

Oral History Interview: Sylvia Rhue

Interviewee: Sylvia Rhue

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: February 4, 2011

Monique M. Today is February 4th, and I'm Monique Moultrie. I'm here with Dr. Sylvia Rhue, and we'll be doing her oral history. I'd like to begin by saying thank you to Dr. Rhue for joining us and being willing to share her narrative with us. So we're going to begin at the beginning with just a general sense of where you grew up and what communities you were a part of. So what information would you like to share about where you grew up and what your neighborhood was like growing up?

Sylvia R. I'm a native Californian, Southern California. My neighborhood was black middle class. I don't know if there were any college degrees, but certainly high school graduates. Just working class, like some teachers, some postal workers. My dad worked on a train, Mom a secretary. And the church I went to, a few college degrees scattered here and there, a couple of professors. The thing I like – I was raised Seventh-day Adventist, and the good parts about it was, one, a health doctrine, which I still kind of adhere to today, and two, a real belief in education. So there was never any doubt that my brother and I would go to college. That was just a given.

Monique M. So there was a religious value on education as well as a parental value on education?

Sylvia R. I don't know anyone who didn't see education as a way out of some of the discrimination, oppression, and lack of opportunity that my parents' generation had been subjected to, so we saw education as a way out, a source of pride.

Monique M. You just mentioned some of the oppression your parents faced. Growing up, were you also attending segregated middle school, elementary, high schools?

Sylvia R. No. The segregation came from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Since I was in Southern California, we didn't have official segregation, and my parents are immigrants, so they didn't have segregation, either. But the segregation...the school I went to that was segregated was Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, and that's where the black Adventists went. Because the white Adventists felt, and told us, that we were under the curse of Ham.

Monique M. And that was also taught to you there at the school?

Sylvia R. No, no, black people didn't preach that. Only the white people said, "You're under the curse of Ham, get away. We don't like you. You're inferior. Go as far away as you can."

Monique M. And so if education was one of the means of being successful and overcoming the oppression, especially oppression you faced in your church, what were other avenues when you were a child? Did you go to the library, did you become active in Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, that kind of thing?

Sylvia R. I lived in the library. I was a Brownie, which was great. And I lived in the library. The summer meant to me...the city I went to had a really good library, the city I was raised in, the little town. And the summer meant that on Monday I would go to the library during the vacation. Monday I would go to the library and I'd check out five books every Monday, and I'd read a book a day.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. And that was my summer. And one time I decided to just read a shelf. I said, well, why don't I just read every book on the shelf? Also when I was in elementary school I went to Pasadena City College and checked out a book and read it.

Monique M. Nice. One of the things we didn't get to, do you have siblings? Were they also a part of the library trips, or...?

Sylvia R. No. But I had a friend who went to the library with me, and that's the first time I was called "Nigger," at the library. Coming out of the library, my friend and I were laughing, not really loud. We were kids, you know.

And this white man came by and he said, “Sound just like Niggers.”

[*Laughs.*] That was one of many. That was just the first.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. So I associate the library with a rather unfortunate incident.

Monique M. So growing up, what other activities did you find—

Sylvia R. Besides being called “Nigger,” what were some other activities?

Monique M. Yes, that brought wholeness as opposed to hurt.

Sylvia R. [*Laughs.*] Activity. Well, church was a big part of my life. That was like Friday night and Saturday, all day Saturday, ‘cause we kept the Sabbath. So that was every week no matter what, and prayer meeting on Wednesday night, usually. Not when I was in elementary school, but when I became a teenager. So that’s two to three nights out of your week and all day Saturday, with no TV, so I never watched “Howdy Doody” or “Buster Brown,” ‘cause they were on Saturday morning. But I wanted to. But I couldn’t, so you get used to it. Other activities? Going to Disneyland, ‘cause Disneyland just opened. And I’ve been to Disneyland 45 times.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. Yeah. And going to Pacific Ocean Park, which was an amusement park in L.A. – well, Santa Monica, in the ‘60s, which was great. It was like a poor

man's Disneyland. And activities... Swimming, going swimming those summer nights. It was fun. At the city pool. Oh, and my father made us a pool. We had a homemade pool in the back, a big, you know, when they call...say cement pond, that's exactly what it was except it was raised. My father made it, but with no regulations.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. No heat, just water, and you get in and that's your pool. And no lifeguard stuff, no one to watch. Kids will come in and jump in the pool. They could drown, but they didn't. I don't know, people – [*laughs*] – but that was it, we had a pool. But it was homemade.

Monique M. That must have made you pretty cool in the neighborhood, a back yard pool.

Sylvia R. Uh, yeah, pretty much. Pretty much.

Monique M. And so talk to me about your educational experience. Did you find a subject in school that you liked a lot?

Sylvia R. Well, you have to say which, you know, elementary school, junior high, high school, college, grad school.

Monique M. Let's start in elementary school and work our way.

Sylvia R. I liked everything in elementary school. I was the student that the teachers left in charge of the room when they left the room, you know, 'cause I was

such a good student. And I loved reading, and I was well dressed, well groomed, well behaved. [*Laughs.*] I was the model child. My brother and I were the kids that everyone else said, “Why can’t you be more like them?” They would get mad at us. “Our parents always say why can’t we be more like you?”

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. And we’d go, oh, too bad. What I liked in school... I liked reading after school, like fairy tales and things. And then of course I was going to the library, so I’d read science fiction. The book I checked out of Pasadena City College was *The Adventures of Lewis & Clark*. I remember that. So I guess...I started reading the paper at age five.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. Yeah. ‘Cause my mother said...she’d say something. I’d say... No, I’d say something and she’d say, “How’d you know that?” And I’d say, “I read it in the paper.” [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] All right, up to date on all the happenings from a tot. And so as you grew, were you interested in the sciences? Did you see yourself in one track going towards – you said you knew you were going to college. Did you have a growing interest in any one area?

Sylvia R. I wanted to be a veterinarian, but I wasn’t good enough in the sciences, because I’m such an animal lover, rescuer, protector.

Monique M. You grew up with animals?

Sylvia R. Yeah.

Monique M. And so in your preparation for college, so you said you always knew you were going to college and you were a very good student, was there one avenue that you thought was more appealing than another?

Sylvia R. The thing I really wanted to do we didn't have the technology to do. I wanted to make movies. You know, and we had a Kodak, but I always thought wouldn't it be great if...if we had had video cameras in the '60s, I would have made videos of my friends and things we were doing, but didn't have a camera.

Monique M. Did you take Polaroids growing up of events and such?

Sylvia R. I didn't, but we had a Polaroid camera, so Polaroids were taken. But we did have a color movie camera, so you take family reunions and the Rose Parade, things like that. So anyway, what I got interested in, I realized that I found social work, because I remember saying, "You mean you can help people and get paid for it?" So I went into social work. But I was also into...I was a psychology/sociology major at my college. In fact, I think I was president of the Psychology Department. I think so.

Monique M. Before we go too smoothly into your college years, I want to backtrack and talk some about the values that you grew up with. So the value of

education was a strong one. Were there any other particular values that you think were very strong in your household?

Sylvia R. Yeah, a stable family, stable loving family. Always had dinner time, it was family dinner time every night. Thought nothing of it. Surprised people don't do it now. Religious values of...oh, you know, being good to other people. You know, the golden rule and ten commandments, stuff like that. You don't steal, you don't...

Monique M. And these values, did they play a role in your decision to pursue a career helping people?

Sylvia R. Not consciously, but I guess they did.

Monique M. So you said you liked to read growing up, and you were a Brownie Scout. Were there any, I guess, non-educational—

Sylvia R. I was also a Pathfinder, which is the Adventist Boy Scout/Girl Scout thing. Pathfinder.

Monique M. Were there any other activities you did that weren't, I guess, academically tracked? Like did you go hiking? You said swimming. Any other extracurricular – in the band, theatre, dance, that kind of thing?

Sylvia R. Adventists did a lot of things, like we would have not only parties, but we did do some hiking. We also went up to Yosemite. We had a camp in

Yosemite and we'd go up there. Oh, horseback riding, definitely.
Horseback riding.

Monique M. And so...

Sylvia R. Loved, love horseback riding.

Monique M. Which makes sense, as an animal lover, to be around animals. In addition to those activities, what did you do when you were hanging out with your friends?

Sylvia R. By the way, I was a badminton champ in high school. What did I do when I hung out with my friends? My friends were all Adventists, so there wasn't anything to do, really. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. We couldn't go to movies, we couldn't dance, we couldn't smoke, drink, have sex, eat meat – well, we could eat meat – play cards, play...what else can't you do? So we went to Disneyland on Saturday night because it was a dollar twenty-five, and we'd listen to gospel music that they had at Frontierland.

Monique M. Also, so I'm getting a fuller picture of how you were growing up, it seems that a lot of your activities were based within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Were both of your parents members?

Sylvia R. Mother yes, Father no.

Monique M. And as a child, were you given the option to not be a member?

Sylvia R. No.

Monique M. And you said one of the things that still works for you were the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As a growing young adult, were you also active in questioning the faith, figuring the faith out for yourself?

Sylvia R. Only when...I wasn't a rebel. I was a Seventh-day Adventist, so only when the white people – because remember, it's segregated – sent us memos and they would say, "You're not to listen to music that causes the foot to tap." [*Laughs.*] And I said to my brother, I said, "They mean black music, don't they?" And he said yeah. So we just...you know, and then another one where they said the mouth is not to go below the navel.

Monique M. Very specific.

Sylvia R. Yeah. And I'm saying, well, how are you going to...that doesn't...that's the Rube Goldberg system. But anyway, so we didn't have any respect for the white Seventh-day Adventists, put it that way, so it didn't matter what they said. In fact, one Sabbath...well, see when the white ministers – very rarely, two or three times in my life – came to our church to preach, they considered it missionary work. And one time the choir had sung and the minister got up and he was very impressed with the choir, and he said, "You know, when I get to heaven, I'm going to find out where you people

are and sit down and listen to you sing.” Because of course heaven’s going to be segregated, right?

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. Right? [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. I know. That’s heavy.

Monique M. Yes.

Sylvia R. I’m going to find out where you people are and sit down and listen. And he was complimenting us, he felt.

Monique M. Now, did you do traveling with the church, with the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Sylvia R. With the choir, yeah. We traveled with the...I was in the triple trio and I was in the choir, and we would go up north and sing.

Monique M. Now, as you traveled, was it a reaffirmation of the segregation that you were experiencing in Southern California, or did the church differ based on the area it was in?

Sylvia R. Oh, no, no. No, this...it’s segregated all through the United States, so we never...we rarely had to mingle with white Adventists, rarely. So when

we did things, they weren't a consideration. We didn't know who they were or where they were. Didn't care.

Monique M. Gotcha. And so based—

Sylvia R. Well, actually, I take that back. We knew they were in Glendale, 'cause that's the headquarters. And at that time Glendale had a sundowner law. I don't even know if it was a law or just custom. But blacks weren't allowed in Glendale after sundown.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. Can you believe that one? And that's 'cause it was run by Adventists. [Laughs.] It's true. That's the headquarters of the Adventists. If you're here at sundown, get out. The police would pull you over—

Monique M. Escort you, yeah.

Sylvia R. --escort you and say, "That's the exit, go." [Laughs.]

Monique M. I'm from Virginia. I'm very familiar with sundown cities. That's part of the training for learning to drive, was learning where you couldn't drive after certain hours.

Sylvia R. Right. Yeah, we were driving from...what's that city in Virginia? Savannah. We were driving from Savannah back to Oakwood and we got lost in Rome, Georgia. This was like 1968. It was '68, 'cause Bobby Kennedy had just been killed. And we pulled up to a gas station 'cause we

were lost, and the guy said – he had big, like, goiter eyes – and he said...his wife said, “Tell ‘em the way the colored folk leave town.” You know, like – oh, we said, *errrh*, get out of here.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. Show ‘em the way to go. Oh God, it...ooh, aliens.

Monique M. May not want to go that way. Might have been a roadblock waiting for you there.

Sylvia R. Just get out. “Show ‘em the way the colored folk leave town.” Oh, my god.

Monique M. So we’ve talked a bit about traveling just in general. Did your family travel, or were most of your trips within the Christian confined setting?

Sylvia R. No, no, no. We took vacations, either driving to Canada or taking the train to Canada.

Monique M. And there you saw extended family and just toured?

Sylvia R. Mm-hmm.

Monique M. Okay. So then I’ll move us a little forward to preparing for college. So as a high school student, you mentioned you were a badminton champ. Were there other activities that you were particularly proud of in high school?

Sylvia R. Yeah, we had something called the Girls...I think it was GAA, Girls Activities Association. But because I had a girlfriend at the time, and it was full of dykes, we called it the Gay Activities Association.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. [*Laughs.*] I won't say full of dykes, but there were enough lesbians in it for... [*Laughs.*] And this is high school. I did have a girlfriend in high school. She was also in my church. I met her in church, actually.

Monique M. That brings me to another set of questions. So were you aware, at an early age, that you had same sex attraction, or was that something you considered yourself experimenting, you were just loving who you loved?

Sylvia R. Well, I knew...in the sixth grade I had written in my diary, "Today I married Pamela Krugerman." And when I was eight I asked my mother if two women could get married. So this is, you know, pretty early. This is in the '50s, talking about marriage, thinking about marriage rights.

Monique M. Mm-hmm. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. [*Laughs.*] So...yeah. The minister's son was my first kiss. Now, this doesn't include being molested by a Seventh-day Adventist, but the first kiss that wasn't a violation was from Walter, the minister's son. And, yeah, it was all right.

Monique M. And so you mentioned you asked your mother inquisitively if two women could get married.

Sylvia R. Well, I had a vision in my head of two women living together, and one was kissing the other one who'd go away off to work, and so I said, "Hey, Mom, can two women get married?" And that didn't go over well, believe me.

Monique M. Mm-hmm. So would you say your family was discouraging of that possibility?

Sylvia R. It just didn't come up. Oh, discouraging of getting married? Yeah. Yes. I mean, Mom screamed. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. And so when you were participating in these girls' activities and hanging out, was it just assumed that they were platonic girlfriends, or do you think your family thought something else?

Sylvia R. Well, another church girl named Barbara, who I really had a crush on, and I always wanted to be with her...she lived in Pacoima, and I always wanted to be there, you know, to be with Barbara. That's when my mother started getting suspicious.

Monique M. Now, did her suspicions lead her to chastise you or to talk to you?

Sylvia R. Well, she just said, it's too much. That's all. "Too much!"

Monique M. And so you said that even though you were getting these messages of maybe not direct “this isn’t the way,” but not encouragement, I would say, that that is normative, despite this fact you also had a girlfriend in high school. So what led you to make the presumption that that was okay, despite what society was saying, that it was okay for you to have a girlfriend?

Sylvia R. Wasn’t the other alternative to be with boys?

Monique M. Well, it depends. I suppose.

Sylvia R. That was never an alternative for me.

Monique M. Because some homes have very, very strict religious values of you’re not to do anything but God’s will, so I was thinking of that as an option as well.

Sylvia R. Oh, they weren’t religiously...neither of my parents were religiously homophobic, they were just culturally homophobic. No, I can even say my father wasn’t homophobic at all. ‘Cause you know what he said when he found out my brother is gay? He said, “Everybody don’t like carrots.”
[Laughs.]

Monique M. [Laughs.]

Sylvia R. And that was it.

Monique M. Wow. So you leave off to go to the Seventh-day Adventist college.

Sylvia R. And I left because I was so crazy about Barbara and she and her sister were talking about they were going to leave and do other things, and I said, “She’s going to leave. I should leave.” And then I went to...my first year in college was the town college, and they were pointing me out as a lesbian, it was kind of getting known. I said, well, I have to leave town, so I actually left town because I thought people were finding out I was gay. I got out of town.

Monique M. And so at that time were you identified? Were you completely aware?

Sylvia R. You know, I knew...I don’t know if I was calling myself lesbian at that time, but I also knew that... Well, actually, I kind of went to Oakwood to be straight and meet a ministerial student and marry him and write his sermons and live next door to someone I liked.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. That was my... But when I got to Oakwood, I met the ministerial students and I asked God to deliver me from them. And then I was walking across campus and this girl named Paula – I hadn’t met her yet – but she was walking my way. She had a blue coat and a red collar and her name was Paula, and she said, “Hi, baby,” and that was it. That was it. That was the end of my heterosexual life.

Monique M. Deliverance didn’t come there.

Sylvia R. Deliverance came in the way of Paula. Well, she's not going to like this.
Too bad. Too bad. [*Laughs.*] I mean, it's not a secret, so...

Monique M. Now, as you were making the decision then to go to, of all places,
Alabama to flee...

Sylvia R. Yeah. I fled to Alabama.

Monique M. That is not a—

Sylvia R. With a banjo on my knee. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. That would not be a normative narrative of places to flee, Alabama. I
don't think it would make the top thousand list. So how was that
transition?

Sylvia R. It was good because I felt like, you know, I was being independent and —
[*laughs*]

Monique M. Were they gender specific dorms or...?

Sylvia R. Oakwood College in the...we couldn't even sit together in church. We
couldn't go downtown together. There was boys' days to go downtown
and girls' day to go downtown.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. When I got there it was the first time in Oakwood's history that boys and
girls could sit together in church. They had just made that rule. And I

went to school with two...my minister's two kids, a brother and sister, and they went downtown together and got in trouble. Now, is that sick?

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. Yeah. There was also in the handbook that couples were not to be seen standing and sitting together and holding hands a lot. So heterosexuality was tamped down as much as it could. They didn't even mention homosexuality. If you got caught, you're out, that's it.

Monique M. Wow.

Sylvia R. Except I know some famous people, who I will not mention, who got caught – famous to this day – and didn't get thrown out 'cause they were too famous.

Monique M. So when you made the move to being a student in Alabama and you were progressing along, how soon did you decide on a major and did you plot your path?

Sylvia R. Yeah, by that time I knew I couldn't make it as a veterinarian, so that's when the psychology and sociology was the most interesting thing to me. And guess what? My psychology teacher molested me.

Monique M. Mmm.

Sylvia R. On my graduation day. He told me to come by the office and then he started kissing me. He said, “You’re not my student anymore” and he started pawing on me, and I just couldn’t believe it.

Monique M. Did you share that with your family, with administrators?

Sylvia R. No. With who?

Monique M. Your family or the administrators of the college?

Sylvia R. No, because I had graduated. I was gone from Oakwood. But he flew to L.A. to try to start something, and that’s when I told him I was lesbian. And then he went back to Oakwood and told every single person he could.
[Laughs.] So yeah.

Monique M. But that didn’t steer you away from the field because you go—

Sylvia R. Of social work?

Monique M. Mm-hmm.

Sylvia R. No. No, that had nothing...nothing to do with psychology and sociology.

Monique M. And so was your first job in the field?

Sylvia R. Yes. I went to UCLA to get a master’s in social work directly from Oakwood. I was the first social work student to go directly to grad school at Oakwood, at least in social work. And then I got a job with the Regional Center for Developmentally Disabled.

Monique M. And so at the time in which you are living in Alabama before you have...and did you...you graduated from the...?

Sylvia R. Yes, I'm a graduate of Oakwood College.

Monique M. And so by the time you graduated, what were your social experiences there?

Sylvia R. [*Laughs.*] At Oakwood?

Monique M. Mm-hmm.

Sylvia R. Besides being in love with Paula? Where of course nothing ever happened. Although the minister's son kissed me. And then when I went back to church, the minister gave a sermon against me, 'cause I called his son. "You girls quit calling these boys."

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. I said, I'll get my revenge. I'll never call another male in life. Okay, anyway, what did we do socially at Oakwood? We roller skated. [*Laughs.*] That's all you could do. There was nothing else to do. We couldn't go to movies, couldn't do, you know. Nothing. We just roller skated and went to church, day and night.

Monique M. That was part of the curriculum there?

Sylvia R. Worship at, I think, 7:15 in the morning and at 6:15 at night every day. And then of course church all day and of course Friday night church.

Monique M. Was attendance gathered or there just wasn't anything else to do?

Sylvia R. No, it was mandatory. We didn't mind. We were Adventists. That's what you did. It's not like we said, "Oh, no." We said, "Oh, worship, okay."

Monique M. And so as you were getting ready to graduate, you immediately, you said, went into graduate school. What was the push towards graduate school for you?

Sylvia R. That was just another step to, you know... A college degree, for me, wasn't going to be enough. So it was either UCLA or USC. I chose UCLA. Although I'm more of a Trojan now than a Bruin.

Monique M. And so I want to backtrack us a bit, maybe. In your narrative, in the bio you have up on the Coalition web site, it talks about meeting Dr. King and that being a push towards social justice. Did this happen while you were in Alabama?

Sylvia R. No, this was high school. My friends Barbara and a few other friends took a day off from high school and went down to L.A. to meet him at the airport, and then we went to...some ministers took us to his hotel room. And then we became part of his unofficial welcoming committee to L.A. And we raised money for him. Went door-to-door, raised money for the effort. And caught him every time that he came to L.A., made sure we were there.

Monique M. And were your parents supportive of that?

Sylvia R. Oh, yeah. They said you're going to learn much more meeting King than whatever you think you'd learn in high school today.

Monique M. And what was formative about meeting Dr. King for you that pushed you into the direction of social justice?

Sylvia R. I was probably on my way anyway because...it's just that he... You know, when you talk to younger people, he's a historical figure and he may be removed emotionally as George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. But he was a real person that I met and knew, flesh and blood, who had a sense of humor, who joked about his being assassinated with us, and just probably, you know, just a great soul, you could feel it. Just a wonderful man. And warm, engaging sense of humor. Generous, kind.

Monique M. Okay. So I think we're back...we're going to go back to...well, actually, we can stay in California, back with you starting the MA in social work. And so your—

Sylvia R. MSW.

Monique M. MSW, Master of Social Work.

Sylvia R. Uh-huh.

Monique M. At UCLA. And your interest there, you said after you finished you worked with developmentally disabled.

Sylvia R. Yeah, you know why I did? Because the Kennedys had a developmentally disabled – retarded, in those days – but developmentally disabled daughter who they shunted away and hid, and I thought it was...I just figured people who are given so much gray matter need to help people who have problems with being able to think and function in the world.

Monique M. And so what took you to the career path of doing a doctorate in human sexuality from working with the developmentally disabled?

Sylvia R. A couple of things. One, after I was working with... Well, what happened, I was working with the Regional Center for Developmentally Disabled, and I was the first black social worker in South Central L.A., and they had just opened up Martin Luther King Hospital, and King Hospital offered us a room. And when we moved there, then they offered me a job as a psychiatric social worker.

And as a psychiatric social worker at King, the head of our psychology department, Dr. James Cannon, realized that we could be trained to be sex therapists, because, you know, this was like 1973, and Masters and Johnson had just published on sex therapy, and UCLA was training people to be sex therapists. So as part of my job, I was trained to be a sex therapist through UCLA, and we opened the largest sex therapy clinic in Southern California for African Americans, because we knew that African Americans would be much more comfortable talking to another African

American than a white person. And I had groups of women to help them achieve orgasm.

Monique M. Hm. Not a bad day's work.

Sylvia R. Not when it works for them.

Monique M. Yeah. And so this move from mental health, which at this point, at this current time still has a stigma, was it also stigmatized in the time period you were working in? Was it seen as a lucrative job offer, a lucrative career path?

Sylvia R. I think I made \$250 a month. [*Laughs.*] No. I wasn't in it for the money. You don't go into social work to get rich, believe me. So does that answer the question or what?

Monique M. Well, I was building to a larger sense of two fields that I don't think are widely talked about. They wouldn't naturally be the "you should be like her" job descriptions because of the stigma associated with both sexuality and as well as with mental health. So were these jobs that you felt—

Sylvia R. Well, there was no stigma with social work, but I will tell you as a black woman, the three jobs that I was told that I was able to access were teacher, secretary, and nurse. And that was better than being a maid or a prostitute or unemployed, welfare. And so when they said you can be a teacher, secretary or nurse, it was presented as if, "Look, the world has opened up to you. Look, you have a choice. You can be any of these

three things.” I didn’t want to be any of those three things. That’s when I realized that social work was something I could do and would want to do, since I couldn’t be a vet. Or a filmmaker, in those days.

Monique M. Yes. So that led you to choose the career in social work, which then led you to this training in sexuality, which led you to be a sex therapist.

Sylvia R. Yeah. And I have to tell you this story, and I told it in our group today. Being raised Seventh-day Adventist, they didn’t talk about sex. It was basically something that happens when you get married, so don’t worry about it, ‘cause if you’re not married you’re not going to do it, and if you get married, then everything’s okay. So I realized that that actually was not a good plan.

And when we were at Oakwood, I really wanted...it wasn’t a driving thing with me, but I thought it would be nice if someone did talk about sex.

And so when my dean said this next Wednesday is going to be a very special worship, no men will be allowed, absolutely, we’re going to talk about something that affects all of us, and it begins with “S,” so I said, oh, finally they’re going to talk about sex, that’s great. So I got to worship and I was ready to hear something. She said, “I’m going to talk about something that affects all of us.” You could see her nodding her head.

And she said, “And it begins with ‘S’ and you know what it is.” And I said, “Yeah.” She said, “Yes, that’s right, sleep.”

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. And that was the big sex talk at Oakwood. So I think that helped propel me to be a sexologist, too, because – *[laughs]* – idiots. Oakwood, they said, for...in psychology – I don't think the Psychology Department would say this, but our religion teacher, because we had to take a lot of religion courses, he said, "Take the D-E devil out of depression and press on."

Monique M. Okay.

Sylvia R. Okay. That was it. That's how you handle depression.

Monique M. Mm. Jesus and a Prozac.

Sylvia R. Mm-hmm.

Monique M. Well, so when you were working within the field of sex therapy, how long did you do that?

Sylvia R. I began the training in 1973 at UCLA, and then we had the clinic, and then about 1978 or 1979...oh, wait. Did I have a clinic? Oh, I had a clinic. I had my own clinic. Oh, god. I was trying to remember which came first, me going to school or getting the clinic. I can't remember, honestly, 'cause they were both at the same time. I had a sex therapy clinic private practice, and I went to... Oh, because the doctor who gave me the office for the sex therapy clinic told me about the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, and then I said, "Oh, man, I can get a doctorate

in this? All right.” You can actually get a doctorate in something you like? Fine. That sounds good.

Monique M. It is pretty cool. And one of the things that I saw on your bio was that at the time you were their first African American student.

Sylvia R. Yes, to get the doctorate in human sexuality.

Monique M. Was that a community that was a welcoming to you? Was it assumed that you were only going to work on black issues and...?

Sylvia R. No, it never came up. There aren't any just black issues in sex except...I mean, that never came up as an issue, not till this very second. No.

Monique M. And so your interest in working in sexuality, where did you see that going? Where were you preparing yourself for?

Sylvia R. Well, I told the Seventh-day Adventists...they had a big meeting of Seventh-day Adventists who had made it called the Black Pearls, and I told them, I said, “Well, being raised Seventh-day Adventist, I thought getting a doctorate in human sexuality was what they meant by going all the way in sex.”

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] And so your plan, you said you got a clinic, and so you were running your clinic. At what point did you start filming the documentary?

Sylvia R. Because I was...the school, the institute, got me into filmmaking because I had to watch a lot of sex films, sex therapy films, and I thought most of

them were really so poorly produced and boring, and I said, “I can do better than this.” So I talked them into having part of my dissertation be a video. And that’s when VHS had come out and we were all excited about this new technology, that you didn’t have to buy a big Panasonic 35 millimeter camera. And I did a documentary on “Women in Love: Bonding Strategies of Black Lesbians,” and it was pretty good. And I just, I got the bug, and I started doing video after video, till I did the big one, “All God’s Children,” with Dr. Dee Mosbacher.

Monique M. I wanted to have on record a conversation, at least, about what you saw the role of the film “All God’s Children” to be. What was your vision for it, and how did it fit into the social justice work you were doing?

Sylvia R. “All God’s Children” was really a lot of fun to produce. I was the co-producer, did a little directing and editing. What was the question again?

Monique M. How did it fit into the span of social justice work you were doing, your vision for how it fit into—

Sylvia R. Oh, my vision is what you’re asking about. Yeah. We wanted...well, actually, Phil Wilson, when I was with the Black Leadership Forum, had said we need a video on...I think he said religion and black people, just to help them with the religion thing. And then in 1995, Dr. Dee Mosbacher and I started doing “All God’s Children,” which was the video that Phil had a vision for. And we knew that we would be able to...well, actually we said if we don’t get any ministers involved, we don’t have it, so the

first ministers we went to said we would gladly be in this. So that opened the door.

And we knew if we were able to get some parents, politicians, preachers on our – say, alliteration – on our side to be affirmative in our orientation, that that would go a long way. Also with the music that we used that I picked out. And it came true because when I started taking it around the country, people would cry and people would say, “Now I can go home for Thanksgiving. Now I can go home for Christmas” to change people’s lives, change their thinking, and to educate them, raise their consciousness.

Monique M. And when you started doing the work of putting together the discussion guide and speaking for the film, what were some of the highlights for you? Did you see it putting together the threads of the work that you’d done in mental health and the work you’d done as a sex therapist and the work you’d done as a religious person?

Sylvia R. Yeah, I was... I would say being a researcher was the most important thing to really do the work on who was LGBT African American in history, which I was able to use for this job for Black History Month, to really dig deep into it and to, you know, try to find things in writing and not hearsay or gossip at all, but really empirical research.

Monique M. Now, one of the things you mentioned was your work with the Leadership Forum, and your bio talks about you being one of the founding members, so how did you all think that through and what was the need it was filling?

Sylvia R. That is totally Phil Wilson's idea. I was brought on pretty soon after it got kind of announced that we were going to have a conference, a convention, a conference. I was brought on at the very first days, first weeks, you know, beginnings of it, but it wasn't my idea. It was totally Phil Wilson. I'm sorry, what was the question?

Monique M. I was asking about sort of being there on the ground level.

Sylvia R. What did it feel like? It felt like we were the—

Monique M. And what need did it fill?

Sylvia R. It filled an empty hole, really, because although there had been an organization before for black LGBT people, it did not continue. So Phil stepped in and said let's start this new one. And it filled a great hole because we've always needed a hopefully national organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered African Americans that was affirming of our lives and our sexuality.

Monique M. And your participation in that, was that also... I'm trying to listen through for the currents of how your faith has worked throughout your positions. Did you bring your faith perspectives and your interest in religion to participation in this Leadership Forum?

Sylvia R. No. [*Laughs.*] Not that I can think of.

Monique M. And so you said that came before the film. So the film started out with an interest in talking about faith and...

Sylvia R. You mean “All God’s Children?”

Monique M. Yes.

Sylvia R. Yeah, that came before “All God’s Children.”

Monique M. Okay, I’m trying to weave a narrative, a timeline for folks. And so the film—

Sylvia R. Well, the black lesbian, gay and lesbian Leadership Forum was in ’88, started in ’88. “All God’s Children” wasn’t till 1995.

Monique M. Okay, that’s helpful. And so your participation and doing research and working with the film, did you see it or hope for it to be a resource that you could use within your faith community? Because I haven’t asked. Do you still consider yourself Seventh-day Adventist?

Sylvia R. Absolutely not. Gladly not. Recovering from them. I’m with Bishop Flunder’s church. I’m with the City of Refuge, which is a Penta-Metha-Baptist.

Monique M. Pentecostal, yeah. [*Laughs.*]

Sylvia R. A very different worship style from Adventist.

Monique M. Yes, yes.

Sylvia R. A whole different world.

Monique M. I've gone once. I went with my best friend.

Sylvia R. In fact, if you got a message from that church that says don't listen to music that causes your foot to tap, then they're saying we've closed the doors of the church.

Monique M. So the break from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, did that happen as an adult? Did that happen after you finished college?

Sylvia R. When I finished college, I went to UCLA, from '69 to '71, and that was part of my coming out process, 'cause I met gay people who were openly gay at UCLA. And I realized that...I had a boyfriend, and he might read this. He's still alive, so I can't say anything, you know, to hurt his feelings, but his vision, his goal, his dream was to find a lesbian and turn her straight. Let's just say that's how that relationship went. Now – [*laughs*] – he did something wrong. So I was coming out of the closet, and...

Monique M. And so the church was one of the things?

Sylvia R. Yeah. When, you know, the first gay parade in L.A. was in 1970, and I was in Sabbath School, and my Sabbath School teacher – I was sitting with my boyfriend at the time – my Sabbath School teacher was so

incensed that gay people would not only appear in the daylight, but admit they were...and admit they were gay, but march about it. So she said, “Look at ‘em marching just like they were real people.” The next year I was at the parade, and the next year I was in the parade. I had left the church. But I didn’t leave it ‘cause it was homophobic, I left it ‘cause it was racist and sexist. The very last sermon that I was involved with with the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a famous black minister. Do you know Wintley Phipps the singer? He sings for presidents and all that.

Monique M. Yeah, the name sounds familiar.

Sylvia R. Yeah, well, he was preaching my last sermon with them, and he said something that was anti-choice. And before that, other ministers would come. It would be a white minister saying something racist, you know, calling us heathens and – by “us” I mean Africans. Heathens, you’re calling me a heathen if you call my brothers and sisters in Africa heathen. And me going off on him, you know. “Don’t you ever come in a black church and use the word...” You know, and just... And then Wintley Phipps comes and says something anti-choice and I go off on him. And when I came home, I said all you’re doing is arguing with the ministers; why don’t you just quit? And I quit. That was my last time. So if I ever see Wintley, I’ll tell him thanks for pushing me out, Wint.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] And when you left, did you search for another Christian faith home?

Sylvia R. No. When you're Adventist, you don't go to other churches, 'cause then it means you have to keep Sunday, and you can't keep Sunday if you had 25 years of keeping the Sabbath. But through "All God's Children" I joined a Sunday church. I joined First AME because Reverend Cecil (Chip) Murray and the staff there treated me well, because you know he's in "All God's Children." And they treated me so well, I said I've got to join this church. And that was fun joining FAME, First AME. So I went there for a while. He and I are still friends.

Monique M. And so as you were making, I guess, the transition out of the church, back into the church, and now into another faith community, what do you think are the religious values that are the overarching themes that you carry? Because I'm interested, and you said something about the doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists still works for you.

Sylvia R. No, the health doctrine.

Monique M. The health doctrine?

Sylvia R. Most of it. I've never eaten pork. I've tasted ham, but I've never eaten pork. Never had a pork chop. I've never had a Coke, I've never had a Pepsi, I've never had a beer. And I don't eat meat. The thing with the Adventists is they didn't want to eat any meat because they didn't feel it's good for you. I don't eat meat now mainly because I don't feel it's good for the animals. They never talked about the animals and what happened to the animals, you know, in their vegetarianism. I just made some

great...I made him some vegetarian tacos. You should have had the tacos I had last week. They were killer! I can make some veggies. I make vegetarian tamale pie, tacos, potatoes.

Monique M. Nice. And so for you is that a religious push as well, seeing the animals as sacred and part of the divine?

Sylvia R. That's a spiritual part, because animals have souls, they have feelings. They have the desire to live. So that's why I'm an animal rescuer. That's part of my identity. My car is my animal rescue car. It's got 250,000 miles on it.

Monique M. Good Lord.

Sylvia R. Yeah.

Monique M. So I want to make sure I've covered...I had a list of questions and I want to make sure I've covered them all. Oh, we haven't gotten to contemporary. So how did you end up with the National Black Justice Coalition?

Sylvia R. Let's see... I was working – first of all, I've been a very...I've been an activist, a gay activist since...well, really since the '70s, since I came out I've been a gay activist. And I worked at the Gay & Lesbian Center, and we got laid off. And then the next job I got was the...they were working on having marriage rights in the state of California, so I got a job as the manager for the California Freedom to Marry Coalition, and so I worked

on statewide marriage rights for California. So that was 2003. Well, in December of 2003, Keith Boykin started the National Black Justice Coalition, so pretty soon after that I became a board member. And then in July of 2005 I was hired as the Director of Religious Affairs.

Monique M. So talk to me about how that job as Director of Religious Affairs connects to your other career interests and builds upon your faith perspective, etc.

Sylvia R. I would say joining Bishop Flunder's church had a lot to do with the faith perspective, and faith anchoring, and faith growth.

Monique M. And does that come out in the leadership work that you do as Director of Religious Affairs?

Sylvia R. Well, I haven't been Director of Religious Affairs for a year now. I'm the Director of Research and Academic Initiatives.

Monique M. Aha.

Sylvia R. Yeah.

Monique M. Okay. So talk to me about that transition.

Sylvia R. Okay. I would almost say that my first identity is that of a writer. And the NBJC needed research and writing, like white papers and a lot of research done, so I transitioned to this position. And I've had it for a year. But I still do the religious work, too. I still go to all the meetings. Like this July 4th will be the tenth anniversary of Bishop Flunder's fellowship

organization, and we're going to have a big, big conference in Las Vegas at their newest and number one hotel. And it's going to be great. We're looking forward to that.

Monique M. And so we have covered, I guess, the span of your career. I want to now offer space for you to talk a little more interpersonally, if you would like, about your social networks, your social relations, how they were formative, sustaining, etc.

Sylvia R. Since what-ing?

Monique M. Sustaining.

Sylvia R. Oh, sustaining. Ask me a specific question, because...

Monique M. Okay. I typically ask about mentors and how you find mentors, and what role mentors serve for you.

Sylvia R. I would put Martin Luther King as my first mentor. Such an example of beautiful excellence and courage, commitment. And can you think of a better mentor than Martin Luther King, Jr.? Dee Mosbacher, Reverend – she's not a reverend – Dr. Dee Mosbacher is somewhat of a mentor. She brought me on for "All God's Children," and of course she is the reason it exists. She's the one who...it was her...you know, she's the number one person. It's her film. I'm just...I was just brought on. I mean, I was co-producer and I did edit it with the editor and did some directing and chose the music. I mean, I made a lot of decisions, but she owns it.

Monique M. Any others that are...?

Sylvia R. Bishop Flunder.

Monique M. Are there any social organizations that you're a part of that offer you solace and bring joy, interest to your life?

Sylvia R. I don't think so. I can't think of any.

Monique M. What about contemporary hobbies? Reading was a hobby as a child. Does that continue to be something that you enjoy?

Sylvia R. Well, I read three papers a day just as a matter...well, I have to read more than that because it's part of my...I do the briefings for NBJC, which means I have to read a lot of – look at a lot of papers from around the world and condense it down to what we think is relevant, and then we put it in the e-digest, so I have to read as part of my job. But even when I didn't have that job I read three... Every day I read the *New York Times*, *L.A. Times* and *Washington Post* and then some other papers if I get my hands on them.

Monique M. Anything else? You make pottery, you garden.

Sylvia R. Oh, you know what? I cook. And I want to be a good cook, or a great cook. I love to cook. I buy cookbooks and...

Monique M. Neat.

Sylvia R. And I rescue animals, remember that.

Monique M. Yes.

Sylvia R. I get up every morning and walk 1.3 miles at the walking park.

Monique M. Ooh. Now, in your, I guess, other activities in life, the things that bring you joy outside of your job, would that include traveling or solitude or what for you?

Sylvia R. Well, I travel a lot, but that's part of the job. But movies, writing. I'm going to be writing my book this year.

Monique M. It's going to be a memoir?

Sylvia R. Well, here's something. A couple of years ago I found out that... Well, when I was growing up my mother always said, you know, our great-grandmother is from Blair House. Do you know Blair House?

Monique M. Huh-uh.

Sylvia R. Okay. There's the White House and across the street is Blair House. It's like the number two famous house in the United States because that's where the President-elect stays right before he's made the President.

Monique M. Oh, okay, yeah.

Sylvia R. And it's where the ambassadors stay when they come to visit. And it was founded by Francis Blair, who was also the founder of the Republican Party. Well, his son Montgomery Blair also lived there, and Montgomery was in Lincoln's cabinet. Montgomery had a slave who he freed and who

became his servant who he also had an affair with. They had a baby. That was my great-grandmother [Matty]. I don't know her last name. I'm trying to find it. Because, you know, it wouldn't be like Matty Blair, because, like, Jefferson's progeny weren't Jefferson. And Washington actually...Deborah Johnson is a direct descendant of George Washington, and they say he didn't have kids, but he did. They all did.

Monique M. Yeah.

Sylvia R. So what happened was, I want to write a book that talks about my own...
Oh, by the way, Montgomery Blair was Dred Scott's lawyer.

Monique M. Mmm.

Sylvia R. Yeah, so there's an amazing history there. So I'm writing a book, and that's going to take a lot of time. Well, you know, time that I'm not working.

Monique M. Yeah.

Sylvia R. And energy.

Monique M. That's really an interesting and new pursuit. Do you see that work leading you outside of the activism sphere, or is this another—

Sylvia R. No, it's part of the activism because it's about a black lesbian activist.
Whose great-great-grandfather founded the Republican Party.

Monique M. Neat.

Sylvia R. My great-great-grandmother babysat Lincoln's kids.

Monique M. Are there any pieces from your own personal life you want to share? Any kids, grandkids, god kids?

Sylvia R. I helped raised five kids with lovers I've had in the past.

Monique M. And what, when you look and you survey your life, are you most proud of today?

Sylvia R. Most proud of? Wow. I guess, you know, Erma Bombeck said when she dies and God said, what did you do with your life, she said, "I want to tell him I used every ounce of talent that he gave me." So I've put every ounce of talent into doing things, activities, writing, producing films, whatever, to help people feel more connected to being a human being. That's nice.

Monique M. Yeah, that's going to be a great quote.

Sylvia R. And I just thought of that just now.

Monique M. And so ultimately where do you find purpose and joy?

Sylvia R. Writing a good paragraph or a good sentence gives me a lot of joy. Putting together words that really connect. Rescuing a dog or cat and saving their life, finding them a home, feeding them.

Monique M. Anything else that you'd like to share on record before we end?

Sylvia R. I don't know if this is for the record. [*Laughs.*] So I won't go there. Doing a good job. Put that down. Being the best friend anyone could ever have. Loyalty. Someone said that courage is fear holding on for one more minute, and I guess it takes a bit of courage to do this. And anti-gay person could off you, you know. I've had my challenges with the opposition.

Monique M. Well, in lieu of anything else you want to go on record, those were my list of questions. I wanted to make sure we covered the big chunks.

Sylvia R. Another thing that gives me joy is that I am somewhat of a religious scholar. I'm not a Biblical scholar 'cause I don't know Hebrew and Greek, but I would say religious scholar, and that I, after "All God's Children," immersed myself in religious studies. And being able to go to anybody who's a, you know, anybody who thinks they can use the Bible to hurt gay people, to be able to run circles around them. [*Laughs.*]

There's another thing I'd like to mention. Otis Gaddis is a brilliant Yale seminarian who wrote a booklet called "Higher Ground." He did most of the writing, but I wrote some of it. It was my idea, and I brought him on to write it. And we now – Bishop Flunder uses it as an educational...as curriculum in seminaries. That was something big. And then, of course, "All God's Children," too.

Monique M. Yeah.

Sylvia R. So I think my documentaries – I’ve done others – have touched people’s lives. I think my writing does. My humor. Oh, I’m funny. I do standup comedy. I’ve done it. I don’t do it. I’ve done it.

Monique M. Very cool.

Sylvia R. I’m very funny. Huh, Terrence, huh?

Terrence. She’s a riot.

Sylvia R. I’m hilarious. [*Laughs.*] I have a list of 20 jokes that I tell people.

Monique M. That is very cool, and very brave. They say standup comedy is one of the hardest things to actually pull off.

Sylvia R. Yeah, I only did it...I did it once. But it’s because you have to sit through all the sexist jokes before. You know, the men will come up and, “And then I told that,” you know they’re sort of... But anyway, I’ve done it, and... Oh, I may, I’m considering, honestly, doing my own comedy show.

Monique M. That would be awesome.

Sylvia R. Yeah.

Monique M. We’d buy tickets.

Sylvia R. If I have the energy. ‘Cause I can see it. Did you see Carrie Fisher’s show on HBO?

Monique M. A segment of it.

Sylvia R. It would be patterned after that.

Monique M. A segment of it. I came in on it late, so I never caught it from the beginning. Flipping channels one night. That would be pretty cool.
Wow. Well, that fills out the gaps somewhat more.

Sylvia R. Yeah, I do some things besides that.

Monique M. Yeah, you were looking like you work mighty hard there. I was like, oh, dear.

Sylvia R. [*Laughs.*] I don't have much of a social life now except this. This is my social life.

Monique M. Well, I think I'll pause us and say thank you on record for your time and for your story and for sharing with us. And I thank you yet again for the LGBTRAN network. I'm going to stop.

[*End of recording.*]