

THE WISE WOMEN OF OXFORD

by
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ABSTRACT

JAZ BRISACK: The Wise Women of Oxford

(Under the direction of Joseph Atkins)

In Fall 2015, a group of women began meeting for lunch. The first meeting was nearly spontaneous: a woman named Eunice Benton emailed a few of her friends, saying that she would prefer to go out to eat with them at one o'clock on a Friday instead of eating alone. From there, the email list Eunice had created began growing and incorporating many new women from a variety of backgrounds, some of whom Eunice knew and then, increasingly, some she didn't. The list spiked tremendously after the 2016 presidential election, as the group provided comfort to women who were extremely upset by the disappointing results and needed fellowship. This thesis brings together the lives of twelve group members, who tell their stories largely in their own words. The methods I used were journalistic methods, but the end result more closely resembles oral history. I wanted to find out what had drawn these women together in the first place and why people kept coming back. As a member of the group myself, I knew some of the value it brings. Other women's insights have highlighted the very different paths many women have taken to feminism, activism, self-acceptance and (in many cases) self-sufficiency. One of my interviewees said that this was a group largely without patriarchy that exists within a patriarchal society. The simple act of women eating together is neither a new nor a radical idea. For generations, organizations like the Junior League and the Daughters of the American Revolution have been hosting lunches. No one would accuse these groups of trying to remake society or advance a progressive agenda. But the Wise Women has been a force for change in Oxford and a community in which women with progressive values (however they define them) have found like-minded women.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PAT MILLER.....	12
EFFIE BURT.....	20
ANNE STEEL.....	30
AINSLEY ASH.....	36
RUBY KELLEY.....	45
ELIZABETH PAYNE.....	51
SUAD PATTON BEY.....	58
MILLY WEST.....	68
DOROTHY ABBOTT.....	75
BARBARA PHILLIPS.....	82
SUE FINO.....	100
EUNICE BENTON.....	108
CONCLUSION.....	121
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	129

INTRODUCTION

In September of 2015, three women sat on the porch at Phillips Grocery, eating catfish. They already knew each other: all three attended the local Unitarian Universalist congregation and had worked together on behalf of LGBTQ+ issues. There was Eunice Benton, the retired district executive of her denomination. Beside her was Ann Phillippi, a retired biology professor. The third woman was Pat Miller, another former biology professor who had been drawn to the gathering because she was worried that she was becoming too introverted in her retirement.

“I thought this would be a good group to be social with,” she explains.

At the end of their meal, the women agree to meet again at the same time the following week. Some of them began adding other women to the initial email list. The group began to grow. By November of 2015, when Eunice’s friend, a Unitarian Universalist minister named Julie Kain, walked into the Graduate, the group was big enough to fill a long column of tables. “It’s the Wild Women Flash Mob!” Julie remarked, referring to the group’s habit of popping up at a new location each month. Over time, the name was changed and shortened.

“We were mostly gray,” says Eunice, “so Wise was a kind way of putting that.”

In the beginning, she says, there was no agenda. “Or if I had an agenda, it was just to get to know some of the women in this town whom I wanted to know, but had never had time to go to lunch with.”

Over time, however, the group has burgeoned into a force for progress and change in Mississippi. It has formed a base from which many other groups have sprung. It has brought women from many backgrounds together to discuss their shared experiences and

learn from their differences. At various times, it has provided younger members with mentoring, community, financial support and grounding from more experienced women. Above all, and despite the fact that group members have engaged in heated arguments and debates with each other about the best courses of actions to take, arguments that have occasionally threatened to split the group, Wise Women has given progressive women in an often overwhelmingly conservative environment a “safe space,” a place where they can not only acknowledge their values and beliefs, but where they can also celebrate them with other like-minded women.

“I feel so welcomed from them, so accepted,” says Suad Patton-Bey, an African-American and Muslim college student. “Even though we don't necessarily have the same racial background or religious background, I feel like I can be myself with them.”

Eunice emphasizes the importance of timing in making this group into the force it's become. Its membership spans a far greater segment of the population than the twenty to thirty women who show up for lunch each week: the continually-growing listserv currently boasts 325 members. The group began in September of 2015, but it grew exponentially in the winter of 2016-17.

“At first, this was really a loose, happy association of—network or community of women who were glad to find people who were not conservative women,” Eunice explains. “Then, through the fall of 2016, with that election, and it is significant that there was a woman candidate for president, and then in stark contrast there's the candidate who won that none of us could fathom that anybody would elect. There were groups online like Pantsuit Nation, and women all over the country responding to it, saying, ‘It's our time.’ That election was what pushed this group into action.”

The first action the Wise Women undertook was holding a Women's March the day after Trump's election.

“Through that period, that's when I couldn't even keep up with the number of names and emails that people were sending,” Eunice says. “That's when we had to move to the google group.”

In the following months, members of the Wise Women started new initiatives or joined others, providing numerical force and contributing enriching perspectives to these organizations. Wise Women turned up in all sorts of spaces. Anne Steel, a retired Latin teacher, provided the epigram: “‘dux femina facti,’ or, A woman (is) the leader of the action (Virgil).” Some of these projects included the Interracial Collaboration Group, the reviving of the long-dormant League of Women Voters, meetings that focused on bridging the achievement gap in education and moving the local school districts to adopt restorative justice approaches, groups like Indivisible and the Blue Wave, which sought to counter Donald Trump's agenda and get out the vote for Democratic candidates, and the Lynching Memorialization Project, which succeeded in erecting a marker commemorating the life of Elwood Higginbottom, the last known victim of lynching in Lafayette County.

Through all this, the lunches continued. These were significant in themselves. Barbara Phillips, a retired civil rights lawyer, joined the group soon after it began. “It appealed to my sense of community,” she says. “Oh, it's a bunch of women want to get together and have lunch, yeah, I'll come do it. And what kept me there was that the first time I went, there were three black women and three white women. And, as much as I enjoyed my community in this town, I also was highly conscious of the fact that this remains a very segregated town, and so to have something—and then the next time I went

to lunch, it was like four black women and four white women, and I recognized it as an extraordinary space that was developing, and that was very attractive.”

In acknowledgment of this, as well as of the work that its members did in many spaces, the Wise Women received the “Keeping the Dream Alive Award” at the annual Martin Luther King, Jr., Day candlelight vigil and march at Second Missionary Baptist Church in January of 2018. Many of the Wise Women, including Eunice and Barbara, were still away for the holidays. Sue Fino, a retired education consultant from Vermont who had quickly become one of the group’s most active members, delivered the acceptance speech and posed with the plaque afterward.

Four months later, Eunice was chosen as the grand marshal of the Pride parade. It was a testament to her decades of service to the cause of LGBTQ+ rights as the self-described “mother of a gay son.” Along with many other women who would later join her at the Friday lunches, Eunice had helped form the Oxford chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Over the years, she had also stood in as a mother figure for many young people whose own families were hostile or less than supportive. When, decked out in a red boa and a rainbow sash, Eunice sat smiling atop an open convertible and led the parade through downtown Oxford, the Wise Women thronged the Square in support.

Perhaps because of the comfort that their shared values creates, the Wise Women has provided a much needed community for a demographic that often suffers from isolation even in more progressive areas of the country. Eunice often references a *New York Times* article that describes the difficulties women over 50 face in trying to find and connect with other people, particularly women their age, when they retire or move to a new town.

“And here we are in this red state,” Eunice says, “and women are very gratified to find other women who share their values, who are more blue than red. And they want that not just for political action but because they want to be able to have an authentic conversation, to be who they are.”

Becky Kelly, who works at the Y in town, remembers the trepidation she felt about even acknowledging that she was a Democrat. In a series of whisper confessions with other women who were working out, she discovered that she was not the only one experiencing this fear of ostracism. One of the women she talked to eventually led her to Wise Women, where she has become an outspoken advocate.

“The other thing about this,” Eunice says, “is that we refuse to be an organization. And so what has that meant?”

She continually reminds members of the group that there are no elected officers and no bylaws. There are no restrictions about who may post to the email list and what subjects they may address. Although the weekly lunches feature announcements from the women present, and despite the fact that political candidates and other guest speakers have occasionally visited, the “no agenda” language has remained.

The impact of the Wise Women on my own life has been tremendous. I met Eunice in March of 2017, at a College Democrats meeting. In passing, she mentioned that the Wise Women were meeting the following day. I asked if I could come. From that point on, I’ve rarely missed a Friday.

As the first college student to join this sisterhood, I have found a welcoming and immensely valuable community of women. I believe that I would have dropped out of school without this group. As many students do, I struggled to find my place on campus

and to build deep and dependable relationships with others. As my own family grew increasingly distant, the Wise Women—and particularly Eunice Benton—filled the gaps, becoming a surrogate family. I didn't know that when I signed up for the Wise Women I was putting myself up for adoption by a bevy of progressive-minded mothers, but I am grateful to every one of them. The Friday lunches have been a refuge. Despite the often bleak political climate and the fact that the Wise Women group itself incorporates women who hold very different views on a number of topics, this community has given me hope. If such a vibrant and necessary fellowship exists here, it can exist—or be created—elsewhere.

While the group has been a constant, the faces gathered around the tables have not been. Some women come frequently, others less so. A few members have moved away, while many more are recent transplants who joined after moving here. I have tried to select and portray a sample of this group that recognizes and honors the variety of experiences its members bring.

PAT MILLER, 67, is an Oxford native and a retired professor of biology, specializing in spiders and mushrooms. At 11 years old, she stood in her backyard and watched tear gas billow from the UM campus during the 1962 riot over James Meredith's integration of the school. While she remembers going to Sunday School and questioning the response from her white community, she was not an activist at the time. Eventually, as she came to terms with her own sexuality and became more involved in community initiatives, she has become an activist and has been an integral part of the Wise Women group, from the very first lunch until the present.

EFFIE BURT, 65, is a jazz singer and native of Lafayette County. She experienced

Oxford when it was a “sundown town” and helped desegregate the county school system. As a high school student, she organized her peers to secure the right to wear Afros and dashikis. During high school, she experienced the social exclusion of an unplanned pregnancy, which led her to move to Iowa. There, she completed her education and worked as a security guard at the John Deere plant for nearly thirty years. She moved back to Oxford to look after her aging mother and became involved in a variety of local initiatives.

ANNE STEEL, 70, is a retired Latin teacher, originally from Detroit. An anti-war protester during her college days, Anne has only recently reconnected with her activist past. She is an environmentalist and sea turtle enthusiast, as well as a musician. Anne and her husband are particularly dedicated to preserving the historic Southern tradition of shape-note singing.

AINSLEY ASH, 20, is a current college sophomore. She grew up in a very conservative community in Meridian. A low-income, first-generation college student, Ainsley is a psychology and public policy leadership major researching methods of creating college-going cultures in low-income and underrepresented school districts in Mississippi. She is also the first recipient of a UK Summer Fulbright scholarship from the University of Mississippi. She is one of the first students to become involved with Wise Women.

RUBY KELLEY, 68, is a retired home economics teacher. A Lafayette County native, she was one of several students to desegregate city schools in the 1970s. Because she lived, went to school and taught in so many different communities, she has unique insights into local organizing and canvassing work. She is committed to her church and has dedicated much of her effort to voting rights advocacy.

ELIZABETH PAYNE, 75, is a native of Nettleton and a scholar of women's labor history. "I became class-conscious through becoming race-conscious," she says, a process that centered around her early involvement in progressive Methodist youth groups. She graduated from seminary but was not ordained, as her denomination wanted to appoint her to a position in which she would be her husband's subordinate. Instead, she became a teacher, which led her to attend graduate school. She became a history professor and also served as the founding director of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

SUAD PATTON BEY, 23, is another student member of the Wise Women. Born to an American father and a Somali mother, she lives in Taylor on land that her father's family has lived on for 150 years. Her family lived in Lebanon for several years while she was growing up; at ten years old, she had to evacuate when the country was invaded by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A committed feminist, Suad is majoring in journalism and Arabic and planning to study international relations at Penn State following graduation.

MILLY WEST, 70, is a photographer and seller of art. She grew up in Memphis, Oxford, Greenwood and Corinth. She owned Southside Gallery and developed a love of Cuban art and culture that has led her to visit the country forty times since her first trip in 1996. She has led photography workshops in Cuba for American photographers and students, brought Cuban art and artists stateside, and taken money and art supplies back. She is also a former professor, occasional columnist and avid environmentalist.

DOROTHY ABBOTT, 74, became an activist at sixteen, working on anti-death penalty advocacy in her hometown of Memphis. She came to Mississippi in 1962 because she knew that she wanted to get involved with the civil rights movement. "I went from being against capital punishment, the prison injustice movement, to the civil rights

movement, to the anti-war movement, to the feminist movement, to the LGBT movement, to a global movement,” she says. “Along the way, I realized that things connected. But young people are skipping that 25 years and looking at things more globally, which seems to save a lot of time.”

BARBARA PHILLIPS, 70, is a retired civil rights lawyer and professor. A Virginia native who grew up in Memphis, Barbara came to Mississippi in 1971 as a college student to work with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She volunteered for Charles Evers' campaign for governor and learned about organizing from Fannie Lou Hamer. As a lawyer, she specialized in voting rights cases but also litigated constitutional issues. She moved to California in the 1980s, where she became the only black woman law partner in a San Francisco firm. After teaching stints at Stanford and the University of Mississippi, she became the women's rights program officer at the Ford Foundation before opening her own women's clothing boutique in Chicago and eventually retiring to Mississippi.

SUE FINO, 72, is an unlikely activist. A former teacher and retired educational consultant, Sue is from New Jersey, by way of Vermont and Massachusetts. She prides herself on her habitual defaulting to reason and logic, for which her family calls her “Spock,” alluding to the Star Trek character. She is a golf and voter registration enthusiast.

EUNICE BENTON, 75, is a retired Unitarian Universalist Association Midsouth District Executive and the founder of the Wise Women. A Florida native who spent a great deal of time in North Carolina, Eunice came to Mississippi for the Southern Studies master's program at the University of Mississippi and ended up staying. She has been very active in LGBTQ+ rights advocacy.

This collection of interviews portrays twelve women who, viewed together,

comprise a cross-section of the group. This is a diverse group, incorporating women from different races, religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic locations, and ages. Taken together, these women's stories highlight the fact that there is no one path to activism or feminism.

From: Eunice Benton <eunice.benton@gmail.com>
Date: Thursday, September 24, 2015
Subject: Fridays Catfish Lunch A weekly practice for a while.. !
To: "ann@maxxsouth.net" <ann@maxxsouth.net>, Anne Steel
<oxsteel@go.olemiss.edu>, Vicki Reithel <victoryfoil@yahoo.com>, "Gelbard, Elaine"
<egelbard@bellsouth.net>, Sharon Schreiber <ulsls@olemiss.edu>, Pat Miller
<hibiscus956@yahoo.com>, Gail Stratton <gailstratton956@gmail.com>, Evelyn Smith
<emariejsmith@gmail.com>, Carnelia Pettis-Fondren <carfondren@yahoo.com>, Susan
Zachos <susan@allawgp.com>, Martha Scott <marthamscott@hotmail.com>, Mari
Kuhnle <marikuhnle@gmail.com>

Favorite Friends,

Here's a confession: Last Friday, by mid-morning, I had this incredible urge to have a lunch of catfish somewhere!! Ha!!! So, by noon-ish I took myself to Ajax where I sat at the bar and had catfish and creamed spinach and iced tea -- and just loved it!!

But -- it would have been better had it been shared with favorite friends!!

Thus... I am launching a 'Fridays Catfish Lunch' practice for the next month (or so)!! 'Spiritual practice' you know.. things that feed soul -- and body and spirit! Great friends finding great local food...

***For tomorrow, Friday, September 25th, I propose meeting at Phillips Grocery to check out their 'catfish basket'.... ! Or -- whatever seems appealing!! Does a 'late lunch' at 1:00 work?? (I have no idea how this will fit with the crowd appeal of Phillips...)

Ann Phillipi and I are committed!! And hope many included here will join in and bring whoever is in your circle! Just fun -- and lunch! (I have not been very methodical in list-making for this... so, please add/include!!)

In future weeks we may try Delta Steak in Abbeville (usually has catfish on Fridays), the BTC in Water Valley when they do, Gus's Chicken which also has a catfish plate -- and who knows where else!! All just for fun lunch explorations of this local fare.

Join in if you can!!! Email back... or call/text me on my cell if it makes connecting easier!
770-356-1057

xxooxxoo!!

Eunice

PAT MILLER

Pat Miller's phone dings. She picks it up, glances at the text message. It's a picture of a spider.

She squints at the screen, observing legs, pattern, coloring, size. She sends back a note: it's probably a *trochosa dentichelis*, a kind of wolf spider.

“Where was I?” she asks, then glides back into the conversation she had been having.

Pat Miller is a generalist taxonomist, which means that she can name almost any type of spider. Other entomologists specialize in certain types. As a result, people from all over the world send her photographs of arachnids for identification.

As a young girl growing up in Oxford, Mississippi, Pat hadn't planned on devoting her life to studying spiders. She was eleven when James Meredith integrated the university and remembers seeing the tear gas rising from campus from a vantage point in her backyard. In her all-white Sunday School class the next morning, she was frustrated by the non-answers her teacher provided when she asked about what was happening. But her environment didn't encourage speaking out. The “white only” and “colored” signs on the town's water fountains would stay up for several more years, but, Pat says, “Nobody protested. There weren't any protests that I'm aware of. This was a pretty typical little southern town.”

And Pat was not a rebel, yet. She describes her younger self as a “typical sorority girl who did everything I was supposed to do.”

After high school, Pat enrolled at the University of Mississippi. “Then, the typical careers for women were teacher, nurse or secretary—not even administrator,” she

remembers. “I never wanted to teach. I was such an introvert—very shy, didn't like public speaking. I didn't know any women who were biologists, but that became my passion. Luckily. But it was not a typical career path.”

As the chair of the Women's Judicial Council and the vice president of the Zeta Tau Alpha sorority, Pat's life was strictly regimented. “You couldn't wear pants,” she remembers. “You had to wear skirts or dresses. One winter, it got really cold and we got permission to wear pantsuits. I did everything I was supposed to do, wore what I was supposed to wear — you couldn't smoke standing up, couldn't chew gum in public.”

She recalls a regimen of curfews on campus, where girls forced to report with whom they left their dorm and to wear raincoats over their gym shorts to walk across campus when they wanted to work out.

“I was a rule follower. I'm still a rule follower — to a point.”

As judicial chair, Pat broke one major rule: the rule that dictated that only white women serve on the judicial council. She appointed the first African American woman to that board because she believed that representation mattered. Pat's role in student government led to another formative experience when, on a trip to a conference in Chicago, Pat heard feminist writer Gloria Steinem speak. “I felt empowered as a woman,” she recalls.

The last semester of her senior year, Pat transferred to the University of Tennessee-Martin to escape the claustrophobic environment in Oxford. “I think it's good for people who are not from here to know that radical women do grow up in Oxford,” she says. “But I had to leave to find myself.”

After graduating with a bachelors' degree in biology, Pat returned to Oxford to work

in the continuing education department at the University of Mississippi. “But I knew I wasn't finished learning, and I wanted to go into ornithology, and Mississippi State had the only ornithologist. So thank goodness he was there. But that was another radical thing.”

Before she had even completed her degree, Pat got a job offer from Mississippi State. She would be curating the cotton insect collection at the USDA boll weevil research lab. Her duties included trapping arthropods in cotton and soybean fields and identifying the hundreds of thousands of species her team collected. “A lot of them were spiders, and I knew very little about spiders, and I quickly learned how to identify them, and, you know, that became my passion.”

She makes it sound easy, but the differences between can be literally microscopic. She is currently working on a paper about spiders' reproductive systems, which involves using tiny needles to punch out their organs for photographing and study. Describing this process reminds her of a story from her college days, when her professor was working on a similar project involving leafhoppers. One day, while working after hours in the lab, Pat overheard him exclaim, “It's so cold in here, my genitals are curling!”

“Of course, he meant the leafhoppers' genitals,” she explains. “I had to leave the room, I was laughing so hard.”

It wasn't long before Pat met another arachnid enthusiast, Gary, and they got married. The couple had a son, William. After a short stint in Utah, where Pat was forced to teach for the first time and slowly began to overcome what she describes as her terror of speaking in public, the couple moved back to Oxford, where Gary had been hired at the University of Mississippi.

“I never thought I'd end up in my hometown,” Pat says. But, after spending a year

working as a laboratory supervisor, she started teaching at Northwest Community College and stayed there for 25 years. “I never thought of myself as a career teacher,” she says, “but I love to talk about biology and that's what kept me going.”

Pat's love of spiders helped her to realize her true identity. Through her work with the arachnological society, she met a scientist named Gail Stratton. The two of them went collecting together and became friends. Not long after they met, Pat traveled to Michigan, where Gail was working, so they could drive down together.

“That night,” Pat remembers, “in Gail's kitchen, she was pacing back and forth. She said, 'If we're gonna be friends, there's something you'd better know about me.'”

“Just spit it out,” said Pat.

“Well, I'm lesbian.”

“I'm bisexual,” Pat remembers saying. That surprised her, she adds. “I'd never identified as that before—not said the word. It's a mystery to me how quickly I knew I had fallen in love with her.”

On the drive back, Pat remembers, she couldn't speak. “I was a deer in the headlights.”

“Is everything all right?” Gail, who was driving, asked.

Pat shook her head.

“Should I pull over?”

Pat nodded.

She remembers saying, “I think I'm falling in love with you, but I am committed to my marriage.”

“It took me a long time to get things worked out,” she reflects. “Two years of fog.

I now know that was depression. Remember, I was a rule follower. And that was a commitment that I had made that I was going to have to break. And Gary is a nice guy, but I am not bisexual,” she adds, laughing.

For four years, Pat and Gail worked across the country from each other. Pat spent hours anchored to the phone in her kitchen, where she remembers listening to Gail tell her, “I want to bring you coffee every morning.”

“And she still does,” Pat says, smiling.

Pat says that William was very supportive of her relationship with Gail. As a young boy, he drew Gail into family portraits in school; when he got older, Pat asked him one time about how his dates felt about him having two moms.

“Well, Mom,” he said, “if they had a problem with that I wouldn't be dating them.”

However, others were less supportive, from other family members to random strangers. “People would say things about the gay agenda,” Pat says. “My gay agenda is going to Kroger to get something for dinner.”

The pair found friendship in several women-only spaces. “Before we were Unitarians, we were in a lesbian drumming group, Moon Lodge. It was an open group—you didn't have to be a lesbian—but most were. They were strong women. There would be twenty, thirty of them, drumming in a circle, and I would have an out-of-body experience. I would drum with my eyes closed, not aware of people—when I'd open my eyes when we stopped, I was always surprised that there were people there.”

A bookstore in Memphis called Meristem provided another community of like-minded women. “There were so few places for just women, where you didn't have to worry about patriarchy,” says Pat. “It was very similar with Wise Women. Pretty much a women-

only space, most of the time, without patriarchy.”

“Men take up a lot of space, and I don't mean just physical space. Gail and I were walking behind these two guys on campus the other day—they were so loud, all over the sidewalk, bouncing a basketball—we couldn't carry on a conversation. I'm not a man-hater, but there are some characteristics of men that make me think they're a different species.”

However, Pat recognizes that not all women share her awareness. She discusses the 2018 election of Georgia gubernatorial candidate Brian Kemp, who garnered the support of a large majority of white women voters in Georgia, despite the fact that Stacey Abrams would have been the first female governor in the state. “Women who vote for Kemp want male approval,” she says. “You can't underestimate the element of male approval desire. They're so used to following what men say, how could they possibly vote for a woman? Some women I just don't understand.”

The community that formed the first basis for Wise Women also created other important circles, including the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Oxford and the local chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays, or PFLAG.

“Ann Philippi called and said they were forming a youth group at a new congregation and said she thought William would enjoy being in it. So he was about thirteen—eighth-grader. So he went, and he came home and said, Mom, it's just like Moon Lodge. Young boys, once they reached a certain age, were not allowed in Moon Lodge—as a young boy he went, that's where he learned to drum, and all the women loved him. And he said, you can feel free to talk about anything, and it doesn't matter that I have two moms. And then we gradually started going to the congregation. It was a place where we felt celebrated, not just tolerated.”

Their involvement with the congregation grew dramatically over the years, with Gail becoming the congregation's first ordained minister and the couple taking over many of the responsibilities around the building, including maintaining the flowerbeds. PFLAG also provided the couple with a supportive community.

But Wise Women went a step further. Pat credits the group with giving her “an avenue for activism,” saying, “I don't know if I would have had those opportunities otherwise.” She participated in marches and rallies with the group, going to the courthouse for small and symbolic protests. But, leading up to the 2018 midterms, she felt compelled to act.

However, her deep introversion made canvassing difficult. Instead, she decided to set up a public table where volunteers could sit and register passersby to vote.

“I'm not a door-knocker, I'm not a phone-caller,” she says. “The voter registration table was something I could do.”

Over thirteen days, more than 70 volunteers served two-hour shifts, from nine in the morning until six at night. The team registered over 130 new voters.

Most people were very friendly and most were already registered, Pat found. Some interactions were more interesting than others: “One woman who passed by, I asked her if she'd like to register, she said, 'I just don't do that.' That was a shock.”

For Pat, the group has been more than just a means of serving the community: it's also a place where she can feel comfortable and accepted. “Since I've retired, I've become more and more of an introvert. So, (Wise Women) is good for me. There are few other places where I go where I'm comfortable meeting new people.

“I think that most of the women who go are open-minded. I have no fear of being

judged because of my lifestyle. Never feel that. There are very few places—regular places—that I go that I don't think about that. It's just a subliminal thing, you know, with gay people. And it still is an open group. I really don't know how people affiliate politically, but I feel that open-mindedness. It's a place where I don't have to interpret, really, who I am.”

She reflects. “I just had this visualization. Wise Women is the core group, with all of these offshoots—League of Women Voters, Blue Wave, Mississippi Votes. It goes around like this (circling her hands), with all of these strands just going out. It's like a spiderweb.”

EFFIE BURT

“I don't think every battle is mine, but if I can fit it into my schedule...”

Effie was born on a farm in Lafayette County, the sixth of thirteen children. She rarely spoke as a child due to medical issues that went undiagnosed for years. “Every time I talked, I would have pain,” she remembers. “It caused problems in school, because I couldn't speak. They thought I'd be handicapped. My dad took me to a doctor and the doctor said, ‘You've got eight children, this is just going to be the dumb one.’ My dad took me to another doctor, who found out that my tonsils were so swollen I had to get them removed immediately. But I never had that Southern accent, because I didn't grow up talking.”

Subsequently, however, she quickly found her voice. “I think I became an activist in high school,” she says. “Lafayette High School, in the county. I believe I became an activist when I stood up for the right to wear a damn Afro. For real. Longer than three inches. You know the big Afros? Nah. And you know why? Because the person behind us couldn't see the bulletin board. And my last name was B, so everyone behind me couldn't see the bulletin board.

“My class was the first class to integrate—went from an all-black school to Lafayette County. And to protest, my mother, Annie Lee Burt, who worked for the legal services, purchased me a long-ass blond wig that reached to my butt. For real. And all day long, I basically threw it—whipped it—look (she demonstrates with a braid)—hit the person in the back next to me—and it was blond. And after a week, my principal—Brewer—told me, if I take that ridiculous-looking wig off, we could wear Afros.

“That was my very first activist—and I'm just learning that I was an activist and not a troublemaker, like I was called all of high school.

Her high school activism didn't end with the Afros. “The next thing I did,” she explains, “was to wear dashikis. We wanted to wear dashikis, but the rule was you couldn't wear dashikis because men, the boys, couldn't have their shirt-tail out. We had the guys put the dashiki bottom into their pants and wore them anyway. Eventually, they said okay.”

Effie remembers being expelled from school nearly every week. Her father, who had had to quit school in the fifth grade after his mother, Effie Mae, died. She remembers him bringing her back to school each week and forcing the administrators to overrule their suspensions.

But before she could graduate from high school, she got pregnant. “They wouldn't let you be around the other girls, or do anything,” Effie says. So, she dropped out. “But my dad said, ‘There's not any way you're not going to get your high school diploma.’ Another friend also got pregnant, she moved to Iowa and said, ‘Come up here, get on aid for dependent children and go back to school.’”

So Effie moved to Waterloo, Iowa, where she graduated from high school and enrolled at the local community college. There, she studied police science, security and laws. “I one time thought about being a police officer,” she says. “I had in mind, I was going to be the good police officer—treat black people fair, treat white people fair—but then a riot broke out, and it looked like fighting. I didn't want to shoot anybody. So I decided to go into security, I went to John Deere (the factory was in Waterloo) and was there for 27 years.”

“I wanted to go back to school,” she says, “but white people got the night and second shifts so they could go to school and I couldn't, and then they came back and took my first-shift job because they had more education.”

One day, a fellow security guard, who worked at the same factory gate, called her over to his truck. “Come here, Effie, let me show you something.”

He was holding a glass of water. He slowly poured a salt packet into the glass, then added a pepper packet. The pepper flakes went to the sides of the glass. “That’s how the n—s run,” he said.

“And the company didn’t do anything to him.”

Effie used many methods to confront racism on the job. But she knew that there were risks involved. “My dad told me that I could not yell and cuss at white people. White people are already afraid of you. You’ve got to be able to look them in the eye, like this (smiling), and say—Go fuck yourself.”

She describes an encounter with a white nationalist coworker. “He was passing out these flyers talking about the Bible, said they should be able to own slaves. He hated black people. One day in the cafeteria I saw him sitting by himself—I remembered what my daddy said. I went over to his table.

“Arryl, how the fuck you doing, you stupid-ass motherfucker’ – with a smile.

“He started yelling, ‘Get away!’ People started going, What’re you doing?

“I taunted him that whole day and he got fired. I got a few of them fired. Why? He kept passing out those flyers and the company said not to. The company hadn’t fired him because a black person had to say they were scared, so I played that card, I said I’m afraid of this and da-da-da, and he ended up getting fired.”

“That was the first person,” she adds. He would not be the last racist she forced into retirement. “I was there 27 years,” she says. “There were all kinds of racial problems. But I made it.”

She says that her membership in the United Auto Workers helped her keep her job at John Deere despite the culture of white supremacy in the plant. Her union card also ensured that she had a retirement pension, “which is great,” she says, “insurance for the rest of my life—health, dental, mental care—I never needed it, though some thought I did. If I get sick and need to go to a nursing home, it pays for it—I needed to keep that job because of the benefits that I would get. So nothing was going to take my job.”

She remembers her supervisors asking her whether she wanted to become a salaried employee. “No,” she'd say, “I want to be a blue-collar worker.”

“Had I been a salaried worker,” she reflects, “I'd have had no protection. But under the UAW, I had enough protection they couldn't do anything to me.”

One night in Waterloo, Effie discovered that she could take legal action against racists. It all started when she went into the Happy Chef restaurant to eat dinner. She sat down in the non-smoking area, only to see people smoking. She had recently begun singing, and being around smokers hurt her throat and damaged her voice. There were police eating dinner there, but the no-smoking law wasn't being enforced.

Effie reminded the server that the law said smokers needed to be in their separate section. The server said that the law didn't apply after noon. “I need to get my food to go,” Effie remembers saying, “and I shouldn't have to pay for it.”

“That's how you people are,” the waitress said. “You want something for nothing.”

Effie remembers shooting back, “Listen here, Betty Lou.” She took the Happy Chef to court over their treatment of her and won \$2,500 in damages. “And that was my first case as a non-ass lawyer,” she says.

She would prove her legal acumen in many more cases, suing a driver over racist

road rage and winning. When a police officer racially profiled Effie while she was driving with her friend, she refused to cooperate with the unlawful stop. She was arrested and handcuffed—“She put them on so tight, it hurt real bad,” she remembers—and proceeded to sing “Amazing Grace” in the back of the patrol car, in protest. She was charged with disorderly conduct. “At the end of the day, I got the attorney that I had to end up suing,” she says. “He said, Oh, we're going to get you off, and then he filed the wrong thing. I paid him \$1,200. I said, Attorney Adams, I'm going to get my money back. And I got my money back. I had Attorney Jesus on my side.”

Effie's deep-seated religious beliefs provide her with comfort—and also aren't too inconvenient. “I really do believe there is a God, and I know he takes care of me, and he knows I'm not perfect, and there's no way I'm gonna hide the word 'fuck' from him. It's not worth trying.”

She regularly sings in her church choir, although she had to find a different congregation than the one she grew up in. “You can leave and come back, and they're doing exactly the same thing. I got back after twenty years and nothing had changed. Same music, same sermons, same people—except that some of them had died. But I can't take that.”

Inside and outside of the church, Effie's musical skill has won her friends, prestige, and even cash. “I helped my daughter through college through karaoke shows,” she says. “I'd win them all. Hell, I'd even win racist karaoke shows. They'd have these ones where you had to sing country and western music. So I decided no music would be off-limit to me, and I learned country and western music. And I saved a marriage.”

Effie remembers singing “You Were Always on My Mind” in a bar. A couple beckoned her over. In tears, they told her that they had been planning to divorce, but that

the emphasis that she put on the words in that song made them decide to work things out.

“And, six months later, they asked me to come and sing that song at their wedding, at their re-commitment ceremony.”

“Another time,” Effie continues, “they had this racist karaoke in a cornfield in Iowa, and I got up there to sing, and they cut the music off partway through, and I kept singing, and the audience didn't know that there was supposed to be background music, because these were all white folks. So I won \$500, and I sent it to my daughter.

“Through all my life in Iowa, I've always had white friends and black friends. And having white friends always ended up taking me to the cornfields.”

In 2007, she also sang the national anthem at a steak fry in Indianola, Iowa, attended by six Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination. “That was the one where it was a big deal because he didn't have his hand on his heart. It was amazing to be that close to him. I had him sign my book and he said, ‘Did you read it?’ And I said, ‘No, but I'm going to.’ And I always get all books addressed to my granddaughter.”

“I also got married for two years. He was a wonderful guy. He stopped smoking long enough to marry me then he started again two days after. A person who was so smart didn't know he shouldn't drink. I divorced him after he wrecked my Mustang. I had a 1979 Mustang. He wrecked it drunk. Hit a parked car. I took him to the hospital and told him, ‘Don't come back. I personally can't handle an alcoholic.’ And he gambled. But he was the nicest guy ever, a fireman. Great income. But I needed to show my daughter that's not a reason to stay with an alcoholic.

“At my job, I could look up any license plate. So I looked up the car he hit. And it turned out it was a businessman who was at a hooker's house, and when I called him he

said, 'How much do you need to fix your car?'

"But my father had told me that if you take anything and you're not honest about it, you'll lose double that amount. So I let it go. Anything so easy to get, that's not honest, is not good for you.

"I think I bought a Malibu after that, but I got rid of his ass."

She returned to Oxford after retiring from John Deere. "I thought I was going to Europe. Then they called me and said, 'Mom has Alzheimer's.' And I said, 'Shit, I got a ticket.' But there's no way I could be over in Europe having fun with my mom forgetting how to do things.

"So that brought me back here to Oxford, and never did I imagine that I would be sitting on the Square with white people." When she was growing up here, she says, Oxford was a sundown town. Her family would do their shopping in Water Valley instead.

"So to come back to Oxford and find the Wise Women and people who have the same worldview about race, leadership, religion—even though it's different denominations—and I've got my mom for two weeks, then she goes down to Jackson. I've got to do more to fight against racism. I can no longer sit and go to a supervisors' meeting and call them all children and pretend the flag is not the Confederate flag."

It's hard to imagine how Effie could do much more to combat white supremacy. She's become involved with the Lafayette County lynching memorialization project, attended protests, and used her singing talent to call attention to white supremacy, even entering a music video in the local film festival. In her film, "God Bless America," she sang about American identity and white supremacy while showing footage from the Black Lives Matter movement, of police brutality, and of Donald Trump.

“Some white people saw the video and said it made them think differently about police brutality,” she says. “It was in their face. That's why I made the video. Plus, I wanted to strangle Trump. Every day, it was breaking news, interrupting my Young and the Restless, my Bold and Beautiful. I had to write about it. The way he did immigrants, (Humayun) Khan, police brutality, Sessions, racist rich billionaires. I had to talk about it. I can't let it go, but I can deal with it. I couldn't sleep.

“The day he got elected, I was in the Dollar General. This guy with a big old Confederate flag on his truck—his a rusty-ass truck—and three teeth in his mouth and his shoestring around his waist cut in line.

“Didn't you get the memo? You n— have to get to the back of the line.’

“I didn't know what to do or what to say. My grandfather was run out of this town by white people.

“The cashier, a white guy, said (the racist who cut in line) had two choices. Get to the back of the line or leave. I got in my car and cried like a baby all the way home, and then I wrote that song. The only things that make me cry are someone hating another person and people killed for any reason. Even if it's a Nazi life. Now, better them than me. And that's what I say about white people. They have to stand up and say something. When black people are put in a situation like that, white people need to stand up and say something so I don't have to do something.”

One of the things she's done is publicly burn the Confederate flag.

“You know, that flag is scary to me, right?” she says. Referencing the rally that the Hiwaymen, an Arkansas-based hate group, held in Oxford in February, she adds, “Even though I didn't go to the Square, I watched the video too long. I had to look at Jeff Sessions

with the axe and look at the dogs. I couldn't sleep.

“When Alabama came to town two years ago, right down from my house they set up a big tent with drawers—you know, underwear—with the damn Confederate flag on it. They had a bikini, a fucking lawn chair, sheets, pillowcase. I'm, like, mad as hell, right?

“I said, Well, Effie, what're you going to do? I'm going to burn a flag.”

She pulled over and walked up to the tent. Her had an exchange with the proprietor went something like this:

“What can I do for you, lady?”

“I want a Confederate flag.”

“You mean a state flag?”

“No, I mean a Confederate flag.”

“Oh!” he said, excitedly. “It's \$8, but I'll give it to you for \$5!”

She moved her car to the gas station parking lot across the street and got her lighter out. “I lit that thing on fire and held it up, and they said, ‘What the fuck you doing? Motherfucking n—.’”

“‘I'm burning up some shit,’” Effie called back.

The threats continued. “I just kept singing loud and waving that flag. I had my mace right here, the door open, the car running. Another car came up and I thought, Oh, God, I'm gonna have to go. It was an older white lady and a young girl—Annemarie.”

“I can't believe you do not have a microphone,” she remembers them saying. “Your voice is so beautiful.”

They hugged and one of the women suggested that they pray. “So we stood around in a circle and prayed, and all stomped on the flag. An old white guy stopped, ‘What's

going on?’ I said, ‘This flag is a flag of hate.’ So he said, ‘Let's pray.’ A black girl pulled up—’We're praying.’ She pulled over and we prayed.

“A guy on the other side, he said, ‘Take our flag off the ground.’ So I did a dance on it. And when I left I dragged it in the car door. Then I saw a car behind me. Ain't no way I'm going home. I drove my ass all the way to Water Valley and parked in front of the police, backed my car up so he couldn't get my license.

“Then I went home and put my car in the garage.”

ANNE STEEL

The crescendoing harmony reverberates through the room, bouncing off the high, cheesecloth-draped windows, reaching to where a crystal chandelier dangles incongruously from among the old pipes still crossing the concrete ceiling of the Powerhouse. The music has no words, yet. Just notes. “So, so, so, fa, so, la...”

Oxford's annual Sacred Harp Singing, now in its 39th year, has begun. A tall, gray-haired woman flits between the altos' section and the table holding the home-cooked dishes that will become the “dinner on the grounds.” Her name is Anne Steel, and no singing would be complete without her and her husband Warren, who co-founded the event.

“Don't ever marry someone who's not a musician,” Anne says. “He needs to be able to sing, whistle, or play an instrument.”

However, Anne admits that it took some time for her musical tastes to sync up with her early music (pre-1700s) enthusiast of a husband. The two met when Anne was in college and Warren was in seminary studying religious music. At that time, both were in relationships with other people. Years later, after reconnecting and eventually marrying, the two had a memorable drive from Michigan to Mississippi. Anne says, “We stopped for the night at the motel, and Beethoven's fifth—no, it was the sixth, the pastoral—was on, and I was entranced. And he said, ‘I can't take this anymore, I'll meet you inside.’” She pauses, still apparently dismayed. “And I thought I knew this man! He doesn't like Beethoven!”

Anne grew up in a fairly traditional family in Detroit but discovered activism as a freshman at the University of Michigan in 1966. She dropped out of her sorority in order to devote her energies to writing for the Michigan Daily, the student newspaper. The other

journalists became her community, teaching her about politics in the process. Anne, a psychology major, started by doing regular reporting but quickly got an idea for a daring investigation. “I decided to enter a local mental hospital as a fake patient,” she explains.

Without ever hearing of Nellie Bly, the New York World reporter who became famous for her stunts, including a ten-day undercover stay in a lunatic asylum, Anne had hatched a similar scheme. Collaborating with a professor who also worked at the hospital, she decided to claim that she was having a nervous breakdown and couldn't remember her identity. Only her professor would know that she was feigning.

“The story was printed and well received,” she says. “And I made a lifelong friend of an actual patient. We're still in touch. But that was eye-opening, and humbling, and made me question the legitimacy of what I had done, to pretend that I was a patient when these people—including my friend—were patients.”

She also started dating the president of the state SDS chapter. “He got me involved with protesting,” she recalls. “I was against the Vietnam War, but I wasn't a pacifist—I knew enough about World War II—but because of being around the Michigan Daily, and covering it, it made no sense to be over there, thousands of miles away, having all these young guys killed for military splendor—imperialism. But most of my memories are the romantic things—the bus ride to Washington, protesting in front of the Pentagon —facing these young men holding rifles, who were the same as age as us, and feeling like we were in opposite worlds.”

Her family was not on board with her activism, although both of her brothers had young families that allowed them to escape the draft. “I was never good at debating,” Anne says. She describes coming home from college and getting into an argument with her father

over supper. “He was out-arguing me. I remember reaching a point I felt I was going to cry, I was so frustrated. I couldn't explain why I felt the way I felt, so I went upstairs and cried. I couldn't do what my peers did so well.”

A couple years later, on another visit home from college, she remembers going boating with her dad on the St. Clair River. He finished the beer he was drinking and threw the can over the side of the boat.

“Dad!” cried Anne.

“Come on, Mouse,” she remembers her father saying, using her nickname. “It's just one beer can.”

“No, it's not just one beer can,” she remonstrated.

Reluctantly, her father pulled the throttle on the boat, slowly going back by the beer can so Anne could lean over and pick it up.

“That was a stellar moment in my life, because I had argued for what I believed and I had won, and it was against my dad, the trial lawyer. And I just have not forgotten that specific moment.”

To this day, Anne says, she and Warren don't leave the house without a bag in their pocket to pick up cans or bottles. “That's one of the more passionate things in my life, being responsible for yourself and how you move through the world. Whatever we do, if there are other people around, we affect them by how we do what we do. And really, that's the whole gist of politics. What we do personally, as a voter, in society—how honestly we do it, how thoughtfully—as countries, how we interact with other countries—and how we act with others—political party, town, country—we just can't go through life being selfish and think that doesn't matter.

“That sounds pompous,” she adds, after a pause. “I don't think that way all the time, but I wish I did.”

After college, Anne began working as a special education teacher. She credits her move to Mississippi with reviving the latent activist in her. Remembering her excitement at getting to teach at an integrated school for the first time, Anne describes driving students home from school and realizing that not only did they have special needs, but seeing the needs of their families as well.

Teaching also helped Anne unite her love of pedagogy with her love of the environment, albeit in a roundabout way. When the school district's one Latin teacher retired, Anne, who had taken Latin through high school, volunteered to take over the curriculum. Her predecessor had only allowed students deemed “gifted” to study the language; Anne opened it to everyone. Her first year, only two sections filled up, so she was forced to teach math as well.

That same year, Anne had gotten an Earth Watch grant to capture and tag green sea turtles on the coast, an opportunity she calls “the highlight of my life.” That first semester, teaching Latin and math, Anne brought some of the sea turtles to her classroom. “We were able to do all sorts of math concepts—measuring the length of the carapace and such—and they went to Latin class, too. Hermes made a lyre out of a turtle shell, you know.”

Had she not married Warren and moved to Mississippi, Anne says she's unsure whether she would have become the “wild woman activist” she describes herself as. “Wise wild woman activist,” she adds. She credits Wise Women with providing her with a cornucopia of opportunities to become involved in causes ranging from period rights to prison rights. She has traveled to Memphis to march for unions and a \$15 minimum wage,

photographing the demonstration, and helped organize the local chapter of Indivisible, a national group that attempted to copy Tea Party tactics to pressure elected officials to adopt more liberal ideas (a seemingly futile quest with many Mississippi representatives, group members discovered). Volunteering to transcribe the handwritten memoirs of current Parchman inmates has been a particularly meaningful experience to her, as it connected with her previous journalism work while introducing her to the experiences of incarcerated men in Mississippi.

One of the projects she spearheaded was small but symbolic. In May of 2017, Anne traveled to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to visit her son. While walking around his neighborhood, she saw a yard sign emblazoned with a number of progressive slogans, including “No Human is Illegal,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “Women’s Rights Are Human Rights.” She spotted another one in a neighbor’s yard. And then another, identical one. And another.

“Its message moved me to knock on the door of one of the homes,” she wrote to the Wise Women listserv. “I met Mary Ann Weber, 76, a twenty-year resident of Albuquerque. I told her about our 'Wise Women' group, and she responded that many of her friends and acquaintances shared our deep concerns. She explained that the signs were a peaceful way of showing support for those concerns, and solidarity with one another. She suggested I share the idea with my Mississippi compatriots, and I promised I would!”

In her email, Anne asked if the Wise Women would be interested in creating and ordering similar yard signs. The first voice to chime in was Sue Fino's. The former businesswoman, who had hidden her politics to avoid losing customers, wrote, “It's time to make a statement despite possible consequences. I'd go for it.”

Many more women echoed Sue's sentiments. Fifty, in fact. And, once the first order went in, twenty-five more signed up for a second edition.

The same principles that Anne wanted to make visible—a desire for equality and inclusion—continue to draw her to shape-note music. “It's political, too,” she says. “Here's how. There's no leader. No one's in charge. It's democratic, meaning everyone is invited to sing a song. You sign up as you go in, and your name is chosen out of a pot, and you get up and lead a song of your choice. It's not a performance. There's no attempt to seem better, to do a fancier song. There's no audition. And—picture it—everyone's facing each other.”

AINSLEY ASH

Pennsylvania Avenue is packed. It's the morning of the March for Our Lives, protesting the lack of gun control laws that might have prevented the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. One woman wears a jacket with a sign taped to the back: "The number of bullet holes in this poster are the number that can be shot in the time it takes to read it."

"Come on!" Ainsley spots an opening in the crowd, grabs her friend's hand and pulls him along. Getting to the front is harder than she expects. By the time the speeches start, she has managed to position herself near a large screen.

"We march for our lives because we now have to beg for them," says one of the Parkland students, Cameron Kasky. Ainsley starts crying, turns to her friend, hugs.

The nineteen-year-old had traveled thirteen hours by car to be here, after recruiting students on the University of Mississippi campus to make the trip with her. But, when she posts pictures from the event on social media that afternoon, Mississippi doesn't feel very far away. People in her hometown of Meridian start attacking her.

"Holy shit you people are fucking stupid." "The thugs get it day 1 off the streets." "We need to pray often for our country."

Even some of her teachers join in. Her grandmother calls, worried and unhappy.

"It's so hard to be a Democrat sometimes," Ainsley sighs, sitting in the car and scrolling through the notifications on her phone.

The fact that she's used to it doesn't always make it easier.

"I feel like constantly throughout my life I've had to combat against ignorance and racism and god knows what else, like in my own home," she says. "I remember telling my brother to turn off the lights to conserve energy, for monetary reasons but also to save the

environment, and being laughed at and called a 'fucking hippie.' I've grown up with Fox News on my television, I've grown up with my grandfather commenting on our African American neighbors and saying, there's a difference between black people and—" she pauses, but the meaning is clear. "And he'd say, The ones across the street—they're black people. But everyone else—probably a—" she stops again. "And I remember not feeling okay with that."

Growing up in poverty in Meridian, Mississippi, Ainsley learned to hide elements of her own beliefs—or lack thereof—to secure social acceptance. She was a cross-country runner who self-described as a nerd, a young woman conflicted about conforming to her mother's superimposed beauty standards, especially when she was elected Homecoming Queen.

"I had to buy myself a dress for it," she says. "And, I mean, it's a beautiful dress, and after I was nominated I was like I kinda hope I get it now, because I'm \$600 in the hole, and I wish someone had told me I didn't have to spend a lot of money on that."

Religion was a major part of her community's culture. She describes her family as Easter-and-Christmas Christians. "When we went to church it was when my mom got a new boyfriend and was trying to do things 'right,'" Ainsley says. "We would go to church on Sundays sometimes and we would fake pray around the kitchen dinner table. I have a memory of my brother and I gabbing and having our eyes open, and getting mad at each other because we both had our eyes open during prayer and my mom's boyfriend then, Barry, who turned out to be gay, got onto us because neither one of us should have had our eyes open.

"Not only was he gay, but he was abusive when he was dating my mom. So praying

around the dinner table that one time didn't do much good.”

Nevertheless, Ainsley spent many Wednesday nights in youth group at the Baptist church because her high school boyfriend was the choir director's son. “Had it not been for the church being the key aspect of social life as a teenager I would not have been in church,” she says. However, this cultural Christianity led to significant psychological impacts.

“They have scared the shit out of me about the end times. One summer the preacher preached the entire book of Revelation and it was my least favorite summer because he was saying if you were scared at all of the world ending then that shows that your heart is not in the right place. So that was great. But anyway so now I have this fear of climate change in the context of the apocalypse. However, it's been really frustrating to debate with religious or political conservatives, which are essentially one and the same, about whether climate change exists, when climate change is essentially what they've been predicting, and it's very frustrating for them to not recognize that capitalism is the proponent of climate change, or “the end,” and—but at the same time, they've brought about their own end.” She reflects. “Republican Jesus is not my friend.”

Religion was not, however, confined to church. “We prayed over the intercom every morning. Sometimes, I was asked to pray, and that was really awkward. The prayers kind of went like this: 'Dear God, thank you for this beautiful day, thank you for getting everyone to school safely, please protect the baseball team at their game tonight, please let everything we do glorify you, help us, uh, do good on our test. We love you and we praise you. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

“This is what everyone said. When I was asked to pray, my prayers would kind of go like this. 'Dear God, thank you for giving us this opportunity to have a public education,

help us to learn everything to the best of our abilities and to be grateful for school and the opportunity to learn. In Jesus' name, Amen.' Because I consciously knew that I didn't want to say things I didn't mean.”

Her high school world religions class, which she describes as “Christianity with a touch of Judaism,” was taught by a Baptist pastor. Every day, one of the students was supposed to get up and write their favorite Bible verse on the board. When it was her turn, Ainsley, who was not yet a-religious but was questioning many religious teachings, wrote down a verse from Ecclesiastes. “Because Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom and I don't feel any particular way about wisdom.”

“How do you opt out of writing your favorite Bible verse every week, without being targeted?” she asks. “If I didn't want to come out as a closet atheist, or a closet non-believer, or a Doubting Thomas—because I know that if I had said anything my name would have ended up on a prayer list somewhere and I would have had people talking to me about my religious beliefs. Also, do they not realize how fucked up that is?”

AP Biology provided a refuge. “The teacher that was supposed to teach the class ended up going to rehab for alcoholism. Actually, she hit a kid the semester before so she was fired and then she subsequently went to rehab for alcoholism, so they had to come up with a teacher to teach AP Bio and they came up with this guy who had a bio degree from Ole Miss and a law degree. He got the job because his mom worked in the county office. I can safely say that. Mr. Butler. He was 25-ish, had come back from Georgia, and incredibly awkward, did not know how to interact with my class of rednecks and Trump supporters.

“Mr. Butler was not a good teacher. He taught to the book, I found all of the answers—I'm not going to say all that because I got an award for the class. But he was

incredibly progressive. One day Mr. Butler came to class wearing a flannel with a T-shirt underneath that said 'Reunite Pangaea' and it was amazing and discouraging to watch him try to defend evolution against creationists. Kids said, 'Mr. Butler, I did not come from monkeys,' and they were citing scripture, and I think that was a moment for me where I was incredibly reflective on the community that I had grown up in.”

Ainsley remembers trying to stay after class to talk to Mr. Butler for as long as possible, because he was the first person she had ever met who denied creationism, would talk about politics, and questioned capitalism. “Sometimes we'd get into conspiracy theories, or at least what seemed to me like conspiracy theories, but now looking back I can see that Watergate and climate change are not as—things are more intentional than I gave them credit for. And these ideas were not outlandish but I'd been socialized to think that they were.”

Running cross-country gave Ainsley exposure to a different religious tradition that she found particularly meaningful. Some of her teammates were Mennonites, and she quickly grew close to them and to their father, Coach Shelly. “That is a type of Christianity that is rooted, in my opinion, in social justice and loving other people, and not dictated by rules,” Ainsley said. This experience deepened when she spent a summer working at a Mennonite summer camp, and provided her with the support she craved: the Shellys championed progressive causes and encouraged her to continue her academic career.

But no encouragement from friends could equal the drive for higher education that she got from growing up in a dysfunctional family. Ainsley describes her mother as volatile. “She's the self-described black sheep of the family, but I think that's also a side effect of her never choosing to grow up. So yeah. Knowing the situation I grew up in has

been kind of difficult for me in the notion of social welfare, because I've seen my mother exploit the system, (that) being food stamps and Medicaid and probably other things I'm not aware of. I know that my mother would avoid working and would blame it on her chronic illness—Crohn's disease—but I know based on my lived experiences with her—and this sounds harsh—but she was a leech on my grandparents most importantly but also like government aid. So I absolutely am still a proponent of social welfare, but I hate to see someone I am related to exploit it in such a way.

“When people ask me about my dad I always say I don't see him, and I don't, and I haven't for a very long time, and I always get looks of sympathy. But I don't think my life has been lacking because I've lacked a traditional father figure. It does not in any way affect my everyday life. He lives in Kemper County, Mississippi, and works at a funeral home helping embalm people. Quite the character. He is kind of like this mythical character in my mind. I know that he is working on building a doomsday shelter for when the big one hits and California falls into the ocean. He is an anti-vaxxer and every now and then I check his Facebook page to see what he's up to. But I think he's deleted it. It's a wonder I am who I am.”

For Ainsley, her grandparents' couch symbolizes the familial conflict that made leaving for college imperative. After her parents divorced when she was three, her mother relied on the grandparents for support. Due to financial hardship, Ainsley's mother moved the family every other year, always within the same county, sometimes to a different house down the road from their current place and eventually to her grandparents' house, where Ainsley ended up sleeping on a couch in the piano room. This forced her to listen to the endless spats and domestic violence between her grandmother and her mother, who always

managed to entangle her in their arguments. Although her high school discouraged her from applying to schools other than Meridian Community College, she had other plans.

“I knew that I could not by any means stay in Meridian two more years or I might really kill myself. That would be the hell that the Baptists talked about, staying in Meridian and sleeping on that couch. And so I knew that I had to leave, and that fueled my desire and my ambition to leave more than anything else.”

As Ainsley coached herself through the college application process, she struggled with deciding whether or not to include homecoming queen on her resume as she applied for college. She ended up leaving it off, deciding it was a popularity contest and didn't actually mean anything, and landed a full ride to the University of Mississippi, one of the two schools where she applied. That and the fact that it was farther from home than the University of Southern Mississippi decided it for her.

Now in her sophomore year, Ainsley has become both a student of education policy and an advocate for other first-generation, low income students. In the summer of 2018, she became the first student from the University of Mississippi to win the UK Summer Fulbright to Northern Ireland, where she studied Education for Transformation at Queen's University in Belfast.

“I realized the extent to which people are people,” she says. “Meaning systems of oppression exist everywhere and they are called different things. And go through different changes at different times. But they're still very real and have real consequences.”

She describes watching a march on July 12th, a Protestant holiday. “In that moment it was really difficult for me to decide what does patriotism look like versus nationalism, versus sectarianism. I know for a lot of those people it really was a celebration of their

British heritage, but it was hard for me to not look at that—it was hard for me to separate being a Protestant and British from being British colonizers, and I think that led to a lot of confusion and reflection that allows me to look at the way that we cling to our 'heritage' as Americans and as Southerners.”

Tim Dolan, who helped Ainsley through the summer Fulbright application process, also indirectly introduced her to Wise Women, through introducing her to me.

“Interacting with the Wise Women has made me reevaluate the place I see the South as, as a place of great power and activism as opposed to—the place has always had a negative connotation for me. And, just like getting to know Mennonites was awesome for my view of religion because it was not as strict and it had a social justice lens to it, knowing the Wise Women—many of them are Universal Unitarians—and that's just as inspiring, to be able to see activism with at least somewhat of a religious lens. And I think that it's a privilege to be able to go to Wise Women and talk to people like Barbara Phillips, who—honestly, I have no right to know people like Barbara or Susan Glisson but it is an immense privilege to just call them my friends, because they have so much experience and such a beautiful understanding of the nuance of America and also the South. It's just exciting to know that that is in Oxford.”

She has also built relationships with group members outside the Friday lunch framework. “And my absolute favorite Wise Woman of all time is Dr. Joanne Gabrynowicz, who has honestly kind of adopted me. And we have connected over being first gen college students, but also women, and growing up low-income, and it's just so exciting to have these women as resources and guides for me as I'm trying to figure out my life. Sure, Joanne and I talk about politics and what I want to do with my life and where I

want to go to grad school, but we also talk about boys and whether or not there is a cosmic being who has a role in our lives, and that's pretty damn special to me.”

RUBY KELLEY

“I wouldn't consider myself an activist,” says Ruby Kelley. “When I think about an activist I think about someone in the spotlight, being very vocal about their persuasion, and I don't see myself in the spotlight. I think you could say I'm a community encourager.”

The Lafayette County native has been pushing to change what she calls a “separatist” society for some time. “It was one of those things that wasn't taught, but it was demonstrated,” she says. “What my parents taught me by their behavior was that, being a black person in this county, there were certain areas you didn't venture in, certain things you didn't do.”

One of eleven children, Ruby grew up 20 miles from Oxford. She remembers her parents bringing the family into town. “My mother would let us sit where—it was called the jailhouse then—where the courthouse is now. She would take the girls to try on shoes and clothes, then take us back and take the boys. We wouldn't go into certain areas, and we didn't venture off. They didn't have to tell us. That was the norm.”

As she got older, she would come with a group of her siblings. They would shop together, but it wasn't safe to separate herself from the group. “We didn't have the freedom to go to a different store,” she says.

She didn't get to choose whether or not to push to desegregate the schools. “My brother and I were the first class that integrated. Again, we stayed in groups. The teachers were very careful with us—they sat us on one side of the classroom and talked to the white children, not to us. One white teacher would talk about ‘nigrahs.’ That was how he'd pronounce it. Some of the teachers were a little more tolerant—we, coming in, we had to tolerate them and they had to tolerate us. But they canceled prom that year—that was one

of the things that was harsh on us.

“I managed to graduate, though several of my classmates dropped out because they couldn't take the pressure. Afterward, going to Northwest, it was much more tolerant there than at the city school.”

After completing community college, Ruby transferred to the University of Mississippi in 1972. “Going to Ole Miss, we all stayed in small groups. There were not that many of us, and we all knew each other. There was one person in the band. That one band member would not carry the Confederate flag, he carried a white flag.”

Finding community was difficult. One of her friends established the first black sorority on campus, the AKAs, but Ruby didn't have the money to join and her family told her she was just there to get her education. That was made difficult by the hostility of the white professors. “Most black people didn't get anything higher than a B,” she says.

One friendly face on campus was her brother, who had begun working for the university police department, where he was the first black officer, after graduating from high school.

However, there were some social diversions, albeit of a questionable character. “We had panty raids,” she says. “We would giggle but we wouldn't throw our panties out.

After graduation, she spent a year working as a food service supervisor at a local special needs center before going into teaching, a career she had aspired to since ninth grade, when her home economics teacher made a lasting impression on her.

However, she faced the same isolation as a teacher that had followed her through school. “I think one of the things that was sort of discouraging was that there were only three or four black teachers out of the whole staff as teachers in high school. That was—

even when I left Lafayette, in '87, I started junior high, (she counts on her fingers) still four. And I think that's still an issue, even today, the number of black teachers compared to the students. That's an issue in the city, too. And I guess I am more of a community pusher when it comes to that.”

She pushed her students, too. As a teacher at South Panola, in Batesville, she sponsored a student organization called Future Homemakers of America, which later changed to Family Career and Community Leaders of America. She encouraged her students to become leaders in their communities. The most gratifying thing about teaching, Ruby says, was watching “students being mentors for other students.”

She also coached them for competitions ranging from cooking to parliamentary procedure. She brought in the chef John Currence to mentor her students before a national competition in Chicago, where they would go on to win second place.

“That got to be my passion, then,” she says, “seeing young people's motivation, competing at local, state and national competitions—because of course I carried them to national competitions—and winning. And I carried them to places they wouldn't have gotten to go—to San Diego, the last group to D.C. They had a leadership training session, got to visit the legislature in session—it was a great opportunity for them, to look at the process from the gallery.”

Some of her students embarked on unique career paths as a result of their membership in the organization. There were as many boys as girls in her group, including the two who studied with Currence. Many of her male students studied nursing, while some learned how to make clothes. “Some of the boys went on to major in interior design—they started in home economics.”

In retirement, Ruby has become involved in different community initiatives. Following the 2016 election, the local Democratic Party decided to hold a series of listening sessions in different parts of the county. One of Ruby's schoolmates recommended her as a moderator for one of the events. While preparing to lead her session, Ruby attended some of the earlier ones, where she met members of the party executive board, which she would soon join. One of her fellow members was Eunice Benton, who suggested that she come to Wise Women.

So, she started coming to lunch. While she sometimes felt isolated among all of the recent transplants in the group, she feels that this resource is worth sharing with her friends and has brought many new women to lunch.

“It's been interesting just to start reaching out to some of the women,” she says. “The reason some of them are not members are because they're so traditional and this is not a traditional group. But some of them may surprise me.”

Ruby has fused some of the traditional beliefs she grew up with with a feminism that boils down to a feeling of comfort in one's own identity. “I am a person that has a strong Christian faith, and there's nothing in my faith that hinders me as a female. My Christian faith teaches me no hindrance, even though there may be some in my denomination. The originator of the Christian faith doesn't do that. I don't have any objections whatsoever to a female leading a congregation, just like a male. In fact, I think using my Christian faith and what I've been taught over the years—in the foundation of Christian faith, there is no gender, everyone is the same according to their leadership abilities—the only thing that hinders us is our physical abilities. Females can be subjected to being respected as a female. I don't mind a male opening a door for me—yes, he can do

that.”

In 2017, Abbeville, which Ruby describes as the strongest African American community in Lafayette County, decided to come together. Ruby had attended elementary school at the Gordon school in Abbeville, now abandoned but still a hub of the community, because, she says, the state had consolidated the school districts in an attempt to strip control of the education system away from black communities. Her familiarity with the community and her membership in the Wise Women enabled her to pull women into this initiative who might otherwise have never heard about it. Additionally, Ruby became a leader of the voting rights subgroup within the Abbeville project.

“The voter rights brochure came out of that group,” she says, referring to the creation of a pamphlet with information about voter registration, a project she spearheaded. “That was an issue not just for the Abbeville group, but in Lafayette and all of Mississippi. We wanted to help people from DeSoto to Biloxi. It concerns me that we have not gotten the Spanish version yet, but we're still working on that.

“One other thing,” she adds. “The diversity of our community and the lack of opportunity for people of minority backgrounds is a concern that is not spoken of enough. And this is one of the areas that—as many voices as possible as speak to this issue can make a difference. Minorities are very well equipped to have more leadership, but because of the appearance that we have too much of—we don't allow minorities to have leadership. If we put aside physical appearance and look at their abilities, this county can be more attractive to people who may not be of the same majority. We're diverse in so many other areas—economics, business—one of my major goals is to see that.”

It's an issue she thinks Wise Women can work to solve. “That's one of the things

that keeps me coming back, along with the fellowship is just outstanding. But I see they can make a difference, and not only that they can, but their willingness to make a difference—they keep stepping up to the plate.”

ELIZABETH PAYNE

Elizabeth Payne looks down at the hardwood floor in her living room.

“Have you seen the movie, *Norma Rae*?” she asks. “This floor is from the J.P. Stevens textile mill.”

She proceeds to explain how, while rebuilding parts of her house after a fire, she called her contractor in Indianola about finding wood for a floor. The contractor mentioned that he had recently bought the now-abandoned North Carolina factory.

“I knew I had to have *Norma Rae*'s floor,” she says.

It's a fitting grounding for a scholar of women in labor organizing. Elizabeth has spent her career researching the lives of women like Mary Dreier, Jane Addams and Myrtle Terry Lawrence. She discovered her passion for history as an undergrad at the Mississippi State College for Women, now known as the Mississippi University for Women but always known colloquially as “the W.” There, she took a class with a professor who waxed eloquent over the history of lace-making in Spain. “It just turned me on,” she remembers. “And I don't know why making lace was so important, but he talked about it in a way in which he was excited and it got all of the rest of us excited.”

Her determination to enter this field was compounded by a negative experience with a different professor, Dr. Skipper. “He was the chair of the department,” she says. “He had a Ph.D. from Harvard. I remember him asking in class, 'Did Africa have a history?' My hand went up and one other hand went up, and he said, 'No, Africa has no history.' How can you have a Ph.D. from Harvard and say Africa has no history? He didn't let us answer.”

A native of Nettleton, Mississippi, Elizabeth grew up questioning the rigid segregation of her town. While her parents were comparatively very progressive, her

grandparents were not. Elizabeth remembers the outrage and shame she felt when her grandmother would not reciprocate the generosity of her black neighbors by inviting them to eat dinner together, and when her grandfather spoke with more consternation about an unmarried mother in the family than about their history of owning slaves. “I became class-conscious through becoming race-conscious,” she says, remembering her mother's lessons about inclusion and acceptance.

She also questioned the gender roles society tried to force upon her. During her junior year of high school, a teacher asked whether she owned an evening gown. Elizabeth did, so her teacher told her to enter a beauty pageant — which Elizabeth won. Afterward, her father told her, “I guess once is okay, but don't let it happen again.”

Although her father was born with congenital heart failure and other illnesses, which Elizabeth said made her even more determined to please him, he worked tirelessly to ensure that Elizabeth and her sisters could go to college. She remembers him saying, “I'm working this hard in order that you can go to college and you can tell any man that doesn't treat you right to hit the road.”

In order to get into college, Elizabeth needed to take geometry. However, her school forced girls to take shorthand instead. Luckily, an English teacher sympathized with Elizabeth's problem and went to the superintendent.

“What will Elizabeth do when the county nurse comes?” he wanted to know.

What little sex education the school offered was taught during this period, as the sexes were separated. The teacher convinced the superintendent that Elizabeth could attend the other class on one day out of the school year, and she was allowed to take the class. “I sat on the front seat, loved geometry and did well,” she remembers.

The Methodist Church provided her with an avenue to participate in social justice work and take on leadership roles denied to her in other aspects of life. In high school, she was elected president of the state Methodist Youth Fellowship board. She began attending summer camps in different regions of the country. Unlike similar events in Mississippi, these programs were integrated. She met Methodists from Japan and India, one of whom taught her how to drape a sari. She listened to Martin Luther King, Jr., speak and met young civil rights activists. She also met her future husband, Ken Rutherford.

They were at Camp Lake Stephens, near Oxford. Elizabeth was 19 years old and in college at the W. As president of the Mississippi youth fellowship, she felt an obligation to go down early for breakfast each morning and try to engage with the other campers. It wasn't going well: they would respond to her questions with one-word answers.

One morning, Elizabeth was sitting at breakfast when a young man approached from the other side of the table.

“Is this seat taken?”

It wasn't, and he sat down across from her. “We started talking to each other and we went on for an hour and a half. And I am two years and nine months older than he, and for some reason, we just stayed in touch.”

They met up periodically, visiting each other's parents and occasionally going out for dinner, but they didn't become romantically involved until much later. However, her friendship with Ken provided Elizabeth with a greater depth of information on the Vietnam War. Because Ken worked with his father at the Tupelo Daily Journal, he had access to news reports on the war. He began sending these to Elizabeth when she had to write a paper on the conflict for one of her courses. The reports left a lasting impression on Elizabeth's

mind. “That was when you had the monks setting themselves on fire.”

In the last weekend in September 1962, when Elizabeth was a freshman at the W, James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi. Elizabeth remembers sitting in the college dining hall and feeling sickened by watching the other girls standing up and singing Dixie, or talking about their hatred of John F. Kennedy and the federal government.

“The turning point in my life,” she says, “was a scream that I had after Meredith had been admitted. It was midnight, and my roommate had gone home. I woke up because someone was screaming the way I'd never heard before, and my throat felt tight, and I realized it was me. The lights started turning on, and the girls went to find out who'd been killed. In some ways, I think that it was relief.”

In an autobiographical essay recounting the same event, Elizabeth wrote, “Somehow in that scream, I found a voice of freedom, and I promised myself that I would never let it go. I never had to scream again.”

This event made her more determined than ever to leave Mississippi; she graduated in three years and went to seminary at the Perkins School of Theology at SMU in Texas. She met a young man from Arkansas and they married while in school. But, while she excelled in her coursework, patriarchy got in her way.

“I did, for a period, want to be ordained,” she says. “And I was told, well, we'll ordain you, and we'll assign your husband to Podunk and you can become his assistant. And that was kind of the end of it.”

She spent a short time working as a counselor at Duke while her husband finished his masters' degree, then moved with him to Illinois, where he began a Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago. She became a fourth-grade teacher in an all-black school. Very

few of her students were at grade-level, and their IQ test results had gone down with each passing year. Elizabeth knew that the scores were misleading but was depressed by the deplorable education they were receiving. Some of them didn't even know the alphabet.

At that time, all public school teachers in Illinois could receive free tuition at any public university in the state. Thus, Elizabeth began studying history at the University of Illinois in Chicago. She began writing about the National Women's Trade Union League, becoming absorbed in the biographies of the union leaders, many of whom, she found, were motivated by religious faith. She spent hours wandering through Jane Addams' Hull House, located on campus. Elizabeth grows excited as she recounts the stories of these woman and their friends: Addams getting herself elected as a sanitation inspector to ensure garbage collection occurred in poor neighborhoods as well as wealthy ones, or campaigning against war, or getting into arguments about bourgeois lifestyles with Tolstoy; Florence Kelley inspecting factories; Alice Hamilton uncovering the effects of lead poisoning in pregnant women. Many of the women she's studied knew each other.

“I do see parallels with *Wise Women*,” she says. “I don't think that they're as oriented toward working-class women. They cover a lot of territory, it seems to me. But I do see some similarity.”

Elizabeth also met women historians, including Anne Scott, Joan Scott and Elizabeth Jacaway, who became friends and mentors. She went through a divorce, adopted a baby, and taught at several different colleges, eventually landing at the University of Arkansas. After teaching there for several years—and going to Cambridge on a Fulbright fellowship—Elizabeth reconnected with an important element of her Mississippi past. Ken Rutherford, the young man she'd met at Methodist summer camp, had kept in touch for

thirty-two years. She remembers, “We had, at about the same time, we got divorced, and it had never occurred to either of us—I had told him, I’ve got a home, I have a child and I have a job, and I am never going to marry again. And he said, I understand and I’m not planning on getting married either. And that opened up some talk about what our lives had been like, and two years later, we got married.”

That same year, Jim Barksdale donated a large sum of money to the University of Mississippi to create an honors college. Elizabeth spotted an advertisement for a job as the first dean of the new program. She was on sabbatical at the time; someone suggested she interview for the position.

Her interview went so well that one committee member remarked, “Well, if you don’t hire her, we don’t practice affirmative action at the University of Mississippi.” In other words, her male competitors would have been chosen solely because they were male. She was offered the job and came to a campus she was not entirely comfortable with. While most of the incoming Honors College class would not rush, the college campus was dominated by Greek life. “I had never wanted to be in a sorority,” she says. “Didn’t appeal to me. You’re either in the sororities or you’re left out.”

However, she was able to bring in guest speakers, help shape the core classes and curriculum, and provide a model so successful that other campus departments began imitating aspects of it. Her work with the students garnered several national scholarship winners; under her direction, the Honors College hired more professors and taught a greater depth of scholarship.

By the end of her fifth year, however, conflict over the long-term mission and administration of the Honors College loomed. Several faculty members and administrators

felt Elizabeth was not the right person for the job. Some of those fears, she says, were couched in sexism, as when a female administrator told her that she “was exhausted from giving birth to the Honors College.” Ultimately, she left the Honors College but stayed on at the university as a history professor for fifteen more years, returning to her roots in women's labor organizing. As a University of Arkansas faculty member, her geographic situation in Fayetteville had rekindled an interest in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union that dated back to a grad school seminar. She began researching the union's history and became fascinated by the life of Myrtle Terry Lawrence, a sharecropper who organized her fellow workers, confronted the governor in his office, and managed a large family. She met with researchers who had done previous work on Lawrence, some of whom gave her their own photos and notes to use in her work, on the condition that Elizabeth's rendition of Myrtle treated her with respect and dignity rather than reducing her to a stereotype.

Now retired, she's still working on this project. She flips through the photos of Myrtle, explaining the context and circumstances of each one. Some of the photos reveal a spat between Myrtle and her daughter-in-law over the propriety of different forms of tobacco: Myrtle looks askance at cigarette use while her daughter-in-law appears embarrassed by Myrtle's chewing tobacco habit. Other photos show her attending revival-style union meetings. The speakers pictured on the platforms are all men. Myrtle stands in the audience, looking up at them.

“But she was the best organizer of them all,” says Elizabeth.

SUAD PATTON BEY

“Animals were kind of my friends,” says Suad. Growing up homeschooled in an African American Muslim family on a farm in Taylor, Mississippi, could be lonely. But there were always plenty of critters for company.

“We had a llama, lots of sheep, chickens, dogs, one cat—now they just kind of overrun the place—a donkey, goats. My first pet was a baby lamb. I named her Blackberry, took care of her, fed her, watched her grow. She died in 2003, so we were together for a very long time. I kind of considered her my best friend.”

A first-generation American on her Somali mother's side, Suad, a current college senior, is deeply rooted in Taylor, Mississippi, through her father. She is the fifth generation of the Patton Bey family to live on land that has belonged to them for a century and a half. “I didn't think much of it when I was younger,” she says. “It was just land. I didn't really know or realize how rare that is these days, to live on the same property your family has had that long, especially for African Americans. I wanted to live in the suburbs, in Cordova or Southaven. That was what I thought was beautiful. I didn't see the freedom we had, with no neighbors, almost off the grid, so we didn't feel the immediate effects of 9/11 until ten years later.”

Nevertheless, people constantly ask her where she's from and whether she speaks English. “I was born in Pennsylvania,” she says. “Seems like that's a pretty American place. But I have to sometimes remind people that I've been here for a long time. Saying I'm un-American because I dress a certain way or have a certain religion is actually un-American.”

Her mother fled the Somali civil war in the 1990s, eventually enrolling in school in Amherst, Massachusetts. There, she met Suad's father and fell in love.

“Naturally, there was a little bit of opposition to her marrying a non-Somali,” Suad says. “There was opposition to her marrying outside her tribe. My mom is from a very big tribe in northern Somalia, known to be—I'm trying to find a polite word—uppity. So my mom married my dad, and he's black, but Somalis don't like to say they're black, they say they're African.”

TSA agents in airports have repeatedly singled out her and her family, questioning her mother's Green Card and even her siblings' names.

“Where is Ahmed Abdul?” she remembers one of them asking, sharply.

Ahmed Abdul was her little brother, then a baby in his mother's arms.

“Do you want to search his diaper?” her father retorted.

These kinds of interactions were common. So were the stares from strangers in grocery stores when Suad started wearing hijab. She tries to explain the complexity of navigating a world where she was expected to speak Arabic (but didn't) and assumed to be Arab (but isn't) because she covered, but worried that her denials might give the appearance of feeling shame about the language or the identity.

This complexity didn't change after the Patton Bey family moved to Lebanon when Suad was ten and she began attending school there. The fact that her family didn't speak Arabic was now a much greater problem, many of her classes were in Arabic. She encountered institutional racism in school, where Canadian students were allowed to take more classes in English but her teachers made no special accommodations for her, insisting she learn their language and catch up. Her parents hired a tutor to help, and she began making progress.

“I did succeed,” she says, “much to the disappointment of my Arabic teacher, who

really didn't like me. She attacked my dad, mentioned how stupid it was that he was supporting my dream of being a filmmaker. She said that was not a proper job for a Muslim woman. She was a piece of work. Glad I'm done with her.”

She had to take many core classes, including history and geography, in Arabic. Her geography class taught some suspect information. “The book said the sun goes around the earth,” she says, laughing.

“Our apartment was so beautiful,” she remembers. “It was in one of the suburbs of Beirut. The view was just—you could go to the living room and see the Mediterranean. I still see it in my dreams. I think it's because I never got to say goodbye to it. We had to rush out during the 2006 Lebanese war—I remember my mom made a cup of coffee she never got to drink. And I had a teddy bear with my baby picture, and school projects, I never got to take.”

The evacuation happened the first summer she was in Lebanon. Her father had returned to the United States on business, but the rest of the family planned to stay in Lebanon so Suad could go to summer school, although the other kids were bullying her because of her skin color.

She remembers overhearing a couple discussing politics. One of them said, “Look out, there may be some problems. Looks like Hezbollah just kidnapped an Israeli soldier.”

“No one realized what would happen,” Suad says. “This is normal. The next day the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) bombs the railway. We can see the sea from our apartment and we can also see the railway, see the damage that was done. My mom went to the bougie market store the next day to get our little Betty Crocker stuff, came back with groceries, had the water guy and the gas guy deliver three or four weeks' worth. People were emptying

out the store, panicking. I think we were beginning to get a feel that if the Lebanese were beginning to be worried...”

She remembers watching the Lebanese news coverage, although her family struggled to make out the Arabic. “Things were not cooling down. The soldier was not returned. Israel had invaded villages that were on the border. People were coming from the south, because villages had been bombed to the ground, all the inhabitants killed. It was pretty bad. People were breaking into apartments of people who were in Canada or the US for the summer.

“That night we began to hear the planes.

“It has a certain noise. And I'm a deep sleeper, I didn't hear it the first time. I got up, and we could hear the air strikes that were happening around us. We went out on the balcony. The railway had been bombed by sea, but these were the planes, and we were like, ‘This is really serious.’ There are two planes—one that takes a picture, it has an annoying noise, you can't sleep—and then the one that strikes.”

After two weeks of this, a ceasefire was declared and Suad and her family thought things would go back to normal.

“That's when they started going back on Dahieh,” she says, naming a nearby suburb. “Because Dahieh was behind us, it felt like they were bombing the next building, from the shaking. You can hear it when they drop it, but that's not where the real noise comes from. They drop the bomb, it goes into the building and rips it from the inside out. Because these are concrete buildings, it's very loud. A noise you never forget. There's not something I can really compare it to. Arab kids like to play with firecrackers. I used to get jumpy about firecrackers before, but after that, I knew what actual bombs—airstrikes—

sound like.

“And the smell of the air—it doesn't smell like gas, it has a very heavy chemical smell—I never will forget it. Nowadays I can compare something to it smells like bombs, like air strikes. I had never smelled anything like that. I had had a childhood friend who was from Gaza, and told me they couldn't sleep at night because of airstrikes. I began to feel what she might have went through.

“And they only airstrike at night. That's sort of the point. My heart felt like—sharp, you know, when you're in shock—sharp pain, physical pain. Much stronger and more intense than the ones before the ceasefire.”

Suad remembers her family trying to contact the American embassy, but the embassy workers had been evacuated. They heard that countries were bringing ships to the port at El-Mina and that Americans were gathering by the docks.

“Most of our Lebanese friends had taken back roads into the mountains. The minivans on main roads were getting air strikes. Eight Canadian families trying to go to Syria got air struck. They said it resembled the vans that terrorists, Hezbollah, was using to smuggle weapons. And Hezbollah was sending weapons into Israel but the casualties, of course, were not equal.”

Her tutor came by and told the family to come with him to Beirut immediately. Israel was bombing UN sites and targeting predominantly Shia areas and Palestinian refugee camps.

“We were panicking,” Suad says. “My mom was like, pack up and carry what we can, but he has a very small car and his wife was in the car with us. So, there's my grandma, my mom, and four of us. We somehow squeeze—I'm somehow sitting on his wife's lap in

the front seat. They don't speak English, we don't speak Arabic. She's on two phones at once—Where are they bombing? And the highway is crazy, there's no speed limit in Lebanon, and the guy wanted to drop us off at this market, near the cheese section.”

They ended up going to the home of an acquaintance's mother, who fed them and washed their laundry.

“That night there were more air strikes, not in our area but still. So we had to find someone who could take us to the port, but all the people we knew had vans, and vans were being targeted. But we had no choice. The guy was just like, Trust God. We left at 5 or 6 AM, and he took us to the port on the east, Christian side of town, and left us there. There were a whole bunch of people there in line.”

The evacuation process was far from streamlined. “They put the Lebanese military in charge of organizing it. They were not good at that. The port was filled with Lebanese Christians, who hated Muslims. They had decorated themselves in the cross so people could know they're Christians. Lots of them had practiced to speak like Westerners, and they had American passports. We were the only black people and the only Muslims.

“A woman who didn't wear the headscarf came over with two boys and asked my mom, 'You're Muslim?' She said, 'Me too,' and came and sat together, stayed together. It was really hectic. Some people had a pink paper. And that was when we realized that we weren't going to get out that day, because they'd been there the day before.”

She remembers ordering food from a vendor and never getting to pick it up. The military told her and her family to go and wait on the empty highway nearby. “That was basically a distraction,” she says. “While we were there, they were filling up the ships. The (U.S.) Marines were telling women to calm down. The women were cussing—this was

where I learned the f word. They were all saying this was fucking ridiculous. I learned a lot of words that day. Some of them were cussing in Arabic, others cussing in French. One woman too tired to move, so she didn't move and she got on the ship.”

They were finally told to come back the next day. The next morning, they did get on a small boat that would take them to the American ship, which was not able to land in the Lebanese port. Suad remembers being afraid to walk across the narrow plank to board the Navy ship.

“They were very nice to us, but the only thing we could eat was baked beans, I think. By morning we were in Cyprus, on the Greek side. We were loaded up in buses and went to some little camp, where we got a kind of shower, not really. It was gross.”

Two days later, they were on a military plane to Germany, where they would transfer to a plane to New Jersey. The soldiers at the German military base told them, “Thank Condoleeza for the food.”

“All we could eat was the apple and potato chips because the turkey sandwich wasn't halaal,” Suad says. “And the only thing we could eat on the plane was candy. And it was my 11th birthday.”

Her father met them in New Jersey. She remembers him teasing them, saying, “Oh, welcome, my little refugees.”

By November, they were back in Lebanon, where they would stay for five more years, returning to the United States during the summers. Suad felt a strong sense of displacement. “I was dealing with the realization I don't belong in Lebanon, but was made to feel like I was an outsider here. I belonged both places and nowhere at the same time.”

Suad is fiercely feminist, although she was not raised as one. Her father bought her

books by conservative writers Phyllis Schlafly and Ann Coulter and hired a tutor who lectured her on “proper” behavior, delivering entire lectures on the evils of wearing tight pants and discussing endlessly the perils of “cultural Marxism.”

“Do not look at his Facebook,” she says. “My mom thinks that he indoctrinated us to not like black people. He was homophobic, racist, misogynistic, always talked about the ghetto. He's one of those men that uses Islam to justify his hatred for women and it's very disturbing.”

Her family put pressure on her, too. “My grandmother and my dad would make a big deal out of the clothes I would wear. The pants—before I was even covering my hair, I had a pear-shaped body, a really nice body, back in those days, but I wanted to be stick-skinny. They made me have anxiety about men looking at my ass.”

She devotes significant amounts of time to trying to instruct others on feminism and women's rights, and has achieved some successes. But some people are less willing to learn than others. “It makes me so emotionally tired,” she says. “Some people are just meant to be misguided. If a child tells me there are unicorns in the world, I'll say there are no unicorns in the world. But if they keep saying there are unicorns, I'm like, okay, there are unicorns, go find them.”

Suad ascribes much of her passion for women's rights to the fact that she experienced sexual assault when she was in the ninth grade. She was in the elevator in her apartment building in Lebanon when a man began remarking on her acne and trying to touch her. He dragged her down the apartment corridor. She managed to escape, but was afraid to say what had happened.

“I didn't tell my grandmother,” she says. “I didn't want my grandma telling my

parents and them flying here for no reason. And I already knew how things functioned in Lebanese society. Yeah, women could wear bikinis, and we didn't have to wear the headscarf, but they had very conservative views. If a girl is sexually assaulted it ruins her chances of getting married, because that's their priority. If she's still a virgin, then it doesn't matter because he didn't do anything wrong. And internalized racism meant I wanted to marry a Lebanese guy, so I didn't tell anyone except an American teacher and another friend, and she said, 'That's terrible but you shouldn't be in an elevator with a man anyway.' That was internalized misogyny.”

In 2012, Suad was 18 and her family fell into financial difficulties. They returned from Lebanon and Suad graduated from high school in Lafayette County and enrolled at the University of Mississippi, studying journalism and Arabic. She joined Wise Women at the beginning of her junior year.

“I feel like I can be myself with them,” she says. “They really create a sense of community, like how they came to support Miss Effie the other day. We're a rare breed in this town, Democrats, we have to stick together. Considering the political climate in the country, it's important that we try to find solidarity and things in common with people that share similar views to us. We're up against a lot of evil from all sides. Evil and ignorance.”

Through her connection with the Wise Women, she and her family have also become involved with an effort to memorialize the lynching of Nelse Patton, her great-uncle, on the Oxford Square. It's an event that lingers in Suad's mind and has kept her away from the Square, although lunches with the Wise Women have sometimes brought her there. It's also an event that bears terrifying similarities to the recent U.S. Senate runoff election, in which Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith said during a campaign rally that she'd be on

the front row of a public hanging if a supporter invited her, a statement Suad denounced as “a bullhorn, not a dog whistle.” In 1908, Nelse Patton was lynched by a mob led by former senator William Sullivan, whose statement afterward was so racist and unrepentant that it made national news. Now, she's working with the local committee—many of whom are Wise Women—and staff from the Equal Justice Initiative to memorialize her relative.

Membership in the Wise Women has impacted her life in other ways, as well. “The Wise Women are not all politics, though. They're very sassy, very funny, very witty, a lot of them. I don't ever feel bored when I go to lunch with them. And they have been so helpful for me, finding tutors for the GRE, for my math class.

“I want to be Barbara when I grow up.”

MILLY WEST

Milly pours a tall glass of sun tea, squeezes a lemon into it, sits down beneath a signed Alberto Korda photo of Che Guevara. “I really feel like we had the best of Oxford, my generation,” she says.

She moved to town in 1962, when her mother started pharmacy school at the university. “I was 13,” she says. “Faulkner died the same year. October of '62 was the invasion of Cuba and the Bay of Pigs, and James Meredith came the same year. The fall of '62 started my relationship not only with Oxford but also with Cuba.”

Her love of these two places is evident throughout her home. “I've been doing the Marie Kondo thing,” she explains, referring to the trendy expert on minimalist organizing. “Categorizing.”

Shelves of pottery, poetry collections and political movies line the walls. Many elements are distinctly Southern: photos she snapped in the Mississippi Delta, books by the Southern canon of authors. But the vibrant painting above the mantel depicts workers chopping sugarcane, and a Cuban flag peeks from the statuettes clustered on a shelf.

She points out work from long-ago art classes, figures she created out of clay to look like paintings of women, how she had tried to capture the arch of the eyebrow here, the expression of anguish there. She has taken creative writing classes, too, with Oxford luminaries including Barry Hannah.

“He loved this one story I wrote about phone sex,” she says.

Milly's creativity has drawn on her surroundings. In her writings, she says, she returned to childhood events like the time she was driving back to Oxford with her mom and younger brother after visiting her grandmother in Memphis. It was 1962.

“I remember being stopped on North Lamar, where it levels out getting off Highway 7, where the Tatum Mansion is now. Stopped by National Guard forces and Mother having to get out of the car and open her trunk to make sure we didn't have any firearms. She got into the car and said, 'Oh my Lord, what have I gotten my kids into.'”

In the long run, however, pharmacy school was certainly preferable to working in a cotton office in Memphis. Milly's mother had become a single parent early on when her husband died of a heart attack. Milly remembers her having to work long hours for low pay.

“Mother graded cotton, weighed, dealt with brokers, did all the work and got paid nothing, compared to the person who owned it, who was down at the Cotton Exchange all day, having coffee in the morning and drinks all day. That's what she would say. But she liked him, it wasn't like she didn't like him. After a while, she just said, ‘I'm not getting anywhere,’ and we took off.”

Milly says she fell in love with Oxford during the three years she spent there as a girl. She also fell in love in Oxford. At the end of tenth grade, she started dating Rod Moorhead, who would later become her husband. But, after that year, her mother graduated and the family moved to Greenwood, in the Mississippi Delta. “I didn't get along in the Delta, it wasn't my—I didn't get the whole Delta,” she says. “In Greenwood, you were either on the wrong side of the tracks or the right side and we were on the wrong side, in a rental house with this lady who was a piano teacher and lived next door. But there was a secret entrance from her house to ours, under the stairs, that I could crawl through.”

The choir at the local Methodist church became a solace. Milly says that she grew up a “typical Sunday morning Methodist. Mom would drop us off at Sunday school and

then come back and pick us up.” None of her relatives were churchgoers. But one night, walking by the local church, she heard the sound of singing coming from the basement. She looked in.

“Two gay guys, who were older, got me to come in,” she remembers. “I joined and started going. But then we moved to Corinth at end of my junior year.”

Milly graduated from high school in Corinth and enrolled at Delta State University, but her relationship with Rod Moorhead drew her back to Oxford. “My sophomore year I transferred to Ole Miss. I told Mom it was because I wanted to major in special ed, which wasn't available at Delta State, but it was because I had to be at Ole Miss, had to be near him.”

“I joined a sorority,” she says. “I had pledged Tri Delta at Delta State, and there were fourteen people in my pledge class. I came to Ole Miss and I thought, well, I'll just activate membership here, and I was never really accepted. I was like the Clampetts coming to the city, even though I really wasn't. But I didn't dress the part, I didn't talk the part, and I was poor. My mother was paying back pharmacy school loans that she'd borrowed from friends, and I wasn't enjoying myself. I remember thinking this wasn't for me when I was sitting in this downstairs room and they'd put up this slideshow of all the girls who were going to come through rush and talk about the girls, and it was like a market. And they'd say, her father does this and her mother is this and she's a legacy, and they were like, Yes, Yes, and, No, No, and it was like, you haven't even met them yet. But I stayed in after that—I remember helping out with some rush parties, but I looked at myself, and they were all finished, and looked kind of grown-up and polished, and I was kind of goofy and messy, but that was just me, and my mom—Mom said, Stop if you're okay with it, because of the

parlor fees and dinner fees. And I was also a theater major and all of my socializing was with theater majors. So I dropped.”

She also disobeyed the campus dress code.

“You know we were not allowed to wear pants to class,” she says. “It was just the most ridiculous thing. I remember going to interview Theora Hamblett.”

She gets up, selects a volume from the bookshelf, hands it to me. “This is Theora Hamblett. Anyway, I went to interview her, and I had on a miniskirt, and she said, 'You girls, you're so crazy, you need to be wearing long pants.'

“Jimmy Smith, he was a photographer, he had this idea. He got a bunch of us girls to wear long pants and stand in front of the Lyceum, and took photos of us individually. I had on a white pantsuit with bell bottoms and a white jacket. I looked absolutely gorgeous.

“The headline in paper was something like the radicalism of it but that word wasn't used—time for a change, or a new era—very soft like that, unlike the commonsense and right thing to do. The rule changed. Not then, but, like, the next year. It was kind of, like, for me, a fashion thing. I was proud to show my outfit.”

She kept busy, double majoring in speech and theater and English, studying journalism on the side. She married Rod during her junior year of college. “I kind of missed being a young woman, free,” she says. “I was 20, 22, 24—I had a baby when I was almost 25. At least we waited a long time to have babies. I shouldn't have gotten married that early, but you know, people always say they wouldn't have gotten their kids otherwise, and it was fine. He was from a really good family.

“He was a potter, and I helped with the pottery, and every weekend we'd get in the car and go sell it all over at craft fairs. Then I started working at Mississippi Blood Services,

which was something I did for about eight or nine years. I got to know everyone in Mississippi that ever thought about giving blood—factories, colleges. People said, ‘You should run for governor, you already know everybody,’ which I halfway thought about for a minute, but then I didn't.”

Milly was still working for them when she and Rod decided to open Southside Gallery, in 1996. She quit her job to focus on the gallery. “We had so much fun with it,” she says. “And we really introduced art to Oxford.”

The same year, Milly went to Cuba for the first time. “I came back and asked for a divorce,” she says. “It was the first time I found real joy, for the first time in years. I found out how happy people could be with nothing. Just music and relationships and kindness toward each other. I was so excited coming back and, you know, would tell my husband, ‘The next time I go, you're coming with me.’ And he wouldn't go. I wasn't going to sit around and be miserable waiting for him to come on.

“My friend Sandra Levingston at the Center for Cuban Studies said I wasn't the first person to get divorced because of going to Cuba, because it shows a whole different side of life.”

After that momentous first visit, Milly went to Cuba two or three times a year to bring back art to sell at the gallery (she bought Rod out after their divorce). She can't remember if she's gone 39 or 40 times now, but still plans yearly photography workshops.

In 2002, while she was walking across the square, a man on a bicycle stopped to ask for directions. His name was Rest West, and he would become her second husband.

“I guess she thought I looked okay,” he said later, “because she said I could come by her gallery sometime. So I did.”

That was the beginning of their relationship. Not long afterward, Milly sold the gallery and the two of them moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where Milly decided to go to grad school. “I had been thinking about going to Southern to get a master’s degree in writing when I met Rest,” she says. “I’m published in all of these books from the university—a poem in this one, a short story in this one. I think they’re both really good, too. I think I could be a writer, even now.”

She ultimately began an MFA program in photography instead. “It was a very commonsensical thing to do. I had a really weird photography teacher there, though. I don’t feel like I learned anything and I got into a lot of debt, but that’s all water under the bridge now. I was really not happy in Tulsa, so much. I still have friends there, but it just wasn’t south enough for me. I left Oxford when it was still a small town. I’d be in the grocery store, and if you didn’t have enough change, someone would say, Here, or make a joke in the grocery line – I remember, in Tulsa, this person buying chips and hot dogs, and saying, ‘Where’s the party?’ And them looking at me weird instead of saying, ‘Oh, come on over at 5 o’clock at such and such a place.’ And I didn’t like driving in a big city. But I was pretty creative there.”

She inspired creativity in others, too, in her work as an adjunct art teacher at the community college, where she taught color and depth. She brought in an artist from Palestine to lead a guest session on drawing still lifes and organized an art show at the end of the semester. She took a group of students to Cuba and began to get involved in politics, marching against the invasion of Iraq. She remembers meeting progressive people, through friends or in music venues, and realizing how many of them went to the same Unitarian Universalist congregation.

“It was called All Souls, and the founders said, We're not calling ourselves All Saints because no one's a saint, we're calling ourselves All Souls because all souls are welcome here.” Milly got involved in different initiatives at the congregation, including helping out with a soccer team for the children of Mexican immigrants. “It was such a fun group to be in. And every sermon was like a lesson in humanity.”

Soon afterward, they moved back to Oxford, where Milly has continued to work on photography and art, sometimes renting spaces around the Square to display Cuban work. She got connected to the Wise Women in the fall of 2016, but has sometimes been reluctant to identify herself with the group.

“I think what I want to tell you now is that I'm not very good at being an old person,” she says. “Why I resist the lunches with the Wise Women is that I just don't feel like talking sometimes—not that I don't enjoy it, because I do, but there's something in me that I don't want to leave the comfort here. I'd rather do yoga anytime than go to a Wise Woman lunch. But some of the Wise Women are so amazing, and I keep wondering, ‘Why am I not friends with so and so, why am I not cultivating this relationship’—I don't even know if I can anymore. I feel like I'm in a therapy session.

“Creativity has eluded me for the past year or two, interestingly. I don't think it has to do with my age, and I'm not drinking a lot anymore, but sometimes I think I'm just not sad enough. Everything I wrote was written during very lonely periods, transitional periods. I've been so angry about the environment, I need to talk about how that wall is going to keep the mountain lions from mating and we're going to have the loss of wildlife because of the wall, but every time I go to that computer I want to throw it in the backyard. I'm so tired of things going wrong with the world.”

DOROTHY ABBOTT

“I knew that I had to go to Millsaps, because it would change my life.”

A Memphis native, Dorothy Abbott became an activist at sixteen, advocating for the abolition of the death penalty. “It was the Caryl Chessman case,” she says. “So many of my counterparts—that case changed their life.”

Chessman was executed in 1960 after being convicted of kidnapping and rape. Typically, the death penalty was not invoked against those who committed non-lethal crimes; indeed, the law under which he was sentenced to the gas chamber had been repealed by the time his trial began, but it was not retroactively suspended.

Dorothy's activism around the case took place through the youth group at her Methodist church. “We went to other youth groups, meeting with them. I remember making a brief presentation against the death penalty, writing something. We were all activists—it was much better than what the churches seem to do now. And there were a couple things at school—I worked on the annual and the paper, and got things in there about it.”

By the time she was ready to go to college, it was 1962 and the civil rights movement was in its infancy. Dorothy knew that the way to get involved was to attend Millsaps College, a Methodist liberal arts school in Jackson, so she enrolled at the school and began working full-time to pay her tuition.

There, she was required to take two semesters of a religion course. “That was how I got to Tougaloo,” she says. “They took twelve white students and twelve black students, and we went back and forth. I think they thought they could do it if it was a religion class. And I met Bob Moses on the Tougaloo campus.”

He was looking for students who wanted to help with his voter registration

initiative, and she would volunteer with SNCC through Freedom Summer in 1964. “I started driving for him. I was a good driver and I had a license, so I took people back and forth between Tougaloo and Millsaps, around Jackson, went back and forth to McComb, where Moses was from. I got arrested when I was driving. We got stopped and mostly picked up then—the whole car was stopped. I got out very quickly as a student, they didn't want me, they wanted to black students. The worst thing was when the young students were arrested, I wasn't really involved, but they made them think they were being gassed and put them down at the fairgrounds in one of those cattle pens. But I wasn't arrested during Freedom Summer.

“After Freedom Summer, Bob Moses made all of the white members leave, so that all the leadership would be black students. He was a brilliant leader, a brilliant organizer. He's still alive, but his health's not good. He gave everything he had to what he was doing in the movement. I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty—it seemed to me like he had one of the strongest commitments to something that I'd ever seen. He had reunions for us. All of us were invited, even though he'd asked the white students to leave. And that was probably the right decision. It's hard to reflect—I was really emotional. I know it was really hard for me.”

Dorothy had come to Mississippi to work with the movement. Now excluded, she sadly transferred to the University of Memphis, where she completed two degrees in sociology and history and attended graduate school in criminology, counseling, and education. As a graduate student, she worked at a juvenile court, assisting and mentoring young children and teenage girls who had been charged with delinquent acts and helping them apply to college. By the time she completed her three master's degrees, she was

exhausted from years of working full time and dedicating herself to her studies and her activism.

“I went from the capital punishment and prison injustice movement to the civil rights movement to the antiwar movement to the feminist movement to the LGBT movement to a global movement,” she says. “Along the way I realized that things connected. But young people are skipping that twenty-five years and looking at things more globally. Which seems to save a lot of time.

“I think when I got more of a global perspective, that I realized that there was a strong feminist movement in other parts of the world, that some of the movements I'd been a part of had been going on for generations in other places. And travel is quite an education. You start to see how things connect.”

Growing up, Dorothy was something of a tomboy. She describes her teenage self as a “latent lesbian Elvis impersonator” who “imitated Elvis – not, as I thought, to attract girls, but because I was infatuated with his rebellious nature.”

Her own rebellious nature led her away from typical pastimes for girls. She describes sitting at a fundraising banquet for the White House Project, which was sponsored by Mattel.

“I felt conflicted about that,” she says. “And then they wanted everybody to go around the table and say what they were doing when they got their first Barbie. And a lot of us were too old when it came out, but a lot of them were lying about their ages—'Oh, I was so excited!'—that kind of thing. But if you lie about the age then you don't own your life. But I said the year Barbie came out I got my pilot's license.

“I had my pilot's license before I had a driver's license, because you could get a

pilot's license at fourteen. And my dad bought a little plane—you could get one for a thousand dollars then—and I wanted to spend time with him.”

By the time Dorothy came out to herself as lesbian, she was a forty-year-old mother. “As a young girl growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, in the fifties, I knew no lesbians,” she wrote. “I probably didn't even say the word until I was almost an adult. And I certainly didn't know myself as a lesbian.”

However, she gravitated toward figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, Virginia Woolf and Lillian Smith, all of whom had been romantically involved with other women, although she didn't know it at the time. She remembers picking up a biography of Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House.

“More than twenty-five years later, in a women's studies class at the University of South Florida, I was amazed to discover that Addams had lived in the same house and shared the same bed with Mary Rozet Smith for forty years. Why couldn't there have been a photograph of them together in that biography I read as a young girl? Why couldn't there have been just one page about those years during which they shared a vision of love and concern for each other?”

In a column she wrote for the St. Petersburg Times, she reflected on the summer of 1985, an unusually hot summer when snakes proliferated in the woods where she went running after work each day. “For me, it wasn't only the summer of the snakes. It was the summer of the kiss.”

At the time, she was working at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, teaching classes and editing literature anthologies. She became close to a visiting author, and they spent hours discussing literature and feminism. One

night, Dorothy dropped the poet off at her apartment. “Before leaving my car she leaned over and quickly and quietly kissed me goodnight. I drove wildly those three blocks (this was a small town, remember) to get home. I dashed into the house to telephone her and say, 'I'll never wash my face again.'”

Her previous notion that same-sex relationships were “icky” vanished. “I left the safe cocoon built around me. For the first time I realized I would have the courage to move out into the wider world.”

It took her a few years to come out to her mother, but when she did, in a roundabout way, she found that her fear of losing her mother's love had been misplaced. In the meantime, she moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, where she and her partner became involved with the Women's Energy Bank, a feminist collective.

During her time there, Dorothy also participated in anti-war demonstrations, including one dramatic protest at the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in 1987. Hundreds of activists marched against the launching of a Trident 2 missile. She remembers being awed by the presence of her heroes Grace Paley and Odetta. She's nearly forgotten the fact that the 83-year-old Dr. Benjamin Spock was there, too. It took some effort for him to get over the fence, she says, smiling.

Dorothy climbed over the fence, too, and was one of 128 protesters arrested on trespassing charges. Many of those arrested refused to identify themselves. “We gave our names as Jane Doe,” she says. “And they didn't have our fingerprints, and we'd made sure we didn't have any identifying documents on us. So they kept us a couple weeks, but they didn't want us. We sang, we were noisy. They wanted to get rid of us.”

When she wasn't in prison, Dorothy spent much of her time producing and hosting “The

Women's Show," a weekly radio show featuring only female musicians. She still has the CDs she would play on the show, as well as the books that comprised the lending library that she and her partner started for the other women in their group. Her collection sits in a shed behind her house, which she refers to as her studio. Many of the books relate to her extensive travels throughout Asia, Africa and the Middle East, where she engaged in struggles for feminism, labor rights, LGBT rights and other issues, sharing her knowledge of radio broadcasting with other women's groups, including in the Gaza Strip. She remembers marching 214 miles through the state of Gujarat, India, reenacting Gandhi's salt march.

"It was important to me to be there, because women weren't allowed on the first one," she says.

She went to Cuba, where she interviewed the escaped political prisoner and freedom fighter Assata Shakur. She pulls a photo of the two of them together, smiling.

"This was before they put the bounty on her," she says. "Her number was in the phone book. She's had to go into hiding again.

"I have an extra copy of her book, if you'd like it."

Dorothy never meant to come back to Mississippi. She has never been a fan of continuity. "I've never really kept jobs longer than about five years," she says. "I've never been bored. I just want to do something new, learn something new. I would volunteer to teach the classes nobody knew anything about. They'd ask me if I knew about something, and I'd say, 'Ask me in the morning.'"

Dorothy planned to move to San Francisco to retire, but when her retirement savings were stolen by an unethical investment broker, that became financially impossible.

Instead, she returned to Mississippi.

“I thought about moving to India, but my daughter wanted me to be here. And my grandkids are here,” she says. Since her return, she's found community with many local activists, some of whom she met through Wise Women, and with her children and grandchildren, who live nearby.

“I'm not as good at being on the roof as I used to be,” Dorothy says. She spent the earlier part of the day cleaning out her gutters, making her reminisce about a Habitat for Humanity project she worked on in the past.

“It was the Women's House. Built by women for a woman. And it was amazing, the kinds of connections you'd make through that. It wasn't just about building the house. Women got out of bad relationships, at least one couple got together, it was a community. And it was all women. We'd luck into meeting the right person at the right time, a woman painter or a woman who owned an A/C company. The house just brought women together.”

BARBARA PHILLIPS

“You never came to Mississippi. None of our family members had ever come to Mississippi, we had no family in Mississippi and no reason to come to Mississippi. We would go on Sunday family drives and when you got to the Mississippi border you turned around and came back. If you wanted a real country experience you might go to Arkansas and see the cotton fields, but you never came to Mississippi.”

A Virginia native, Barbara grew up in Memphis, the second youngest of four siblings. Her physicist father taught at LeMoyne College. When the family didn't spend summers at her maternal grandparents' farm in the Virginia mountains, they would sometimes travel to Oak Ridge, where her father worked at the atomic energy commission, or to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he taught summer classes. Barbara remembers leaving early in the morning for those trips, so that they would be sure to pass through Mississippi in the daytime.

“My parents did do a lot of travel outside the South. They were very determined that we not think that the world was segregated Memphis, Tennessee. We had summers off because my father was a teacher, so we would go to Virginia, to D.C. and see the monuments and museums. We took a camping trip to Reed College in Portland, Oregon—we went camping in the national parks because that was the only way to afford for the whole family to go. And there was an atomic energy conference at Reed, which is why we were going there.”

When Barbara was in high school, her father took a position developing the physics department at Winston Salem State University. Barbara and her older brother enrolled in the neighborhood high school, which was a short walk from their home.

“My parents were appalled by the deficiencies of the school,” she says. “In particular my brother who was in the 11th grade, my parents learned that there was one microscope in what was supposed to be the laboratory. So my parents wanted me to go to a school that had more than one microscope.”

The next year, over ten years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board*, the Winston Salem school district implemented what they called a “freedom of choice” plan to desegregate the schools.

“I don't know how it was decided, but I joined three other black kids in being the first ones to go to RJ Reynolds High School, and I was the only one in the 11th grade. It was not like the Little Rock Nine experience—it was very borderline civilized. We didn't have to have national guard troops walk us to our classroom, but you know, I would often enter the school room with white kids hanging outside making monkey noises as I entered the building. There were only two white students in the 11th grade who spoke to me the entire year. So it was like that. But there was no physical violence, there was just this isolation, being invisible, kind of experience.”

She was happy to return to Memphis and to the Catholic school she had attended in the ninth grade. Although it, too, was segregated, it offered a higher quality education than the public schools. It also provided a strong community, especially as there were only 200 students. Barbara still takes annual vacations with eight of her friends from Father Bertrand.

“I was a very good student the entire time I was in high school,” she says. “You know, even at RJ Reynolds I was on the honor roll. It was like your duty to represent the race. And I was just a good student. I loved reading and writing and everything.”

Because of her very high standardized test scores, she was recruited by many colleges. Spelman offered a full scholarship. But she was intrigued by a brochure from Macalester College, a small liberal arts school in Minnesota.

“I liked that because I liked the smallness of the Catholic school I'd gone to, and it had an outstanding history department, and the chair of the history department was the president of the American Historical Association, which really impressed me. I was passionate about becoming a historian. So I sent back a postcard, and they sent an admissions officer to Memphis to interview me and also to interview a white boy named Howell Pew whom they were also interested in. This was 1967—they were not in hyperdrive about recruiting black students, but they were interested in geographic diversity.”

She decided to attend Macalester. “The first time I saw the college was when I went up there to move into the dorm—it was my first plane ride. So I get on campus and it's just the whitest place in the world. I had been outside the South and therefore been around white people, I knew there weren't many black people in Minnesota, but to actually experience it was a little bit different. There were maybe ten black students on the campus. I get in this new dormitory and I was the only black student in my wing, there was one other black freshman in the other wing. Only one. I remember going to bed that night thinking, In the morning the maids would come and they'll be black and I can ask them things, and in the morning the maids came and they were all white and it was shocking. And I just thought, Oh, no.”

Adapting to the Minnesota winters was difficult, too. “In those days, your mother took you, when you finished high school, on many shopping trips, and you were getting

your college clothes. And everyone showed up with a trunk full of sweaters and very nice clothes, and I had a good winter coat, except that the winter coats you buy in Memphis don't have a clue about winter in Minnesota. So I went to St. Paul to buy a winter coat, and I remember seeing a black person on the other side of the street. I almost ran across the street to introduce myself.”

Back on campus, she joined the Student Action for Human Rights, a group she says attracted “those of us with any conscience.” A senior named Pauletta Hawkins took Barbara under her wing. “She was the most radical student activist on campus, and her passion that year was Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign, and we started organizing in St. Paul and Minneapolis to support the Poor People's Campaign. So I jumped into that and just found a community.”

The day she returned home to Memphis for spring break was the day after Dr. King had been assassinated. After that, she says, “there was a rising kind of activism on campus. The black students broke off from Student Action from Human Rights—and I was part of the leadership of this—and started our own organization, titled as only young people could do. It was called the Black Liberation Affairs Committee—BLAC—and you know the revolution was around the corner. And Pauletta and I were really into the Poor People's Campaign at that time, and the then president of the campus, Harvey Rice, summoned us to his home, which was on the campus, and into his home office, to tell us that we needed to be grateful to be there and that we needed to stop doing whatever the hell-raising we were doing.

“And you know, the anti-war movement was bubbling up, the movement across the country around student rights and responsibilities was bubbling up. When I entered

Macalester College, there was this concept that the college stood in the place of your parents. Women had to be in the dorm at a certain hour, and if men were visiting on the floor the woman student had to go down and sign them in and sign them out. It was very regulated. You had to have permission from your parents if you were going to be off campus overnight. And, of course, I don't think the men had dorm hours.”

The following fall, Macalester hired a new president, Arthur Fleming. “He was Republican but he was very progressive,” she says. “He wanted to see all sorts of things change on campus. He supported student activism against the war. Students caught up in wanting to throw off restrictions and rules and get the campus out of the role of parent substitute—he welcomed that. He challenged the Black Liberation Affairs Committee to do something, to engage in conversation about what to do about the fact that there were so few students of any kind of color on campus.”

Barbara joined a committee that he created, called the Expanded Educational Opportunities Program. She helped recruit more students of color, from less privileged backgrounds, and worked on establishing more egalitarian relationships between students and professors. By that summer, the Black Liberation Affairs Committee had established relationships with the local black community and began working with neighborhood organizers. “It was all about black power, knowing your history, challenging the system, raising one's consciousness,” Barbara explains. “It was quite stunning.”

The fall of her junior year the students she had helped recruit were arriving on campus. “The professors didn't know what to do with them, and many in the administration were opposed to it, but Fleming was unrelenting in his support of all of it. That was my favorite thing—it was hard for students to be in conflict with the administration because

he insisted that the policies be so progressive. It was amazing. I remember one instance where one of the administrators—I think he was head of the finance office or something—objected to President Fleming ordering that these EEOP students be given stipends to buy clothes and boots and coats. He storms in, ‘We can't do this, it's not what we do.’ Fleming looks at him and says, ‘It is what we do. We make sure our students have what they need. We wouldn't send a football player out there without a helmet, would we?’ He understood that a kid needed a coat and boots and gloves just like the college would pay for a football helmet, that the college was in the business of giving kids what they needed to succeed.”

Macalester encouraged students to study abroad, so she spent much of her senior year in Belgium at the College of Europe. But this experience was not as formative as a project that took her much closer to home, to work on an oral history project in the Mississippi Delta.

“One thing that had happened my freshman year was we used to have these things called convocations and all the students had to attend and Fannie Lou Hamer came to speak. And I—we had the opportunity to do an independent study for a month, and I thought about Fannie Lou Hamer, and about Charles Evers, who was the first black mayor in Mississippi, and had just been elected mayor of Fayette—and I did my oral history project down there in January of '71. I lived in Fayette for a month and got to know people.”

She remembers her parents driving her to the Delta from Memphis. “The Evers people had arranged for me to stay with Mother Mary, one of the leaders, who was involved with the civil rights community—a nice little old lady. And they looked around, and she had shotguns leaning up against every window in her house. They acted like they didn't see it and left me there. I know they drove off saying, ‘What is she doing there, she has lost

her mind.' They didn't criticize any of it, and I know they thought it was crazy.”

Afterward, Barbara organized Macalester students to go to Mississippi and participate in a voter registration drive over spring break; they subsequently hosted Mississippi students who helped register students. This experience helped convince Barbara to alter her career path. After college, Barbara says, “I was on track to go to grad school in history. I was the research assistant to the head of the program, his protégé. But I decided what I really wanted to do was be a community organizer, to the dismay of my parents and Dr. Schaefer. So, when I got out, I went to Chicago.

“Saul Alinsky had created the Industrial Areas Foundation to train community organizers, and it was in Chicago, so if you wanted to be a community organizer that was the place. That was where you wanted to go. And in fact I was in the last group that was there and engaged with him before he died. And Heather Booth and I were there at the same time. So I got myself hired by something, coming out of college, called the Youth Project, because you had to show that you were going to actually do some organizing when you got out of being trained, and you had to have some entity paying the IAF.”

Subsequently, she says, “I organized myself out of a job. The Youth Project flew me, and the whole cohort, to Washington D.C. for a weekend orientation, indoctrination or something. I was very put off by the fact that they had what I considered very fancy offices in D.C., that they were misspending the money. I was so radical I thought that was unconscionable, so I and a few others of us who were part of this organizing thing demanded that they make certain organizational changes and they said, ‘Y'all can walk.’

“At this time I had finished the training at the IAF and I was unemployed so I came down to the Evers campaign, and I worked for nothing. Only affirming my parents view

that I had completely lost my mind, instead of being in graduate school, going somewhere. But they were very supportive, even when they thought I was crazy.”

After spending two years working on political campaigns as well as issues of black land loss, during which time she spent hours at Fannie Lou Hamer's kitchen table, eating beans and receiving life advice, Barbara went to law school at Northwestern to become a civil rights lawyer. “I just never returned to the idea of going to grad school and becoming a historian,” she says. “In law school, I continued to be engaged with Mississippi. It was like a virus or something.”

After her first year in law school, she came back to work with the Mississippi Council on Human Relations, which was conducting a study of employment practices of state agencies. “None of them had any black people in any position other than maintenance,” Barbara says. “So we picked ten of them, the ones we thought were the most significant, and I bought a dress and shoes and I think I even put on pantyhose and went around and applied for jobs at all those ten agencies, and of course I was not hired. After one year of law school, I was not applying for an attorney's job, but I was applying for everything else—paralegal, secretary, anything—and that was the case at all these agencies. I went around and applied for jobs and the lawyers then went around and filed complaints with the EEOC and eventually filed complaints alleging race discrimination. It was a class action lawsuit and I was a named plaintiff. And in fact those cases weren't decided until I was out of law school and working for the Minnesota Attorney General, and we won.”

She spent two years working in the office of the solicitor general in Minnesota, acting on advice she'd gotten from the man who would later become her fourth husband.

He said that to become a good civil rights lawyer, she needed to understand that people who needed a civil rights lawyer deserved the best lawyers in the world. Rather than going straight into the field, therefore, she got as much experience as possible litigating suits in state and federal court before returning to Mississippi as a staff attorney at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. She specialized in voting rights, challenging at-large elections and redistricting plans, but practiced in a variety of spheres. She remembers the trauma of visiting inmates in Parchman.

“Every time I'd go there, I'd take a six-pack of beer, and I'd drink it on the way home. We had no open container laws then. And it took a whole six-pack to be able to go to Parchman.”

Her favorite case was a First Amendment fight. The state of Mississippi had banned a textbook, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, which didn't sugarcoat the state's history of white supremacy, taught that the Civil War had been fought over slavery, and included sections on local labor history and the civil rights movement. Instead, teachers were forced to use a textbook that glossed over the horrors of slavery and ignored the resistance efforts of enslaved people, glorified the Confederacy, called the KKK a “secret social and fraternal club,” misrepresented Reconstruction, and used the term “Mississippians” to refer only to whites.

The co-author of the accurate textbook, Jim Loewen, had often testified on behalf of the Lawyers' Committee as an expert on racially polarized voting. “So he and (Charles) Sallis did that book,” Barbara explains, “and when they got screwed over by the state, of course, we had to sue them (the state). The most fun I ever had was in that trial.”

Duncan Gray, the Episcopal bishop in Mississippi and a prominent civil rights

advocate, was a plaintiff in the case. “We wanted all the theater we could get out of him being the bishop. We knew that he couldn't walk in fully robed with his bishop's staff, but he promised us he'd wear his outfit—a proper black suit, and a collar—and he'd wear his big medallion. We staged the whole thing, had him wait outside, and when the judge said, ‘Call your next witness,’ Frank (Parker, her co-counsel) turned and had the double doors thrown open. We'd told him we wanted him to process to the witness box, and he processed. It was great theater. Like having God walk into the courtroom and be on your side. And we won.

“We didn't win as big as we wanted to because we couldn't get the judge to order that the book be used. But what we did get was some beautiful language by the judge about the content of the First Amendment and the substance of what it meant for public education, language about students having a First Amendment-protected right to learn and teachers having a First Amendment-protected right to teach. And it pains me that I don't see anybody in this state making use of that language.”

In 1980, she went to D.C. to advocate for key planks in the Voting Rights Act that were in danger of being overturned. The litigators, responsible for making courts enforce the law, were outraged by the lobbyists' compromises, many of which she felt would all but nullify the gains the lawyers had won.

“We would not accept their ideas of what was possible,” Barbara says. “We were able to get them to understand the strategy of mobilizing constituencies of members of Congress to pressure them to approve the bill that we put forward. And there was a popular mobilization of congressional districts that turned the tide. So we were successful. But it left a bitter taste in my mouth about these people in Washington, D.C., who are supposedly

looking out for our civil rights.”

After this experience, she says, “I felt like I had become a workaholic and that I wouldn't be able to change that if I continued to stay at the Lawyers' Committee. I later came to understand that the thing that made me a workaholic was the thing that if I didn't say yes to whatever the piece of work was that it wouldn't get done, or that only I could do it the right way, the way it should be done. I later realized that there was so much ridiculous ego in being a workaholic.”

She moved to San Francisco, where she was introduced to a civil rights lawyer named Sandy Rosen. “Shortly after, I became a partner in his firm,” she says, which made her the only black woman law partner at a San Francisco firm. “We did lots of civil rights litigation, class actions against California prisons. We continued to do voting rights and employment discrimination work, and we represented small businesses and public entities, like school districts.”

During this time, Barbara, who was in between relationships, decided that she wanted a child. David Lambert, a civil rights lawyer, agreed to be the father.

“After my son was born, I didn't want to litigate anymore, and I loved litigating. I wanted to die in a courtroom. But after my son was born I didn't enjoy the warfare of litigating, which was exactly what I had enjoyed before. So I took a fellowship to Stanford and got a second law degree and a teaching position. I co-taught constitutional law with the dean of the law school and created a seminar on democracy and civil participation.”

During the constitutional law class, she tangled with the dean, Paul Brest. “He came in one day with this wacked-out apology for affirmative action, and I was completely blindsided by it. He presented it as something that was unfortunately necessary, but

tolerable under the Constitution because it was temporary. I was furious, but that was his day to lead the conversation. The next day, it was my turn and I came in loaded and took down his very poor case. One of reasons it's wonderful is because it destroyed the mythology of white supremacy. I was so pissed off about it. It took me several years, but I got around to writing a law review article about it right before I went to the Ford Foundation, and I trashed him. I didn't do it personally—I used his law review articles and shredded them. That was so satisfying. And he always carried this cloak of being such a grand liberal because he had worked in Mississippi for two weeks in the summer of 1964. Men and women in my age cohort often use that—I was in Mississippi in '64 – and then you find out they were there for two weeks, and what have they done since then?

“I sent him a copy of it. He never responded.”

In 1994, Barbara took a professorship at the University of Mississippi. “That was a time when, in law schools, this idea of critical race theory was bubbling up, and particularly at elite law schools, and not-so-elite law schools, there was just open warfare between white and black faculty members who were engaged in critical race theory, and mind you not all black faculty were, but there was just this open hostility and trashing of critical race theory. And for new non-tenured professors, they'd tell you, don't write anything about critical race theory until you get tenure.”

Barbara explains that this theory, derived from the writings of authors like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Angela Davis, centers the experiences of black people and focuses on the power dynamics within legal institutions, which are rooted in oppressive histories. “And some of it is tiresome, because it's this hyper-intellectualized analysis that became enamored of its use of these words and phrases that are totally incomprehensible to

ordinary people. The more obscure and confusing you could make it the more critical race theory it was. And it became totally divorced from reality in some circumstances. But black professors were always scrutinized in a different way. If you wrote about race you were considered to be in critical race theory.

“So there was this bubbling hostility in the academy. And my colleagues, my POC colleagues would wonder, ‘How are you doing at the University of Mississippi?’ And I was doing fine because my colleagues were so anti-intellectual they weren't reading anything, not what I was writing or anything else. Had I been at Harvard where the white professors had been reading what I wrote, I might have been in trouble, but these people weren't reading anything, so I was just cruising.”

Over time, however, she got increasingly frustrated with the effects of internal and external politics on her ability to teach. While her colleagues at the law school voted to hire Louis Westerfield, who became first black dean of the institution, the would-be dean, Robert Khayat, soon became chancellor and dedicated his time to making Westerfield's life as difficult as possible. Within a year, Barbara says, he died of a stress-induced heart attack (his wife was able to claim workers' compensation from the university, which upheld this interpretation of his death).

Making matters worse, in *Hopwood v. Texas*, the Fifth Circuit court overturned key affirmative action requirements. “I was watching the impact of the Hopwood decision and I looked up one day and I saw that I had one black student in my constitutional law class, and I thought, ‘What the hell am I doing here teaching one black student constitutional law?’

“I was putting the finishing touches on that law article shredding the dean when I

got a call from the Ford Foundation asking if I would be willing to be the women's rights program officer.

“I was responsible for its grant-making globally and in the U.S. in the field of women's rights. The first thing I did when I got there was go back through the portfolio and find out what grants had been made to in the past. And I attempted to change what had been the history of that portfolio, which was that it had developed and invested in the institutions that led the—what one sometimes calls the mainstream women's movement, which were white women-led national agencies—and had never, for example, made a grant to Asian American women, never Native American women, and only two black women-led organizations.”

She began rectifying this, recruiting activists to envision and develop initiatives. She brought in community leaders who had never been considered before. “My intention when I got to the Ford Foundation was to get as much money as possible to the right people, because I saw the wrong money going to the wrong people, and I focused on that the whole time I was there. Ford had an unspoken rule that they wouldn't fund LGBT groups, and I gave them first grant to the Astraea Foundation, and they started making international grants with the money. And that was the first contribution Ford had ever made to an LGBT group.

“For what was supposed to be the most progressive group, the institutional racism and bullshit was just a revelation. But I feel like I accomplished some things while I was there. And I learned a lot.”

While she was there, the Ford Foundation began redirecting its focus away from funding organizations in the Global North, instead focusing on investing in and developing organizations of the Global South. Barbara funded the African Women's Development

Fund and other feminist groups, pushing the Ford Foundation to support truly feminist and radical initiatives.

“While I was there,” Barbara says, “I also learned from a black woman in Brazil about why black women in the Global South gravitated toward the human rights framework, because she said, In the black movement in Brazil, I can't be a woman. And Brazil had a big women's movement. And in the Brazilian woman's movement, I can't be black. But I can be wholly who I am in the human rights movement. Because human rights had not been my field—I was a civil rights lawyer. But she really opened the door and was one of the teachers who taught me about the human rights movement.”

While these women understood the struggle, many of Barbara's coworkers at the Ford Foundation—and many the women coming to her for funding—did not. “I began to feel like by being in that building I was an honorary white person,” she says.

One woman, whom Barbara describes as “one of the grand poohbahs in the international women's movement,” came to her office and, on her first and only visit, asked, “Don't you find African women childlike?”

“I realized what privilege white women really have in the world,” Barbara says. “Three white women came in from D.C. who had previously gotten money, about this new idea they had to coordinate conversations among women in South America. The first question I asked them was, ‘How did you arrive at South America?’ And they said to me, ‘We went around the office and asked people what other languages they spoke and more people said Spanish than anything else.’ And I don't know how my brain got un-numb to ask a second question, but I asked, ‘Have you asked any women in South America if they need you?’

“And this was why creating the global south initiative at the Ford Foundation was so important, because people would come in and say bullshit like that and get a million dollars. Women would come in here and just say these ridiculous things and many times the program officer just wouldn't know better. With some of them, it was as if she'd come in and said, ‘The sun rose in the east today and we had someone working on that.’

“I find philanthropy very problematic, and—our peculiar structure supports this capitalist system, where a few individuals gain tremendous wealth by gaining the rewards of other people's labor, and we exempt that wealth from taxes under the guise that it is to be used for the public good, but the public good is determined by the whims of the foundation, which stands in place of the person who has illegally—not illegally, unethically, in all cases unethically, gained all this wealth. And there's insufficient oversight or even understanding of what it means to use this wealth for good. Bill Gates has done horrible damage to the continent of Africa and who knows where else.

“But very few people who have been involved with philanthropy write anything honest about it, because they remain interested in getting rants. And so it protects itself, and co-opts people. But I'm like, I'm at the Ford Foundation on a three-year contract that will be renewed if I don't kill anyone and then I'll be there for another three years, and then I'm out of here. So I'm not going to go to war with anyone except in the way I went to war with Paul Brest. And I intend to write about philanthropy, and that's my way of going to war.”

After she left, she “puttered around” Chicago for two years, trying to decide what she wanted to do. Eventually, she decided to purchase a women's clothing and accessories store that was around the corner from her house.

“I knew nothing. I didn't know how to put a tag on a dress, how to price it, how to buy. I was not a detail person, and I wanted to become a detail person. So this was an adventure into a world I knew nothing about. And I didn't know anything about women business owners, and there was a very vibrant chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners, with women who were in construction, who had multimillion-dollar businesses, all the way down to women who were selling Mary Kay shit. I even went to the national conference, and I saw how women are really caught up in this entrepreneurship idea. It was like a kind of church. It was something they believed in, being an entrepreneur—women who were making little jewelry at home had the same feeling about capitalism and entrepreneurship as the woman who was making the multimillion dollars in contracting or landscape work.”

“It was quite an experience,” she reflects, “that didn't make any money. I had very definite ideas about it. It was a boutique, and our tagline was, For women of substance and style. I only bought things my friends and I would want to wear, and the shop evolved into something that showcased the women of color designers in Chicago. We had seminars and things. People from the feminist bookstore would come and give talks, and we were a corporate supporter of the bookstore. And the women's art gallery would come and have little talks at the shop, and we were also their corporate sponsor—their fundraiser had a fashion show, and we would dress them for it. So we did things with it that were fun. And our signature drink was a—what was it—it was something with tequila and mango and champagne—and we had an espresso coffee machine, gave our clients coffee, and had drinks. We didn't make any money.”

In 2005, she returned to Mississippi.

“My late husband had some money to burn, and so he wanted to buy me a house, and he said I could have a house anywhere I wanted, and so I gave it a lot of thought, and I thought about what was important to me, and I realized that it is important to me to be in community. And so I didn't want an apartment in Paris where I didn't know anybody, didn't belong. I just thought about, ‘Do I want a house in Italy, in San Francisco, do I want an apartment in San Francisco,’ and I just kept coming back to what's important.

“I wanted to be part of a community where I feel connected, feel like I belong, and that was Oxford.”

She had stayed connected to friends she'd made as a law professor at the University of Mississippi, and after her husband died, she started spending more time in Oxford. She joined Wise Women shortly after it began, in 2015, through Evelyn Smith, attracted to the community and especially to the fact that it was one of the most integrated spaces in town.

Oxford is not the only community Barbara maintains ties with. A few years ago, she returned to San Francisco for a reunion of civil rights lawyers. While there, she started talking with her son Charles' father, David.

“One of us suggested, ‘Do you want to go get coffee?’ And we did. And then that wasn't enough, so it was, ‘Well, do you want to go for a walk?’ And that turned into, ‘Do you want to get dinner?’ And we've been together ever since.”

SUE FINO

“I never thought of myself as an activist. I had never been in a march, never gotten involved in a campaign. Then the election happened, and this just popped out.”

Small and slight, with silvery gray hair and glasses, Sue Fino is an unlikely activist. A New Jersey native, Sue—whose soft voice still carries a Northeastern accent—attended Catholic schools from grade school through grad school. Many of her teachers were priests and nuns. She aced Sister Ann Flabian's high school history class, winning a citizenship award from the Daughters of the American Revolution. While the curriculum included segments on social justice and labor issues, including the Catholic Worker icon Dorothy Day, Sue was taught that the Civil War was about states' rights, not slavery.

“It just didn't seem right,” Sue says. “I was so logical. Everyone in my family called me Spock, because I was all about logic and reason.”

A few years later, this trait got her into trouble at St. Francis College in Pennsylvania. A math major, Sue ran afoul of the institution's conservative curriculum.

“I was in a religion class and I had to write a paper on abortion,” she remembers. “And they gave me the conclusion. It had to say abortion was wrong. I decided that wasn't what school was supposed to be. You're supposed to come to a conclusion based on the research that you do. So I transferred to the University of Dayton, which was also Catholic, but different. But it wasn't about my own beliefs, it wasn't emotional. It was all logic. You weren't supposed to write a paper that came to a conclusion, you were supposed to come to a conclusion as you wrote the paper.”

During summer vacations, Fino worked on the assembly line at the Stirling Plastics factory in Mountainside, New Jersey, turning out thousands of red pencil boxes.

“I was like Lucy at the factory,” she says, referring to the 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy*. “They just kept coming, coming, coming – if you'd been able to eat pencil boxes, I would have eaten them!”

Although the factory was rigidly segregated along racial and gender lines, Fino fell in love with one of her coworkers, a stockboy named Marty. She quickly learned that Uncle Sam had a say in his life—and would come to play a role in hers, as well.

“The first time I went out with my husband, he told me that he was in ROTC – not because he wanted to be, but because he wanted to go to grad school and needed to defer the draft.”

After their marriage in 1968, the Finos moved to Ohio, where Marty would study psychiatry at Kent State. To support his studies, Sue got a job as a math teacher in a local school. After excelling in a summer course in New Math, she was offered a position as a graduate assistant at the university. Despite Marty's misgivings, she accepted, taking the then-revolutionary step of placing her education on an equal footing with her husband's.

On May 4th, 1970, she was in a department meeting when she saw National Guard troops marching down the street. That same day, they would kill four college students in a brutal crackdown on anti-war protests.

“That definitely had an effect,” she says. “My husband was going to be in the Air Force, and after he graduated, he went to Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois, and I did not want to live on that Air Force base. So we lived in Urbana, which was about 17 miles away, and he commuted there. The military was not something I really felt positive about, I guess.”

When Marty was stationed in England, the couple bought a house in East Anglia

because Sue again refused to live on the base. Nevertheless, she says, laughing, she wasn't an activist.

“At that time, you really couldn't be involved with anything like protests if your husband was in the Air Force – it just didn't work. I mean, we had a book that told me what length gloves to wear,” she says, pointing halfway up her arm to show the regulation height.

“If you were an officer's wife—I was known as a dependent, so everything was just my husband's last four digits of his social security number. When I went to the dry cleaner on base, you would just give them the last four of his social security, and that's how I was known. Women weren't thought of too highly at that time, and I was fearful.”

Sue wouldn't go to the meetings of officers' wives' club, but they did give her a present when she and Marty were about to return to the United States. She goes into her kitchen and returns with a little ceramic container, painted with green vines.

“I wouldn't go to any of the functions, so someone who didn't know me picked out this—I think it's an egg cozy? And this was the sum total of my interaction with the Air Force wives' club while we were in England, and every time I look at it, I think about that. I use it for toothpicks.”

After returning stateside, Sue worked as a special education teacher in Massachusetts for several years. She wanted to become a mother but was unable to have biological children. “We tried to adopt an older child—she was 14 and her name was Monica. But she ran away, and then she came back with a baby and ran away again. She still calls. I spoke to her a couple of weeks ago. She's a grandmother now. But I decided to start my own business, in educational services, because I had time.”

In order to launch the new enterprise, she needed a loan. “I knew that without Marty

getting the loan, I wouldn't get the loan. I remember thinking, 'That's not right,' but I don't remember agonizing over it at all. That's the way life is, no use to get all upset about it. Now, I realize that if we had had a way of communicating we would have had a lot of women saying, I want to start a business and I can't unless I have some male to get the loan.”

This experience, she adds, prompted her to identify as a feminist. Prior to that, she says, “I know I had an ERA button, so yes, I was a supporter as far as a button, but I didn't do anything that I can recall that had anything to do with the ERA except wear a button. I wasn't particularly fond of Gloria Steinem, I never read any books (on feminism).”

Her company, Learning Styles, helped several Massachusetts public school districts accommodate students needing extra help by counseling teachers and identifying students' needs. In some cases, she was able to help public schools retain students who would otherwise have used state-funded vouchers to attend private institutions instead.

Her work also prompted her to take up snowboarding.

“It scared me half to death, but I had a big picture of me on a snowboard—I worked with a lot of adolescent boys, and the best way to build rapport with teenage boys was to snowboard. It's great to be retired and not have to snowboard.”

She would have every student plot out their strengths and weaknesses, she elaborates, filling out a sheet labeled, “Plains, Hills, Mountains and Goals.” She would share hers and then ask the students for theirs. “And I would always say, ‘For me, snowboarding is a mountain. I'm not really very good at it, but it's beautiful.’”

Sue spent much of her working years commuting, as she and her husband moved to Vermont but she continued to work in Massachusetts. Snowboarding aside, she loved

Vermont. She waxes nostalgic about biking in Burlington, visiting the Ben & Jerry's factory and baking with King Arthur Flour (a worker-owned company she continues to support). But, she says, her own rural community was predominantly conservative. There was no Unitarian Universalist church, no Democratic Party. There was also no golf course, which became another priority as she and Marty looked for a place to retire to (their current house backs up to one). And, she adds, "there were no Wise Women."

Sue joined the group prior to the 2016 election and met Evelyn Smith, a charter member with a long history of civil rights advocacy (a Nashville native, she started marching in the sixth grade and grew up around John Lewis and other Fisk University divinity students, who would come to her parents' house for dinners). Evelyn recruited Sue to assist with a voter registration drive.

Not counting the time, in 1982, when she stood outside a Massachusetts polling place to urge passage of the state's bottle bill, which instituted a cash payment when the containers were turned in for recycling, Sue's first political action consisted of sitting outside the Cash Saver grocery store and asking passers-by whether they were registered. The cause was a logical place for her to start.

"I knew 40 years ago that I wanted to register voters," she says. "If I could have done whatever I wanted when I retired, I would have bought a little RV and driven around, playing golf half the day and registering voters the other half."

The morning of November 9th, Sue says, "I woke up in shock." For days after the election, she had trouble sleeping. Working with her sister on breathing exercises to try to alleviate her insomnia, Sue considered joining other women journeying to Washington, but realized that that would likely worsen her condition.

Then, as the Wise Women were sitting at lunch two weeks before Inauguration Day, someone said, “We ought to have a march.”

One woman volunteered to get the permit. Another said she knew of a speaker who could address the gathering. “I’ll do whatever it takes,” Sue said. She recruited Evelyn Smith as master of ceremonies and UU minister Gail Stratton as a speaker. She helped moderate the tone of the event, urging people to stand up for their beliefs rather than protest in anger. And, controversially, in hopes of attracting a higher number of male participants, she named the event the “Oxford March for America,” rather than calling it a “Women’s March.” (The turnout was large, with local papers reporting 700 participants.)

Sue carried a sign reading, “I’m marching for them,” with pictures of her two nieces. After the march, she continued organizing.

“I always knew that protesting wasn’t really my area of interest,” she says. “I’m more interested in doing something, in changing things than protesting them. That’s where I’ve tried to put my energy. When push comes to shove, I’m an introvert, and I need a lot of downtime in order to push myself to do something that is out there to change—I’d rather read a book than go out there and knock on doors, but I see the necessity of it.”

She served as the de facto campaign manager for Paula Shanks’ alderman campaign in spring 2017, as well as becoming one of the first board members of the League of Women Voters of Oxford/North Mississippi and a leader of the local Indivisible chapter. Because Marty serves on the executive committee to the Lafayette County Democratic Party, she explains, she sought roles in other organization to avoid conflict, although they still clashed over Sue’s desire to be an activist, a word Marty did not view positively.

“We’re used to arguing—not arguing—discussing,” Sue says. “And we’ve been

married for 48 years. You know you're going to stick it out.”

She believes that communication and cooking are key to maintaining a healthy relationship. Although she is far from identifying as a foodie, she says that her Italian husband can be a gourmet. In April of 2017, she hosted an Indivisible training session at her home. At this event, she learned about the concept of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conception of the ways in which power structures are connected and oppression based on race, gender, class etc. is intertwined. Sue tried to apply to her own life.

“I’d never even heard the word before,” she says. “But the person explaining it was like, ‘Think of a Venn diagram,’ and the math major in me got that. It’s about finding common ground. And so I’ve tried to find the intersectionality with my husband. You know—after the training, I made pizza. It balances out.”

In 2018, she spearheaded GOTV efforts for Mississippi’s senate races through the coordinated campaign known as the Blue Wave, organizing postcard parties and canvassing (although she says other organizers criticized her habit of dividing the walk lists into batches of 15-20 houses, rather than the typical 40). Following that election, Sue had become involved with Democrat Jay Hughes’ campaign for Lieutenant Governor, continuing the weekly postcard parties.

Then, in February, Jay voted for a six-week abortion ban, a so-called “heartbeat bill” that would ban abortion before most women even know they’re pregnant (and also before the fetus has a heart). This action angered and surprised many of the Wise Women who had been working on his campaign.

“I tried and tried to get pregnant,” Sue says. “If anyone should be pro-life, it would

be me. But I'm pro-choice.”

She was so disappointed in Jay's vote that she withdrew from his campaign. “As a member of the ‘Blue Wave,’” she wrote to the group, “I enthusiastically supported our candidates with no reservation. Prior to holding the first postcard party for Jay Hughes, however, I found it important to speak with him, to explain that gun safety and women's reproductive freedom were issues of concern to me.” (Jay had also voted for a Republican-backed bill that expanded the areas in which guns were allowed, allowing people to carry in college classrooms, for example.)

“After our conversation I agreed to hold postcard parties only until the 'Blue Wave' reassembled. Now that Jay has voted to fund the ‘Heartbeat’ law I find myself unsure of how to proceed.”

She hosted a meeting for members of the Wise Women to voice their concerns. Although many of the guests urged loyalty to Jay, she has been unwilling to return.

“It's the first time I've had this kind of emotional response,” she says. “I'm Spock, remember. When I was at St. Francis, that was about logic, not emotion: I didn't think they should tell you what conclusion you had to come to in a paper. But this is about emotion.

“Marty's still very much supportive of Jay Hughes, so we still have a Jay Hughes sign, because he's doing the postcard parties now. And I have to give him credit for that, because it's definitely not along his line of support, but we've managed. And it was tricky at first to manage that, but after you've been married for 50 years you figure out ways. Although we have never come across political differences before.”

EUNICE BENTON

For Eunice Howze Milton, growing up in tiny Marianna, Florida, as the great-great-granddaughter of the Confederate governor of Florida, John Milton (a direct descendant of the poet's brother), was a source of pride and pressure. Mostly pressure.

“It didn't feel terrible, I just *felt* it, in the form of expectations that I came from a good family. You just know that your great-great-grandfather was the governor! And there's his grave! That was the Milton-Deagle crowd. And by the time I was a teenager I could see the arrogant bitchy side of that. But that was also an era where the Confederacy really just meant the South. I had to get away from it to see it.”

Her father was the school superintendent; she describes him as an Atticus Finch character, though less bookish. She remembers her father driving her around the farm in their Jeep. “Dad would lift his arm and point to the pine trees and say, 'There's your college education.’”

She was a good student and especially enjoyed Mr. Grant's history class. “He was a good teacher,” she remembers. “Except there was one test that had the question, True or False, the KKK had to be organized to protect Southerners during Reconstruction, or after the Civil War, I forget how it was phrased. And 'had' was underlined. And one of the things with a true/false is, if it's too set in stone, it's probably false. So I put what I thought was right, and he said, you missed this one. He said it was true, and that gave me an 88 on the quiz instead of 100. That was 8th grade. Why do I remember this so clearly? And I loved that teacher and I continued to love him.”

Eunice reflects. “When I look back to think about my life I think about, where did you learn things that shifted the course of your life, you know? Because I don't think of my

life in terms of, 'What did you accomplish.' I think, 'Where were the epiphany moments?'"

In 11th grade, she had one of those epiphany moments that made her question the segregated South.

Over the years, Eunice had grown close to Ben Fudge, an African American man who worked at her Aunt Howze's boarding house. "I loved Ben and he loved me and we hugged each other," she remembers. "On Christmas morning he always showed up in the driveway on his bike bringing Miss Howze's Christmas presents to us. And one year he brought me a present from him. He had bought me a yellow dress. I've never forgotten it. It had a printed picture of Robin Hood on the front of it. I was just—I was touched.

"But here's the story. When I was in the 11th grade he died, I never knew of what. But somebody called the house to tell us that Ben had died, and it was at an afternoon after school time and I was there and I answered the phone and took the message and I remember I just burst into tears. So when it's suppertime, I'm still upset and I said out loud to our dinner table, I'm going to Ben's funeral.

"And there was silence. And then my father said something like, Daughter, we will attend Ben's funeral the way he would attend a funeral in our family. We will not go into the church, we will simply attend the graveside service.

"I was so upset. And I looked at my father and I said, Daddy, if Ben were here, he would let me go. I was convinced that was true."

A year later, it was time for Eunice to go to college. "We were dirt poor," she says. "We had a lot of dirt but it wasn't worth much."

In 1962, the trees came down and Eunice went off to "The W"—only partly because her high school sweetheart was attending the University of Mississippi, two hours away.

That first semester, another student named James Meredith enrolled at UM, the first African American ever to do so. White supremacists responded by starting a deadly riot on campus. As many of the other girls at the W voiced their opposition to integration, Eunice thought about her friend Ben. “And if that was '61, it is '62 when I'm a freshman at the W, so it's only a year plus later when the dining hall sang *Dixie* and I sat down. Because James Meredith's trying to go to school was an epiphany moment.”

She decided that she had to transfer. At that time, the University of North Carolina only admitted women as junior year transfer students, and she decided to apply as soon as she was eligible. In the meantime, she broke up with her high school boyfriend and spent the summer of '64 working on Cape Cod.

“That was Freedom Summer, but I didn't know about it,” she says. “I wasn't on any recruiting lists, and I probably wouldn't have done it if I had been. I was still figuring things out.”

When she got to Chapel Hill, it was the furthest from home she'd ever been. It was also the first integrated school she had ever attended. Her senior year, she was elected president of the YWCA. “It was the activist org on that campus, or it was at the time. It sounds odd, but it had morphed into a space for the activism there was no other place for. I would walk up to my desk at the office and it would be full of protest signs, where one segment or another would be out there on the quadrant with some subject—I can't remember all of them. In the beginning, it was civil rights, and then it was the Vietnam War. This was '64-'66.”

In her role as president, she also helped overturn the campus speaker ban. “The issue was trying to keep a communist, and I'll just put that in quotes—what is a

communist?—from speaking on the university campus. It was a reflection of one of the main issues of the era—this was at the tail end of the McCarthy era and the bill that we essentially filed suit against was one of those boilerplate bills that surely had been written by a think tank somewhere and sent off to legislatures to try to get them to pass it. Ohio had sense enough not to pass it, but somebody railroaded it through North Carolina on the last day of the legislative session and the governor had no veto. It was the law.

“The major officials at the university were opposed to it. The president gently spoke out, referencing the First Amendment and what the university was about, to let students learn for themselves and make decisions, but nobody could get it off the books. Had the legislators tried to do it the firestorm would have been around them. Had faculty or the administration have done it, the firestorm would have been around them.

“So a wise old attorney in Greensboro decided that if the students did it, it would be credible, as long as they were student leaders, people who wouldn't be considered rabblers. Those of us who had elected positions were called in and asked, would we be willing to do this?

“My father was terrified, terrified, terrified. He assumed I would come home and teach in the state of Florida, and the state of Florida had a loyalty oath that you had to take, that said you had never been a communist. So my father and I sort of made a deal that my name would stay on that suit until I graduated and then I would pass the baton to the next president of the YWCA, which is technically what happened, but my name stayed as a plaintiff. I was the only girl.”

During her college years, Eunice also questioned the Southern Baptist tradition she'd been raised in. “I probably was still in Mississippi at the W when I realized that if I

had been born in Southern India, I probably wouldn't be Southern Baptist. I saw the link between religion and the culture you were exposed to. That opened a door for me.”

But losing her faith was hard. “I had believed all my life up until then in something that was really—because this is what the Baptist Church preaches—a very personal God, somebody that was there for you every moment. There really was a death of something for me to step away from that, giving up that belief that there was somebody who was going to take care of you, that there was somebody who was going to be there for you, every minute, living and dead, but I realized that to be honest I had to give that up.”

In Chapel Hill, Eunice also met a young man named Bill Benton. “I was not attracted to him the first time I saw him. He misbehaved terribly. I should have known better. He was just—Bill can be—act crazy and funny and gets his kind of bad boy behavior on. And he was doing it that night.

“But there was something about both of us that I know that—and not all relationships happen like this—but one of Bill's frat brothers said, ‘Well, y'all were like an old married couple even before, in college.’ We just had this comfortable relationship, almost this devotion from the very beginning. And Bill was a great person to court you. He would send me telegrams to ask me to go to the movies.”

After college, Eunice and her friend Betsy decided to go to Europe together. Neither of them had much money, but they were determined to visit places outside the South. In England, Eunice found work as a secretary; in Paris, she took a position as an au pair. She spent Christmas in Innsbruck, Austria, and remembers how dirty the air in Paris seemed by comparison upon her return. By February, the girls had bought an old car and they started journeying around the Mediterranean.

They were on the island of Crete, in Greece, in '67, when the military junta came to power. "I had never been anywhere where the king was overthrown. There was no telephone, we didn't know anybody. We'd only been there long enough to make a few connections, and some of the connections managed to bring us some food in paper bags. We were in a hotel, we just couldn't get out, we couldn't leave. There was a curfew. They were trying to control any resistance to the coup."

Eventually, they got out, found their car right where they'd left it on a street in Athens, and continued their trip, heading into Germany and East Germany and up to Scandinavia. "And then we had to bite the bullet and come home. We thought our best chance of getting a job was getting a teacher job, and I always joke that Betsy and I got the last two teaching jobs in Georgia. That wasn't true but it was close to it. They had raised the salaries and everyone in the South wanted to teach in Georgia that year. That put us in Atlanta when King was shot and when Bobby Kennedy was shot."

Eunice was a year older than Bill. When she was in Europe, he was a senior finishing his thesis, which centered around interviews with veterans of the Spanish Civil War. "When I went to Europe, he drove me to New York City and put me on the boat, and then I didn't see or hear from him but twice the whole year, so I was furious with him. Didn't care if I never saw the soul again. And I fly back in the next June and my mother and father pick me up at the Dothan airport. We load stuff into the car and get in to head to Marianna, and Dad says, 'What was that guy's name that was here last spring, who was from Winston-Salem? He called last night.'

"So Bill just turns up in Marianna. I'd been back from Europe a week. He was about to volunteer for the draft so he would have some choices, and decided to come find me

before he did it. We were never sappy romantic, but I'm just telling you, it's still in there. So we stayed in touch that whole next year, and by the spring I'm teaching in Atlanta and he's going through officer training school at Fort Benning, which is in Columbus. I say, 'I'll marry you but I don't want to marry you before you go to Vietnam and have all the families say, now you come home, you're a married woman.'”

In May, she remembers, Bill waltzed into her apartment in Atlanta holding a list of officer assignments. The first four names on the list would be stationed in Germany. The rest were headed to Vietnam.

“I can see it still. ‘Agren, Bartlett, Beatty, Benton.’ And Bill says, ‘You want to go to Germany?’”

They had a simple wedding—Eunice bought the first wedding dress she tried on—and moved to Europe. They would return two years later with baby Michael, ending up in Bill's hometown of Winston-Salem, where he started taking over his father's business. This blindsided Eunice, who did not want to live in Winston-Salem and who had expected a more adventurous and less corporate-focused life.

When the Benton family wanted Eunice to attend the Presbyterian church that her father-in-law had helped found, she was forced to make a concrete decision about her religious beliefs or lack thereof. “I decided I wanted to check out the Unitarian Universalist congregation in that town, because I knew what it was. And I thought, I can do this. And I was in with all fours before I knew it.”

They made her the chair of the building committee, a bigger job than she signed up for. In her late twenties, she oversaw the construction of a new building on the property. In her early thirties, she became president of the congregation. “This is another part of the

story of my life where two threads came together that were pieces of what I did for the next decade. Because Michael is little, and I had a number of part time jobs. I was trying to find my way now that I was living in this town that I didn't want to live in. I wanted to go to graduate school but I was in an odd town, I was the 'mother of,' and I started directing myself into being an interior designer, which was something I had never wanted to do, but the architect who had done the church building asked me. So I was a mother, I was a community volunteer, I would say I was a part-time interior decorator, and I was the president of the Winston-Salem Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, which now had a new building.”

1986-87 was Michael's senior year of high school, and he was dealing with severe depression. In a conversation with her son's therapist, Eunice asked whether they had discussed the possibility that Michael was gay.

“And he very appropriately said, ‘Let me ask you how you feel about that.’ And I said, ‘Well, I have two things to say, and they're equally true, even if they're contradictory. First, I don't care if he's gay. I think he's fabulous, and wonderful, and all kinds of good things, and it doesn't matter if he's gay. Doesn't matter to me at all.’ And I said, and my other response is equally true and heartfelt, ‘Please please please don't let him be gay, it's too hard. It's too hard and it's fraught with all kinds of dangers, from the possibility of getting AIDS to being rejected by a world that just doesn't understand.’”

Eunice would eventually devote much of her life to trying to make the world understand, creating groups that provided safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community while also promoting societal acceptance and inclusion. But, at the time, she says, “I was not immediately the activist parent or voice about that. I think for a lot of reasons, one of which

was that Michael was still adjusting to that reality. So I really didn't become an active voice supporting the queer community until the late '90s and the early 21st century, and then I'm living here.”

The following year, Michael went to college and Eunice began making assessments. Her relationship with Bill was strained, perhaps more so by the fact that he was mostly oblivious to that fact. In 1992, Eunice enrolled in the Southern Studies graduate program at the University of Mississippi. The rental market in Oxford was such that she bought a fixer-upper house, intending to sell it after completing her studies.

One day, a neighbor pointed out an ad in the *Daily Mississippian* that encouraged people who were interested in forming a Unitarian Universalist congregation to join weekly meetings on campus. Close to graduation, Eunice said no. But in February, after celebrating her fiftieth birthday, she decided to meet with them.

“On some Sunday in February I get up and take myself over to the (Student) Union. And all those doors over there they have no windows in them, and I go along trying to find this room and one of the doors was unlocked, and I opened it and the way I describe it was, there were about eight people huddled around a candle.”

After the service, as they were introducing themselves, someone asked, “Oh, do you know anything about this?”

“And do the math,” Eunice says. “I have just spent twenty years doing Unitarian Universalist stuff in North Carolina. And I have to decide what to do and I decide I could not walk away from helping that.”

Two years later, the new congregation was getting ready to charter and Eunice was getting ready to sell her house in Oxford and move back to North Carolina. Then, she saw

an advertisement for a position overseeing the new Midsouth District of the Unitarian Universalist Association. “People keep calling me. ‘Eunice, that's your job. You are going to do that, aren't you?’ So I do apply for it.”

She was hired in April of that year, a week after the Oxford congregation was officially chartered. For the next fifteen years, she served as the district exec. “It was not a big dramatic job, but it was wonderful work for me. It was, you know, making some things work that linked to values that I cared about in a region that I knew about but that did not usually support those values. And so on a number of occasions in the latter years when someone would say, ‘Well, how do you see what you do?’ I would say, ‘I live at the intersection of a very liberal religion and a very conservative southern culture and somehow I'm able to live at that nexus.’”

During this time, Eunice became involved in the formation of the PFLAG chapter, which came into being in 2004 after Duncan Gray, the current Episcopal bishop and the son of the former bishop, who was known for his outspokenness in favor of the civil rights movement, provided a disappointing, unsupportive response to the ordination of the first gay bishop in his denomination. Some of the leaders within the Oxford church reached out to the Unitarian Universalists for support, and Eunice joined the group as its first program chair.

“The whole subject was in the closet,” she says. “We were just trying to normalize what it meant to be GLBTQ.”

As a Unitarian Universalist, Eunice's own agnosticism was a non-issue. “There has always been a sense for me that I don't know it all. I'm not trying to project some kind of divine humility, that's not what I mean, but I don't say I'm an atheist because I'm not damn

sure about that either. So what I say is it's like my old buddy Jim¹ said, standing in the doorway that afternoon, 'E, we ain't ever gonna know.'

“I remember one time in some congregation I wound up doing—at the last minute, somebody needed a sermon, and I didn't really do a sermon, but I said, you know, we can do this, if we're hanging out in places that have shingles that suggest religion, we need to remember that we all ask the same questions. Human beings just do. Who am I, where did I come from, what's gonna happen to me after I'm not here, after I'm not living, and is there anything bigger than me? We all ask that. And religions attempt to give you answers to that stuff. And some of them are scary answers. Some of them are comforting, and some of them are threatening.”

In 2011, Eunice decided to retire. She wasn't quite sure what she wanted to do yet, but she remained involved in many of the organizations she'd worked with (as of this year, she's president-elect of the Oxford UU congregation). She also decided that she was going to prioritize getting to know some of the women she'd been too busy to connect with before. “It was almost an accident, and spontaneous,” she says. “It was one o'clock on a Friday, and I was running some errands and got hungry, so I thought, hell, I'm not doing anything else, I'll just go sit at the bar and eat lunch. And that's when I thought if I had some good women friends it would feel fabulous. And I went home and wrote the email. And what is still amazing and very true is that more and more women want to do that.

“And you know, even though some people in this group are really strongly political in some ways, as you listen to this group what they're really saying is we just want to be

1

A lawyer and ex-Presbyterian elder who came to the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Winston-Salem and provided free legal support during the process of building the new sanctuary.

together, we want to know each other. So it wasn't just me. I struck a nerve.”

From: Eunice Benton <eunice.benton@gmail.com>
Date: Tuesday, March 5, 2019
Subject: Please Discontinue Conversations about the Confederate Statues
To: wisewomenoxford@googlegroups.com

Dear Wise Women Sisterhood....

We have never before let our online conversations be so charged that we were accusing our sisters in this network in anger... that we were not able to hear points of view of others without judging or putting down others in this group...

Please hear and honor this request to discontinue this line of discussion until we have an understanding about how we will treat the various views and experiences and opinions in our group! If there are more posts I may, as moderator, remove them... It is NOT appropriate for anyone to be disrespectful to any others in this group...

There are now more than 300 of us... of all ages and backgrounds and experiences... Listening respectfully to each other has been a hallmark of our group...

Please, please carefully consider any posts you make... being sure that you speak for yourself and out of your own experience without demeaning the experiences or posts of others... If this is not something you are comfortable doing, then please unsubscribe yourself from the list...

Honoring and with gratitude for each and every one who is a part of Wise Women.... !

Eunice Benton

CONCLUSION

Over the past three and a half years, a group that started with three women has evolved into a progressive powerhouse. Recent transplants and women who have lived in Oxford their entire lives have alike found community in this lunch group and listserv. It is a sisterhood that draws women from all different backgrounds and helps other women, providing everything from meals and housing support for the sick to bail money for antifascist demonstrators to college tuition payments.

It has evoked comparisons—both positive and negative—to a sorority. For the vast majority, the group has become a family of sorts, a group of women united by shared values who find comfort in their association with one another. For other members and ex-members, the group has taken on a less favorable connotation. Some have seen the group as cliquish or judgmental, while others have been troubled by the frequency of the emails as well as their content.

The simple act of women eating together is neither a new nor a radical idea. For generations, organizations like the Junior League and the Daughters of the American Revolution have been hosting lunches. No one would accuse these groups of trying to remake society or advance a progressive agenda. Indeed, the phrase “ladies who lunch,” popularized by the 1970 musical *Company*, signifies just the opposite. The song describes women who flit between the gym, shopping sprees and parties.

The Wise Women is unique because, although Eunice Benton has remained clear in her position that this is not a group that elects officers and writes bylaws, and although the topics of conversation at lunches are never pre-decided, this has remained a substantive group that addresses real issues. The range of views expressed in the group, as well as the

seemingly incessant announcements of some event or another, are part of what makes this community special: no one is policing language or content.

From the borderline absurd—a woman trying to give away “five beautiful goats”—to the political—volunteer opportunities on campaigns and reminders to vote—Wise Women has covered a multitude of topics. Some of these have sparked controversies, and some have even threatened the existence of the group as a “safe space” and a group of women who can unite despite their differences.

Eunice describes the exchange that took place during the Wise Women's discussion of the white supremacist march in Oxford in February, and the accompanying discussions of the town's Confederate iconography, as a milestone in the group's development.

The conversation began when students who were affiliated with the United Students Against Sweatshops group on campus asked the Wise Women to help provide food for their scheduled convention; this was the event that the white supremacists were protesting. As preparations for protests, counter-protests, and counters to the counter-protest continued, the conversation veered into discussions of what should be done with the Confederate statues themselves, which were attracting Nazis and neo-Confederates to the town and campus. Many voices called for their removal and suggested ideas for statues that could be erected instead. Effie Burt got herself put on the agenda for the monthly county supervisors' meeting to discuss the issue, and many Wise Women turned out to support her.

Some voices, however, disagreed. Janice Carr wrote, “The Black communities have much more bigger problems today than trying to have a statue moved. Our children are underperforming in school, parents having to work two and three jobs to make ends meet

and they still don't meet! ... How helpful it will be to go before the governing bodies and ask for obtaining a living wage, healthcare for all, summer jobs for our youths, etc. It's going to take funds to remove these statues. Why not use the funds to better the lives of our citizens.”

She was not alone. “I feel that taking down the statue on the Square would be a sad mistake,” wrote Dicki King. “To remove this statue is to diminish the Square which encompasses much of our history.... I am not sure that tearing down all our complicated history is in the best interest of our town and its history. Quentin in *The Sound And Fury* [sic] cried, ‘I hate it. I hate it.’ We should air all of history—such as the lynching that was recently acknowledged---and the faint trails of bigotry.

“Oxford is an historic town for many reasons. It should not be diminished or glossed over. Please think long and hard about the implications of this proposed action. Also, I think it was a crime to tear down the old jail, that’s just me, but I could hear the prisoners singing as I passed by on the way to get ice cream at Avent's Dairy on North Lamar.”

Later that night, Seyna Clark, the young woman whom Wise Women had helped keep in college, responded passionately. “I can't believe I even have to write this. I am pissed off. Honestly, I am tired of reading sad excuses and statements from privileged white women about how Black students and residents should stand about the statues. I am tired of reading about what you all would be comfortable with on how to handle the removal of the statues and what you'd be most comfortable with and works or doesn't work for your satisfaction. It's not about you, we don't care about your feelings.”

Dicki King's daughter, Merrill, wrote to Eunice asking to be removed from the list,

saying that she couldn't watch her mother be attacked, even though she had spent the afternoon trying unsuccessfully to dissuade her mother from posting her letter.

In an unprecedented step for the Wise Women, Eunice halted the conversation. “I did it reluctantly, but it had to be done. I didn't want to lose Wise Women.”

That was the first time anyone had ever prohibited a topic of conversation within the group. Since then, women have been more outspoken about their displeasure with certain emails sent to the group, from notices of items for sale to announcements that one of the ministers in the group will be preaching the next Sunday.

When local state representative Jay Hughes voted for a six-week abortion ban and defended his vote with white supremacist rhetoric, the group was divided on how to respond and whether or not to continue supporting his lieutenant governor candidacy. The discussion of this topic has sometimes grown heated, as some women try to stop others from posting notices of Hughes' campaign events that cause pain for other women in the group.

This time, Eunice is trying to prevent others from stopping the postings. Her logic, however, remains the same. “I'm afraid we're going to lose Wise Women.”

Her concern is proportional to the uniqueness of this group and the importance of the role it plays in the community as well as in its members' lives. This group has been almost an experiment. It has filled a need for many women, who return each week or who remain subscribed to the email list despite the immense volume of communications. Certainly, it has provided a surrogate family for me. I think the group has been successful because so many women feel a need for it and haven't experienced something like this before. I joke sometimes that this is the only space I know of where women can gather for

a couple of hours without being interrupted (although we do it to each other sometimes), but I think that really speaks to the hierarchy of the society in which we live. Women in the South are still often expected to conform to certain gender roles and to let men take precedence.

This group has intentionally remained women-only (although, of course, anyone who identifies as female is welcome). Some men have been resentful that they could not join, while others have been wistful. In fact, several of the men (including Sue Fino's husband) started a Wise Guy's group that meets weekly to discuss politics. It has not been as successful as Wise Women, probably in large part because a room of just men is not unusual (and there have been progressive men's groups such as the Secret Liberals' Society at Square Books that have met for much longer).

Wise Women has also generated a spin-off group, the Like-Minded Ladies of Tupelo, although they eventually became co-ed and merged into the local Indivisible chapter there. This group filled a similar need; I think that, along with the Wise Guys, these similar organizations are a testament to the yearning for connectedness and fellowship that Wise Women has satisfied for so many of its members.

Barbara Phillips point out that the degree to which this need is met varies for different members. She refers to the fact that many of the white women in the group remain relatively unaware of the ways in which their actions perpetuate white supremacy. "I don't think black women will ever be able to be as comfortable in this group as white women," she says. Nevertheless, she continues to attend and to find women who do share her commitment to addressing structural injustices. This group is far from perfect, and incorporates many of the problematic elements of the culture its members come from, but

it is still valuable.

Telling this story has been an honor and itself something of an experiment. I didn't originally plan to write my thesis on the Wise Women. I was planning to talk to union organizers about their work and connect it to the history of organizing in the South. At some point, I realized that there was another story sitting right in front of me that no one was telling. The Wise Women is a story about organizing, too, although it looks and feels very different from a union campaign. Members of the group have shown up to rallies, protests, community canvassing events, voter registration drives, and many other initiatives. They have provided a volunteer base and have at times both trained and been trained by college students, creating a connection with the campus community often lacking for those who retire to Oxford.

One of the more difficult elements of this project was writing about a group that defies classification. Comparisons to women's consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s, or to the National Organization for Women or the Lavender Menace, fall flat. Wise Women does not have a stated agenda. If it has achieved consciousness-raising, it has been almost by accident, a result of casual conversations and realizations among group members. By contrast, the Women's Liberation movement set this as an explicit goal. In 1973, feminist leader Kathie Sarachild said, "Our aim in forming a women's liberation group was to start a mass movement of women to put an end to the barriers of segregation and discrimination based on sex." To this end, she says, "We also believed it necessary to form Women's Liberation groups which excluded men from their meetings" (Sarachild 144). The women-only nature of these earlier groups indicates some similarities, but Wise Women lacks the specificity and the organization they prioritized.

As I began working on this project, I intended to write feature stories about many of the group's members. I think that the final project is still composed of feature stories, but it incorporates more elements of oral history than I had anticipated. Working with this medium was particularly gratifying, however, because I have been drawn to oral history since I encountered Studs Terkel my freshman year. In Terkel's case, and indeed in many oral history traditions, not least the gathering of narratives from formerly enslaved people, many of the stories collected would not have been told otherwise.

Of course, there are pitfalls to oral history. It makes a greater pretense of objectivity than journalism because it allows the subjects of a piece to tell their own stories. Therefore, I think that it can be a source of empowerment. However, it is often abused. The stories of formerly enslaved people, related in normal language, were translated into dialect to uphold white supremacist stereotypes, while some of the interviewers collecting these stories were white women who were children of plantation owners (Lawrence lxxxix). In these cases, objectivity was clearly not part of the writing process. While Studs Terkel was much more conscientious, he still executed great editorial power in deciding which elements of his interviewees' stories remained and which were cut (Kučerová 52).

The ethics of oral history are interesting and complicated, especially when the interviewer is very close to the subject, as I am to the Wise Women. However, I think that this proximity also helps me understand the context and the society in which these stories took place. The biographies of these individuals provide insights into this group and into growing up in the South and grappling with racism and patriarchy. This project made me more conscious of the fact that events, such as the desegregation of schools, that we treat as distant historical occurrences are much more recent and thus impact the present to a

larger extent than I had previously understood. This history needs to be discussed more, and I think that personal experiences are a valid and, due to their relatability, effective way to do so.

Each woman's story contributes to the piece in a different way, but seems to uphold the idea that this group of women is unique because it is a voluntary and intentionally unstructured organization that prioritizes sisterhood, even when it falls short. In an email to the list, Pattie Overstreet Miller, an integrated marketing communications professor, wrote, "One of the great privileges of my life was that, when I came new to Oxford, I was welcomed by this sisterhood of marvelous women. Even if I can't make the lunches, I've never felt left out. I know that this sisterhood wraps me like a warm blanket—and it's my job to do the same for those who come after me."

I am grateful to have been welcomed into this group and to have been able to become close to so many wonderful and wise women.

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