

JM: That's a nice way to talk about it too and think about it. We've amassed a lot of skills, because we do when we get challenged. How do you stay sort of centered? Is there something you do as a practice?

GV: Well, this is fun. I don't know if you are on Facebook. You might be, I think. So staying connected to my body and taking care of myself is super hard. I could work all day and not go to the bathroom, eat, which is really bad, so I'm always trying to recalibrate. So I did the certificate in positive psych at Kripalu three years ago, which helped me with my BRIDGE program, but also helped resource me. And one of the things I loved there was the let your yoga dance that they do at noontime at Kripalu. It's my little pitch, because anyone can go for \$5, and it's so amazing.

There's a meditative practice. It's moving yoga. It's moving through your chakra energies, so for me to try to do something that I can manage, I actually became a certified instructor a month ago. Talk about joy and fun.

JM: Where do you teach it?

GV: I have not yet. I'm helping Jess get it for this group done, but I brought in another one of my graduates from Lenox, a co-graduate, so that we're designing it together, and Amanda's delivering it for Jess and I'm Jess' mom, but then I'm crafting a course that's like a racial justice and equity one, so the songs moving through the chakras match to the process of this work, is what I'm doing, and so when that's launched I will offer it, but I'm very excited. It gives me a lot of excitement.

JM: Well, in the body, that's exciting. Is it the same as what they used to call dance kinetics?

GV: Yeah. I think they all franchised off and did their brand, so there's a somatic line with the guy in Lenox, Levinson, and then Megha, who's a 35-year-Kripalu veteran.

JM: I think I have a DVD of her.

GV: So she's my teacher. She did the positive psych program as one of the team, so she's the teacher, and they're actually in January—we and ----- yoga dances in Oprah's magazine.

JM: Whoa. Cool.

GV: Super cool, so I'm very excited. I'm so pumped about that, because it's a really good practice. When these guys were little, I did mom and baby yoga and stuff, and I just need to stretch and breathe. But the yoga dance—when we were on the military bases, I remember being dragged along to Jazzercise and watching Richard Simmons with my mom, and there's a little bit of that and Kripalu mixed in.

JM: Even that is centering.

GV: For me it's really good, and just cooking and eating and being with family. I don't watch television, and I try to staff off media a lot, so that keeps me, I think, more

centered, because I stay out of that space as I try to intentionally craft what I look at on Twitter and Facebook and stuff. My days are full without.

JM: You don't need it. That's great. Well, that was a nice little piece.

GV: Actually, _____

JM: Also the dancing.

GV: The dancing.

JM: That's sort of in your being.

GV: Yeah. It's good. I can go there in any kind of headspace or emotional space, and it really intentionally moves through the chakras and I believe in that, and so I feel like it kind of moves through, so it's my practice and also what I want to bring to other people in my journey of being connected with body and doing all that too has a lot of different things. And I do serve as the Berkshire County Commissioner on the status of women. You know that, right?

JM: Yeah.

GV: I was the chair for three years, but I look back, it's been seven years. I can't believe—I didn't realize that.

JM: What are they working on?

GV: Our job is to be in tune with the women and girls' experience in Berkshire County, and we're all appointed officials, and we report back to the Mass. commissioner who works with the women's caucus. We're the longest-standing commission in Massachusetts, and I was able to do a webinar for the National Association of the Council of Women on how to kind of keep a commission going and revise it, because when I

came in, I clearly brought an equity inclusion they hadn't focused on before, and so that was interesting to national groups. So there's 11 in the world (012108).

This other little mission I've had all the time of these ten years is put the Berkshires on the map. You know how western Mass. stops at Springfield? So I intentionally am always trying to get resources out here to help us be accountable in our practices, and also bring the resources that we need, and so the commission was one of those. It was a direct link to the State House, and so that's why. And the women connection, we are minority-women-run, but sometimes I felt like that was not being honored as much in the work I was doing at BRIDGE, and so that was my space where I was like, this is something that's always been really important to me, the women's leadership and women's voices, so that's why I found that to begin with, and then I've been sticking it out.

So sometimes it can look like policy. Sometimes it can look like holding forum in high schools or in communities. That's how I've discovered them is they did a forum in Stockbridge actually, and they asked me to get diverse voices there, so I brought our immigrant women's group there. What does diversity look like in South County? I got them to that Stockbridge meeting, and then they invited me to join, so that's how that happened.

JM: Did you have something you wanted to ask, Wendy?

WENDY: Shirley was just interviewed. We just did Shirley. I was interested in your connection with Shirley.

JM: Ask the question so it can be heard, because our transcriber always has trouble with that.

WENDY: I was interested in hearing a little bit more about your relationship with Shirley. You had mentioned the babysitting, but Shirley was just interviewed, so I thought there might be a way to connect.

GV: So Shirley, this is funny, when I was doing my work, they kept saying in the beginning of BRIDGE, “You’ve got to meet this lady who has these kids dancing in her living room. She’s working really hard in Pittsfield,” so we kept hearing each other’s name, or, I guess, at that point, I was just hearing hers, but I found out later she was also hearing mine. And then at one of Governor Patrick’s gatherings at his home, someone said, “Shirley Edgerton, that’s Shirley Edgerton.” I went over to her. I said, “Oh, my God, I had just been hearing about you.” Again, like I said, we’re isolated. I had never met.

And so we met there, and, honestly, I don’t spend as much time with Shirley as I’d like. I feel like we both hold a lot of work and a lot for our community, so we don’t get to spend as much time together, but I definitely—the Women of Color Giving Circle honored me early on and our BRIDGE award ceremony, the first one that we did with Governor Patrick, we honored Shirley. We overlap work. If I’m confused, I can call Shirley to give me some guidance and structure and framework for things, Pittsfield and historical references.

I admire her a great deal and the work that she does and the time that she’s had into it. It’s longer than mine, and ten years feels like a long time. I don’t know. I can’t say more about how the community has—we wouldn’t be the same without her. I sometimes think that she should run for office. I’ve said that to her a few times. I know **she’s out supporting female politicians and I am too on a national and local level.**

Tahira came here as the Mass. Commission on the status of women to hear the talk, and then I know she's been back for Four Freedoms and NAACP.

JM: Can I ask you a question too? *Wendy asks about community leader, Shirley Edgerton....*

GV: ----- and Youth Alive danced at most of our early-on performances, and then BRIDGE just got busy in a different way. We haven't done that, but for our tenth anniversary I hope they come back, but if you look at our website, there's lots of pictures of Shirley and her girls. I have a lot of respect and honor her work and trust her work.

JM: Now Shirley and all the women, I think, that we've interviewed before all mentioned growing up with a church experience, and I wonder if this is generational, if something is changing. First of all, your personal experience, and then I'd like to hear your thoughts about church as a role in the community.

GV: So I wish you could do my training. So there's a part in each part of my training about the necessity for spiritual space. In four wheels of health, spirituality is important as far as a resource that people have. Again, your intellect you can't really take away. Spirituality is one of those. It really is a marker of African-American culture. My family was Southern Baptist. They actually then switched when my grandmother moved to a different Christian-based religion. She also changed church denominations. I can't remember which one it is, although that's where all the funerals happen. I can't remember the denomination.

What happened in the military is the church, there was the Catholic service, and then there was everybody else. So I, not my mom or my dad, but I would get my little

sister and brother dressed up and we'd walk to church on Sunday morning, so for me I felt motivated to find that. When I came up here, after the first couple of years, again, I thought there were seven people that lived in Great Barrington, but then as I became more of an upperclassman and actually moved off campus and stuff, I started exploring the churches, and the one that caught my interest, which I relate to the military experience, was the Unitarian Universalist, because it wasn't just one thing, and the other churches were small and not as well welcoming right away which I feel like is a New England marker.

For some reason, the Unitarian, probably for reasons I would critique in my training, were very excited about my showing up with my children, and they were so welcoming, so I joined the Unitarians and really appreciate their seven beliefs, and both my older ones did the coming-of-age process. And I also taught eight years of religious education, which means I ran a crew of kids with a co-teacher through learning about all the different religious possibilities, spirituality paths, and then kids crafting their belief statement, which often were a blend of all those.

I am a UU. I'm on the UU Board for social justice for Massachusetts, and have Southern Baptist roots, and when Reverend Dozier was alive, I used to make sure I did Easter at her church, the Zion Church, because that felt more like what I was looking for and what my family represented. And she was amazing, and I always hold the visions of what she wanted for South County and the Berkshires and the Zion Church, so I had some really meaningful moments. She would be on my list of mentors, and so it was really hard when she left.

JM: Do you want to say something about her?

GV: Just that. I mean, she had such vision, and she was starting to realize it, and I just remember the days that I was at the church and the busloads of little African-American children came from Philadelphia to learn about Du Bois and see this church, like little Zions. I remember she'd always invite me, and I'd go. I don't know. She was just welcoming and a real beacon, and she had some real vision for the community and what we could be doing and told me to stick it out, because I told you that I was leaving every year, so she told me, "Can't leave. You have work to do." That was really important to me.

Fran O'Neil's another one. She's a little wild, but Fran is (012844), and she walks the town, and she's the second mayor. She talks to my mom, so she keeps my mom up-to-date on how I'm doing. So I feel taken in by those two women in Great Barrington. And before that when JV was little and Jess was little, I lived in Housatonic, and there was Wilene **Austin**, who was an African-American woman that took in foster children, and there weren't many black foster families, so she would always have her five kids growing up, and also others.

So here I was 20 with two children, one with a disability, and when she left town to go to Rochester, she would have me move in and I would take care of all of those kids, which I was not very much older, at the time. So she also was a mentor of what it meant to take care of community and our collective children. Fran is still here. Those women were the people I knew in South County that really pulled me.

I know that there was a lot of work and responsibility when she brought me into her house, but it was also a way of her honoring my independence, but also taking me in. I thought I was just fine and didn't meet any of the statistics that people thought

that I was as a young mom, but I think she was looking out for me, and I really love her for that.

JM: That's really sweet, and she didn't say, "I'm looking out for you." She asked you to come and help.

GV: Yeah.

JM: So that's nice,

GV: and I think a good lesson, and then religion in general, my husband and I can have an annual argument or debate, or whatever you want to call it, because he's sort of anti-organized religion for the ill that it's caused in the world, and I feel like it's just anything else. It's really unevolved/bad people that have used religion to do bad things, but it's not religion in and of itself, and I can go on about that for hours. And he can go on about the other side, but that's my belief is that it's the people that used it for their ill will, but not because religion in and of itself and organized religion is bad. I think people need to feel connected, and they need a sense of something, and I think that lack is a part of what we're seeing, that people haven't felt connected to each other, because the loss of the church. Because church is about community, and so I just hope we create a different kind of community for not going back to organized religion, as it were.

I think that in African-American culture, it is the way we survived, so I think there's just a different world view from my husband and myself, because we wouldn't be here without gospel singing and dancing in the church. It's why I think there's so many church burnings 'till today, is because that was a source of strength for us. That's what I think.

JM: And all the people we've interviewed, it's been a very big part of their lives, every single one, I think, pretty much. It's a huge topic. Thank you for sharing your view. It's really important, and I'm sure it will be listened to.

GV: Thank you. This was so fun. I didn't think I'd talk about myself this much.

JM: Well, there's an awful lot to talk about. You think about 45 years.

GV: It's true.

JM: You have a lot of experiences. Thank you very much.

GV: Thank you.

JM: We could go on and on. We could go on all day. We can have Chapter 1, Chapter 2.

GV: These last parts were super important, the religion and the family. Those are important parts to me.

JM: I had the religion in there, but I saved it until the end not on purpose, but it didn't come up, and so then I realized, oh, yeah. Usually it came up.

GV: People don't see me that way, although it's super important. It's center to me, and my faith is, again, how I think I made it through lots of really difficult times in my life. I talk about it in training, and I say, "Don't shut down when I say religion; hear a sense of purpose, engagement, and belonging." That's what I want people to hear, and I just say that that's one of the areas of poverty and privilege. It's one of our areas of health. We have to have that, and it may not be in going to an organized church, but we do need to have that.

JM: Very interesting. Well, when you said church is about community, if people see it as that, I mean, it certainly is. You know. I mean, when you move all the time,

especially, a lot of times people who move, that's the first thing they look—they used to look for the church or the synagogue or whatever it was they would affiliate with. It was the first sort of point to—send your kids to school, find out where the church is, that kind of thing, and it helps you connect. I'm really grateful for your view on it, because it's very well-articulated, and so someone who doesn't know about it, the first time thinking about it, it's nice to hear something so well-articulated.

GV: Thank you.

JM: Thank you.

[end]