INTERVIEW: Jackie Washington
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Arvey
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Interviewer: **Why don't you give me directions? Driving directions or something like that?**

J. Washington: Oh, you want know how to get from here to Detroit. Let me see I think I would go back to Main Street, head out to M-14, then take that already to Plymouth, then join 696, and head home from there.

Interviewer: **I'm going to start recording now.**

J. Washington: All right.

Interviewer: **The first set of questions has to do with your personal biography and your earlier years.**

J. Washington: All right.

Interviewer: **Try to pinpoint what might have influenced you to your feminist activism early on.**

J. Washington: All right.

Interviewer: **So, we're going to start from the beginning. If you could talk about where you were born, what year, and your family circumstances during your earlier years.**

J. Washington: Well I was born in 1931 in St. Augustine, Florida. My mother was a schoolteacher and my father a pharmacist, and of course we lived in the south and I grew up in Miami, and most of the time we were living in segregated situations. So I came from a background in which activism perhaps was never encouraged, because in order to preserve your life and preserve your way of life you did not challenge the authority. That is something you don't do. In fact, your family taught you not to do that because they knew that was the way to survive. So I came up in segregated part of the city, segregated school all my whole life.

My mother and father were separated when I was about 12 years old. My father had an alcoholism problem and there was a lot of family abuse, which we didn't talk about. It was one of those things that even though my mother was a professional woman and had to go to work with a black eye or whatever. She wore the dark glasses and stoically went on and nobody talk about because in

those days you just did not talk about abuse. It was something that was a family secret, you kept behind close doors and I was always told you don't talk about this; you don't talk about things that happen in your house. So I went through many years of living in that situation.

As I reflect on it, my father, who was a very educated man, was very frustrated by Jim Crow laws not able to provide for his family the way that he did, wanted to. And I'm sure that he turned to alcoholism as a way to cope with what he was doing; that did not help us very much. And so therefore, it made for a troublesome childhood, but fortunately, both my mother and father love me greatly and I was the only child. So I think that compensated for some of the problems that we may have had. My mother remarried when I was 15 years old and that turned out to be much more pleasant situation because my stepfather came in and became a father and a real grandfather to my children later on.

I graduated from high school at about 16 and went away to college. I went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, which was an all Black college, a historic Black college. And that is where I went. My husband who was at that time going to graduate school at Meharry Medical College, and of course I thought that was really big stuff for me. An undergraduate co-ed dating a guy who was already at dental school. That was already so exciting for me. I never thought that would happen.

Interviewer: **Was it assumed that you would go to college throughout your childhood?**

J. Washington: Oh! There was no question about it! In fact one of the family joke was that my father when I was 4 years old that I was going to go to Radcliffe. I had no idea where Radcliff was. But that's the kind of thing in their mind that was what I was going to do. But that's not to say that a Black child was going to make it to Boston go to Radcliff. But it was just one those things that were understood you were to make something of your life, you would be educated. And my mother, of course, thought I should go and get my teaching certificate like she had so that I could always support myself in the case that something else happened to me, just as she had to support the family for a period of time after her divorce. She wanted to make sure that I could do the same. Now I had no intentions of being a teacher but anyways that's another story, and so yes, I went to college with the idea that whatever degree I was going to get it was going to be something that would help me support myself if the time ever came that I would have to do that.

Interviewer: **Where was Fisk College?**

J. Washington: In Nashville, Tennessee.

Interviewer: **So was the climate as far as being an African American and an activist different at that time?**

J. Washington: Well, don't forget I was not an activist at that time. It was still a culture in which it was before Martin Luther King; this was before the days of integration. So, even moving to Nashville I was living in the segregated south, in which we — that was probably why I went to Nashville to Fisk University, where it was a closed environment where they supported the students and tried to keep them away from all the things that were going around in the city. Well, when we went to the city we had to go to segregated theaters through the alley upstairs to go into the balcony, that's where we sat. We had to go downtown to shop; you couldn't try on clothes, anything like that. So this was just preceding the era in which Martin Luther King and the Montgomery boycott and all that. So before then no you're not an activist, you're not encouraged to be that. You're encouraged to speak up for yourself, but within limits, if you were going to survive. So, that gives you an idea of the background in which I came from. One which were very protective and making sure you didn't do anything that was going to irritate the establishment, and that's why later on my mother was just amazed with the things that I was doing because it's just not what a cultured African American young woman would get involved in. You were supposed to be very very cultured and rather conservative in the things that you do.

Interviewer: Before we move on to talk about your activism, did you practice any religion while you were growing up that might also have influenced the way you turned out and your path?

J. Washington: I don't think so. Let me say that my father was Baptist, my mother was what was now United Methodist and that's the church that I grew up, the United Methodist church. I was brought up in the church and then continued to be a practicing Methodist for awhile, then of course when I got to college, like most people didn't do much of anything, and then I only returned to becoming a churchgoer after I was grown and married and began to have children.

Interviewer: And you said you met your husband in college while he was in grad school?

J. Washington: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you get married?

J. Washington: Yes, we got married just at graduation. He was graduating from medical dental school and I was graduating from Fisk the same year.

Interviewer: And did you all move?

J. Washington: Yes, he entered the army right after graduation because that was the way he was able to help pay for his dental schooling, the government paid for it, and in return he had to give two years of service. So we, he went into the military and we stayed there for two years before coming to the Detroit area. We were in

Pennsylvania for two years and that was where my first child was born.

Interviewer: **How many children do you have?**

J. Washington: I have three children. I have two daughters and a son.

Interviewer: **Okay, great. So what did you, what lead you to the feminist movement then? How did it come into the picture?**

J. Washington: Well, that didn't come for a long time because when I came to Detroit and had a family, I had always wanted to go to the school of social work. And in fact, before I made a decision to get married in Nashville, I had applied to Columbia and was accepted and was excited about going to New York for the possibility of getting a Masters in social work. Then of course love triumphs over everything else, and then I decided I would get married and put my career on hold. And then I had my three children, and it was when my youngest one was getting ready to go to kindergarten that I really had the urge to go back to school, and because I lived in Detroit going to Wayne was an option — I could go to school and still be at home and be a mom. And that's what happened. I went back and got my degree in social work. I would say that was the beginning of my roots in activism.

Going to school in social work opened up a whole new world for me and I was just impressed with the people at school and how active they were in the community and the curriculum really led us to explore ways we could change the system and offer us many different avenues which that could be done. And so it began to open up a new world for me in terms of possibilities for change. I had gone on into social work because I wanted to help the poor. I wanted to do something for the oppressed, but I came out with the understanding it's not just the lady bountiful kind of thing that you do. There are many other ways in which you can make changes if you are a social worker. So, that was the beginning of it, and at that time, I decided to go into the school of social work. And in doing so I ran into a family, one in which a mother came to me whose little boy was having all kinds of problems, and we couldn't figure out exactly what was wrong with him, and even though I had many many opportunities to interview the family and to get information about the family there was nothing when I was obtaining the history that it gave any indication that anything was wrong. So one day the mother called me, she was at the bus stop, I mean the bus station in downtown Detroit, and she had the little boy with her, and she called and she said "I don't know who else to call but my husband has beat me and I can't take it anymore and I'm leaving and I have no place to go. Can you help me?" So all the time I've been seeing this little boy and interviewing the family there was this reserve about them that they never gave a hint that anything was going on.

Well of course, that just stirred a lot of memories for me and I immediately

pursued trying to find something for this person to — well I found that there was no place for her to go. That no matter what I did or no matter where I turned there was no place in that day for a woman who is battered to go. The only thing — there was no shelter, there was no assistance, in fact even the social work curriculum in some places tended to blame the woman if she was beaten. That was just the atmosphere, and tried as I may I could not find anyplace for that woman. She eventually had to go back to her husband, but in the time that I was trying to help her I called my friend Mary Jo Walsh who was at that time president of Detroit NOW and I was not interested in becoming a feminist, I just I saw that like many of my peers in the African American community as something that White women were doing and not something that I would want to do. But I respected what they were doing enough to call, pick up the phone and call Mary Jo who had become one of my classmates at the School of Social Work and say, "Look I got this problem, I got this woman, is there anything that NOW can do for her?" Well at that time NOW was powerless to do anything about this woman or any battered woman but it was something that was on their agenda and Mary Jo said to me, "Why don't you come to our next NOW meeting, executive committee meeting, and talk about your problem and see if there isn't something that we could do together?" and because she said "We have this task force on violence against women and maybe there is something that we could do." At that time, their task force was more devoted to rape, assaults, sexual assaults on women and not as much on domestic violence. This was something that was just beginning to be talk about and of course, the rest is history. I did come to the meeting; I ended up co-chairing the violence against women task force with a woman by the name of Win Fredericks. But it eventually evolved to a place where it was more of us working with violence domestic violence — not that rape wasn't still important — but because of my involvement and my really concern about this issue dating back to my personal experiences that I just went into it with great enthusiasm and great gusto.

So what do you do when nobody knows that this was a problem? Well, I started working in the task force. We did many different things. First of all speaking out against it, raising the issue. I had a lot of television interviews, radio interviews, and people were alarmed that this was something we were even talking about. You know, why are you talking about this? Because of the taboo of even bringing it out. So that was number one, number two I also worked with the police department. At that time if a woman called a police officer in terms of domestic violence they did little or nothing for her. She was always told to go back home and they would say they couldn't take sides, they couldn't find any evidence, or they also said, "Well we wouldn't take him in because we know you won't press charges and it would just be a waste of our time." Just a series of things they will say to a woman who would be called, and so she could not find any relief from the criminal justice system; the same thing was true even if they went to court. The judges were not comfortable doing anything against a man. They would always say to the women well you better go home

and work it out. Of course, when you know when she went back home the situation was worst just like that. So I spent a lot of time working with people in the community who was interested in doing something about that there were some people within the criminal system who were interested in working on it.

There was a councilman, Maryann Mahaffey, who was really interested in working on this and out of that came a task force that works with the police department in helping them to develop training for police officers in domestic violence. It was one of the first that we have in the whole nation, but we did have people who were willing to put together that kind of curriculum, people who were willing to enforce the training so that police officers could begin to understand what this meant. The other thing I was involved in was in trying to find a place for women to go who were battered. Going back to this woman who had called me to the bus station trying to find a place and we could not find a place for her to go. We began to look at places that could be shelters and nobody was thinking about shelters in Detroit. Although in some other parts of the country, those things were beginning to happen. And I remember going to the shelter, the YWCA, in downtown Detroit and meeting with their board of directors and suggesting to them, since they have this large building with a lot of dormitory space wouldn't it be wonderful if they turned some of the floors into housing for women who are victims of domestic violence. Well you would you just would be surprised how negative the response. They could not conceive of such a thing happening, even though they have this great big building with all of these rooms and they would say, "But you know we are here to provide homes for those young women who are coming into the city and have no place to stay." Well even when you point out to them that the place is empty because that was how young women did in the bygone era. Young women coming into town didn't need that anymore, and they turned me away. Well that's not going to work they don't want to hear it.

But because of the changing environment, because of the way that people were becoming more educated about it, the way the attitudes of the police were changing, I got a call from them approximately a year later maybe even two years later. You know, "We remember you coming to us talking to us about the possibility of using our place for a shelter for domestic violence, would you come back and talk to us again?" Some of the Y's at other cities were doing this and I did go back and talk to them again but the attitude had changed. It took time for the culture to change; it took time for people to understand that this was a big issue. It took time for them to realize that there was something that you could do and with the YWCA. It was women who had to take the lead and do something about it. So even though I wasn't involved in the establishment of the shelter I do believe my involvement in having to educate that board of directors in what they should do led to an opening of the very first shelter for women of domestic violence in Detroit. And it has been other shelters opened after that, but you needed a breakthrough. You needed one to take the leadership in opening it up and from then on there were many other people who

became interested in opening up a shelter in the area.

Interviewer: **Now by this time did you call yourself a feminist?**

J. Washington: Yes, I guess I did by this time; it just evolved. I must not…I didn't call myself anything, I was just an advocate for, for the women who were battered, but you can't get involve in one issue without beginning to understand how the system is like. You can't begin to understand how strong sexism is like until you deal with the police and their response, until you deal with the judges and hear their response, until you see the whole system is geared to bringing that woman back into the home and just as that's happening with her it's happening at other places, and slowly you begin to see the interrelatedness of the battered woman and the problems of women in other situations. They might not be physically threatened as the battered women were, but clearly, the whole system was geared to keep women in a certain situation. Not unlike the situation I found myself in the south where the whole situation is geared to keeping you in your place and as long as you stayed there and don't do anything about it the system is happy. It is only when you began to challenge the system that it becomes to crumble. But it takes people to begin to challenge the system. So yes, there is an interrelatedness with every bit of the system, and I learned that slowly. I didn't go into that thinking I would come out a confirmed feminist but it helped me to understand and to connect the dots if you will in terms of the situation in which women find themselves.

Interviewer: **You were a school social worker at that time?**

J. Washington: Yes, that's correct.

Interviewer: **Your work and your activism played into each other.**

J. Washington: Yes, if it had not been for that particular thing I might not have been, I might not have reached out to NOW and said, "Can you help me?" I looked everywhere, I looked to every other situation and it was the women's movement who responded. I went to Traveler's Aid other social agencies and nobody responded, it was only in NOW, women feminists who understood what the problem was and understood that this was an issue that they wanted to take on.

Interviewer: **Were you, how did you find time to do your advocacy for battered women and domestic violence and do your job and raise your children? Was that an issue?**

J. Washington: Well, that was not a problem because remember I said I did not go back to the school of social work, until the children, the youngest was going into kindergarten at that time. I had these dual roles, but the children were old enough that I can take on some other kinds of responsibilities.

Interviewer: **Was your family, immediate family, husband, children, and then your sisters and your parents, were they supportive of your activism?**

J. Washington: Yes. As I said, my mother couldn't understand it because it was so out of character for what she wanted for me to do. Although I think she was probably happy that something was being done but she was very distressed that I frequently referred to my family situation. She didn't like that at all and it took her awhile to understand that if it hadn't been for [what] you went through I would not do what I was doing now. The children thought it was exciting, they liked to participate in marches and so forth, although sometimes some of the issues we got involved in they'll say "do you always have to speak out on everything?" but I do want you to know I raised feminist children, all three of them are feminist. They worked through all of that with me and my husband was quite supportive of my actions and I tell you he took some abuse as I would imagined many of the husbands did because "are you going to let your wife go out there, who wears the pants in your family, you sound like a battered spouse" they would say to him. They was — people were uncomfortable with this and they responded in whatever way they thought appropriate. That doesn't happen anymore but it did initially.

Interviewer: **Can you recall any especially funny or dramatic moments, significant events in which you were involved?**

J. Washington: Oh dear, there been so many I'm not sure where to even begin. Let me say this: that when I left social work there were several of us who joined together to form this firm New Options and then I was really free to participate in a lot of activities as it relates to women's issues and we got involved with working with women that we were trying to find non-traditional jobs for, and that perhaps led to many of the situations in which we had, this firm in which we were going to go out and talk to employers about hiring women to work for them. Well, we had many interesting situations because the employers, especially those who hired blue collar women thought we were crazy and coming in to talk to them and they would turned us down when we [would] say, "Have you got an opening, we [would] like to place a woman in this job" and they would say, "Well, we can't do that, we only got one bathroom. And so therefore we can't hire any women." We can't do that and they [would] always make references on women being uncomfortable here: "We wouldn't want any women here, we wouldn't want them to have any trouble here on this job." So we were always confronting the bigotry and they were very macho on what they were saying, but I think those were the most challenging situation that we had. And I would like to say that we started this business with more guts then know-how; we really went in because we believe that women should have these jobs, and lo and behold nobody else believed that when we got out into the world, but we were very convincing. We were so convincing that we sound so professional that people were taken aback by the fact that here are these uppity women who

were coming in here looking for jobs, jobs on construction, jobs on the highway, or jobs as truck drivers. Things that they never heard of before, and I remember we went into one meeting one time and we could hear the whispers well here come the women. So those were times when we had to hide our discomfort a lot and you couldn't show that you were weak in anyway because they would take the upper hand in the meeting if you were talking about jobs for women.

Interviewer: **Gerry Barrons talked about New Options also being formed in conjunction with affirmative action.**

J. Washington: Yes, right.

Interviewer: **And how did you combine your affirmative action as far as trying to get people of color hired is that…**

J. Washington: Yes, we started out as New Options strictly for affirmative action. It was at the time when affirmative action was at its height and employers we saying, "Well we can't always find people to always fill these positions." So we decided that we would start this agency that would find jobs for minorities and women and that's why I said we have more guts than know how, we never been in employment [agencies] we were social workers and activists and we had a lot of women who knew us and we had entree into the media because all of us had been very much involved in doing things, so we attracted a lot of attention when we said we're going to open this business.

So we began… a lot of people came to us because they were looking for jobs and we were on one hand interviewing people, interviewing applicants, getting their information, and on the other hand going out and talking to employers and trying to sell them on finding people that — to hire people that we had found [for] their position. We worked a lot with organizations like General Motors, or Ford Motor Company, or Bandit or some of the other and placing people with them. There was a time in which Ford wanted us to help them find women to work in their engineering department and they could not — There weren't enough women in engineering school for them to do it, but they said to us, "Find women with science background, find women with math background and we would train them with some of the techniques that we want them to have."

So, we were able to find some schoolteachers and other people who have perhaps majored in math or perhaps majored in some of the sciences, perhaps teaching it, and then convincing them that they should leave the school district and go to work for Ford. And that worked out very well because that's how the Ford knew that they want to hire engineers but there were also some position they had that did not really need an engineering degree and that was that was good. We also worked with the state of Michigan to try to find people for civil engineering jobs or in the transportation department.

I want you to know that this was [not] necessarily the easiest thing that we could of chosen to do because in spite of the need for affirmative action there was always something that was wrong. I mean you knew before the person was hired something may have gone on to her that they could not hire her or things fell through, so it was always supporting the applicants if it was minority male or a woman. It was supporting them in which they made this transition from a job in which they may have been extremely comfortable moving into an atmosphere where they weren't quite sure that they were wanted or that they might have been some challenges there. I know that we had one woman that we placed at General Motors at the paint department and this was a blue collar job but she was working in the paint department, and very difficult work, very hot and there was this guy that came up to her and said, "If you were my woman I wouldn't let you work here" and she turned and said, "That's why I'm not your woman or anybody else's woman." And so we were counseling them while they were still at work. It wasn't a matter of just putting them in a position and then saying, "Thank you we collected our fee for this." It was a matter of retaining them in those jobs and supporting them over a period of time. There were women who were subjected to a lot of hazing and harassment because they really were not welcome, so it was a little kind of different employment agency that you would have ordinarily. People just needed that continual support no matter how big that company was. They were still always feeling that they might not be wanted, that the times they had were more difficult then they need be because they were placed in those positions.

Interviewer: **Now the five or six of you quit your jobs and started this agency. How was that for you all?**

J. Washington: Well, I was one of — there were only a couple of us who were working full time and I was working full time as a school social worker and I had I'm not sure why I did. I think it was a combination of school social work was no longer challenging and my work in the feminist community just coincided, just seemed to be a good way for me to go. And the counseling expects of getting people in jobs and working with them would still fulfill some of my needs to work with people and do that. And also some of the counseling we did on helping people to explore whether or not they were ready to move from the jobs that they had. So I saw a coming together of two of the things that interest me and knowing that you would not make a lot of money right away because a lot of this was contingent upon placing the person and having them stayed there in order to get paid for the services. It was a challenge and it was just something that I think for the years that we stayed there, we made a lot of headways; we were able to create some openings that would not have been there had New Options been around.

Interviewer: **Did you all break even? Make any money?**

J. Washington: We probably broke even, we didn't make any money, but nobody knows that, I mean nobody realizes that because people were looking for a job, they contacted New Options. If an employer was looking for a job they contacted New Options. What happened was that over time company began to grow their own. They didn't always want to be dependent upon an agency to find applicants. So that was one thing. So over the years as they begin to meet their affirmative action goals many of them begin to put in training sections in their own company so that females or minorities employees could begin to get jobs.

The second thing that happened was Ronald Reagan's election to presidency, and I just believe that the day that he took office our telephone stopped ringing because it marked the shift in which whether people believe that affirmative action will be enforced and if employers felt that it was not going to be enforced then they certainly did not need to continue to press to get women and minorities in their doors. And that I think was the end of New Options in the way that the public saw the need for affirmative actions in hires, when before the government was really pushing it and monitoring it and willing to put money into the enforcement of equal opportunities and then when the shift with the Reagan administration people can sense that there was going to be less of this work being done on behalf of the government.

Interviewer: During this time who were your personal and organizational allies for your activism?

J. Washington: Well, most of the time it was the National Organization for Women. I would imagine that NOW was the strongest ally. We were still having troubles in terms of other women's groups, early on saying, "you know I'm not a feminist, but..." So, even though there were other women's organizations, professional women's organizations that were working towards the empowerment of women they weren't really as comfortable in being outspoken about these issues. So if you're talking about the business and professional women or the Association of University Women, things like that. Early on they were not seen as being supportive of the women's movement; it took a generation to have that happen. As people began to learn more, that it didn't mean just burning your bra, because that's what you heard a lot…Especially the African American community, again, "that's not for us," but what made the difference was when people began to open their eyes and see they've been discriminated against and when they look at things and saw, "Gee, I've been a teacher for 15 years and this male who taught physical education has been promoted to principal while I am still here laboring in the classroom." And they begin to question, "why is that, what's happening?" With Title IX now today there's a lot of emphasis on sports, but Title IX of course had to do a lot with education and where women were in the education system and tenure and so forth, and it was only after those laws were passed that people begin to look at that. So early on women's organization were not feeling that this was something for them, but slowly and surely they began to do that and then you began to see many organizations for

women come on board saying, "We want to advocate for this" or "We are strongly supportive of this issue."

Interviewer: **Did you have any opponents?**

J. Washington: Oh yeah, there were a lot of opponents. There were people for within the state who were opposed to women's rights who felt that the feminist movement was going in the wrong directions, especially those in the days of ERA. We were trying to get the ERA passed so yes we had a lot of opponents who were fighting bitterly to keep the ERA from being passed and they were equally as verbal about the negative effects of the feminist movement, and for some people they had a meaningful voice. So we had to constantly combat the things they were saying. It's interesting that in the early days of the feminist movement that if you wanted airtime they would always say, "Well we always want to get the other side we want to engage in debate," and we would say, "No we don't want to debate them. If you want to talk to us about the issues we will talk to you about our issues but we're not going to get involve in sharing the air time with somebody else so that they could get their point of view across," so we were successful in that because we would just not go on the air and debate because that would just cut down the amount of time that we had to talk about our issues.

Interviewer: **Now even though you work on depressing issues, domestic violence, trying to get people to organize battered women shelters, did you have fun in your activism?**

J. Washington: Oh I think we did. We had a lot of fun in just being together, talking about it. I developed a lot of lifelong friends in the movement as a result in being on that. We had, we had times we would have retreats together and just sit and talk and talk. I mean it was just amazing how much we had so much to talk about when we got together and there was a little time, and a more frivolous time when we would toy with the idea of forming…called the Motor City Mamas, which was a group of us and we would sing feminist songs and we were pretty bad so it didn't go very far. So that was one of our more frivolous times, but we still referred back to the formation of the Motor City Mamas.

Interviewer: **That's great. The next sort questions have to do with reflections on the next wave of feminist movements. First of all what's your definition of feminism and has it changed over time?**

J. Washington: Oh dear, I would think that feminism is a system by which people come together who believe in women's issues and who want to change the system so that women can have equal rights and equal treatment. I'm not sure that the definition has changed because sexism was and still is a major issue that has to be overcome, and if we don't continue to fight sexism it will surface again and destroy some of the gains we have made. In fact, you see that now. I think that

the first wave of feminism, it may have seen so unrelated to the lives of the women, so when the second wave of feminism came about it began to touch on many many issues, not just on voting rights, but issues that were basic to the lives of the women: how they made their money, how they lived their lives, how they raised their children, how they — whether they have reproductive rights.

All of these things begin to play a really strong role in the second wave of feminism. I don't think anybody was really aware how important reproductive rights were to women and how that was tied in to the economics of women. So the second wave began to do much more in terms of education. I think the times was right for education where we could get to more people to talk about the issues then we did the first wave of feminism could. We also had the advantage in the second wave of feminism with having women who were in the media and that helped a lot. We were able to have some inroads and the more people we got who were in position of power then we were able to really began to get our message out that there was indeed a feminist movement and it was good for all women and it was good for men as well.

Interviewer: **Do you think the press accurately portrayed your movement?**

J. Washington: It all depends on who it was. There were some who [were] really really good. In the early days when I joined NOW, [when] you have a conference, *The Detroit News* would send a reporter to our conference even if it wasn't in the city because the news coming out of the conferences were so important that they thought it was significant enough to have a reporter cover it and feed the news back. You don't see that today. Things are not that important to the media now. So there were some there were very supportive and others that were slanted. I think it was a mixed bag.

Interviewer: **Some analysis of second wave feminism has characterized it as a bunch of bored housewives who had nothing better to do. Also they characterize it as overwhelmingly concern with middle class, white women's concerns. Does this accurately describe the women you worked with and your experience?**

J. Washington: Let me say that attitude was quite prevalent and continued for a long time, because if you look at any of the pictures, if you saw any of the marches, if you visited any of the meetings that's what you would see. That you would see white women and that's why for me it was not as easy to accept that, and if it had not been for that issue I would probably not have been involved. So yes, I think that when Betty Friedan wrote her book and people started to respond, I remember somebody saying to me, "Have you read *The Feminine Mystique*?" and I said, "I wasn't interested in reading it." But when I did joined the Detroit Chapter, I saw that they were not bored housewives, they were many of them professional women, many of them were women who had a real contribution to

make to society.

It still was overwhelmingly white and it wasn't until much later you began to see inroads of people of color coming into the feminist movement, and nobody wants to be associated with an all-white group. So you're going to wait to see what happens. You're going to wait to see whether or not this group really means what they say. You're going to wait if they're going to do anything for me. There's many many debates at conferences and workshops about women of color. Now I want you to know that I don't like taking apart of discussions about women of color. Not that I don't think that it's important it just begins to categorize you and I always said that I had much more to offer as a panelist on some other issues than I had being a spokesperson for women of color. I wasn't an expert, I am a woman of color, but I'm not an expert. So if I were asked to be on a panel of that I would say, "No. Why not have me as panelist on reproductive rights or have me as a panelist on domestic violence? That's what my expertise is."

So we needed to wait to see, meaning we, meaning people of color, needed to see whether or not the women's movement was really serious in bringing in women of color and doing something that would be of significance. I think over time it has been proven that the movement is broad enough and the issues broad enough that they covered all people, and it was not easy. It took a long time and sometimes the comments made by white women were racially insensitive and that's just something that would drive people away — "See that, see, I don't think they're very serious, look at what they said." So it took awhile for that to happen.

What I think is the greater reward in the feminist movement is not by accounting the numbers of women who belong to the movement, but by accounting the numbers of women who now respond in a different way to situations in which they find themselves. I think if you go into any group of women whether they are Latinas, whether they are African Americans, Asian Americans, you're going to find them standing up for their rights they're going to demand equal rights they're going to demand equal pay. And so they don't see themselves as maybe joining a movement but they're certainly benefiting from the education that they received from the movement and they have taken those same tactics and they are able to utilize them wherever they are and I think that is the most significant and I know that a lot of times people would say to me well how many women are they're in. Well I don't know how many but what's more important was how women of color have been able to improve tier status because of the feminist movement.

Interviewer: **Now going back to what you were saying about people of color, women of color waiting to see some sort of something for them to join the feminist movement. Can you pinpoint what those changes were? What convinced them to join?**

J. Washington: Well, let me say that I was part of NOW at the time when we put together an affirmative action plan for the organization. When the convention, when the conference met in Detroit there was a serious outcry, and this was about 1980. I get my years messed up here, but anyways the conference was in Detroit and they said…Women of color came in and said, "You know there's still nobody here, we are still not being represented, you got to do something about this." And we established a minority women task force and I was appointed to participate in that, but we also put together an affirmative action plan from the National Organization of Women for their representation to the national board saying that if there were three people coming from a region, that one of them has to be a woman of color, and that began to make a difference in people who were at the national board. Also looking who gets elected and the vice president and so forth. So it just…NOW had to begun to make a determined effort to make changes within the ranks and it was through the pushing of people within the organization and those on the outside who said, "Now show us that you really mean business," and I think that was opening an opportunity for people of color to begin to participate in policy making decisions in NOW and it continues to this day.

Interviewer: Can you think of any outstanding figures that you met or worked with?

J. Washington: In the women's movement? Oh lots. I was the president of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund for two years and that had a lot of the women who formed _____(??). There were Betty Friedan herself, and there was Muriel Fox. They were all of these women [who] have been founders and also established the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. I was very fortunate to be elected to the board of directors and then eventually to the presidency and in those times I was able to meet a lot of people: Ilene Hernandez, who was the first African American woman who was the head of NOW, Elly Smeal, Judy Goldsmith. I know I have known and still known the whole leadership of the organization. Met a lot of outstanding women who have been active in the women's movement.

Interviewer: We have about five left on the tape and I have about two more questions. So, I think we would be able to fit it in. What do you see when you're thinking about the next generation of feminism? What do you see are going to be the outstanding issues the next generation is going to have to confront?

J. Washington: Well, sometimes I'm very disappointed in the fact that young women are not as aware of the gains that have been made. Many young women, I mean early twenties, are not aware of what has happened over the period of time and I found that that's true of most movements that they reached a peak, that they're able to make gains but then the next generation right after that is unable to understand how important it is to maintain those gains. So I hear young women

say things and act in the way that would make me believe that they are insensitive to what the women's movement was all about. So I feared that if they are left without that information, without pride in, without support, that we may begin to step back. So I have real concern about that and that they're sometimes…that our younger women are willing to accept what I called "second-class citizenship" because they're often more interested in self then in what's happening with women in general. So I just fear if we're not careful that we're just fall behind.

Interviewer: **So what advice would you give them?**

J. Washington: Well, I'm not sure I'm wise enough to say that, I know that when I talk with young women one on one I get an opportunity to share with them some things: Did you know there was a time that women could not get abortions? Did you know that there was a time that birth control was not provided? I mean speaking on very very specific concrete things I'm able to do that and I think that's what it's going to take. You know because women are 50% of the population in law school or 50% in medical school they think that that's always the way, and if you're not careful you may find ourselves slipping back. I think that maybe some of us could be mentors, maybe we can be those people that they look to for information on what it was like before the women's movement and what may be the consequences of not continuing to fight or to maintain equal rights.

Interviewer: **That sounds good. Well thank you so much for the interview. I really appreciate you coming down here.**

J. Washington: Oh, you're welcome.

Interviewer: **If you'll just sit still here for a little while I'm going to take some photo stills. They take a little while to do…Okay thank you.**

[END]