Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, 1996

Photo by Julian C.R. Okwu
Interview History

Jewelle Taylor Gibbs started as assistant professor at the University of California School of Social Welfare in 1979, became an associate professor in 1983, a full professor in 1986, and was appointed to the endowed chair as Zellerbach Family Fund Professor of Social Policy, Community Change and Practice in 1993, a position she held until her retirement in 2000. During these years Professor Gibbs wrote influential articles and books on a wide range of topics including minority mental health, young black men in America, and the O.J. Simpson and Rodney King cases; she was a visiting scholar in the United States and abroad; and she mentored a generation of students and faculty. She received the highest academic honor at the University of California, the Berkeley Citation, and testified before Congress. Professor Gibbs had returned to graduate school when her sons were in high school; her life has followed a trajectory instructive and inspirational for women who raise their families and occupy careers which impact the public sphere in significant ways.

Our interview sessions took place in the living room of the home she shares with her husband James Gibbs, former Martin Luther King, Jr. Centennial Professor of anthropology at Stanford University. We started each meeting with a visit, and always shared tea, hot or cold depending on the season, and a delicious assortment of cookies.

There are seventeen interviews in all. Interview one was misplaced and never recovered, and so Professor Gibbs reconstructed it based on what we knew was left out of the subsequent interviews. Our meetings were almost always in the morning, lasting two hours or a little longer. Professor Gibbs carefully reviewed the transcript and made corrections. [Editor’s note: Upon reviewing the oral history, Professor Gibbs added three written inserts to the interview in addition to a reconstruction of the first lost session. These were submitted to the Regional Oral History Office in July of 2007. The first can be found in interview six; the second is in interview nine and replaces a gap in the transcript; and the third consists of a life update or epilogue which is appended at the end of the oral history.] Interviews one through eight were recorded on tape, and the remaining interviews were recorded on minidisc. Nadine Wilmot, project manager of the African American Faculty and Diversity Project at the Regional Oral History Office, was present for interview fifteen, which was videotaped in addition to being recorded on minidisc.

I spoke with some of Professor Gibbs’ colleagues and family members in preparation for these interviews, including: Carol Bowman, Sara Boyd, Russell Ellis, James Gibbs, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Mary Ann Mason, Joseph Merighi, Edward Nathan, Kurt Organista, Charlotte Siegel, Paul Terrell, and Rhona Weinstein. For family background, I read the books referred to in the interview, The Sweeter the Juice and Finding Grace, by Shirlee Taylor Haizlip.

Jewelle Taylor Gibbs was interviewed as part of the African American Faculty and Senior Staff Oral History Project series. This series of interviews explores the experiences of African American faculty and senior staff at UC Berkeley as part of the broader history of the University of California and its commitment to access and diversity.

This series is grounded in the premise that higher education is one of the primary strategies for gaining social equality – access to employment and income – for historically disadvantaged communities. Moreover, the University, comprised of its students and faculty and administration,
with all of its intellectual and financial resources operates as a critical touchstone in processes of systemic social change. Therefore the university functions not simply as an educational institution, but also as a significant site of past, present, and future potential for imagining and crafting opportunity for ethnic and racial groups formerly excluded from higher education. This project recognizes that the University of California, as California’s premier public educational institution, plays a significant role in the socio-economic mobility of all of California’s residents. The story that we hope will emerge from this project is a story of California – its people and one of its most important public institutions.

This interview was conducted under the auspices of the Regional Oral History Office. The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through recorded oral memoirs the Library’s materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in the Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Leah McGarrigle
October, 2006
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McGarrigle: What are your earliest memories of growing up in Connecticut?

Gibbs: I spent the first five years of my life in Stratford, Connecticut, a small picturesque town bordering on Bridgeport, the industrial hub of Southern Connecticut. My parents, Julian Augustus Taylor and Margaret Pauline Morris, had married in January of 1933 and migrated North from Washington, D.C. for my father to assume the position as pastor of the First Baptist Church, a modest white-washed wooden church with a small congregation of New England colored people, as we were then called.

McGarrigle: How did your parents adjust to such a major move?

Gibbs: Well, of course I wasn’t yet born, but they sometimes talked about it later. I think my father was very happy to have his own church, after several years as the Assistant Pastor at his father’s large Baptist church in Washington. I think my mother was ambivalent about the move from the cosmopolitan District of Columbia, where middle-class blacks enjoyed a thriving social and cultural life, to the distant landscape of New England, well-known for its inhospitable climate and reserved citizens. On the other hand, they both were eager to find a neutral place where they could begin their married life together, unencumbered by the competing demands from my father’s first wife and two daughters and from their two extended families.

By the time I was born on November 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was in the first year of his presidency, the nation was emerging from the Great Depression, and my mother had turned our small gray and white shingled cottage on Stratford Avenue into a warm and cozy home. My earliest memories of Stratford center around my family, the church, and the beach on Long Island Sound.

McGarrigle: Can you describe some of those early memories?

Gibbs: My mother was very involved in church activities but she did not work outside the home. Fortunately, she had come into a small inheritance shortly after I was born, which supplemented my father’s modest income and enabled them to buy a late-model Studebaker car and enjoy some luxuries that were virtually rare among their friends and parishioners. She was a very loving and attentive mother, still barely an adult at age 21, so she spent hours playing with me, reading to me, and teaching me rhymes, my numbers and colors. By the time I was two years old, according to my older half sisters, I could recite the alphabet, identify colors, read simple words, and dress myself, albeit sometimes putting my clothes on backwards. Undoubtedly, as the first child of my father’s second marriage, I was spoiled by my mother and my two older half-sisters, yet I often think that this early attention and praise for precocious
behavior gave me a sense of security and a sense of self esteem that provided an important foundation for my later development.

McGarrigle: Did you have any younger brothers and sisters?

Gibbs: In 1935, I was joined by a younger brother, Julian, Jr., who satisfied my father’s yearning for a son. Two years later, in 1937, our family expanded again with the birth of my sister Shirley Ann Morris, a pretty baby who was said to resemble my paternal grandmother. My mother had her hands full with three children under six, so she welcomed the addition of a foster daughter, Margaret Gomez, to help with childcare and household chores. Margaret, who was 12 when she joined our family, was a lively, good humored girl who blended in seamlessly with our growing family.

McGarrigle: What was growing up in a big family like for you?

Gibbs: In the summers when my two half-sisters from my Father’s first marriage came up from Washington to stay with us, the house was very crowded, but the three teenagers provided us with endless entertainment, internecine squabbles, and social intrigue. On those long sultry New England days, they would take us younger siblings to play at the end of the road where Long Island Sound formed a small inlet with a rocky beach. We would watch the sailboats and the fishermen for hours, playing barefoot in the sand until it was time to go home for lunch or dinner. Sometimes we would catch crayfish that swam into the brook running though our backyard, or pick green apples from the tree for my mother to bake a pie. On the weekends we would sometimes have picnics with my godparents, Richard and Matiel Robinson, who lived next door, or spend an afternoon at Pleasure Beach enjoying the rides and the allure of the boardwalk.

In my memory, it was an idyllic childhood, unblemished by family conflict, economic insecurity, or racial prejudice. Yet the reality was probably far more nuanced, as my mother and older siblings sometimes would later recall, but we younger children were carefully shielded from conflicts within the home and protected against prejudice outside the home.

McGarrigle: How long did your family live in Stratford?

Gibbs: In 1938 when I was five years old, our family moved 20 miles away from suburban Stratford to industrial Ansonia, located in the Naugatuck Valley, only 11 miles from New Haven. My father had accepted a position as pastor of the Macedonia Baptist Church, a church with a larger congregation of predominantly Southern blacks who had been recruited to work in the steel mills in Ansonia. Although my mother was reluctant to leave her comfortable cottage and circle of friends in Stratford, she realized that this church offered a better opportunity for my father to provide security for his family and to develop his skills as a community leader.
McGarrigle: How did your parents feel about moving to Ansonia?

Gibbs: My parents faced their first obstacle in locating a decent house for an African American family of six in Ansonia, so for a few months they rented an apartment in Shelton, a neighboring small town. The church trustees had promised my father a parsonage for the family, but we first had to rent a lovely old wood frame house in one of the city’s all white “better neighborhoods.”

Soon after I started kindergarten at Lincoln Elementary School that Fall, the teacher called my mother to ask her who had taught me to read. Of course, as my mother explained, I had simply absorbed the nursery rhymes, fairy tales and bible stories that I was exposed to and had spontaneously taught myself to read.

It wasn’t long before the teachers in kindergarten and first grade learned that I could not only read, but that I also liked to talk, often in class. My first grade teacher learned quickly how to focus my attention and channel my energy by letting me help with the slow readers. It gave me such pleasure to be praised by the teacher and admired by my less literate classmates, that I often wonder if that early reinforcement laid the foundation for my ultimate career as a college educator.

After nearly three years in our large house with it spacious front porch and an elm tree with a swing, the owner decided to reclaim it for his married son and we were uprooted again.

McGarrigle: Where did your family move then?

Gibbs: Our family then moved to Waterbury, Connecticut, about seventeen miles from Ansonia, for a temporary rental of an apartment over a funeral home owned by their close friends, Mack and Sara Keyes. By 1940 the country was gearing up to its defense against the war festering in Europe, so there was a housing shortage in the Naugatuck Valley, where the steel mills were working overtime and workers were pouring in from the South and Eastern Europe. The apartment in Waterbury was small, so my younger siblings and I often went downstairs after school and on weekends to check out what was happening. Macabre as it may seem, we used to play hide-and-seek around the caskets, but we were not allowed in the basement where the bodies were embalmed and prepared for viewing. The experience certainly cured me of any fear of death or dead people, but I would not necessarily recommend it as a playground. Since then I have never enjoyed the scent of gardenias because it always evokes a memory of corpses silently waiting to be displayed for the viewing of families, friends, and curious strangers.

McGarrigle: How long did your family live in that apartment?
Gibbs: After months of searching, my parents finally found a second-floor apartment in a two-story house owned by an Italian family on Long Hill Road in a section of Waterbury dominated by second-generation Irish, Italian, and Polish-Catholic families. I was enrolled at the Woodrow Wilson Elementary School a few blocks away from our apartment, but was surprised to see that I was one of the few black students in the entire student body. As an African American Protestant family, we were a rare species, yet we got along well with most of our neighbors and ignored the few who seemed hostile. My mother became great friends with Mrs. Amato, our landlady, and her daughter Connie, who taught her how to make genuine Sicilian style Italian spaghetti with meat sauce. They often teased my mother about looking like an Italian with her black wavy hair, her creamy skin, and her slightly hooked nose, little knowing that her maternal grandfather was reputed to be Italian, although his actual origins remain a mystery in our family to this day.

McGarrigle: What do you remember about your years in Waterbury?

Gibbs: Shortly after I celebrated my eighth birthday, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and catapulted the country into World War II. I can still remember the traumatic events of that Sunday, December 7, 1941. We had just returned from church and my father was in the bathroom, listening to the radio, while my mother was in the kitchen preparing an early dinner. He rushed out of the bathroom and yelled, “Margaret, the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.” Because my father was usually restrained and rarely raised his voice unless he was very angry, we knew that this was very important news and soon learned that the United States had declared war on Japan and Germany.

McGarrigle: What else do you remember about World War II?

Gibbs: I remember that the next few months sped by in a mixture of panic and patriotic fervor as the country geared up for war. My father, who had a part-time job during the week as a youth worker at the Waterbury YMCA, volunteered to be a local air raid warden. I still have a vivid memory of him donning his special white helmet and jacket with a flashlight to patrol our neighborhood during the weekly air raid drills that were held on the East Coast. I also remember, that as food shortages increased, so many of my father’s parishioners with smaller families selflessly shared their meat rations with us because my mother was pregnant again and they wanted to assure that she had sufficient food to eat. My youngest sister Patricia Rose was born in June 1942, named after her maternal grandmother Rose. She was a beautiful baby with glowing pink cheeks and sparkling black eyes, a mirror image of my mother as a child. Our family was now complete and my father increased the pressure on the church trustees to buy us that long-promised parsonage.

McGarrigle: What else do you remember about your years in Waterbury?
Gibbs: Later that same summer I was roller skating on a steep hill with my best friends, Lorraine Robillard, whose father owned a moving business, but we didn’t skate fast enough to get out of the way of a large truck with faulty brakes that came careening down the hill as we neared the bottom. Both of us were hit by the truck and ended up in St. Mary’s Hospital, I with a broken leg and a hernia and Lorraine with a head injury. My most enduring memory of my hospital stay is how much I enjoyed having so much exclusive attention from my parents, who came to visit me daily and showered me with affection and gifts.

Eventually, my father sued the owner of the truck and with the proceeds purchased a new beautiful Baldwin spinet piano for the family. I always claimed ownership of the piano because it was paid for with the insurance from my accident; unfortunately, I never benefited much from the six years of piano lessons that followed. Despite regular practice sessions and weekly lessons, I never exhibited any real talent as a pianist, always playing with too little feeling and too much fortissimo. Sadly, I had not inherited the musical talents of my father and his four brothers, who had once toured the South as the Taylor Brothers Quintet, entertaining audiences with spirituals and semi-classical tunes.

McGarrigle: How did your accident affect your schoolwork?

Gibbs: My accident really set me back in school, as I missed the first few weeks of fourth grade while my leg healed. When I received my first report card just before Halloween, I was not too surprised to see a C- in arithmetic, but my parents were not amused. From the first grade I had always been one of the top students in my class, and my parents were very proud of my stellar grades. True to form, my father pursed his lips, raised his right eyebrow, and said “Young lady, do you care to explain this C-?” After stuttering and stammering for several minutes, I finally said I didn’t like math and I thought the teacher didn’t like me. He gave me a withering look and replied, “Education is not a popularity contest. It doesn’t matter whether you like math or whether the teacher likes you and you like the teacher. Your education is your responsibility and we expect you to do your best in every subject because we expect you to go to college. I will expect a higher grade in arithmetic on your next report card and I will not accept any more excuses.”

At the tender age of nine that was a memorable conversation with my father, who was usually a man of few words. It reinforced my parents’ very high educational expectations for us, which they conveyed in many direct and indirect ways. We were all taught to read early, stories about the achievements of our paternal grandfather and uncles and our maternal cousins were frequently repeated, heroes of black history were extolled as role models, and object lessons about the adverse consequences of dropping out of school were often noted.
McGarrigle: How long did your family live in Waterbury?

Gibbs: We lived in Waterbury about three years. The church trustees finally found a parsonage they could afford, a white Cape Cod style house located on the West bank of the Naugatuck River, directly across the street from the church on Clifton Avenue in Ansonia. The ten-room house was large enough for our family of seven with a living room, dining room, large kitchen, five bedrooms, a separate study for my father, but only one bathroom. This caused a traffic jam on Sunday mornings when we were all rushing to get ready for church, not to mention frequent sparring over “first dibs” when we reached the vain stage of adolescence.

McGarrigle: How did you adjust to the move back to Ansonia?

Gibbs: Ansonia was a small New England mill town, divided geographically by the Naugatuck River, into the East side where the two large steel mills and major business district were located, and the West side where the high school and hospital were located. When we moved back there in 1938, the population was about 18,000 and rapidly increasing with an influx of Southern blacks and Eastern Europeans recruited to work in the steel mills as the nation geared up for a looming threat of war. It was a multi-ethnic community of Yankee Protestants, Blacks, Italians, Irish, Polish, Russian, a small Jewish community, and a small group of Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands. While all of these groups got along well on the surface, they each tended to congregate in their own neighborhoods, attend their own churches, and look out for their own political interests.

McGarrigle: Tell me about your elementary school years in Ansonia.

Gibbs: By the time I entered fifth grade at the M.E. Willis School, a six-block uphill walk from our new home, I had a very clear set of expectations from my parents. As the eldest child, I knew I was expected to excel in school and to set a high standard for my younger siblings. No more Cs would be tolerated. So I settled down and soon was earning all As and Bs, with my strongest grades in English and spelling.

During the summer of 1944, after I had completed the fifth grade with flying colors, I had my first direct lesson in racial injustice, when James Thomas, a young man in my father’s church was accused of raping a white girl in spite of his denial that the sex was consensual. His parents called my father for a referral to a lawyer and they both believed James’ story. The case provided the perfect opportunity for my father and a few other community leaders to organize a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] in Ansonia, where the longstanding patterns of discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations were becoming less and less acceptable after World War II. The NAACP consulted
with its national office and imported a lawyer from New York City, who won the case and exonerated the young man.

McGarrigle: How did that case affect you at the time?

Gibbs: I remember the excitement of that year as my parents were very involved in building up the new chapter of the NAACP with frequent meetings at our home, nightly discussions about strategy at the dinner table, and my growing awareness about racial discrimination and social injustice throughout the nation.

Within a year after the case, I turned twelve and I convinced my father to establish a youth branch of the NAACP. That gave me a major outlet for my energy, making an early commitment to work for equal justice for minorities.

In the sixth grade I had so much pre-adolescent energy that I joined the junior choir at our church and, later that year, joined the newly formed Girl Scouts troop sponsored by our church. I was very competitive and liked to be in charge, so I channeled my boundless energy into assisting the choir director and earning as many Scouting badges as I could.

McGarrigle: Was that about the time World War II ended?

Gibbs: Yes, on April 12, 1945, as the Allied Forces seemed to be on the verge of victory, President Roosevelt died suddenly at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia. My parents were visibly upset, for Roosevelt’s New Deal had created more opportunities for blacks since the Emancipation Proclamation.

He was an icon in the black community and his progressive economic and social policies were the reason so many had switched to the Democratic Party. The news of his death was the first time I had ever seen my father cry, and it affected me deeply.

Less than a month later, on May 8, 1945, the Germans surrendered and my parents were joyfully celebrating V-E Day in the streets of Ansonia, surrounded by people dancing in the streets, honking their horns, and kissing perfect strangers. On the brink of adolescence, it made me aware of how quickly fortunes can change and lives can be altered forever.

McGarrigle: Did you have any other experiences in elementary school that affected you deeply?

Gibbs: One of the most traumatic memories of my childhood occurred during the following summer of 1946, just after I finished the seventh grade. For its annual Sunday School picnic, our church had selected a Schuetzen Park in Seymour, a new site with a small lake surrounded by gently wooded slopes. Like many black girls of my era, I had not learned to swim partly due to the lack of opportunities and partly due to worries over drying my shoulder length
coarse hair. (That was long before the “Afro” natural look was popular.) Just before lunch was to be served, I wandered down to the lake to watch the older kids swim and two teenage girls taunted me to join them in the water. Just as I was gingerly wading into the water, Rosalie Carey, one of the girls, began to struggle and scream for help. At first I thought she was kidding, but then her friend began to scream for help also. I ran back to the picnic area to get my father and Thomas McDuffie, the Sunday School Superintendent, who followed me down the hill to the lake where both the girls were struggling, barely able to keep their heads above the water. Thom jumped in the water, fully clothed and tried to rescue Rosalie while the other girl managed to pull herself away from danger. As more and more church members gathered on the shore and we all looked on horrified, Thom and Rosalie disappeared in a dark whirlpool beneath the surface of the water.

Someone had called the local fire department, but by the time they arrived, both of them were dead and everyone was in a state of shock. We later learned that Thom McDuffie, one of the most well educated and popular back men in our church and community, did not know how to swim, but had risked his life to help two young women in danger. As a witness to the accident, I was numb for weeks and didn’t want to go near the water for the rest of the summer. Although I never got over my fear of deep water, I finally learned to swim out of necessity when I went to college.

McGarrigle: What are your recollections of your junior high school years?

Gibbs: By the time I entered junior high school, I had established myself as one of the top students in our elementary school. The transition to eighth grade, the first year of junior high school, was very exciting because it was housed in Ansonia High School, the city’s one academic high school. We eighth graders felt very grown up going to school with the teenagers in their circle skirts, penny loafers and sweater sets. Again my parents encouraged me to take the most rigorous academic program and to become involved in extracurricular activities. I was fortunate to have college-educated parents who understood the tracking that subtly discriminated against poor white and minority students, channeling them to the “general courses,” business, or trade classes in high school. That pattern meant that I was one of few blacks in the college prep courses in both junior and senior high school.

McGarrigle: What were some of the highlights of your junior high school years?

Gibbs: One of the highlights of the eighth grade was the spring production of the school operetta, for which students had to audition. Since I was a soprano soloist in my church’s junior choir, I knew I had a strong voice, could read music well, and liked to perform before a live audience. Much to my surprise and dismay, I was not selected for the opera, The Gypsy Rover, so I went home in despair and complained to my parents that the audition had not been fair, especially because none of the black students had been selected.
Although my mother tried to comfort me, my father responded quite differently. He told me to return to school the next day and appeal to the music director on the basis of my singing ability. It was clear he wanted me to stand up for myself, but would back me up if necessary. Instead of following his advice, I complained to Miss Lane, my favorite English teacher, who knew I had a dramatic flair from my class presentations. She immediately promised to talk to the music director and to “take care of the situation.” By the end of that day, I had been selected for the chorus of the operetta, and another name had also been added to the list—Howard Tinney, a handsome black classmate who lived across the street from our family. Howard would be my partner. (In those days there was no concept of “non-traditional casting.”) We shared a secret joke that we added some much needed authentic color to the chorus of gypsies.

McGarrigle: What impact did that incident have on you?

Gibbs: That incident was also the first time I learned the importance of confronting discrimination, challenging the status quo and standing up for your rights. By doing so, Howard and I broke generations of tradition that only white students were eligible to perform in the Ansonia Junior High operetta. It was a very powerful lesson – a “teachable moment” that reinforced my father’s constant messages about the importance for standing up for your principles, of insisting on equal treatment, and of preserving your personal dignity.

McGarrigle: How did the rest of that eighth grade year turn out for you?

Gibbs: I graduated from eighth grade in June 1947, at the age of thirteen and a half, marking the end of elementary school, but not yet the major transition to high school. Ninth grade was considered the second year of junior high school, yet we considered ourselves high school freshmen, even though our classes were held in the afternoon at the high school. In retrospect it may have been a very wise decision to delay the formal entry into high school until our brains began to catch up with our raging hormones. At the graduation ceremony I was awarded the History Prize and was the runner-up for the English Prize, to the great delight of my parents. When I joined them after the ceremony, I could sense their pride and joy in my accomplishments and I realized, perhaps for the first time, how important it was for them for their children to excel, partly to counter the negative stereotypes about black intelligence, and partly to serve as examples to the other black youth in the community. This was the double burden that I was to carry for the rest of my life—being a successful symbol to whites and an exemplary role model to blacks.

McGarrigle: How did you and your family celebrate your graduation from eighth grade?

Gibbs: My parents had promised me a special surprise for graduation, so I was delighted when they told me that their gift was a two-week stay at Camp Atwater, a privileged haven for middle-class black teens near Springfield,
Massachusetts. Those two weeks were my first extended stay away from home, and also my first sustained experience with dozens of black girls from the East and South who came from similar backgrounds. I was amazed to meet so many competent and confident young black women, who were optimistic and enthusiastic about the future. The older girls seemed very sophisticated as they talked about their travels, their plans for college, their career goals, and their cool boyfriends. During my two summers at Camp Atwater, I found my first group of simpatico peers and forged some social bonds that would last all my adult life.

McGarrigle: How was your last year in junior high school?

Gibbs: Ninth grade was a continuation of eighth grade in my academic and extra curricular activities. I joined the staff of the school newspaper, *The Observer*, as a class columnist and discovered I had a knack for writing. Ironically enough, the music director in ninth grade selected *Huldah of Holland* as the operetta, featuring dancers wearing blonde wigs and wooden clogs. Howard Tinney and I paired up again, this time even more self-conscious as the only black couple in the chorus. We would share a lifetime of laughter over wearing our yellow wigs and dancing in clogs as the only two students of color in the operetta.

Little did I know that my exuberant performance in this school production was seen by a staff member of the Southbury Playhouse, a summer theater about 25 miles away in southwestern Connecticut. About two months later, the principal of the high school contacted my father and arranged for me to audition for a play for the summer season at the Playhouse. My father drove me to the audition and I was almost giddy with anticipation, fantasizing about a glamorous career in show business. When we arrived, the director seemed surprised that I was so young because I was auditioning for the role of Rheba, the sassy maid in Hart and Kaufman’s classic play *You Can’t Take it With You*. I quickly asserted myself and asked the director to let me read for the part, and if he thought I could handle it, they could make me up to look older. He agreed and I got the role. It was the first time I talked myself into a coveted opportunity, but it would not be the last. I had learned another important lesson about speaking up for what I wanted, despite doubters and obstacles.

McGarrigle: What kinds of things did you do with your family when you were a teenager?

Gibbs: In the Fall of 1947 I turned fourteen and discovered boys. Although my parents did not allow me to have formal dates, they did approve of occasional movies with boys from the church, who had to face my father on Sunday mornings. However, they wanted to assure that I met some “eligible boys,” defined as those from other black professional families. (This was the era before interracial dating was tolerated.) Thus began our odyssey to meet other middle-class teens in the surrounding larger cities of New Haven, Bridgeport,
and Waterbury. Fortunately my parents had some longstanding ties with other black families in these cities through church, social, and civic organizations, so there was a mutual understanding that their children should socialize as well. Parents chauffeured us to weekend and holiday parties, summer picnics, and cultural events during our adolescent years.

My parents were particularly keen on introducing their children to cultural activities available in New Haven, a magnet for pre-Broadway shows at the Schubert Theater, and concerts and lectures at Yale University from the leading intellectuals and politicians of the era. I remember seeing great singers like Paul Robeson and Marion Anderson, meeting famous politicians like Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, and hearing inspiring civil rights leaders like Roy Wilkins and Walter White. All throughout my high school years, my parents sacrificed many of their weekends to expose us to the wider world outside of our small town—the world of the arts, theater, and politics that they felt was an essential component of preparing us for college.

During the summer of 1948, just before I entered tenth grade, my father received another call from the Southbury Playhouse, this time from the director himself, asking if I would be interested in auditioning for another play. What a boost for my adolescent ego and a source of summer income just as I was getting interested in stockings and makeup! This time the Director greeted me warmly and joked that I looked so grownup that I wouldn’t need much makeup to play the part of Gertrude, the witty maid in “Here Today,” a period comedy. Reprising his role as chauffeur and agent, my father drove me down to Southbury for two more weeks of rehearsal and two weeks of the production, which brought a second set of favorable reviews in my hometown newspaper. Even though my parents strongly dissuaded me from pursuing a theatrical career, those two experiences in summer stock gave me an intimate exposure to the world of theatre, and developed my confidence in public speaking and entertaining an audience.

McGarrigle: What do you recall about your father’s personal philosophy and his ministry?

Gibbs: As the senior pastor of a Baptist church, my father prized his independence and autonomy to plan the worship service, to establish policies and procedures, and to set priorities without the interference or oversight of a church hierarchy. He believed that the black church had an important traditional mission to serve all the needs of the congregation—spiritual, social and moral—so he viewed the church almost like a social agency that would address the economic, educational, and political issues impacting on blacks. He was a strong advocate of higher education for black youth, home ownership for black families, and political empowerment for black communities. He worked tirelessly to break down racial barriers in the community and throughout the state, and he frequently sacrificed time with family and friends to participate in meetings and conferences about civil rights and economic issues.
My father was an early proponent of the church as a community center, so he convinced the church elders to sponsor a range of activities for youth, including troops for boy scouts and girl scouts, black history classes, adult literacy classes, and voter education sessions. The church had an active chapter of the Baptist Young People’s Training Union that focused on leadership training for young adults and sponsored annual regional and national conferences where members enjoyed networking with other black young adults. All of these activities were part of his broader goal of motivating the youth in the church to achieve in school and prepare themselves for college.

During nearly half a century at Macedonia Baptist Church, my father wore many hats and played many roles with his congregation—preacher, social worker, teacher, marriage counselor, legal adviser, business consultant, and political advocate. He was not only a great role model for the young people in the church, he was also a primary source of inspiration and motivation for me and all of his other children.

McGarrigle: How was it for you growing up as a “preacher’s kid?”

Gibbs: It was a mixed blessing. In some ways I had a privileged position as the daughter of the most visible black minister and community leader in our small town. My father had founded the NAACP, had the largest black church, negotiated with the YMCA to integrate their swimming pool, pressured the downtown merchants to hire black salesgirls, et cetera, so he was very well-known and highly respected. But it was a catch-22 situation for his children. We always felt as if we were under a microscope and felt enormous pressures to be good students, perfectly polite teenagers, and to avoid doing anything that would embarrass our parents. On the whole, I think I was protected against the more overt forms of racism in our town and I undoubtedly had many opportunities, because of my family’s status in the community, that the average black child didn’t have in those days.

McGarrigle: What values did you learn from your parents?

Gibbs: My parents taught us the values of education, hard work, honesty and integrity. My father always stressed the importance of standing up for your principles and living by the Golden Rule: to treat others as you would want to be treated. My mother taught us about being kind and generous to people who were less fortunate, and to treat everyone with tolerance, no matter what their race, religion or social class might be. They both taught us by example to give back to the community and to always be proud of ourselves, our family heritage, and our race.

McGarrigle: How did you parents instill that pride in family heritage and race in you?
Gibbs: At the dinner table and on our Sunday afternoon trips to my father’s other church in Norwich, Connecticut, where he was a “temporary pastor” for nearly twenty years, he would regale us with tales of his family’s adventures and achievements. He was very proud of his father, the Reverend William Andrew Taylor, who had graduated from college in 1896, and later founded Florida Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. before World War I. He particularly enjoyed bragging about his three older brothers, who were all successful in their fields: my Uncle Bill, a dentist and property owner in Washington; my Uncle Clinton, founder and Chair of the Art Department at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University; and my Uncle Robert, the editor of the Washington edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the major black-oriented newspapers on the East Coast. His youngest brother Percy, an excellent musician, was considered the failure in the family because he had never been able to capitalize on his musical talent, yet his nieces and nephews considered him the most unpretentious and fun-loving of the group.

While my father often entertained us with family stories, my mother rarely talked about her family and, when she did, it was often with a tinge of bitterness. On our annual family pilgrimage to visit our relatives in Washington, we always enjoyed seeing out Taylor relatives, who were warm, outgoing, and informal. But we had a sense of discomfort around my mother’s aunt and her three cousins, who were more reserved, more distant, and more formal. My father always felt that my mother’s paternal Aunt Mamie was always slightly condescending, never letting him forget that she had opposed their marriage. We always sensed that there were family secrets that we couldn’t discuss and family dynamics that we couldn’t understand, all related to my mother’s missing father and her four older siblings.

McGarrigle: What happened to your mother’s family? How did they go missing?

Gibbs: Both of my mother’s parents were racially mixed, with very fair skin and “straight” hair, assets that were highly valued in her family. My maternal grandmother was of mixed white, black and American Indian parentage; her father was reputed to be Italian. My maternal grandfather was the son of an Irish immigrant mother and a mulatto father, whose own father was the son of a Scottish-English judge and a mulatto slave. My maternal grandparents had six children, all of whom could “pass for white.” My mother’s father had a drinking problem and had trouble supporting his large family. When my mother was four years old, her mother died of cancer and her father essentially abandoned his family. He turned the older children over to his mother and the two younger children to their maternal cousins. It was a very fateful decision, because his Irish mother decided to board the older children with white families to be raised as “whites,” while my mother and her younger brother were reared with her their deceased mother’s “colored” relatives, thus they grew up as “blacks,” dividing the family in two separate worlds in the same city.
My mother’s abandonment by her father, Aunt Mamie’s younger brother, was so traumatic and painful for her to recount that we never learned the full story until we were young adults. We always sensed that holidays were difficult for my mother, especially Christmas, when she always seemed a little sad and withdrawn in the midst of our raucous family celebrations. It took years for my sister and I to piece together the details and the chronology and nearly a lifetime to try to comprehend my mother’s loss.

McGarrigle: I think this is a good place to stop for today. We’ll continue on this topic about your family the next time we meet.

[end of session]
Interview 2: November 7, 2002

[begin tape 1A]

McGarrigle: So let’s see how it’s picking up your voice.

Gibbs: Okay, I’m Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, and today is November 7, 2002.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: Well, I was going to say, in 1976 my husband and I went to Washington, D.C., for a sabbatical, and at that time, my mother’s first cousins were alive. She had three first cousins, who had known about this, kind of, conspiracy of some of the people in the family passing for white. They had been in contact, through their mothers, with—Ruth Morris Jones was their mother’s sister, so they knew where she was, and they had [inaudible] made contact.

I think at that point, as they were getting older, they were beginning to feel somewhat guilty about my mother being excluded from all this information. And so they began to tell me things, in that year, in 1976—I was, of course, quite a grown woman with children, who were teenagers—about my own family.

One of the things that they showed me was this picture of my Aunt Ruth [Morris Jones]. [shows photograph] And they told me that it had been taken in Chicago, when they lived there as bride and groom [John Tazewell Jones] in 1916 and 1917, and that it had hung at the Chicago Art Institute. And so I asked my cousin—you see, it’s a huge oil portrait, it’s beautiful—could I take a picture of it, because obviously there was only one oil portrait, and it was owned by my cousin Ruth, who was named after this Aunt Ruth.

She said yes, I could. “I don’t think it’ll ruin it. I’ll just take a picture of the portrait.” And I said, someday I’m going to go check it out, learn about when it hung at the Chicago Art Institute, what were the circumstances, and so forth. Well, I’ve had that picture since 1977. I got it in the spring of 1977.

And also I learned more about the family who was passing for white. Some details, not enough so that I could have gone to find them, but some details that really—I guess I would have to say that it created a great desire on my part to learn more about them. And so all these years I’ve had the picture. That picture’s on the wall.

When I went to Chicago last month, I said, you know, all these years I have wanted to find out about this picture. To see if they could give me just the name of the artist, I called before I left, and I told them that I wondered if they had archives that I could look in, that I had this portrait that I had been told
hung in the Chicago Art Institute, and I would like to know if I could find the artist.

They said, “We really don’t have that kind of service,” the lady told me, and she was very discouraging. She thought that I really wanted this for commercial reasons, and I said, “No, I don’t want this for commercial reasons. I’m not trying to sell anything. I’m not trying to find its value.” I said, “All I’m trying to find out is if I can find the artist.”

She said, well, she didn’t know how she could help me, but she would put me in touch with the archivist, so I called him, and he had a European accent. I couldn’t place it, but he had a European accent. So he said, “Well, you can come in, and I’ll give you half an hour,” he said, “but I don’t really have time to go through everything. We can narrow down when you think the picture was done, and then we have books, huge books of the annual exhibitions at the Chicago Art Institute, and you’ll have to go through those books.”

So he gave me half an hour. I did see him, and I went in, and he was very nice, and I showed him the portrait, and I said, “Do you have any idea, does this style look familiar to you?” He said, “No,” he said, “but I’ve only been here a few years,” he said. “But I’ll take you upstairs—.” And he took me up into the archives, into sort of the back of the Art Institute, upstairs, and he showed me these books, which are like this—[apparently indicates great thickness]—you know, huge, huge picture books of prints.

They had a catalog of all the artists who had exhibited at the Chicago Art Institute for all those years, and each year. They weren’t necessarily famous artists, but their work was juried, and it was good enough to be shown, so I said, “Well, I think we can narrow it down.” I said, “My guess is that this is a Chicago-area artist. She was young. She was a bride. And I don’t know whether this was commissioned by her husband or whether she was an artist’s model.”

He said, “No, I don’t think that’s a picture of an artist’s model because they usually didn’t get dressed up much. They usually were in costume and sometimes naked. This is a portrait of a prosperous young woman.” He said, “That’s a fur coat.” I said, “I think it does look like a fur coat.” He said, “No, the artist’s models wouldn’t have been dressed like that, so this is a picture of a prosperous young woman. We’re going to assume that it was commissioned by somebody to be painted.”

So I sat down with these huge books, and at first I was very discouraged, because I looked through for about a five-year period. But I said, “Let me just look. I’m a scholar. I know how to do scholarship.” I had one hour, half an hour that he gave me and then half an hour before I had to go to the airport, so I had exactly one hour, and I had to be back at the hotel. He spent about fifteen or twenty minutes with me. I said, ‘I’ve got about forty minutes, and I
have to find this because I’m not going to do this again. I’m going to do it
now, and if I don’t find it, I will never probably come back.’

So I figured, well, I know she was here in 1916 and 1917, and I’m just going
to concentrate on those two years. I’m not going to waste time with all the
other years. So I did, and the first run, I didn’t find anything. And then he
gave me some smaller books. He said, “Well, look at these books. The picture
may not be in there, but do look down and see if there is any other identifying
information.” He said, “What was her name?” I said, “Her name is Ruth.” He
said, “Well, you look carefully.” He said, “Look at these smaller books, which
give the names of the portraits as well as the names of the artists.”

So I looked through 1916, and finally I came to an artist [Charles Lesaar]
whose work—they didn’t have a picture of his work, but he had, in the year
1917, “A Portrait of Ruth.” I said to the archivist, “Do you think this could be
my aunt?” He said, “I think it probably was. Why don’t you find out now—go
downstairs to the reference librarian, and see if she can tell you anything about
the artist.”

Of course, by this time I was absolutely thrilled, and I had about five minutes
left. I went downstairs. He said, “Let me Xerox this for you,” because it said,
“A Portrait of Ruth.” And what’s interesting about it is they had how much
each of the paintings cost. It was the most expensive in just about that whole
year. It was a thousand dollars in 1916 for that portrait. That was the price.
And so maybe somebody else bought it—or was supposed to buy it—but it
was a thousand dollars, and all the others were, like, fifty, a hundred, five
hundred. The closest to it, I think, might have been one at seventy-five. So the
artist obviously thought this was very important, his work, and it was a
thousand dollars.

And so I went downstairs, and the librarian said, “Yes,” she said, “I don’t
recognize his name, but if he ever exhibited here, he will be in Artists of
America,” the huge book, and they had it for, I don’t know, for about a fifty-
year period, and his name was there. And they described him, and she said,
“You know, the stars must be with you today.” I said, “Why do you say that?”
I told her the story about Ruth. I didn’t tell all the story, but I just said I found
it. And she said, “The stars must be with you.” She said, “You notice he’s
born in Belgium, the artist?” I said yes. She said, “The man who helped you
was also born in Belgium.”

Isn’t that a wonderful coincidence?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: I said, “It makes me feel really good because I think the stars have been with
me all along about”—I told her I was trying to find more about my family
history. So she said, “Yes, this hung in this museum in 1917, and this was painted by the Belgian-born artist, Charles Lesaar.”

And then the other part of it that was such a coincidence to me is that Lesaar also lived in Oakland, California. The only two places he lived in America were Oakland, California, and Chicago, and he has portraits in Oakland which I’m going to go check out, because then I want to see if—see, I never saw the picture. It just said, “A Portrait of Ruth,” and her name is Ruth. So they advised me, “Well, why don’t you go see this?” There are two places in Oakland and one in San Francisco where Lesaar’s works are hanging, and you may find that you can look at the style and say, “Yes, this is definitely that.”

Isn’t that something?

McGarrigle: Is that the Oakland Museum?

Gibbs: No, it wasn’t the Oakland Museum. Actually, it’s a college, Sacred Heart.

McGarrigle: Oh, okay.

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: So he didn’t sign the portrait.

Gibbs: Well, he may have signed it, but we can’t see it. They think that there’s probably a signature right here. [apparently points to place on photograph]

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: See, there is something here. So anyway, that’s the story of Ruth.

Then my husband and I made a trip to Brazil a few years ago. I think it was 1996 we went to Brazil. I said, “I want to go see where they lived. I want to see if there’s any evidence of her.” We did have the address which, again, my cousin had given me. We went to São Paulo. The street she lived on, its name had been changed. I had a lot of help. You know, if you know how to do research, you could find things. And so I went to the city archives of São Paulo. The librarian helped me. We got out a big map, and she said, “This street used to be—it has been renamed, but I can tell you exactly where it is.”

And we have another picture of her standing by a tree. It’s actually not as nice as that portrait, but we have a picture of her standing by a tree, and in this picture there’s a little church in the background. We found that exact spot. The tree, or its baby, is still there. My husband framed the picture, and he took a picture of me in front of the tree. It’s a Catholic church.
Now, we talked to the priest to find out if they had gone to this church, because they would have records, this priest. They speak Portuguese, I speak a little Spanish, and between us we just weren’t able to really communicate that well. I had a little Spanish, and he had a little Spanish, but—he knew I was looking for some family member, but he kept saying, “I need somebody who can speak English, and if you can wait another hour—”

Well, that day we didn’t have another hour to wait. I wish we had, but—so I don’t know whether it was her church or not, but it was in what they call the American Gardens. That’s where they lived. So, you know, I guess there’s been a real drive to try to fill in the gaps about this whole part of my mother’s family history, those who went over and passed for white. And we’re just still gathering information about them and still finding new cousins and things like that.

McGarrigle: Did she and her husband live their entire lives in Brazil after they went there, then?

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: Did they die in Brazil?

Gibbs: Another strange coincidence. They lived their entire adult lives there. I’m not sure where she died, but he came to America for a major reunion I guess—yes, it would have been the fiftieth reunion in 1954 and died in a plane crash, coming to his reunion at Harvard, and that was the year that I was a senior at Radcliffe. But I never knew him. So he tried to come to the reunion, and the plane crashed, and he died in the plane crash. And I don’t think he was with her.

So that’s just one of the many dramatic stories. [laughs] And then I think to myself of the people of the man who did the picture, and when they hung the picture, they had no idea this woman had any African-American blood. They had no idea. They wouldn’t have known.

McGarrigle: That’s really interesting.

Gibbs: Really interesting, yes. So I thought you would like to hear that story, since I just did this little research. But I like doing research—I mean, the fun of it. My sister and I both contributed to the earlier book, *The Sweeter the Juice.* I helped her with the research, but she wrote the story.

McGarrigle: Do you find that it’s different doing research, for example, when you went to Chicago, when you were at the Art Institute and you knew you only had an hour—do you find it different doing research as a scholar on your family than it is as a scholar in the other areas that you’ve worked in?
Gibbs: Only in the intensity, because I had one hour. I had to focus down so much. I just had to focus and be very intense, and I couldn’t let anything distract me. I had to cut out all the noise, all the visual things. There were a lot of interesting things in this archive where I was, you know, lots of things, and I had to cut it all out. And I had to say, ‘Here are these books. I have to look at these books. I have to look at them carefully, and I have to be out of here in an hour.’

And I did, and I found what I believe was evidence that this was the portrait of my great-aunt. Whereas when you’re doing research that doesn’t have anything to do with you personally, first of all you have more time, it’s more leisurely, and there isn’t that same emotional component.

For example—and I don’t know whether I had mentioned this to you last time, tell me if I did because I don’t want to repeat it—about when I went to the archives in Washington to find out about my great-grandfather.

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: Well, see, that was very emotional. Again, we knew very little about my mother’s background on her father’s side because of the issue that they wanted to keep everything secret, including from her, because they were so afraid, I guess, that she would go and try to find people and sort of spoil their lives by confronting them. That would not have been her intention. All she wanted to do was find her relatives and have some family when we were growing up.

So they kept everything compartmentalized from her. But somehow, as I grew up and when I was a young woman, I lived a year in Washington after I finished college. My first job was in Washington, D.C., at the Labor Department. I got to know my mother’s family much better, I think, than anyone else, any of the other children because I was there a year. I was around them. They invited me to dinner, and they were really very nice to me.

I used to ask questions, a lot of questions. They would sort of put me off, but finally my oldest cousin, her oldest cousin, who was named Hilda [Smith Cobb]—they began to tell me a little bit more about the family. Growing up—I think this is in my sister’s book—there was always a joke. The one thing they had told my mother: “Well, you need to be proud of your roots because we’re descended from the first families of Virginia.”

We used to joke about it, my sister and I, when we were growing up. We used to joke and we’d say, “Yeah, from the slaves of the first families of Virginia.” And we would just sort of laugh at that. We thought it was kind of—well, I don’t even know what to call it—but kind of a false pride. Obviously, as black people, to say you’re descended from the first families of Virginia, with no proof and no papers, as we used to say, is kind of a false pride. But they were very proud of that, and they used to say that.
So when I was there, I used to say, “Cousin Hilda, what do you mean we’re descended from the first families of Virginia?” She said, “Well, someday I’ll tell you.” And I was already out of college. Well, she just let out little hints here and there, and a few years later, some years later, she did tell me the name of my great-great-grandfather [James Dandridge Halyburton] who was white, and that he was a judge in Richmond, Virginia. She said, “Now, he was from the first families of Virginia.” I said, “Was he—?” She said, “Yes.” She said, “But I can’t say any more about it right now.”

So I came back to Stanford, and I went to the law library, and I wanted to know did he really exist. I mean, was he really a judge? I found out yes, he did exist and he was a judge, and he had graduated from Harvard. Another what seemed to me strange coincidence. I didn’t know any of this growing up. He had graduated from Harvard, and he was in the class of John Adams and all those famous people.

He was a judge, a prominent judge. But I didn’t go any further with it at that time. I knew he graduated from Harvard, and he was a prominent judge. And that’s what it said in the available bio about him. And it wasn’t until many years later in the 1990s, when my sister was writing her book, that we found out just who he was descended from and found out that his mother was the niece of George Washington’s wife [Martha Dandridge Curtis]. That’s who his mother was. [The daughter of Martha Washington’s brother, Bartholomeus Dandridge.]

We had no idea of that, growing up. And, of course, he certainly never claimed—I mean, nobody claimed legitimacy from him. So when I went to the archives in Washington, which were right down the street from where I worked, I just wanted to know if I could find out the name of my great-grandmother, who was a slave, who had a child by him.

We were pretty sure of that. That’s an oral history in the family. I mean, a mother knows who the father of her child is, and she told my great-grandfather that his father was the man who owned the farm that she worked for, in his house. Of course, he looked like a white man. How could he look like a white man and it turns out looked like his father? That’s another piece of the puzzle.

So I go down there. I had been to the archives four nights—not in a row, but four nights over about a month’s period, and I was getting very discouraged, because it’s very difficult to find out about slaves. They had what they called the slave book, you know, but the slaves are not named, as you would be named as a white person in this country. You are counted by your owner as property.

So what you have to do in the slave book is look up—if you know the name of the owner, okay?
McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: So I knew his name, but I wanted to see how the slaves were listed, if they were listed by first names. I had decided I was going to do this one more night. It was in the spring, and we were going to leave in a couple of months, and I said, ‘You know, I’m going to do this one more night, and if I don’t find it, I’m going to give up.’ I’d been here, and you know, you just put these things on these rolls, and you have to look at them, and—

McGarrigle: The microfiche.

Gibbs: Microfiche. And, oh, it’s very hard on your eyes, and you work a full day and you go there, and I would spend a couple of hours with the microfiche, and then I’d be exhausted.

I knew he lived in Richmond, Virginia, in Henrico County. And so I was looking at these rolls. And then you have to figure out, well, what year would it have been? And, of course, it would have been before the Civil War, and so you have to figure all that out, what census, what year. And so I hit on, let me look in the 1860 census, before the Civil War, where the slavery is all in place, and that ought to give me the information that I need.

And so I did look at it, and this was my last night. I had looked at all of Richmond, and there was one area that I had not looked in, because I had no idea where exactly he lived. So I’m coming to the end of this last roll, and I’m really tired, and I said, ‘Well, there’s only a little bit more. Let me look at this last roll.’ And I did.

And at the very end of the roll, almost to—I mean, there was very little left on the roll—I came across his name. I looked at it, and I said, ‘Oh, my God. Here he is.’ And it listed his slaves, not by name but by race. So they had mulatto slaves, one was a woman about forty-something, I think forty-one years old, and a teenage boy who was a mulatto male child, and he was something like twelve. And I thought, ‘That’s my great-grandmother and her child.’

It was so emotional, I cannot tell you. And it made me feel—you know, they didn’t even put her name down, but that’s who it was. And they did say, “mulatto child, mulatto slave.” And then there were others. There were some that were black, but that was my great great grandmother—I was sure. And her name apparently was Ruth, too, but they did not have her name listed. I thought, ‘Well, you can’t say this is proof that the child was his, but they were living in his household.’

And the other interesting thing was that her last name, that he took, my great-grandfather—the judge is my great-great-grandfather—was Morris. As I finished the roll, I just happened to look. The person who lived next door to this judge was a Morris family. I knew what that meant.
McGarrigle: She had gone from one family—

Gibbs: That’s right. She had probably been born on the Morris plantation because you took the name of the plantation where you were born, if there was any last name at all. She had been born, and because she was mulatto, that meant probably the man, the plantation owner was probably her father, and then you get rid of those children as soon as you can get rid of them, because the wives don’t want them around. And so probably when she became a teenager, she went over to work at the judge’s—Halyburton. His name was Halyburton, James Dandridge Halyburton. And Dandridge is the maiden name of Martha Washington. Martha Washington was the maiden name of Martha Dandridge Washington.

McGarrigle: And this child who your great-grandmother had was named?

Gibbs: Well, the interesting thing is he was named after the president of Harvard.

McGarrigle: Who was?

Gibbs: Whose middle name was Everett, Edward Everett Morris.

McGarrigle: And your sister tells the story—you both tell the story in the book about the basis for that, the influence of that, the man with his name originally was a classmate of Judge Halybarton when he was a student at Harvard.

Gibbs: Yes, well, apparently they were friendly. I don’t know whether they were roommates or something, but they were friendly. And who would name a slave Edward Everett unless there was some connection? And he later became the president of Harvard. It all makes a lot of sense.

But then bringing it forward, if you got to that part of the book, there are two things that clinched it for us, because there’s no DNA, of course, but there are two things that clinched it. First of all, there was just an oral history that my great-grandfather told his son, that his father was a great judge, Halyburton. But he took his mother’s last name, which was Morris. That’s all we had to go on. And he obviously had lived in the house.

The thing that clinched it for us—well, there were other things, too. Like, he worked for the judge’s, I think, brother or brother-in-law in a bank. He learned to read and write, and he was a very accomplished slave. The only people that they taught basically to read and write—they would lend them out in the community for clerical jobs if they could read and write—but they were usually their children. Even though it was illegal to teach the slaves to read and write.

So he knew how to read and write and do math, so when slavery was over and he came to Washington, D.C.—in fact, before the end of the Civil War,
actually—he was able to get a pretty good job, actually in masonry, because he had also done, I guess, jobs like that around the plantation—for the federal government. So my great-grandfather ended up helping to build a lot of those huge government buildings in Washington, D.C., because he was a stone mason. I mean, that was part of his training, being a stone mason, as a child growing up.

But then, after we started the more intensive research, which really began actually in the early nineties, when my sister was preparing this book for my mother’s eightieth birthday, and the whole idea was she was going to write a history of the family for my mother’s eightieth birthday. She was trying to find my Aunt Grace and hired a private detective. Now, that part you must know by now.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: But the thing that, I guess, really clinched it for us, that we can really say is almost 95 percent accurate certainty, is that when she appeared on *Oprah*—and I don’t think this is in the book. I don’t think so, because this came after the book was published, and so this was not in the book. When she appeared on *Oprah*, it so happened that day—I don’t know if you remember the day, it would have been about ’93 or ’94—there was a huge snowstorm in the East that crippled everything. It was the worst one they’d had in fifty years, and it was only the second time in history that Harvard had closed its classes, the second time in history.

[begin tape 1B]

Gibbs: Everything from New York, Washington, Chicago. Everything was closed down. Even the buses couldn’t run. Everybody stayed home. You know what? People who never looked at *Oprah*—she had the biggest viewing audience—it just so happened!—the day my mother and sister, all of us, were on *Oprah*. She brought in twelve of us and sort of orchestrated this reunion between my mother and her cousins, nieces and nephews that she had never met, didn’t know existed, and orchestrated it on television.

I mean, literally everyone in the East was home, so she had this huge viewing audience. You know, what do you do when you can’t go out and it’s snowing? You turn on the TV! Or you sleep. So it was a big, popular program. She played it—dozens of times, it’s been on, because they play the favorite programs. And on that program—this woman in Illinois was looking at it that day. She was also housebound. She was running her vacuum cleaner, and she looked, and she saw the picture of my great-grandfather, and she stopped the vacuum cleaner. She said, “Oh, my God. That man looks just like my husband’s great-grandfather.”
It turns out that this woman who saw the picture, was the wife, or is the wife, of Judge Halyburton’s legitimate great-great grandson. When she saw the picture, she stopped everything she was doing. She sat down. She started to take notes. And she called my sister, and she said, “You know, I want to tell you that I saw your program, and I saw the man that you say is your great-grandfather, and he was also”—well, she showed the photos of [her husband’s] great-great-grandfather and the great-grandfather, so she showed the photos of wife of the judge and the one who was our great-grandmother. She said, “Your great-great-grandfather is also my husband’s great-great-grandfather.” And she said, “So we want to send you some pictures that may help you in your research, and we’re going to send you some family history because my husband said, ‘You know, I think she’s right. I think that must have been my great-grandfather’s brother.’”

So they sent the pictures of his great-grandfather, who was the son of the same great-great-grandfather, and the two looked like brothers. And it turns out that part of the family history is that when my great-grandfather was a slave child and he lived in what they called the big house, he played with the judge’s son, his legitimate son, who was about the same age. They played together. And this was the boy who grew up to be the other guy, the one in Illinois—his great-grandfather.

McGarrigle: They were half-brothers.

Gibbs: They were half-brothers. So he sends this picture, which I have a copy of—I don’t have it handy—and they look almost identical. So that, to us, proved that this child was the son of Judge Halyburton. I mean, I don’t think he could have any better proof. Plus [my great-grandfather] looks a lot like Judge Halyburton, himself. Well, I think you saw that—they look a lot alike.

McGarrigle: Did the man in Illinois have, through his family lore, have any knowledge about this relationship?

Gibbs: Well, no, see, now, he was on the white side, so they didn’t know.

McGarrigle: They didn’t have any indication that this might have been a relative?

Gibbs: Because they didn’t own up to it, they didn’t talk about it, they denied it all through the South. I mean, that’s what happened with the family of [President Thomas] Jefferson. They always knew, but they always denied it.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: They always made up stories about it or denied it. So, no, he didn’t know. But I’ll give this Illinois relative credit. He then went on a second program on Oprah with my sister to discuss it. He said, “Yes, I think we are related” through the same great-great-grandfather. And I think ever since then, we
have felt pretty confident that this is the case, that we are descendants of Judge Halyburton.

McGarrigle: Your relative in Washington, Hilda [Smith Cobbs], did you have an indication what was going on in her mind, why she could only give you at that time small pieces of information, what she was waiting for, to be more revealing?

Gibbs: She’s dead now, but I think all these years, there has been—and this is my thought, I could be wrong. First of all, I think as they grew older, there was some guilt around how my mother had been treated and excluded from the family. I think that there is some guilt, because her mother, who was my Aunt Mamie [Smith], was the one who kept in touch with everybody. She was the one who kept in touch with everybody and gave my mother little pieces of news when she felt that she should have it.

But in terms of giving my mother access to her own brothers and sisters—her one sister and her brother and uncles and aunts, she didn’t. The ones who passed for white, Mamie protected them. There’s no question that Mamie protected them. And I think because she had so much loyalty to her own brothers and sisters. We now, as we’re older, can understand that. But she was always very nice to my mother and made a difference in my mother’s life in many ways, a positive difference. And when I came to Washington, I think they bent over backwards to be nice to me because they felt guilty about how my mother had been treated by that family.

And so the little pieces of information—I think she probably realized that I was smart enough to track it down, and she gave me that much clue, because she hadn’t told anybody else that, including my mother. My mother never knew about the judge. She said, “Well, the first families of Virginia. Well, who are they?” You know. And I was the one she gave the name to, and from the time she gave me that name, you know, this has been something I had been trying to unravel, simply because it is part of my identity. It’s part of my past. Not because I want to be white, not because I want to feel that I’m from a special family, but simply because I want to know my heritage. I want to know all those missing pieces, and my mother—to tell her. She was very happy to hear. Happy in a way, and also angry, of course, in a way. She was angry.

But, you know, the sixties did have [inaudible]. We have been in touch and met cousins and visited them, and they have visited us, in Ohio, in Minnesota. We used to live in Minnesota. I had no idea I had a first cousin right within miles of where we lived. I had no idea. A first cousin, my mother’s brother’s oldest daughter lived outside of Minneapolis, and I lived in Minneapolis for six years. And she has three lovely daughters. All of them have been very friendly with us.
I’m writing something for my sister’s book right now, and I’ll just mention this to you because I don’t know if you know as much about psychology, about Jung or anything—

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: You know who Jung was?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: But I’ve always been a little bit attracted to his idea, mystical idea of the collective unconscious because I guess I grew up in a family where my father was a minister, and there was a lot of talk about ESP and things like that and things that you can’t explain scientifically. There was just a lot of talk about that, about people mysteriously getting better who were expected to die, after prayer and so forth.

And so I was obviously influenced by that, even though I think of myself as a very rational person. There’s a part of me that believes that there is a part of the world we can’t ever explain and a part of the cosmos that we will never know. Whatever we want to call that, I think there is an unknowable part.

And so I’ve always been attracted to this idea of the collective unconscious because what we often call coincidence sometimes seems to be more than coincidence. So in my mother’s family, there are several layers of what some people want to call coincidence, which I think may be much more than that.

For example, my mother and her sister were separated for seventy-six years. They didn’t have any contact with each other. They didn’t know about each other’s families. My mother’s sister is older, almost nine years older. She had one daughter. She named her daughter Patricia. My mother named her youngest daughter Patricia, not knowing that her sister, separated by a continent, had named her daughter Patricia.

Patricia, who was my first cousin that I never met, named her oldest son Jefffrey. I named my oldest son Geoffrey. And my cousin in Ohio named her oldest son Jeffrey. None of us ever knew each other. And another cousin in Ohio, one of her daughters is also named Patricia. Now, somehow I think that’s more than coincidence.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: So there are several Patricias, there are several Margarets, and there are several Jeffreys in the family, all among people who never had any contact with each other after they grew up, and yet we have these three names that appear: Margaret, Patricia, and Jeffrey. I just think it’s interesting.
McGarrigle: It is.

Gibbs: So interesting. So it’s been a journey as far as the family part. It’s been a very interesting and, I must say, emotional journey, finding—I mean, we were all adults with grown children when we found my mother’s sister, and my mother luckily lived long enough to have a reunion with her at the age of eighty. She was lonely, she was a widow, and she was very glad to reunite with my mother and I think glad to meet us. My sister is the one who kept most in touch with her, because she lived in Los Angeles. But then her daughter’s oldest child, Jeffrey [Scott], her grandson, has been very friendly with my younger son and has been here to spend a weekend and has kind of been the bridge between the two families.

And I have a first cousin in Ohio named Carol [Morris Battles], who also has a PhD and teaches college. So, you know, there are a lot of commonalities, a lot of things that we tend to have in common.

McGarrigle: Did your Aunt Grace know about your mother and the history of the family or no?

Gibbs: No, because my Aunt Grace was separated when she was a little girl. One day she went to school as a black child, and the following Monday she went to school as a white child. After her mother died, her grandmother took her in, and we didn’t find that out until years later, until just recently, that she didn’t deliberately decide that she was going to pass for white. Her Irish grandmother, our Irish grandmother, my Irish great-grandmother decided that she was going to take Grace and the older boys and that they were going to pass for white.

McGarrigle: So this was after your—

Gibbs: After my mother’s mother died.

McGarrigle: After your mother’s mother died, and then your mother’s father took some of the children but not—

Gibbs: Well, we thought he did. It turns out my mother’s father probably had the problem of so many working-class Irish, which is the drinking problem, and he wasn’t very reliable. It seems as if—and we still don’t have that quite clear, that some of the children went with the grandmother and maybe one or two of the boys. We’re still not clear who went with whom, but her father was not a responsible father, and it really didn’t have much to do with race. But he decided that he was going to pass for white. It was just easier in those days, if you looked like that, to be white than to be black. And so he left and apparently went to Delaware to work, on some farm.
The children were kind of left on their own. Grace said after the age of fourteen, she pretty much brought up herself. She worked. She was, like, a mother’s helper when she was growing up. She was a mother’s helper. She never could afford to go to college, so she graduated from high school and then I guess she met a nice man, and he married her.

But she had a hard time. She told my mother—she said, “You know, it wasn’t my fault, what happened.” And my mother had always blamed her. She said, “It wasn’t my fault. I was only a child, too, when this all happened.” And that helped my mother a lot, because my mother always harbored a great deal of animosity toward her family, and especially she said, ‘This is my only sister, and why did she leave me?’

But she was only—let’s see, if my mother was four, she was maybe about thirteen when her mother died, and their grandmother said, “You’re going to come with me,” and she put her in a place where she’d be a mother’s helper with a white lady and Grandmother said, “Don’t ever, ever tell anyone that you were ever”—in those days they said “colored.” “Don’t ever say it.” And so she was taken away from her home in northwest Washington, I guess in one day, and the next week she was entered into a white school. So talk about identity.

McGarrigle: Yes. Yes. And this grandmother is the grandmother who married outside her race.

Gibbs: The grandmother from hell, yes. [laughs] Yes, she did. But it’s a question of whether she knew that he was black, which—we don’t know that she knew that.

McGarrigle: I see.

Gibbs: But she sort of discovered it. We don’t know whether she knew that. She was in a convent, a Catholic girls’ school convent. Somehow she met him. She was an immigrant from Ireland and was in a convent. Her father put her in a convent. Her father was a businessman in Georgetown. He was, of course, Irish. And then his wife, her mother, died on the voyage over, apparently, and so he couldn’t raise her, so he put her in a Catholic girls’ convent. Apparently she met my great-grandfather, who was quite handsome. He was handsome. They had a courtship, and she married him. It isn’t clear whether she knew when she married him that he was a black man, but I guess she found out soon afterwards.

McGarrigle: In the book, your sister indicates that she remembers meeting this grandmother when your sister was about eleven and your great-grandmother was in her nineties.
Gibbs: Yes. I remember, too. [I was about fourteen, so Shirlee was probably ten years old.]

I was surprised Shirlee remembered, but she was scared. I guess she was kind of scared. Yes, I remember, and the funny thing is that when we went into the room—now, keep in mind that my mother had seen her a few times over the years because as she got older, she came back to live with my Aunt Mamie, who was her daughter, her oldest daughter. The other one was in Brazil. So she only had one daughter in the U.S.

So she was aging, and she was sick, and she was in her early nineties when we were children. My Aunt Mamie said to us, “Would you like to go up and see your great-grandmother?” She was our great-grandmother. I was always kind of outspoken, and I think I even said, “Not particularly,” but my mother said, “Shh!” And so we all went up into the room, and my mother had not seen her since she was—I don’t know, for quite a while, I guess, and her grandmother was probably in the early stages of dementia.

What was really funny is that when I bent over her to take her hand, Aunt Mamie said, “Now, kiss your great-grandmother,” which I really didn’t want to do. I remember feeling I didn’t want to do this, you know. Why would I want to kiss her? But I bent over to sort of brush my lips against her face, and she took my hand. It was like a steel grip. And she said to me, “Are you Margaret?” And I thought, “Boy, there’s that guilt coming out.”

I said, “No, I’m not Margaret. I’m Margaret’s oldest daughter.” That was my memory, the only time I ever saw my great-grandmother. She was Irish and she had white hair and blue eyes. By this time, her skin was puckery—sort of mottled and pale. But she had a lot of white hair still, and blue eyes, and that’s all that I remember about her. She thought I was my mother. The years then collapsed.

McGarrigle: Yes. Yes.

Gibbs: So it’s been an emotional business, of trying to find the family and trying to bring the family back together. I mean, it’s the twenty-first century, and it’s time to heal the wounds. Actually, as I said, it started with my sister doing the research on the book. And now I can honestly say that everybody’s in touch with everybody else. Not that we hear from them on a weekly basis or anything, but my cousin [Carol Battles] from Ohio has been to visit me twice, with her husband. She has a daughter in San Francisco who’s married to a Filipino. Unfortunately, they have divorced, and we haven’t seen much of her since their divorce. She’s been kind of upset, I think, about the divorce. But we talk to her sometimes.

And then the young man named Jeffrey in Los Angeles calls me every year for my birthday. He doesn’t write. He’s not a writer. But he calls me once a
year. I know I’m going to hear from him at my next birthday. He keeps in touch more with my sister in Los Angeles. He calls her.

And then the others that we’ve found, the others in Minnesota also keep in touch. When we go to Minnesota—two years ago, my husband and I went to Minnesota. They’d never met him, and they were curious. They all came out. My cousin and her three daughters and all their families came out to have dinner with us—you know, to invite us to dinner, and that was very nice. The kids were very curious, very curious. These are families who all live as white people, so of course they’re curious about a black cousin.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And I’ve seen them twice, the two times I’ve been to Minnesota. So we are at least in touch, and we write, and we exchange Christmas cards. I’m especially close to the one in Ohio named Carol, who is also a college professor. We have a lot in common, so I’m close to her. We visited her in her home in a little town called Chesterfield, Ohio, where her husband is the mayor or whatever they call it. They don’t actually call him mayor, but the man who’s in charge of the town. They entertained their friends for us, and it was very interesting. You know, the friends were very careful about what to say and what not to say. But they had a potluck for us, and their friends all came, and they were very interested.

So things are changing.

McGarrigle: This person who, when she was vacuuming during the storm in the early nineties, saw the family—

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: It seems from that story that she was very open.

Gibbs: Yes, she was. I’ve never met her husband, but Shirlee did because they were very open. She also is an archivist. Isn’t that interesting?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: She is an archivist. And this again—all these sort of coincidences. She works at—the Lincoln birthplace is where she works, in Springfield, Ohio. Not Ohio. Springfield, Illinois. She is the one who keeps the archives at Lincoln’s birthplace museum. So she said, “You know, I’ve always been interested in all these issues: slavery and the Civil War and the whole business.” She’s really steeped in it. She said, “When I saw that, I said, ‘Oh, my God. My husband has relatives who are part black,’” or whatever.
So anyway, she came out to have lunch with me the next year. She had a conference in Berkeley. She had lunch with me. I haven’t seen her since, but we, again, exchange Christmas cards. She always writes me a nice note at Christmas. I said, “Have you told your children?” She said, “Oh, yes, they know about it.” And she said, “When they get older, I hope they’ll come out and meet you.”

So it’s just fascinating.

McGarrigle: Yes. Yes.

Gibbs: I think the best thing about it all is that it has helped my mother. You know, as people get older—my mother is ninety, I don’t know if I told you that. She probably doesn’t have much longer to live. She’s in a nursing home, and she’s not doing well at all. She’s gradually withdrawing from life. But what this has done is to help her to put her life in perspective, because when people get old and are about to die or feel that they are near death, there’s this natural human tendency to try to make meaning of your life, to figure out what has my life meant to me? What have I contributed? What have I experienced?

And so if a big piece of your family is missing, that’s hard. So this has helped her to fill in the gaps about her family history, and helped my mother to feel better about herself and to understand why her father left and that it wasn’t just a rejection of her, and why she didn’t go. She always had these ideas about why she wasn’t taken, but the reason she wasn’t taken is that the two youngest were left with a cousin of her mother’s because they were not old enough to work, and the father couldn’t take care of them because he had a drinking problem.

The grandmother was too old to take care of young children. My mother was four, and her baby brother [Michael] was two. So they were left with a cousin of her mother’s. Of course, that cousin lived in the black world, in the black community, so they were reared as black, and all the others went for white.

McGarrigle: So it was circumstance.

Gibbs: Yes, but she always thought that her father had deliberately left her because she was a little more swarthy than the others. People always said my mother looked like an Italian child. She had kind of that creamy, swarthy skin and black curly hair. She always thought that—but the other child, the baby boy—he was a blonde, with blue eyes. I used to say to her, “Well, that doesn’t make sense.” But he was crippled. He had probably what we call spina bifida. He had a funny, bad back. He died at the age of about twelve. So my mother—I think that was the last time she’d seen her grandmother. Grandmother came to the funeral. I think it’s in the book. He was, she said, a beautiful boy, but he had this kind of hump back.
So her father really—you know, they didn’t want to admit in those days that people had drinking problems—but he did. He just couldn’t take care of those two young children. They were four and two. So he gave them to my grandmother’s cousin. And because of that, the circumstances, those two were reared as black, and the others all went off into the white world. And it was really purely circumstance, but my mother didn’t understand that until recent years. I think that’s been good for her to understand.

McGarrigle: It’s certainly understandable how, from a child’s perspective, it would be personalized.

Gibbs: Oh, absolutely, yes. Yes, absolutely. Let me get a picture of my mother and her sister, when they had their reunion. [moves away from microphone] She took a picture, and she sent me one. Let me get it, and I’ll be right back.

McGarrigle: Sure.

Gibbs: This is my mother. [shows photograph] She has makeup on and is kind of suntanned from the summer. This is my aunt, who wears white makeup like the Japanese wear, who looks more white, but she actually has on—the Japanese have this makeup that makes them kind of look white. She has that makeup on; my mother has a suntan. But anyway, you can see that without my mother’s suntan, there really is not much difference in the color of the two of them.

McGarrigle: There must have been a complicated reaction from your aunt.

Gibbs: Very complicated. I think Shirlee describes it at the end of the book. At first, she was reluctant to even admit that she had a sister, but after my sister made it pretty clear that she didn’t want to cause trouble, that she just wanted to come and talk to her and try to find out what had happened to the family, she said that Shirlee could come over then. The minute my sister went in, she said they looked so much alike that it was just really incredible, the way they looked so much alike. They both have these little humps on their back. But those are the two sisters.

McGarrigle: Your Aunt Grace would have remembered. She was old enough to remember when her mother died.

Gibbs: Oh, yes.

McGarrigle: One day she was in one community and the—

Gibbs: And the next week, right. She remembered. And she said they had a hard time growing up. They were poor. She said she had a hard time.
McGarrigle: Did her children have any indication that there was this background?

Gibbs: Apparently not, no. Apparently not.

McGarrigle: She kept that to herself?

Gibbs: She kept that secret. The grandchildren had no idea. Her one daughter was dead. The one named Patricia died. Now, the grandson named Jeffrey told both of us, told me and Shirlee he always thought that there was a family secret, but he didn’t know what it was. Here’s another funny thing. He is very handsome. I mean, really very handsome. He’s tall, he’s got dark hair, and he’s got light eyes. I guess they’re blue. He looks like a lot of Irishmen with black hair and blue eyes. That’s what he looks like.

His father is Italian, but they had changed their name. The father used to be Scotti. They changed their name to Scott. His father is not related to us. He’s Italian. Now, Jeffrey has always been attracted to what we would call black music, soul music. That was before rap, so it would be basically soul, rhythm and blues, all that kind of music. He had a huge music collection which is—almost every black artist in the twentieth century, he has. Always been attracted.

A week before Shirlee called him—I don’t know whether you got to that part of the book, but finally Grace gives Shirlee the name of her grandson and said, “I think he’s the one to contact. He would be interested,” she said. She always thought it was funny, “to be interested.”

So apparently, Grace had told them that there was some Indian in the background. She had told them that. Well, there was some Indian in her mother’s background, and so they had become—her daughter Patricia had started collecting Indian artifacts and was fascinated with Indian artifacts. She had a whole room in her house of Indian feathers, dresses, pictures and all, because her mother had told her there was some Indian in the background. Of course, Indian is different from black.

Jeffrey said about a week before Shirlee called him, he had been at work. He worked at one of those big companies down South, one of the big engineering—I’m trying to think, manufacturing companies, like Boeing, one of those big ones. And he had been talking to a bunch of his coworkers, and he had said—now, remember, this is 1992. It was the fall of 1992, and she finally actually called him, after several months of meeting with Grace, and Grace finally warmed up and said to her, “Well, I think that you want to meet my grandson. Call Jeffrey. He’s the oldest.” She said, “He would be interested.”

So he said, “I was sitting at work, having lunch, and I said to them, ‘You know, I think it would be great to have some black blood or Spanish blood or
Indian blood.’ He said, ‘It’s really boring being just a white person.’” He said that about a week before Shirlee called him. They all laughed, he said.

So when Shirlee called him, he said, “Oh! This is great news!” [laughter] She said “Oh really?” He said, “I’ll tell you why”—and he repeats this conversation. And then he said—he’s an engineer type, and he’s very methodical, very rational, and he said, “Well, let me take down all the information, and I’ll call you back.” Then he talked to his grandmother, and she sort of admitted that yes, she had a sister. I guess she must have admitted some of it, anyway.

He said, “Why didn’t you tell us?” And she said, “Well, you know, I was a little girl,” and whatever story she told him. “I didn’t want to talk about it after I married,” because she never told her husband. Well, if you don’t tell your husband, you can’t tell your children, you can’t tell them anything.

So he said he always knew there was something missing because whenever they wanted to talk to their grandmother about her history, she only would talk about one brother, and she never talked about her parents, and she didn’t have a picture of her mother. She did have a picture of her father, but she didn’t have a picture of her mother, but she never talked about her—she used to say to them, “It’s too painful. I was poor, and it’s too painful. My mother died when I was young and I don’t want to talk about it.”

So he knew there was some kind of family secret, but he didn’t know what it was. He didn’t have any idea what it was. He said, “I thought maybe she was illegitimate or something,” he said. “But I knew there was a family—I’ve always known that she was hiding something from us, and I never knew what it was.”

He flew back to Washington to go to the Archives and did the same search we did. Shirlee told him where she found it, because it’s so hard. If people are going to do it, you tell them. And she told him exactly where to find the same thing I found about the judge. And also we had gone in all the censuses to track different people.

That’s the other interesting thing. We had tracked these people because, you know, you have a census and everything, and these people are in it, and if you know what city they live in, you can track them. We had tracked my mother. We knew my mother’s brother and her sister had first gone to the Cleveland area. What you see is their race changed from “colored” to mulatto to white. It’s very interesting.

In fact, I think when they were in Washington, in one of the censuses they were listed as mulatto anyway, but then they go from mulatto to white over the years—you know, as we see these changes. They just put down white, and ever after then, they’re white.
So he did the same thing we did. Of course, he found it, I guess it must have been in the 19—I’m trying to remember which census that I found them in first. My mother was born in 1912. I think it must have been in the 1900—there’s one census that was lost. I guess that’s the 1910 census. I think it was the 1900 census where they were listed, I think, the family. I think in that census, they were listed as mulatto, and in early censuses they had been listed as “colored.”

And then the next thing you know, after my mother’s mother died, from the census of I think it was 1920 probably—anyway, it was always white after that. You know, they decided they were going to be white. You’re going to move, you’re going to leave, and you’ll be white.

So he found, of course, the things that we found, and he said, “Well,” he said, “as far as I’m concerned, this is true.” In other words, he acknowledged that “You must be my mother’s sister, and you look like my mother.” And then he went and visited them, and that was the beginning of the kind of coming together, when he went and visited my mother. She was so thrilled that he came to visit and see her.

Then he went back and he said to his grandmother, “I think you need to get together with your sister. You’re both older. You need to get together.” And my mother came out to visit my sister in Los Angeles, and they had their first meeting. My sister said it was so emotional.

I don’t think this was the first meeting. I think this was the second meeting, but it was the first—it was very emotional, more for my mother. But after that, Grace was glad to see us. She would call us. She would send her—she was already up in her eighties, almost ninety. One year she sent something really cute. She sent my mother a birthday card with five dollars in it. But, you know—

So that has been, in recent years, one of the major themes in our lives, is finding the lost family. It’s been a major theme.

McGarrigle: Did we talk last time about Charles Ball’s book, *Slaves in the Family*?

Gibbs: Yes, a little bit, yes, yes. I actually read part of that. I don’t think I read all of it, but I read part of it. I saw him on TV several times.

McGarrigle: I heard him speak [inaudible]

Gibbs: Yes, you mentioned it. And actually, there had been several other books that I’ve read that had to do with that, about people passing for one thing or another, or not knowing they were white—or not knowing they were black, I should say, and finding out when they were adults. There are a lot of books
like this coming out now. *Cane River* is another one. Do you know about *Cane River*?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: A woman in Menlo Park wrote it. It’s been, I guess, a bestseller. Lalita Tademy is her name. She wrote a book about all of these racial mixings in Louisiana where the wealthy planters used to have Creole mistresses, and then they would support these families. In her family, there were four generations of women who had [inaudible] relationships with wealthy planters, who supported them; they had children by them, but they never married them. And so she wrote a book about that. It was really quite widespread in the South.

One of the problems in American history is that we don’t acknowledge it. It’s a big problem. But it’s been, I would say, extremely widespread in the South. Every black person I know has white blood. Every single person. I don’t know a black person without white blood. Even you look at my husband. His great-great-grandfather was Dutch. Now, you wouldn’t know, looking at my husband, but his great-great-grandfather was Dutch and named the child that was born to a mulatto woman Huldah, which, of course, is a Dutch name.

His grandmother was named Huldah, and his sister is named Huldah. People say, “How do you get Huldah?” That is a Dutch name, with an “h”, -d-a-h. That’s a Dutch name. Well, it comes from this great-great-grandfather in Virginia [John Van Lieuw] who was Dutch. And his sister was a famous Yankee spy. Miss Van Lieuw was her name. That’s my husband’s family.

So, you know, if you talk to any, I would say, middle-class black person, any middle-class black person, you will find they have white blood and sometimes also Indian blood, as I do. A lot of them have both. But it’s a big secret in America, and it shouldn’t be. It’s a huge secret that we have all this racial mixing that’s been going on since way before the Civil War. All you have to do is look at people, and you say, “Why are some people light-skinned with light eyes and straight hair, and other people dark?” Well, why is that? And nobody seems to ever want to acknowledge that the black race is really more diverse, probably, than any race, because we’re not just one thing. We’re not just African.

McGarrigle: The great-grandmother your sister talks about was Anna White Cloud Fortune?

Gibbs: She’s on the Indian side.

McGarrigle: On the Indian side. This is on your father’s side.

Gibbs: Yes. Her photograph is in the hallway, too. That’s my father’s mother’s mother, my father’s grandmother.
McGarrigle: And do you know her history?

Gibbs: We don’t know as much—that’s my next task, before I leave this earth. We’ve been trying very hard to get more information on the Fortune family. He was presumably Cherokee, either full-blooded or half. You know, there’s some debate about whether he was full-blooded or half. But he was Cherokee, and he came from North Carolina, my great-grandfather, John Fortune.

McGarrigle: That was Anna’s—

Gibbs: Husband. That was Anna’s husband, and she was also Indian and part black.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: She was supposedly a mixed-blood Iroquois because she came from upstate New York. We don’t know how they met, but she came from upstate New York, and he came from North Carolina, and they must have met in Washington, D.C. There was a lot of movement in those days. They produced my father’s mother, who is part Indian and part black.

McGarrigle: That’s Roberta.

Gibbs: Yes. White Cloud was also Indian, and she had some white blood in her because she had green eyes, and Indians don’t have green eyes. We know she had green eyes. She was the only one in our family who had green eyes. My father saw her, remembers her as a child. She had these bright green, maybe hazel-green eyes. And there are several children and grandchildren in the family with green-hazel eyes, who came from her.

So we don’t really know about the white blood. All we know is that she had some, had white and Indian and probably some black, and he had Indian, and I think he must have had some black, but the amount, we don’t know. We only know he was Cherokee and that she was Iroquois. So my grandmother, my father’s mother, was at least half Indian, and then the other part, all these other things, some black and some white.

McGarrigle: Maybe we could stop there and then we can start next time with you and your siblings, your early life.


[tape interruption]

Gibbs: I wanted to tell you that he is one of my role models, because in speaking of people who resisted segregation, my grandfather was one of them. He was a leader in the early part of this century. He was a black minister. He was one of the first blacks after the Civil War to get a college degree. I think he was born
after the Civil War, but he got a college degree from a small school, one of the first black universities, like a land grant college, called Shaw University, in Raleigh North Carolina. After slavery was abolished, his father managed to buy a tobacco farm and had enough money to send him to college. He graduated in, I think it was 1898 from college, which wasn’t that long after the Civil War, and became a real leader in—they didn’t even call it civil rights then—but in gaining equal treatment for black people.

I’ve always admired my grandfather because he kept moving to give his children a better education. So after he graduated from Shaw, he had his first church in North Carolina, and he was not satisfied with the public schools there for black children. He started his own private school so his children could have a good education, and he imported a teacher from Washington, D.C.

There was one teacher especially, who came down and taught my father and his brothers when they were children, so that they would get a good start, and other children, who were children of the more educated black people in this little town. He had his own private school.

Then my grandfather moved to Newport News, Virginia, because he was still trying to improve the education for his children as they grew up. He wasn’t satisfied with that, and then he moved to Washington, D.C., where he founded a very large black church called the Florida Avenue Baptist Church, which is still standing today. He founded that church in the early years of the twentieth century, brought his children there, and established himself. He founded the church and then, of course, was more satisfied. The schools in Washington then were pretty good for black children. He had five sons and one daughter. He sent them all to school.

My grandfather became a leader early in the century of advocating for equal treatment and equality for black people. He was a very prominent minister and listed in Who’s Who of American Blacks in I think it was 1920. He was very active in the founding of the National Baptist Convention, which is the largest convention of black Christians—a religious denomination—in the world—National Baptist Convention.

So he was active in that and served many years on the board and actually was a friend of all of the early leaders—he knew all of the early leaders in the civil rights movement. He knew all of the educated black people, because they all knew each other. You know, there were not that many of them. They all knew each other. They used to travel from New York to Washington, down South, giving speeches and trying to exhort people to vote.

Strangely enough, he was a Republican because he believed, in those days—and it’s in my sister’s book—that the Republicans were the ones who were going to—you know, because they were the party of Lincoln. So he started
out as a Republican, and then when my father got active in the Democrats, he was not that happy about it. But in those days, they thought the Republican Party was the better party for blacks.

But in any case, he had a great influence on all of our family because he believed in education, he believed in civil rights, he believed you stand up for yourself and you don’t let anyone trample you or take away your dignity or take away your rights. And he taught all of us that. He taught his four sons that—well, actually, five. And then his daughter died young. And my father and my uncles passed it on to us, that first of all, education was the most important route to mobility, whether you’re black or white, and secondly, that you must stand up for your rights, no matter what. You just have to stand up for your rights, and you have to really demand that people treat you as a human being, and treat you with dignity, because otherwise they take away your humanity.

So that’s a lesson that I grew up with, and I think it’s a really important lesson, and I’ve passed it on to my children. But I also think that having a grandfather like that sort of set the tone.

One of the other things that I would say—because his wife died young, she died when my father was eighteen—but she, I think, had [inaudible] But the only other thing I want to say about my grandfather and that generation of black people in America—they fought the most important battles at the beginning of the century, long before World War II, long before the Army was integrated, long before you had the civil rights movement or anything. They fought the basic battle, which was to get good schools for black people, even though at that time they were segregated, but to get access to jobs, to be able to vote. They understood that education, that employment opportunities, and to be able to vote and participate in the government are really important things.

And so I think that all those things, he passed on to us. I really think that I am who I am not just because of my parents but because of my grandfather. Whenever I go back to Washington, I always go to his church. It’s still standing on the corner of Florida Avenue and 7th Street, Northwest. Big church.


Gibbs: My father and my uncle.

McGarrigle: Your father and your uncle.
Gibbs: There’s one with [President] John [F.] Kennedy, and then there’s one with [President] Lyndon [B.] Johnson, too, and my father. I have them in my hallway, but I’ll show you next time.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: There may be one with Robert Kennedy, too. I think so. I think it was Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, though. Yes.

McGarrigle: I can only see in my mind Robert Kennedy—

Gibbs: But they were all active in— my uncle was very instrumental. My uncle was one of the main plaintiffs in the Thompson Restaurant case [*District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson Co.*], which was the case that integrated restaurants in Washington, D.C. My uncle, Robert Taylor. I believe he was one of the main plaintiffs to integrate the restaurants in Washington, D.C., in I think it was—oh, it was around 1953 or ‘4, around the same time as the case, [*Brown v. the Board of Education*]. It was around that time.

McGarrigle: They would have known Thurgood Marshall?

Gibbs: Oh, absolutely. My father—I knew Thurgood Marshall. We can talk about that. Yes, I knew—we were all active in the NAACP, too, because my father founded the NAACP in our town, in Connecticut. He founded it in 1944. He was the first president. For twenty-five years he was president. And I grew up in the NAACP as a child, and by the age of fourteen, I was very active in the NAACP. We knew Thurgood Marshall, we knew Walter White, we knew Roy Wilkins, we knew all those people. And also Lester Granger of the Urban League. We knew all those people, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell and all those people. They used to come to our house sometimes for campaigns, political campaigns.

You know, I’ve lived a very interesting life through my father and mother and the people they knew. Growing up, I had wonderful role models. I mean, my father knew all the black politicians in the East. Whenever there was a national campaign, many of them used to come to the area where we lived, and he introduced them or he picked them up at the railroad station in New Haven. So we just knew those people. We’d meet those people.

It made a big impression on my life, to meet these people when I was young. A lot of the black and white politicians made a big impression on my life. So we can continue that next time, yes.

[end of session]
Interview 3: January 23, 2003

[begin tape 3A]

McGarrigle: —Thursday, January 23—[tape interruption]

Gibbs: I don’t want to go off on a tangent, but this really is just a brief story to say that I knew Martin Luther King [Jr.] when he was a graduate student in divinity at Boston University. I was actually a freshman when I met him—I think I was a freshman at Radcliffe. And he called me one night—that’s another very funny story, because he had a very strong Southern accent. Our fathers had been bragging about both of us. They were both Baptist ministers, and they were on this executive committee of the National Baptist Convention, which was the biggest group of black Baptist churches in the world. So they were on this executive committee, and you know how parents brag.

So my father said, oh, he had just sent me off to Radcliffe, which of course, you know, was the finest girls school in the country, and he was bragging to all his friends, of course. And they were, I guess, suitably impressed, at which point—they called him Daddy King—his father said, “Well, Julian, you know, my son is getting his PhD at Boston University.” [laughter] So, you know, that kind of back and forth. Apparently, my father said, “Oh, your son should call my daughter,” and so forth. So they set it up, see, unbeknown to either one of us, although he eventually called me and said, “Well, my father knows your father, and I’m here and maybe we can get together,” and so forth and so on.

But anyway, so I knew him and actually dated him several times. He was quite a bit older than I was, I was only a freshman, but I dated him several times at church. And finally I said to him, “You know, Martin, I’ve been going to church every Sunday all my life. But if you want to keep dating me, we’re going to have to do something like go to a movie or something.” I said, “This is not my idea of fun.” [laughter]

McGarrigle: And what was the response?

Gibbs: [laughter] Well, you can imagine, you know! True, he was very serious, and he wanted me to hear him preach. So every Sunday—the only good thing about it is he was a student, like an intern, a student preacher, so he would be invited to different churches around the Boston area, mainly in the city of Boston, in Roxbury, which is a black section, but there were lots of churches. He would invite me to sit up on Sunday morning and hear him preach. And the only good thing about it is we’d always get a really good dinner after church, because one of the ladies—we call them the “sisters” of the church—would have usually a fried chicken dinner or roast beef dinner or something really good, which I didn’t get in the dorms. [laughter] So that was why I
would go, because I said, “Oh, this is going to be a good dinner, a day for a good dinner.”

Then after about three Sundays—I actually went to hear him preach three times, and after that, I said to him—and I knew he was getting interested, but it was all this sort of formality—I said, “Martin, this is not fun for me. Let’s go to the movies some time.” Then he took me to the movies once or twice, and then he invited me to a party.

And the funny thing about that—I had then met another guy—that I really didn’t feel romantically inclined to Martin. He was very nice as a friend and very serious, and I didn’t really want to get too serious because I had decided I could never marry a minister because of my father. It’s a hard life for a woman, the wife. I decided my mother had sacrificed a lot of herself for my father and being the perfect wife and opening up her home all the time. I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to have a life of my own, plus I didn’t want to live in the South. And he made it very clear to me very early on that he wanted to go back South, and he had these ideas of changing the South; he didn’t know how, but he had some very strong ideas. So I heard that, too.

So then I had met another fellow at B.U. [Boston University], it turns out, and when I went to the party I took another girl because I wanted to signal him—I took a girlfriend of mine from school—I wanted to signal him that she and I would go home together and that there really isn’t any future. What was funny is, that was the night he met Coretta [Scott King]. She was there. And so it’s a very funny story.

But anyway, so it all worked out well. But we remained friends. But when I read all of these historical books about him, the real Martin hardly ever comes through. The person that I knew as a young man, it hardly ever comes through. It’s always kind of a face that maybe he put on after he became a celebrity or after he became a leader, but there was a lot—he had a good sense of humor, he had a lot of interests other than the church. And the part of him that I knew fairly well—you know, by the time you date somebody six times or more, you have a good sense of who that person is—hardly ever comes through. So I often think it depends on how well the writer knew you or how well he got to know you through your family.

But I don’t think you can get to know people just through documents, I’ve decided, it’s not the way to get to know people. You have to really—if they’re dead, of course, that’s the only way you can do it. But I think you really have to get into their inner circle, their family and their friends, and talk to them about, “Tell me about what this person was like, not what he did for the movement, but what was he like as a person.” And there’s maybe just one book where I get a sense of him as a person, and that’s Branch’s book. [Parting the Waters: Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement 1954-63, by Taylor Branch]
McGarrigle: Thelton Henderson is in the Branch book.

Gibbs: Yes. I didn’t read the whole thing, to tell you the truth, but what I did read was—I got more of a sense of him. But anyway, that was just about historians telling their own story from their own perspective.

McGarrigle: We started off, before we turned the tape on, saying that those who write the history books get their version.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s right. And I think that’s pretty true of family memoirs and any other kind of political histories, you as the writer put your twist on it, and somebody else might put a different twist or emphasize different things. Anyway, I just thought you’d be interested in that story about Martin Luther King.

McGarrigle: And did you stay in touch when he did make some trips to northern California later on?

Gibbs: Yes, actually I stayed in touch with him all of his life but not—when I say, formally, like if he would come to an area where I was, I would always go to see him and talk to him. We wrote for a couple years, but I don’t know—I won’t say that his wife had anything to do with it, but after a while, the letters stopped coming. I think it was just that he was busy. But we wrote, and I helped organize a group of people to raise money for the first bus boycott in Montgomery. I was still single, and I raised some money for him and sent it to him. And there are two letters—that’s something else I ought to try and find for you—that I wrote to him that are in two volumes of his, the history that Clay [Clayborne] Carson is writing. Clay Carson is our professor at Stanford who is head of the King archives. He’s a good friend of my husband. He’s an African American professor who has been authorized to do the official King biography by his wife. So we have a copy of everything in the Boston archives, which is the original archives, but everything in that archives has been copied and Stanford has a second copy.

He called me one day and he said, “Jewelle, I’m on the second volume of the King biography. I’ve come across a letter by somebody named Jewelle Taylor. Is that you?” I said, “Yes! You mean he saved that letter?” He said, “He saved pretty much every scrap of paper that was ever sent to him. I think he knew he was going to be famous.” He said he saved everything. He said, “I came across your letter,” and that was the letter where I wrote to him and told him I was raising money for the bus boycott. And later there is, in the third volume, another letter that I wrote to him later on, you know, more of a just chatty, “How are you? I read something about you” letter. I have copies of his correspondence to me, but I can’t find them. I mean, they’re somewhere around, and probably valuable, in one of my many boxes in the garage, because we’ve moved several times and I’ve lost track of it. But we did
correspond, and then he visited Minnesota when we lived there and I saw him there, and I saw him a couple of times in California.

But then after a while, the last few years of his life, I really didn’t see him. He was so busy, always rushing, always pressured, and he didn’t really come out here very often then. We’d only been out here a couple of years when he died, actually. We came in ’66, and he died in ’68, so I didn’t see him those last two years.

Gibbs: Did you have discussions with him about what you were doing at Radcliffe in terms of working on discrimination?

Gibbs: Oh, yes! We used to talk about civil rights and the difference between the South and the North, and he was convinced that the North was in some ways worse than the South. Because as he says in the South—he had a very famous statement that is probably in more than one of his speeches—he used to say that in the South, people let you come close but not go up, meaning to be mobile. In the North, they let you go up but they don’t want you to come close. So that in the South, blacks and whites actually had more contact—sometimes they lived practically next door to each other—even though they didn’t go to school together. And you know, blacks worked for whites in their homes, took care of their kids, and there was just a lot of physical contact.

Whereas in the North, neighborhoods are very separate, there’s hardly any physical contact, and blacks may or may not work for whites. I mean, they may work in a black neighborhood, they may work for the city or for the post office, so there are not as many domestics, so they’re not in people’s homes as much. I thought that was a good point, that whites and blacks, there are different ways of relating to each other, and that Northerners and I would say Westerners, feel much more discomfort around blacks than white Southerners do.

McGarrigle: Well, I was going to ask you about Westerners, that was my next question.

Gibbs: Yes, I feel much more—. White Southerners actually feel pretty comfortable around blacks, but they don’t want a black to have more status than they have. As long as you’re on a lower level, they feel more comfortable, they’re not as threatened. I think in the North and West especially, they’ll feel more threatened by you. They’re more fearful in some ways, especially of black men. Anyway, I don’t want to veer off too much from what you want to talk about, but that’s my opinion. [laughs]

McGarrigle: Well, that’s part of what I want to talk about. One of the things I wanted to ask you about was your mother’s life as a minister’s wife, and during the years when you were growing up, because it sounds like she did a lot of entertaining and hosted a lot of people who were—
Gibbs: Yes, she did through the years; we always had an extra bedroom. We lived in the parsonage and we always had an extra bedroom that she said she had to keep clean because who knows who would be coming through. And let me say that—I won’t say she didn’t have any life. That probably is not exactly true, because she did have some activities of her own, like she integrated the Ansonia Women’s College Club, which was the predecessor to the AAUW [American Association of University Women], which I’m sure you’ve heard of. And it became a chapter later of the American Association of University Women. She was the first black member of that, and she was active in politics, with my father, but on her own too. She did a lot of poll-watching on election day and registering voters for the Democratic party. We hosted in our home when I was growing up not only ministers and ministers’ families who would be coming through to preach or whatever they would do, but we hosted politicians, too. There were a lot of politicians, black and white, who came up to Connecticut looking for votes.

My father was the vice chair of the Democratic party of Connecticut, and so anytime a politician was looking for the black vote, whether they were black or white, they would contact my father and he would speak at rallies, or he would often pick them up at the train station. Then, there weren’t many planes coming to Connecticut, but everybody traveled by train when I was a little girl. I remember once he picked up Eleanor Roosevelt at the train station, and I got to go with him and met her in the 40’s when I was a little girl—I mean, I was then almost a teenager. That was the most exciting thing. I mean, I already knew who Eleanor Roosevelt was, and in fact that was the election of 1944 when her husband was ill and she did a lot of campaigning. During the war she did a lot of campaigning for her husband, and she came to New Haven. New Haven has always had a fairly large black population, and the Democrats knew they could always depend on the black vote. So she came to New Haven and she made basically two stops in New Haven, one to a Yale audience, a kind of upper middle-class intellectual audience, and the other speech was for black people and working-class whites in New Haven. My father was her host who drove her around while she was in New Haven.

So I remember meeting congressmen, governors, the governor of Connecticut, [Abraham] Ribicoff, who became a good friend of my father and appointed him to—my father was a hearing examiner for the state of Connecticut, like a civil judge. A hearing examiner is sort of—well, they hear civil cases, mainly around discrimination, so he was a hearing examiner for the State Commission Against Discrimination. So we got to meet all kinds of politicians. And my mother always was a gracious hostess. She always entertained them, and if they would give dinners and things, she would always go with my father. You know, she had a nice personality, she was outgoing and lively, so he was happy to have her around. She had an interesting life like that, but most of it, the majority of it was dealing with church members and church organizations. She kept her home open—often two or three nights a week, people would have meetings in our home. We just grew up—it’s sort of
like a political life, your life is pretty public. Your house is, they feel, if you live in a parsonage, which they pay for, they feel they can use it any time they want to use it. So my mother had to have boundaries for the family as we grew up, she had to set boundaries.

McGarrigle: And what kinds of boundaries did she set in terms of preserving your private life?

Gibbs: Well, you know, she said on the weekends, except for Sunday when you go to church anyway, but she said, “The house is for my children,” especially when we became teenagers. That, “They have to have their friends over, they have to have fun.” Her famous statement was, “My husband was called to preach, the rest of the family was not called to preach.” [laughter]

McGarrigle: In terms of hosting and doing all the meals, did she do that all herself?

Gibbs: Most of it, yes. Now, we always had—in fact, that article in her obituary points out we always had a foster girl living with us, they were teenagers. There was a place in Connecticut called Long Lane Farm. And in those days, if girls got pregnant out of wedlock and their parents rejected them, or if they were delinquent girls, they would be placed in this place called Long Lane Farm. It was sort of a cross between a boarding school and—not exactly a prison, but a detention home sort of, that’s what it was. It was way out in the country—actually, it was in a beautiful part of Connecticut. When the girls were admitted, after about six months or a year, they would also teach them a trade. Most of them were high school dropouts. So it was more rehabilitation than punishment. They would teach them a trade and—I mean, it could be secretarial or something, anything, but they would get them through high school, with like a GED. Then, if they thought the girls had been rehabilitated, they were no longer delinquent or no longer, whatever they would call them, sexually promiscuous or whatever, and the babies would also be farmed out as foster children, the girls who had babies, or to their families.

But then the girls would be what they called rehabilitated, and then families in Connecticut, they would ask them to take the girls as foster daughters to put them back in the community. But they wanted to get them out of the environment where they grew up, out of their family environment, because often it was violent or it was alcoholic or abusive parents. So my mother got involved with that system, and she actually had—well, five formally, five foster daughters, and they became members of the family. But in exchange for living in the home, they were expected to help with the housework. So it was kind of an arrangement like board and room, “You’ll get board and room and we’ll treat you as a member of our family,” which my mother always did. In exchange, they would babysit for my youngest sister and they would help with the dishes and all, no heavy housework, but light housework, and that was the deal. My mother got just—I think the state paid a pittance, really, for the food and lodging, but basically it was an exchange agreement. So these girls would
come, and sometimes some lived several years, some lived one year, some lived two years, and then they would help my mother while we were growing up. They would help her with, you know, entertaining and things like that.

McGarrigle: Did they get reunited with their children later, or was that a permanent separation?

Gibbs: I remember two did, and I think one never was reunited, she had two other children. But my mother married three of the girls off. I mean, they had weddings in our church or in our home.

McGarrigle: Wow. So they must have maintained contact with her.

Gibbs: Oh, they still do. We call them our foster sisters, and they are treated just exactly like members of the family. In fact, what happened is the longer they would live with us, the less work they would do, you know, that’s what would just happen. They would see as we got older, we weren’t doing all that much work, so they would stop doing it. My mother never complained. [laughs] So she ended up really having another daughter to take care of.

But one is dead, and a couple have moved away out of Connecticut, and the others are still in touch with her. Two were at the funeral, still in touch with all of us, actually. We became very close to three of them, and one of the three is dead. The other one that we’re close to moved away, and Althea, the other one still lives in New Haven and took us all out to dinner when we were there for the funeral. So it was really a good healthy relationship. I don’t think they ever felt like they were second-class citizens, which they could have felt like, but they weren’t treated that way in our home.

McGarrigle: In terms of the kinds of foods she prepared, were there special dishes that she prepared when you had company or was it—do you remember?

Gibbs: My mother was kind of a traditional cook. She always said she couldn’t really cook when she got married, but she cooked sort of quasi-Southern food. I’d say quasi-Southern, because it really wasn’t deep Southern food. My father liked Southern food, and so she would have to ask the ladies in the church how to fix certain dishes and they would teach her. But her food was a cross between New England food and Southern food. She liked things like smothered chicken, pot roast, which is really a New England dish. We ate a lot of pot roast, a lot of smothered chicken, chicken and dumplings, but basically I would say quasi-Southern and New England food is what she cooked, sort of a combination.

McGarrigle: The kinds of dishes your father liked that were typically Southern, what dishes would those be?
Gibbs: Well, he liked smothered chicken and smothered pork chops, and stew, which is more New England. As I said, it was kind of a combination. They liked beef stew, beef and potatoes and carrots and onions, I mean, just a regular stew. So it was not deep Southern but it was quasi-Southern with a little New England thrown in.

McGarrigle: I was just thinking, that’s a family of six plus the foster daughter, family of seven—

Gibbs: Plus two dogs and a cat, or one dog and two cats, depending on the year.

McGarrigle: Plus the animals, plus the visitors.

Gibbs: Yes, it was a lot of cooking.

McGarrigle: It’s a lot of cooking.

Gibbs: Well, it was a lot of cooking and it was a lot of entertaining and it was a lot of work. But in those days it was different than it was now in some ways, because people weren’t so formal in their entertaining. Of course in California they’re not formal anymore, but there was a period where people were very formal. So my mother was more informal and made it easier than if she had been terribly formal. We’d mainly eat in the kitchen during the week, and on the weekends we’d eat in the dining room. She didn’t set the dining room up except basically on Sunday, we ate in the dining room when we had company. We had a huge kitchen in those days, we had a huge kitchen and a big kitchen table, and all six of us would fit around the kitchen table, plus one of the foster sisters would be seven, and sometimes there was an eighth. In the summer my mother also had two stepdaughters to take care of. They would visit every summer. So then it would be always eight or nine, and I’m telling you, it was busy.

McGarrigle: Were there farms nearby where she got food?

Gibbs: No, no, we lived in a town, a small town in Connecticut. No, I think they always shopped at the supermarket. My father wasn’t big on going out to farms and things, he just wanted to do whatever was convenient. He did the shopping. He was a little before his time.

McGarrigle: That was very before his time.

Gibbs: He did the shopping. He did not like to clean house, but he would do the shopping, and so she didn’t ever have to shop. She’d give him her menus, tell him what she wanted, and he would do it every week. So that did save her one major task. But he was not a house cleaner. Like my husband, my husband likes to cook. My husband does the shopping for groceries, he likes it, but he
McGarrigle: Do you have impressions that stay with you about that time when you went to the train station to pick up Eleanor Roosevelt?

Gibbs: If I ever write my own biography or my own memoirs—well, there were three people that I most remember. One was I remember Eleanor Roosevelt because she was so tall and imposing, but what we would now call dowdy. She wasn’t a pretty woman and she wasn’t a fashionable woman. I mean, I remember this big sort of gawky woman getting out of the train in a long—I believe it was a black coat, but it was a dark coat, and a funny floppy hat. That’s what I remember, seeing her.

And another famous black congressman was named Adam Clayton Powell, and he was a friend of my father’s, and he would come up to Connecticut. Now, he was just the opposite, he was handsome and dashing and used to love to tease me. I loved Adam Clayton Powell. I mean, he was a big tease. Of course, later I found out he liked the women anyway, but I was a young girl. But he was a big tease and always would give me a big hug and a kiss. But I mean, I was like eleven and twelve when this was all happening. He really impressed me a lot.

Then there was another black congressman from Chicago who was very powerful, his name was [William L.] Dawson. You may have never heard of him, but he was one of the most powerful black congressmen of his time, and I think he was very influential with President Roosevelt [and President Truman] in getting certain legislation passed. And Congressman Dawson came—we picked him up at the train station in New Haven—and after I had talked to him all the way back—I was very talkative as a child. I still am, but as a child you don’t know how to censor yourself. So the distance between New Haven and Ansonia was eleven miles, and as my father loved to tell the story later, I talked the whole eleven miles. So we got home and my mother had dinner ready, and Congressman Dawson said, “Well, Mrs. Taylor, I think you’ve got a budding lawyer here.”

That’s when it entered my mind that I wanted to be a lawyer because that’s the first time anyone had ever said that to me. He said, “Yes, she’s not only talkative, but she makes a good case for whatever point she’s trying to get across.” [laughs] He was a lawyer. He said, “You’ve got a budding lawyer,” and my father laughed. He said, “Yes, I think you’re right, she loves to argue with me,” which I did. And I liked to win, too. I was at that twelve—you know everything, smartass age. Then I decided I was going to be a lawyer after that! Well, you know, as life turns out I always had that thought, and then after I got married I changed it to psychology. But there is a part of me that really still always wished that I had gone to law school. Because I think it was probably more of a natural calling for me, but I didn’t go.
McGarrigle: It sounds like you’ve been able to participate in the debate in different ways.

Gibbs: Yes, it had to do with the time I came along and what women were doing, and my husband was traveling to Africa. We haven’t talked about that yet, when I went to Africa with my husband right after we married.

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: I just couldn’t seem to fit it in. If I had waited a couple of years to be married, I could have just gone to law school, but I married a year after I graduated from college. And it was kind of an awkward time, because he wanted to go to Africa for a year and a half and obviously if I was going to marry him, I had to go with him. We never considered—now we would probably consider, I’d stay here and go to school. But we never even considered that. So I went there, and when we came back, he got a job in Minnesota, and so it was just—and then by that time, we were thinking about a family—and there really was just no time that it seemed right. Well, then, by the time the kids came, I started having different ideas about social work and psychology and ended up first in social work and then in psychology.

But there was, as I say, always a part of me that sort of regrets that I didn’t go to law school because it just fits with me, and I like politics, and I like to be engaged in the political debate, the political life. You have to do that in a different way if you’re not a lawyer, if you’re in any other field, but if you’re in the law, it kind of comes naturally to you. And the opportunities to be engaged in the debate are many more than in any other field. I think that what happened was I used to probably talk about it when the kids were in school and it subtly shaped my oldest boy, he became a lawyer. I think he became a lawyer partly—you know how children often do what their parents wish they had done, I think that’s what happened. Of course he would never admit it, but I think that he always heard me talking about, “Well, I wish I’d gone to law school. Law is so interesting.” But he did go to law school, so at least we have one lawyer in the family.

McGarrigle: I’ve been watching The HistoryMakers’ video, they sent that to me.

Gibbs: Yes, that was interesting, wasn’t it? That was a long interview. I don’t know how much—they cut out a lot of it, I’m sure.

McGarrigle: They may have sent me the unedited portion.

Gibbs: How long is it about?

McGarrigle: It’s about four hours, I think.
Gibbs: Oh my God, they did send you the unedited portion. We had quite a—the woman stayed here all day, almost a full day. She came at ten o’clock and left at four o’clock.

McGarrigle: They were very nice on the phone and they sent it. I’m borrowing it from them.

But I wanted to ask you more about your family home, and I know your father and your uncles loved to sing and music was a big part of your life growing up.

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: When did you start violin lessons?

Gibbs: Oh my God, did I mention that? [laughter]

McGarrigle: I read that somewhere else, actually.

Gibbs: Let me tell you that music was a big part of my family’s life, but I was not the musician. That’s what I should tell you right off. My father and his brothers did have a quintet when they were young.

[begin tape 3B]

Gibbs: Well, about music in my family—my father and his brothers, when they were young, long before I was born, had a quintet. I think it was first a quartet, and then they invited the youngest brother and it became a quintet. They traveled throughout the South singing mainly in churches but, you know, concerts. Mainly the program would be hymns and spirituals and what they used to call light classics, whatever that is, sort of operetta-type songs. I think “Danny Boy” would be—things like that—what they would call light classics. But in any case, by the time we were born, that phase was over. But several of my uncles, I guess all of them played the piano and played it well, one was a professional organist. My father played, but he didn’t play well, but he sang. So they all sang, and three of them played well. So by the time we came along, the music that was going on in the house was actually my father playing the piano and singing at home sometimes, and then the church music.

I liked to sing, and I guess I had an average voice, but they tried me on the violin when I was about six and that didn’t last long. I learned to play “Pop Goes the Weasel,” that was the height of my violin experience. It was actually kind of cute. [chuckles] I think I was in some kind of recital. But then I decided that violin was just not for me, and then I took piano lessons from about the age of ten. And I think it was probably too late, I never got inspired. I played well enough to play in the Baptist church, which I belonged to. We had a senior choir and a junior choir. I don’t know if you know anything about
the Baptist church, but in most Protestant churches, it would have been called a youth choir in a lot of churches. We called it a junior choir, but that is people basically twelve to eighteen, pretty much high school kids and junior high. I was the person who played for them, so that was the height of my playing. I mean, I could play hymns and spirituals, what we called church music, I could play that pretty well. And then I kind of fell away from the piano.

I keep thinking—we have a nice antique piano in my family room—I keep thinking someday I’m going to take adult piano lessons, just because it was another part of my life that I felt I didn’t develop like I should have; I didn’t practice like I should have. Nearly everybody in my family is musical except me, and it’s sort of like, ‘What happened to you? Where are your genes for music?’ [laughs] I really do believe that there is either a predisposition or some kind of genetic contribution to people who are very musical, who start as little kids and, you know, have perfect pitch, play instruments, sing. It runs in families. I didn’t get it. I don’t know what happened to me, I didn’t get it.

But, I have a famous cousin whose name is Billy Taylor, he’s a jazz pianist, and he is the director of the Kennedy jazz program at the Kennedy Center in Washington, and he’s won all kinds of awards. He’s older now so you may not know who he is, but he was a very big jazz pianist in the, I’d say, fifties and sixties, and has a program, actually, every Tuesday night on KQED. If you’re ever in your car around, I think it’s eight o’clock. It’s either seven or eight, Billy Taylor. He’s now almost eighty-one years old, and he’s still playing, and he’s still the director of the Kennedy Center jazz program. But his height, it was about thirty years ago. He was classically trained, went to Juilliard, so he’s a classically trained jazz pianist. He was the first black ever to head a studio band for a daily television show. He headed the studio band for the David Frost Show. I don’t know if you’re old enough to remember that.

McGarrigle: Oh, I do remember the David Frost Show.

Gibbs: Yes, well, he was Billy Taylor who would lead it in and lead it out. It would start with “Here’s Billy!” and then he would play, and then it would end and he would play it out. So he was the first black ever to have that opportunity.

McGarrigle: What was the reaction to that when that came? Was that controversial? No?

Gibbs: Nobody cared! It’s always the first who breaks the bonds, and if you play well—first of all, they would see him only like a few minutes at the beginning and maybe less than that at the end. Maybe not even—two minutes on television is a long time. But you’d see him when he’d begin the show. You know, they always think it’s going to be controversial, but the truth is most people want to know, “Does this person cut the mustard? Can he play? Is the band good?” They don’t care about anything else. And that’s exactly what it
was. There was all this anxiety, and of course who broke him in? A British person, David Frost, because he said, “This is ridiculous. I know Billy, he’s a good player, I want him for my show.” But they’d never had a black band. You know, all those stereotypes, “Will they show up? Will they be dependable? Do any of them use drugs?” I’m sure all of those questions were asked. Well, he never, I’m sure, has used drugs in his life. But anyway, he and Billy knew each other personally and he said, “I want Billy Taylor. That’s who I want,” and so they hired him, and the rest is history.

I think as long as the show was on, Billy was in it. And it was on a long time, maybe five years. I used to look at it. It used to come on out here about four or five o’clock and I would look at it. Billy did very well. And last January, a year ago, they had an eightieth birthday party for him at the Kennedy Center where all these famous jazz people came and played. My husband didn’t go, I went with my sisters. All these really top-notch famous people, like Nancy Wilson, the singer. I mean just a whole slew of them. They came and they performed, and each one got up and said how Billy had influenced their career. And Nancy Wilson said, you know, “People don’t know how many people he’s mentored, how many people he’s taught. He told us all to stay away from drugs because it would ruin our careers, and he was right,” and they went on and on. It was just wonderful. So he’s really made a tremendous contribution. I think younger people don’t know of him because he’s now eighty and he hasn’t been—he used to be on the college circuit.

He’s my role model in the family, because he’s so famous. In fact, I’ll show you an article about him that I just got the other day. Remind me before you go. He played at the Kennedy Center just recently, and they had an article in the Washington Post, because he’d had a stroke two weeks before the concert last year. I think he was, I don’t know, maybe anxious about it and couldn’t come to the concert. So he spent the year in rehabilitation and he had the first concert since the stroke. They said that he was better, but I think the right hand is still a little weak. But they reviewed it in the Post.

So I just have a lot of musicians in my family, and I’m just one of those who somehow feels like I was the retarded one as far as music goes. [laughs]

McGarrigle: He was related on your father’s side, he was one of your uncle’s—

Gibbs: He’s my father’s nephew, my first cousin. Let me get it while I’m thinking about it, because if I wait, I might forget. [tape interruption]

There we are, even though I didn’t get the musical talent, although I still like to sing. I sing all around the house all the time. I like to sing. And actually, I think if I had had singing lessons, I might have done better than all the other stuff, but I didn’t. [laughs]
McGarrigle: I did hear you, though, in the last interview talk about an operetta in high school.

Gibbs: Oh yes, that was the one where—I had a very loud voice, but also I could keep a tune, and that was when I was singing in the church choir. And I did sing in two operettas in my junior high school, and then after that I decided—oh, actually I did try out for the Radcliffe choral group in my freshman year, and I did sing with them for a year. I sang with the Boston Symphony once, I just remembered that. I forgot that.

McGarrigle: This is not an un-illustrious musical career, that’s an advanced musical career.

Gibbs: [laughs] Well, let me put it this way, yes, I did try out, I did make it as—I was a soprano, and now I’m probably more of an alto. I thought I had a future even maybe, but probably not as a soloist. Yeah, we sang with the Boston Symphony Orchestra a couple of times. The Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Group have a relationship with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, so we sang with them at least twice that year. My parents came up from Connecticut. Oh boy, they were so proud that I was singing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. You know, I’ll tell you, one of my other fantasies is I think today, if I were coming along, I’d probably want to organize one of those girl groups. That’s what I’d like to do, and, you know, sing! [laughs] That seems like a very non-academic fantasy, but that’s what I might have done if I were coming along now. Because I did like to perform, I’ll put it that way, I did like to perform. I’ve always liked that. I’ve always thought maybe in another life I might have been an actress or a singer because I like to perform.

But you see, teaching gives you that ability. A good teacher is actually a performer. You will never find a good teacher who is not a good performer, because what they’re doing when they lecture—I’m talking about especially when they lecture, not when they are one to one—but when they are lecturing, they’re actually performing. The students like teachers who are good performers. Because they have to be good speakers, and a good lecturer knows how to dramatize the material to make it interesting to students, because you can be talking about something that can be so boring to the average person, but if you know how to deliver it you can make it interesting to students.

So one of the things I enjoy—and I’m veering off, I realize—but one of the things I’ve enjoyed about teaching was that it gave—there is this performance aspect in me that I am very much aware of since I was a little girl. I enjoy bringing the material to life, so that when I would talk about—you know, I taught psychology to social workers—so when I would talk about, for example, a depressed person, I would act it out. I’d say, “Now, here’s how a depressed person looks,” body slumped, kind of slack-jawed, no energy, and I’d walk like a depressed person. Well, students love that, they loved that. I
said, "Now, if you’re working in a hospital or you’re working in a clinic and somebody comes in and is like that, the first thing you’re going to think, your first diagnosis is probably depression. And if they’re all energetic and walking fast and talking fast, you’re going to have another diagnosis." [laughter]

McGarrigle: Well, I’ve spoken with Paul Terrell, among your colleagues, and Kurt Organista, and they all indicated how well-liked you are by the students, and I should say also, how much you’re missed.

Gibbs: Oh, really? Yes, well, that’s nice. But anyway, the students used to get a big kick out of me because I would play all the roles. I mean, there are several diagnoses that are kind of easy to imitate. Not in fun, not in fun. But the psychotic, I would talk to them about, “Now, here’s how a psychotic person is going to talk, and you’ve got to listen for it.” And, “What are the signs of the bipolar disorder? One of the signs of course is mania, and what is a manic person like?” Well, they loved that one, they loved that one. [laughs] So anyway, I would see my students years later, and I had a favorite joke about—I don’t know if you know much about psychology, but the borderline personality is a famous personality type, and one of the causes of the borderline personality, presumably—actually, I don’t really agree with it—is the communication between the mother and the child. In later years I’ve kind of rejected that, but in early years that’s what they taught us and that’s what the literature said, and now we know it’s probably genetic. All the stuff that we thought had to do with mother-child communication is much more likely to be genetic than anything else.

Anyway, I would tell the story about, “This is the kind of communication called double-bind communication.” The kids had a little bit of a hard time, I would find, the first couple of years, understanding it. “What is it? What is double-bind communication?” When you really give the person two choices that are not true choices, because you’re saying to the person you have to do both of them at once, when you can only do one. And that really isn’t a choice. So they would have trouble understanding it until I finally came up with an idea of a joke. This is sort of a joke. I’d say, “Okay, a mother gives her son two ties on Christmas day. The first tie is a red tie, the second tie is a blue tie. So to please his mother, he wears the red tie on Christmas day, and she says to him when he comes down to dinner ‘What’s the matter, don’t you like the blue tie?’ That’s the double-bind communication.” I have seen students years later say, “You know, Professor Gibbs, I still remember the story of the red tie and the blue tie.” That helps them to understand the point, and it’s visual and it’s easy to remember and you can act it out. So I’d be the mother and I’d be the son, and they will remember it that way. So I do think that a good teacher is a good performer.

McGarrigle: Well, you get to the essence in that case, the example got to the essence of the diagnosis.
Gibbs: Yes, but it’s even more than that, it’s trying to leave them with something that will leave a deep imprint on their memory, you see, because it could be dramatic or something. But you want to have an imprint, and what do you do? So if you act something out, people are much more likely to remember it.

McGarrigle: Did you have teachers growing up who stayed with you in the same way that we’re talking about?

Gibbs: A few.

McGarrigle: In elementary school, or was that later?

Gibbs: No, mainly in high school. I have a hard time remembering any elementary school teacher that had a big impact on me, but I do have—starting in eighth grade I had an English teacher, [Miss Lane] and a Latin teacher, [Mr. Ryan] and a history teacher, all of whom were very good teachers, and all of whom I bonded with, and they made a tremendous impact on me. And also, fortunately two of the subjects, English and history, were very good in terms of sort of general knowledge. So I did have those two, and I always liked English and I always liked history because partly of those teachers. Latin, you can forget about. I go to graveyards now, you’d never know I took four years of Latin. My husband, we go to England and he says, “Can you read this tombstone?” I said, “Barely, but ask me about Caesar, I could tell you about Caesar’s marches.” [laughter] Oh, Lord. So you know, there were some topics that I really enjoyed, and English literature was one, and any kind of history; I love history. So, those were the two things that both really—and social studies too, social studies I liked. So I guess those three subjects which really impacted on me.

McGarrigle: Were there books that you read at that time with the English teacher that have stayed with you, that she introduced?

Gibbs: You know, that’s a good question. Some of Shakespeare’s plays I used to enjoy, believe it or not. We read mainly the classics, things like Ivanhoe. We read a lot of classic books, especially from the British authors. Some from American authors like Faulkner, we would read Faulkner. I don’t remember reading Hemingway in high school but I read Hemingway in college. But most of the books we read would be considered the classics now. We didn’t just read any old novel or any old play. They were all carefully prescribed, that you were expected to read these if you were a well-educated person, so they weren’t always fun. I think most of the books that had a real impact on me came in college rather than in high school. If I really put my mind to it, I could probably remember a few in high school that really—aside from Shakespeare, which we had to read—I could probably remember a few. But I would say that my sort of general education really began in college where I began to choose my courses, take what I wanted to take, and was introduced to philosophy in college, and I love philosophy. So it was mainly in college.
McGarrigle: Before we leave high school, I just wanted to ask you about the school system in the town where you grew up. I understand that it was integrated, but there were not very many black children in the school where you went, and maybe that’s because you were also on the academic track in the school?

Gibbs: Yeah, well, first of all, this town had—maybe 10 percent of the town, maybe even 20, were black people. Somewhere between 10 and 20, it was a small town. My town when I was growing up was about 18,000, so it was a small town. And it was a New England mill town, which meant most of the people in the town were working-class people. Whether they were white or black, they were working-class. We did not have a large upper middle-class or upper class in that town. The upper class people were the mill owners, and the middle-class people were the store owners, and the few professionals—we had a few professionals. And as far as blacks go, you had even fewer of those people. So we were in a position in my family where my father was one of maybe half a dozen blacks in the town who had even gone to college, had a college education. We did not have what you would call a class structure among the blacks. It was mainly working-class blacks, mostly Southern, who had come up from the South to work in the mills.

Then there was a group of people who were old Yankee blacks, some mixed with Indians. They’d been there—a few families, very few—had been there a long time and they’d been mixed with Indians and they sort of held themselves apart. And then there were some Portuguese people who—some of them looked like black people, but they didn’t identify as blacks because they came from the Cape Verdes. You know, the Cape Verde Islands? They were brown people but they spoke Portuguese, so they didn’t identify with the blacks and they lived in their separate section of the town. So here we have basically kind of three different groups of people who looked black, but they were very different in their origins. And there were a very few black professionals. We didn’t even have enough for a separate group. We had a black dentist, we had a black doctor, and one or two black businessmen who owned restaurants and bars, maybe two. We had my father. And at the time I was growing up there were no black school teachers, so it was—I think there were about half a dozen black people who were college graduates who would consider themselves middle-class.

So, now, when you go to the high school—we had two high schools. One was a trade school and most of the black boys went to that trade school, they were pushed into that trade school after eighth grade. They were pushed into it, and it really was machines and stuff like woodworking. I don’t know what they thought they were going to do, except they thought they were going into the factories, and nobody ever questioned it in those days. Then there was the other school which was the academic school, the Ansonia High School, where I went and my sisters and my brother went. That school had three tracks—general, academic, and commercial, and I was in the academic track. And in
my track, in my year, basically there were maybe four black kids in my class who were in the academic track, just about four of us.

McGarrigle: And was that different from the junior high school?

Gibbs: No, it was the same all along.

McGarrigle: It was the same. So there were probably the same students also.

Gibbs: Yes, the same kids, although there were more black students in the school. There might have been twenty in my graduating class, not quite twenty, somewhere between fifteen and twenty in my graduating class, but only about four were in the academic track. So basically I was in that track all the way from junior high where they began to track you, and I really didn’t have classes with many black students. Most of the blacks and the Portuguese kids were in the other tracks.

McGarrigle: It’s hard to know how to recreate that situation for people today who didn’t grow up with that. How would you describe it in terms of that experience?

Gibbs: Well, you can describe it in two ways—how you felt about it, and the educational program. I’ll first start with the educational program, because it was a pretty good program. It was a traditional New England school. And the funny thing is since they tracked all the working-class boys, white and black, into [Pine High School], that other school, and the troublemakers, they all went to the other school. So the kids at Ansonia High were kids who wanted to finish high school. Some would go on to college, most to the state colleges, and some would not. But the funny thing is that even though it was a mill town with mainly working-class people, the high school was set up as really an old traditional New England—like a Latin school. We had to take four years of Latin at that time. Like the Boston Latin School, it was modeled on the Boston Latin School. So looking back—and I realize what an anomaly it was—it was not the kind of education that most of those kids were ever going to need.

I took four years of Latin, two years of French, and the rest English, social studies and so forth, and geography. It was, I would say, fairly rigorous. And the reason I say it was fairly rigorous, I had a lot of homework, I will say that, I had a lot of homework. Translating Latin every night for four years, writing a lot of short stories, poetry and—we had all those kinds of creative writing. When I got to Radcliffe, coming out of a small-town high school of 18,000, I did just as well as the kids who had gone to the top prep schools in New England, just as well, especially after the first semester.

I mean, when I finished my—I had a little scholarship. It wasn’t a big scholarship, but we had to keep a B average. I ended the first year with about a B average, B, B+. When I finished my second year, when they were thinking
about who was going to go into Phi Beta Kappa, I was chosen as one of the 100 top students at Radcliffe, in my sophomore year. And that’s no small thing, because we took all our classes at Harvard. So I was one of the top. They gave us a reception. That’s how you know that you’re being considered. If you come out of the top 100 and you’re in your second year, and if you want to make Phi Beta Kappa—of course it gets sort of harder to make, they begin to narrow it down. I just missed Phi Beta Kappa probably by a couple of grades, but I was a contender at the end of my second year. I didn’t make Phi Beta Kappa, but I did graduate with honors. That’s why I know my high school had to be pretty good. We just took it for granted, “This is our high school.” We weren’t comparing it—how did we know?—to any other high school.

And also the funny thing is, being a minister’s daughter helped me out too, because when I took the first year’s humanities course at Radcliffe, there was a lot about the Old Testament and the Bible and philosophy that originated with the ancient Greeks and the ancient Romans, and we used to talk about some of those things. My father was a well-educated man. He used to quote Plato and Socrates all the time. This was all part of the Humanities 1 course, it was named Humanities 1. I sat there and I said, ‘I can’t believe that we’re talking about the Bible which I’ve heard every Sunday for all of my life. You know, I came up here to—.’ [laughs] And at the first midterm, I did so well that the professor commented on my maturity and understanding. [laughs] I wanted to tell him, “Well, if you had to go to church every Sunday for eighteen years, you’d be mature about these things too!” But you know, I just sort of remembered some of the things my father had said about these texts that I had to read.

McGarrigle: Well, it speaks to what he was talking about to his congregation.

Gibbs: Yes. So anyway, I loved the humanities course, because it introduced me later also to philosophy. What I found was that because of the kind of conversations we’d been having at home and hearing sermons in the church, a lot of those issues about what is good, what does good mean—I mean, those are some of the most basic issues, good and evil, that philosophers deal with. So I found that those particular topics—I felt very comfortable reading Plato, reading Socrates, reading even Hume, I mean, some of the great philosophers, because I had thought about those things before, in the context of my father’s sermons, when I was listening. You know, “The greatest good for the greatest many.” What does that really mean and how should we live? What is a virtuous person? I had thought about those things. They were not new to me. And I think a lot of the other kids, I don’t know whether they thought about them or not, but I had been exposed to those ideas on a regular basis through the sermons, so it worked out that between whatever education we got at that little high school and the sermons, that I had been thinking along some of those lines, and it was not overwhelming to me to come to college and hear this stuff for the first time.
McGarrigle: That was the academic part of the high school curriculum, but in terms of the way you felt it—

Gibbs: Okay, that was the jump—see, this is the other thing that I think it’s hard for people to understand. I did not feel any kind of racial discrimination, let’s say overtly, in high school, because number one, I was a good student. And I tell people all the time, I say, “You know, when you get right down to it, teachers like good students. If you’re a good student, the teacher is going to reward you.” So sometimes I hear about all this prejudice and all and I say, “Were you doing your homework? Were you turning it in? Were you participating in class when you say the teacher didn’t like you, when you say the teacher gave you a poor grade?” I do think there may be a group of individuals who go on to teaching who are so biased that their biases affect their grading. I think the average teacher loves a good student. The average teacher loves to teach, and if you respond, they’re going to like you. So I never had any problems with my academic program.

Now I have to say, to be fair, there was one time when I felt a teacher graded me down because I had been talking in class, and that was partly my fault, that I had been talking in class. One other incident, I think it was in 9th grade when I was a smart aleck—this is a funny incident—and I probably deserved for my paper to be—I actually liked this teacher, who was an unmarried Catholic woman and apparently very devout, middle-aged, and she was very uptight—

[begin tape 4A]

Gibbs: —I decided to give an oral presentation on the relationship between Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini, which was quite scandalous in the mid-1940s. Do you remember that?

McGarrigle: Yes, their liaison?

Gibbs: Yes, it was a terrible scandal at the time. Now, I got up—this is English class, it was one of my favorite classes. But I decided I was going to titillate the students about Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini, and I got up to say, “Well, today I’m going to talk about—.” The teacher says, “Miss Taylor, you can sit down right now. We are not going to discuss that topic in this class.” [laughter] Now, see, I don’t consider that racist. I mean, I was just being fresh! And I realized—I told my father later, and he said, “You know you couldn’t talk about that in high school in front of Miss Lane, you knew that!” He says, “I don’t want you talking about it at home,” but he’d let us talk about things like that at home. He said, “But you’re so curious, but you knew that you couldn’t take that up to Ansonia High School to Miss Lane’s class, and you deserve to get”—I think I got a zero on the assignment.

But other than that—those two I remember—I always got good grades. I was the second highest in my graduating class in the academic track. They had
separate sort of ratings. They had an overall rating, and then they had separate ratings for each track. We all knew that the general track and the commercial track were much easier, everybody knew that, but they had to give the fiction that—they had to somehow put us all together. So in the overall rating, I was seventh for the highest GPA, but in the academic track, I was second and would have been salutatorian if they hadn’t mixed all the groups. So I ended up being in the top ten and I ended up speaking on Class Day. But I mean, I always got very good grades, I always was rewarded, my teachers always liked me. Although I’m sure some of them thought I was a smart aleck, but they gave me good grades. I got good references and I never felt discriminated against academically.

Socially, I had white friends. I didn’t date white boys, but I had white girlfriends. Very active in everything you could do in a high school. I was the co-editor of the yearbook, I was a co-editor of the newspaper, I was head of the pep club, I was on the prom committee. So everything that you do—as I told you, I like to perform—I was there. And I like to run things. I’m sort of bossy. People say I’m a little bit bossy. But I like to be organizing things and I like to run things, and that’s just my personality, and at least I am aware of those things, and so I was in everything. I had a lot of energy, which I still have some, and I was just all over the place in high school.

But the dividing line came on the weekends. On the weekends, the white kids went their way and you went your way, by and large. But I did have four very close white girlfriends, and sometimes I would see them. We would go to football games together and basketball games, we’d sit together, but as far as the dating scene, there was a very sharp line. Blacks dated blacks and whites dated whites. Portuguese, they might have sort of gone both ways—they dated blacks and whites. They were about the only group, because they were racially mixed in general, so they sort of went both ways. But I never felt that I was left out, because I was very popular in my own group on the weekends, so I never felt that I was left out, because we always had parties—my house was one of the sites where we had parties on the weekend.

McGarrigle: So the parties weren’t necessarily integrated, then? In terms of the social—

Gibbs: No, the social life was basically not integrated. Sometimes the black and white girls would be friendly, and black and white boys were friendly, especially if you were on a team together, but the mixed groups—we didn’t really mix except for like a public prom or something. And at basketball and football games we’d all mingle together at those games, but as far as house parties and dating, there was—I won’t say none of it, because a couple of the black football players occasionally dated white girls. They were big heroes and occasionally dated white girls, but they were about the only ones who were dating across racial lines. But you see, I guess because it was so much a part of the fabric of the society at the time, nobody ever really questioned it. It wasn’t like we felt excluded, because we had our own parties and our own
friends and our own dates. So we didn’t feel excluded from the whites, and I’m sure they didn’t feel excluded from us, it was just that you went your own way on the weekends.

McGarrigle: Was it something that your parents felt they had to talk to you about in order to prepare you for a mainstream world?

Gibbs: I don’t think so, not then. I think we have to now. I don’t think we did then. I don’t think they ever said to me consciously, “Well, you know you’ll be going out just with black boys when you get to be a teenager.” I think you just grew up knowing it. You grew up seeing it and you grew up knowing it. And you grew up knowing that you belonged to a church where the people are all black, and other people belong to churches where the people are white, you just grew up knowing that.

McGarrigle: Well, maybe it’s harder in some ways now, in a way, that—you just said Martin Luther King talked about the difference between the South and the North and West.

Gibbs: Yes, it’s harder, because the kids grow up thinking they’re equal, and then when they are teenagers they begin to realize that the parents don’t all think they’re equal. It happened to both of my boys, and it’s very painful for them. I will tell you, it is very painful. They grew up on this campus. Their school was even more white than my school. Many years later, they went to this school, Lucille Nixon [Elementary School, Palo Alto Unified School District], which is right out here. Actually, they started at Escondido [Elementary School], which I liked in some ways better because it’s an international school. You know Escondido?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Where all the graduate students, they live there, their kids go to school there, people from all over the world, and that was a good experience for them. But then they built Nixon over here when my oldest boy was, I think, in fourth grade, and my kids were in the dividing line, they had to transfer. And it turned out that most of the campus kids went to Nixon and most of the graduate school kids went to Escondido, which was, I thought, an unfortunate thing to happen in the first place. So what happened was Escondido became the school for College Terrace and the graduate school housing down near El Camino [Real]. And this school became the school for the campus faculty families.

McGarrigle: The faculty kids.

Gibbs: Yes, which was kind of you know, I thought it was a class difference. So they came up here when Geoffrey was in fourth grade. I guess he started fourth grade and Lowell started second grade up here. There were one or two black
kids in every class. They were perfectly fine with the kids. They played with all the white kids and vice versa—they went to their houses, they went to overnights. The minute, the minute Geoffrey graduated from sixth grade, that’s when you saw the invitations for overnights stopped like immediately. That’s when they started to have boy-girl parties, in seventh and eighth grade. And Geoffrey was just—he came home one day and he said, “You know, so-and-so didn’t invite me to her party,” and I did have to sit down and talk to him then. I said, “Well, you know, sometimes maybe their parents want all the kids to be white at the parties now when they’re starting to date.” It was very hard. It wasn’t as bad two years later for my son Lowell, for some reason, but it was very hard on my oldest boy.

It’s a rude awakening because they think, ‘These are our friends, we all live in the same neighborhood, we go to the same school, our fathers teach at the university.’ But somehow, the message is when you are teenagers, ‘We don’t’—especially black boys—‘we don’t want them to date our daughters. We don’t want them to socialize with our daughters.’ There’s this real fear. It’s very irrational, but it’s there, and I knew it was there, so I had to discuss it with them.

But when we were coming along it was different, because we didn’t grow up in junior high school with the overnights and all. In fact, nobody was doing much overnighting when I was a child, and so it was very different. You just didn’t grow up that way. And your neighborhoods were a little more segregated, too, in those days. Whereas now, the kids grow up in integrated neighborhoods, they go to integrated schools, a lot of places in California, and then they still hit this junior high school—it’s really the beginning of adolescence—when the parents want to separate them. I don’t think the kids themselves would separate, but I think it’s the parents who feel that way. So it’s really more difficult for my children than it was for me or my husband, because I can still remember that I never had that sharp feeling of being excluded when I entered into adolescence.

McGarrigle: Is that a topic that you’ve dealt with in your research?

Gibbs: Not really, not directly. Indirectly, not directly. Only indirectly, when I’ve interviewed kids. But it’s really been more about not so much the social life; it’s been more about school expectations and things. That might come up, but it’s peripheral.

McGarrigle: How’s your time? I know you have to be—

Gibbs: About twenty minutes. You’re sure you don’t want some hot tea?

McGarrigle: No. How about you?

Gibbs: No, I’m fine, I just thought maybe you wanted something.
McGarrigle: I know I had read in your sister’s book about some of the houses that you lived in growing up and the idea of ghosts.

Gibbs: Oh my God, you really want to get into that? [laughs]

McGarrigle: I was interested in that.

Gibbs: Oh, dear. You want to talk about that?

McGarrigle: It’s optional for you. You don’t have to talk about it.

Gibbs: Yes, no, well, let me just briefly say, I think this is partly cultural. I guess I have to say I come from a culture, an ethnic group, blacks, who are very superstitious in general, and that started before slavery, because it started in Africa. The slaves brought a lot of superstitions here to America. You can’t really escape it if you’re a black person, because it’s just part of the culture. There are a lot of black people who believe in ghosts.

So having said that, then I have to say my father comes from a family of religious people who believe in the afterworld. So you put the black culture together—because my grandfather was also a minister—you put that together with a basically fundamentalistic religion, which Baptist is a fundamentalistic religion where there is a belief in the afterworld and life after death—so when you put the two together, yes, we grew up in a family where there was a general belief that there is such a thing. First of all, it’s accepted that there is an afterlife.

Well, if you accept that there is an afterlife, what happens to the people in the afterlife? And then it sort of gets elaborated that they’re looking out for you, they may intervene for you in trouble, all those kinds of things. Now, the issue about seeing them and hearing them is another whole level, and I think that’s part of American culture, too, to tell you the truth, and it’s part of New England culture. In New England culture, they still believe in witches.

McGarrigle: Right, and it’s also part of Asian culture in terms of afterlife.

Gibbs: Yes. So it is true, according to my mother—I was only a baby—that they did move into this house when I was a very small girl, where the house had a reputation of being haunted. This is in an all-white town of Shelton, Connecticut, and they were renting the house until the church could get them a different house. According to my mother, my father, and my two older sisters who would come in the summers, they heard funny noises, stairs creaking at night and doors slamming at odd times, and so she said she believed the house was haunted. As I say, it wasn’t a black neighborhood, it was a white neighborhood, a white town. There were hardly any blacks in Shelton, and everybody in the
neighborhood said, “This is a haunted house,” and apparently there were lots of noises.

Then as the years went by, my father and mother used to tell stories about seeing their dead parents or hearing voices. I don’t know whether they did or didn’t, I can’t say. But I will say there were some strange things that happened in my family when I was young, I will say that. I happen to think that what they were talking about is more of a phenomenon like ESP, and I think that’s the way I think about it, you know, extrasensory perception. That some people—and I guess I do believe that—that some people have like a sixth sense where they can sense things happening without being there, or they can almost sort of sense messages or feelings of people who are not right there with you. I think that probably is possible, and I think that probably can be explained. As I say to people when I tell people about this, and they say, “Well, how would you explain it?” I say, “Well, how do you explain radio waves? Isn’t it the same thing?” It’s a different form of electricity or energy.

I think it can probably be—I don’t think we have the technology to explain it yet, but there are too many things that have happened, not just in my family, as a matter of fact, but too many things that have happened around the world. Where twins in different continents will die at the same time, and people in wartime will wake up and say, “I think my son’s been shot or killed,” and they get a telegram in the mail the next day. That does happen, and it happens frequently enough for me to believe that there is some phenomenon, some kind of transfer of energy between people who are highly connected and probably intimate in some way, that there is a way that they can communicate without being in the same room, or through ways that you and I might not.

So I think that’s all probably I need to say on that subject. But I think that in the future we may find ways of measuring this, whatever it is. But I think there is something there.

McGarrigle: I’m not a skeptic on that score.

Gibbs: I think a lot of people are.

McGarrigle: I’m not one of them who is skeptical about that.

Gibbs: Well, as I say to people, “If you’ve had the experience, you’ve had it, and you don’t need to be defensive about it.” I’ve had many, many experiences that would probably come under that, ESP. I’m not defensive about it. I say I’ve had them and that’s all there is to it, and nobody can tell me I haven’t had them, where there are independent witnesses to what has happened, and that’s all. Someday I may write a book about some of my experiences. But I just can’t—you know, I wouldn’t try to teach a course on it, because I don’t think I have the evidence of what it is.
McGarrigle: It’s more experiential at this point, as you say.

Gibbs: Yes, I think it’s very experiential, yes.

McGarrigle: I’ve read, and in the other interview, heard you describe yourself as an independent thinker since childhood. It sounds like that was encouraged in your family, there was no—well, I should ask you—idea that girls were any different in terms of achievement or goals?

Gibbs: No, and I think that, by the way, I think that’s cultural, too. I think that there’s a long history of black women who were independent and had to work. Most black women and most black families have to have two jobs. And black women have never, in general—I’ll say in general—had the conflict that white women have about this feminist conflict of family or career, because we’ve had to work. So that we’ve accepted working as a part of our life and a part of our existence. And when you know you have to work, you don’t have a conflict, it’s a luxury to have a conflict. So when this feminist movement started, sort of in the mid-sixties to early seventies, I was totally confused, I mean, “What are they talking about?” Almost all my aunts were teachers, my father’s sisters-in-law—because, of course, his only sister died young, and my mother didn’t know her sisters—and my mother’s first cousins, they were all teachers, grew up, taught school, had families, had successful marriages, and those were my role models.

They were all from Washington, D.C. My two aunts on my father’s side who were in-laws, his sisters-in-law, and three first cousins on my mother’s side who are written about in the book, all had these successful careers and very stable, loving families. That’s how I grew up, and that’s who I would see every summer when we would go down to Washington on vacation.

It never occurred to me that you should have a conflict about being married, having kids, and working. It never even occurred to me! I mean, I never thought about it. And everybody I grew up with, we all knew we would eventually have careers, and maybe we would stop when we have children for a little while and then we’d go back. So all my black friends went to school, and a lot of them went to good schools, assuming we would marry, we would have children, and we would have careers, and we never once thought of it as a conflict. So it is cultural, it is cultural. So I think because of this that black mothers raised their daughters to be strong and to be independent-minded, because they’re assuming their daughters will have to manage a household and a career and raise children.

McGarrigle: That’s interesting about the feminist movement.

Gibbs: Well see, who was in the feminist movement? Who led it? And in many other cultures, that’s true too. Women work and women have careers, and they
don’t run around feeling sorry for themselves and starting movements. [laughter]

But anyway, I think in my particular family, we might have been encouraged a little more to speak up for ourselves and to think about things, to think about issues. Because at the dinner table my parents were always discussing—you know, my father founded the NAACP in our small town, and my mother and he co-founded it over an issue of a black boy being accused of a rape which he later was exonerated from. But he was accused of raping two white girls. My father really believed he was innocent, so he started a chapter of the NAACP. And I joined the NAACP youth chapter when I was twelve years old and was president of it by the time I was, I guess, fourteen or fifteen. So I was speaking out on civil rights issues certainly by the time I was fifteen or sixteen years old.

McGarrigle: At that time, how were the issues framed that you were speaking out on? What were those particular issues?

Gibbs: Well, in our town, the issues were, first of all, railroading all the black boys into this particular school and not giving them really equal educational opportunities. Secondly, black kids couldn’t get jobs after school at the local five-and-ten-cent store, Woolworth’s. Thirdly, we couldn’t use the pool at the Y, the one public pool—well, not exactly public, but it should have been, it was at the YMCA in the town, blacks were not allowed. My father and mother worked on all those things, and when I got older I was working on them with them from the point of view of—our youth chapter would take picket signs and boycott Woolworth’s when I was fourteen and fifteen.

And there were a couple of restaurants which were kind of nasty to black people. If you went in they would sort of ignore you. You could go in and sit down, and they might serve you at the bar, they might not let you sit down at a table. Two of the leading Italian restaurants were pretty nasty to black people. So those were the issues. The issues were youth jobs, and as I said, educational opportunities, and also housing. Housing was very segregated. We lived in the one part of town which had whites and blacks in it, we lived in that part of town. I guess there was one other part up in the hill, too, near the high school. There were these pockets of black areas. In this really small town, there were four pockets where the black people were expected to live. So all of those things were issues.

My father and mother used to talk about—you know, very early on we used to talk—our dinner table conversation was about those issues when I was a child. And I got very interested in all those issues. My father and mother raised us to say, “You are equal to anyone on this earth. You are never to accept second-class citizenship. You are never to allow people to discriminate against you without fighting back. You are never to demean yourself and take a job that is below your ability.” My father wouldn’t let me work in high school except for
babysitting, because unless I could have a nice white-collar job or even a sales clerk, I was not going to work, so I didn’t work.

He didn’t want me to work in college. I could get a job as a babysitter, more like an au pair, in college. I called my father and mother after I went to one house and the lady wanted me to iron, which was not part of the job description at Radcliffe. You were supposed to take care of the children, you could wash the dishes, and I think there was one other thing they allowed that they said you could do, but it was very light housekeeping, like sweep the kitchen floor, something like that. But you weren’t supposed to vacuum the house and you weren’t supposed to be ironing. This was—the university sent you, and these were professors’ wives, and this lady asked me to iron, and I balked. I said, “You know, that’s not part of the job description.” Well, she got mad and she called the employment agency at Radcliffe and told them she didn’t like my attitude, and I told them of course why. They said, “Well, we will just de-list her. She knows she’s not supposed to ask you to iron.”

So I called my father and he was furious. He said, “Who told you to do housework?” I said, “I wasn’t doing housework, I was babysitting. I didn’t think I was doing housework.” The job description said babysitting, washing dishes, and feeding supper to the baby when they went out. I mean, that’s all part of babysitting, when you wash the dishes. I didn’t feel that—you know what he said to me? He said, “We didn’t raise you to be a domestic, and I will send you extra money for your allowance, but you are not to go and clean any white woman’s kitchen.” He said that to me. “That’s not why we raised you.” His idea was that I was cleaning a white woman’s kitchen. He said, “So you are not to do that anymore.” And my father at that point, he was stretching himself just to send me to Radcliffe, because I had a very small $200 a year scholarship. Well, you know, that buys your books, at that time it bought my books, that’s what it did. He was really stretching himself and didn’t have a lot of extra money hanging around, but he just increased my allowance. And he said, “You are never to clean up a white woman’s kitchen.” You know, he had strong feelings about that.

McGarrigle: Was that the end of your—

Gibbs: No, I did do some babysitting afterwards, but I would tell the woman on the phone what my boundaries were. That I was only interested in babysitting and I would feed the child and—you know, it was always in the evening, because I had classes in the day—and that I was not interested in doing any housework except washing dishes after supper, I would do that. So then it worked out. But I didn’t tell him, he didn’t want me to do it anymore. In fact, I did very little after that. It just made me so upset, the experience. I did very little babysitting after that. But see, luckily, being a girl—I mean, in those days—now girls chip in—we didn’t chip in for dates. So being a girl, I was able to go out with boys on the weekend and they would pay for the movies, they would pay for the pizza or whatever we ate, and they would pay for all the
entertainment. And besides buying your cosmetics, you don’t need that much—you know, my parents supplied all my clothes, they of course paid everything for college, I had all my meals taken care of. So, basically the things you needed were your personal cosmetics, a magazine now and then, and a movie now and then. Basically you didn’t need much else—transportation into Boston. So he would send me my allowance and that would do it. But the boys—I never had problems getting dates so—I was popular with the boys. [laughter] So I always got to go out at least once a week with a movie or restaurant date or something.

So you know, my parents did have strong feelings. And I was very independent, I knew what I wanted to do from a very young girl, I mean, in general. I knew I wanted to go to college, and I knew I wanted to be in a profession where I could work with people because I like people, so I wanted to be doing something with people. As it turned out, I didn’t go to law school, but I ended up in a profession which is very oriented to people.

McGarrigle: And public policy also, which is another aspect of that.

Gibbs: Well, public service too. I was more interested—when I started my career in public service—in doing something that would help people, I really was, and the public policy came after I went into teaching. Because at first I was not a teacher, my first job was—

McGarrigle: As a clinician.

Gibbs: Yes, at Stanford, working with students, which I loved! To this day, it was one of my favorite jobs because I felt that I was helping young people, and I always wanted to help young people figure out what they wanted to do.

McGarrigle: We can stop for today and then we can pick up next time with the transition from high school to Radcliffe.

Gibbs: Oh boy, that’s going to be good. [laughter]
Interview 4: February 14, 2003

McGarrigle: Let’s pick up with your transition from high school to Radcliffe, and that story. [sounds of teacups clattering onto saucers] I wondered, how did that decision come about?

Gibbs: Well, the decision to go?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Okay. I think I told you a little bit about my first year, but we have to go back to how things happened. They use the word, I like the word serendipity, a serendipitous event. I think a lot of our lives are ruled by serendipitous events—meeting people, reading things, going places, and all of a sudden the trajectory of your life may change, because of, you know, sort of a hopefully lucky encounter, or it could be an unlucky encounter, like an accident. But what happened was there used to be a magazine called Calling All Girls. This magazine preceded Seventeen, you probably remember Seventeen?

McGarrigle: I remember Seventeen.

Gibbs: But I bet you don’t remember Calling All Girls. [laughter] But it was during the forties, and I was a young girl, and it was my first sort of magazine—it was for pre-adolescent girls. So, maybe I was probably about twelve. And I had a subscription to this magazine, and one day I was reading it and it was talking about women’s colleges, in an article on women’s colleges. They talked about the Seven Sisters, the sort of counterpart to the Ivy League schools. And what interested me is I lived eleven miles from Yale, and when I was growing up girls could not go to Yale. So it was very prestigious—because where I lived in Connecticut was so close to New Haven—very prestigious for all the boys who went to Yale, and the girls who were smart really resented it, because our high school, and most of the local high schools, had one or two or sometimes even more scholarships to Yale, because it was the closest private college and because it was an excellent college, but it was an all-boys college. So what would happen is every year at graduation these boys, who might have been smart boys, but maybe they were no smarter then some of the girls, would get these scholarships to Yale.

McGarrigle: And was that open to everybody or was that—?

Gibbs: Well, it was usually based on the smartest boys in the class that would get it. And I suppose there is always a little favoritism, in some way or the other, but it was open to people who had good grades. And certainly I know there was a black fellow a few years older than I was who did get a scholarship to Yale, so I don’t—the thing is you had to be very smart, and that was the main criteria.
So, when I was twelve, I was already thinking about where I wanted to go to college, because if you live around a place like Yale, there’s a lot of talk about colleges. So I saw this article, and I saw that there was a college named Radcliffe College, which I don’t think I even heard about before, and that it was sort of the women’s part of Harvard University. And then they mentioned all the other schools, but the one that I liked, the reason why I liked Radcliffe—at twelve, I was getting interested in boys, I’ll have to admit that—was that there was a connection with the boys’ school, and that they had classes with the boys, so it was like going to a coed school. I mean, it was a coed school in everything but name. And the idea of calling it a separate college, it was kind of like what we call a legal fiction. You know? There is a legal fiction. Yes, they had a separate board, yes, they had a separate group of buildings, but in fact every day they had classes over in the Harvard Yard, and they did a lot of things jointly, so it was clear that you couldn’t get an education unless you were going to Harvard.

So I thought that sounds like the best of all worlds. Instead of a girls’ school—and there is a kind of a protectiveness about a girls’ school, and they had a small campus in Cambridge—then there’s this wonderful boys’ school, so if I can’t go to Yale, I can always go to Harvard’s sister college, which was sort of my idea. So from that moment on I said to my father and mother, “You know, when I grow up and go to college, I want to go to Radcliffe.” They knew about Radcliffe because two of my older cousins had gone to Mount Holyoke, which is one of the Seven Sisters. But they had always thought I would go to Mount Holyoke. That was on my mother’s side of the family, it was sort of like this—with two it becomes a family tradition, right?

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: So my mother’s first cousin and one of her second cousins had gone to Mount Holyoke. So I was supposed to go, but I said, “Oh, no,” and I’d read about Mount Holyoke, that it was sort of in the country, and it didn’t appeal to me at all. So I thought, no. I’ve always liked being in urban areas ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be in an urban area. So that was how it got stuck in my mind, and my father said to me, very prophetically, he said, “Well, it’s probably very expensive to go there, but if you study hard and get the grades, we’ll do all we can to send you.” And that was a promise, so I did. So I studied hard. For four years, I thought, this is where I want to go and I know I have to have good grades to get there. So that’s how I chose Radcliffe.

McGarrigle: There weren’t any other—did you apply to other colleges?

Gibbs: Actually, you know, in those days you didn’t apply to so many. It was interesting, they encouraged us to apply to three or four. First, the competition wasn’t that intense in those days, because you had a lower percentage of people going to college. This idea of everybody going to college really didn’t start until, I would say probably the sixties. Now we have about half the
population actually goes to college, not more. But when I was coming along and I was a teenager, it was probably more like a third. So you had much less competition, number one. Number two, at that time, the Eastern schools hadn’t become so national. They really gave preference to people in New England, New York, and maybe they went as far as Chicago, and that was about it, and down as far as some Southeast cities. But they weren’t recruiting from California, they weren’t recruiting from all around the country, they were really New England colleges. So, your pool was then smaller.

And the third thing was that it just, if you were a good student, you were assured of a slot in a good college. You really didn’t have to worry about it. Like now, good students still have to worry about ‘Where will I go?’ because of the competition. So I applied to three schools, and they were all very different schools, and the funny thing is that when I think of them now, there was no rationale. I just had to have three schools. One was University of Vermont, I knew a fellow from Ansonia who had gone there and he liked it, and he was black, and he said, “Oh, they’re very friendly to black people at Vermont, and they’re not so prejudiced as they are in some parts of the country,” which is still true. He said he was very happy in Vermont. And then I thought, you know, I don’t know if I want that much snow all year. Then the other place was a place called Skidmore. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of Skidmore.

McGarrigle: I have heard of Skidmore.

Gibbs: It’s a small, very good school in, sort of not exactly in upstate New York, but it’s in sort of mid-New York, and at that time it was considered a very good small school. It was expensive, but it had a good program. And I don’t even, remember how I got interested in Skidmore, to this day, it must have been one of my teachers. So those were my three schools, very different—one in New York, one in Massachusetts, one in Vermont. I may have applied to the University of Connecticut, but I didn’t want to go the University of Connecticut, I wanted to get out of Connecticut. I probably did apply as a safety school, but that was it. That was just it. And I didn’t apply to any of the black schools in the South, where some of my friends were going. They were interested in going down there, but I was not interested in going down South. I figured what I needed most was a good education, and there was still a lot of segregation in the South then, and I didn’t think I could tolerate it. So I didn’t want to go down there because I didn’t want to be in a segregated environment. So the decision just sort of came together. Then I was accepted to all of the schools, and I chose my first choice—Radcliffe. On April 15, all the letters came in, and I was just thrilled, and I said to my mother, “Well, I’m going to Radcliffe,” so that was it.

McGarrigle: Wow. And at that time, were you aware of a quota system operating?
Gibbs: Oh, we all knew there were quotas, but you know, as long as you’re part of the quota, you’re not too concerned about it. Because you know there is a quota, you know they’re only going to—in fact, they had a quota for Jewish girls, too, I don’t know if you know they had quotas for Jews. There weren’t that many black girls who applied to those schools, because first of all, there weren’t that many black families who could afford it, even then. And so you weren’t competing against a very large pool if you were black. If you were Jewish, your pool was much bigger, and they did have quotas. They also had segregated rooming situations, which I found out when I went, and right away decided I was going to protest that, which I did. But you know, they used to take in maybe two or three girls per class when I went in, black girls. In my class they took in two, one didn’t show up. So they gave me a single room, and I was supposed to have a roommate.

McGarrigle: And that would have been the other girl. Do you know why she didn’t go?

Gibbs: I never even knew what her name was. But I was looking around for her the first day of school, and there was no other girl that was visibly black, that I could tell, although there were a lot of light-skinned black girls who went to Radcliffe, so I wasn’t sure. But I didn’t see anybody who looked like she was black, so it turned out when I got my room assignment, I had a beautiful single room, and single rooms cost more than double rooms. So my father said, “Well, you better go check with the dean on Monday.” I think we arrived on Saturday, because we were only supposed to be paying for a double room, and a single room is almost twice as much. So he said, “You’d better check, this may be a mistake.” So we didn’t figure it out until Monday, and then the dean kind of embarrassedly, said, “Well, your roommate didn’t show up,” so right away, I didn’t even have to ask her, “Was she black?” I just knew.

And so I said, “Well, you know, it’s a stretch for my father, who is paying the bills, it’s a really stretch, if you—” and she said, “Oh, don’t worry, you’ll only pay the same rate you agreed on.” So this is how they did it in those days. So I in fact benefited from their idea of segregation, because what happened was I had my single room, which allowed me to get used to college, to have a quiet room, not have to deal with any roommate tensions for the first year, and to kind of establish my own pace of studying and sleeping, and doing whatever I wanted to do. So I benefited from their policies of segregation. I had a single room at a double room price. And you know, this is what often happens with those kinds of social policies—they have unintended consequences. So they wanted to segregate me with a black roommate, when she didn’t come, they lost the income they would have had from the single room. Do you see what I’m saying?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And I benefited. I definitely benefited. But at that very moment, I decided I was going to protest the policy, and I did. There was a chapter on campus
called—it was a chapter of the NAACP, only they called it the Radcliffe Association for Minority Problems, I think they used that title. I was of course invited to join the chapter, and it was mainly Jewish girls from New York who had grown up in families who were radical Jews and very, very left-wing Jews, who believed in integration and all. So they were the children of—their parents, some of them may have been Communists, I don’t know, but they were the children of parents who were rather radical and left-wing in their day. They had this very small chapter, so I joined, and the first meeting, I brought it up. And they said, “You know, we’re tired of being segregated, too. We have had the same problem, and we didn’t know what do about it, maybe we can just join those issues?” And I said, “Yeah, let’s.”

So we carried a campaign out for one year, peaceful. We didn’t do any picketing or anything, but we took it to the student government, the student government discussed it. And it was just at the period where people were beginning to become more liberal, early fifties, when it dawned on them that what we’re doing in this country is wrong, and we ought to, you know, it was this ferment about the Supreme Court decision that was in the works already. It was in the early fifties, and a lot of people, educated people, were beginning to question these policies, so luckily that was when it was. Our student government, which of course had all the student leaders on campus, voted unanimously to take this issue to the administration and tell the administration that they felt this was an old-fashioned policy, and that in fact they should give people a chance. A lot of them said, “We’d be willing to room with a black roommate.” So of course, you know they come back with, “But the parents would protest.” So we said, “Well, why don’t you try and see?” See, it’s always, there’s always a rationale about racism, always. They always find a rationale and it’s usually not even true.

[tape interruption]

Gibbs:  I was a rebel from the minute I entered Radcliffe, I was a rebel, I really was. And I was a rebel for what I thought were important causes. And I had started—I think I told you that I had belonged to the youth NAACP in my small town when I was in high school.

McGarrigle: Yes, and then you became the president of it.

Gibbs: Yes, I became the president of it. So I’d had the experience with the NAACP, and how important it was in creating social change, even in my small town. And I also, I guess I told you this too, I also felt very strongly that there have to be two parties to racism and discrimination, and people can’t impose it if you won’t accept it.

My philosophy is that a lot of the racism, if people had fought back earlier during slavery, if the Jews had fought back earlier, the whole course of history would have been changed. So if you accept it and it becomes institutionalized,
then it is harder to get rid of it. But for individual acts of racism, my philosophy has always been, ever since I was a teenager, that you have to stand up and say, “No, I won’t accept this,” and then see what happens. There may be negative consequences, or you may win the battle, as I did with my eighth grade operetta. I told you about my eighth grade operetta. So I started very young saying, “I don’t have to accept this.” I’m not going to be treated as an inferior person, I’m not going to be treated—well, classified, “She’s a black person, and we have to treat her this way, she has to sit here, she can’t do this.” I’m not going to accept it, and I will fight it, and I will protest it, and maybe I’ll take my life in my hands, but it is very important to me, it’s part of my very being that I want to be treated with dignity, and I want to be treated as an equal human being. And that is so important to me that I am willing to risk my life and my reputation and my health, and I have done so.

McGarrigle: Well, Radcliffe knew about your family background, they knew that you were the president of your [NAACP] youth chapter. So they selected you anyway.

Gibbs: They knew that, but what they probably didn’t know is that I was going to come from the very first day and cause trouble about the room. [laughs]

Anyway, the story ends on a high note, because we had a male president, and his name was Jordan, and he was so shocked when a delegation of us went—there were about four of us who went to meet with him. [doorbell rings] I think that’s FedEx.

And he was so shocked, he couldn’t believe, you know, he had so much power. Again, the past—a male president of a women’s college, okay? So he’s sitting up there with all this power over all these women who were kind of probably intimidated by him, I guess. And so the four of us—by this time it was my second year and I was the vice president of the student government, my sophomore year—so we went, the four officers, and told him we had a petition, and we had had this unanimous vote against—I don’t think we even used the word “segregated” roommates, I think we said something like “preferential rooming assignments” or something, but we used a different word, so it was less threatening. And that’s also a political issue you learn when you do these protests that it’s sometimes not what you say, it’s how you say it that makes a difference, so we decided we’d kind of say it in a way that was more palatable to the administration. But it meant the same thing.

And so we said that all the girls on the student council said that they would not object to, in the first year—because after that you picked your roommate, so it’s no problem after that. But all of them said, “We wouldn’t object to having”—sorry about the noise, god, it gets worse and worse. [loud noise in the near background] So he was quiet a minute. He said, “Well, that’s interesting.” I can’t remember exactly all he said now, years later, but basically he was upset that we were sort of, you know, testing his authority,
really, saying, “We don’t like this policy, we would like this policy to change.”

He said, “Well, first of all, what about the parents?” And that’s the first argument. So we said, “Well, who are you educating? Are you educating the girls for their future, or are you giving in to the parents who are victims of the past or who reflect attitudes of the past?” So he said, “Well, that’s an interesting point, but I have to take this up with the board.” So we said, “Well, we’d like you to take it up with the board,” and I think we threatened going to the press, the Boston press, and then he really got upset. He said, “Well, we will talk about it, the administration will talk about it, and then we will have to talk about it with the board, and maybe we will have an experimental year,” and all that stuff. So anyway, we said, “Well, we’d like them to attend to it as soon as possible.”

The next year, they had—see, they had so few black girls, but the next year, they put the black girls with, you know, they mixed them up with white girls. And apparently, it’s less obvious with Jewish girls, but apparently they also had some mixing—not total, it turns out it wasn’t total, but by the time I graduated, it was random rooming assignment. Random in the sense that you do say what preference do you want, you know, like smoking or not—well, I don’t think smoking was the big issue in those days. But you know, you can state certain kind of preferences for roommates who have certain interests like yours, like if you like to play music all the time and stuff like that. So they do try match roommates according to certain interests, but the race was no longer a factor. So by the time I graduated, we had succeeded in the campaign. And of course, the irony is, maybe ten years later, the students came in, maybe fifteen years later, in the sixties, you know what they wanted?

McGarrigle: They wanted segregated housing.

Gibbs: It was very ironic. I said, “We worked so hard to spread this message that we came here to be educated, to meet each other, to mingle, to learn about the rest of the world, and we got them to change the policy.” And then I guess it was about the mid-sixties or early seventies that the students, the black students came in and said, “We wanted segregated rooming.” And to some extent they got it, so it was just one of those things. So times change, that’s social change.

Then I had to have another fight with Harvard. By then my children are growing up and going to college, and then I had another big fight with Harvard over my son’s rooming, so you know, it just goes on and on, and it was exactly the opposite issue. He did not want segregated rooming, and they thought all black kids wanted segregated rooming. So actually, it was the same issue for me, so I had to go through it all over again, because they were responding to the black students’ organizations that were saying, “Oh, you know, we need to be by ourselves, we need our own house,” and it was ridiculous. I mean, I think it was ridiculous. So when my son was a
sophomore, they choose houses, and he chose three houses based on his interests. Harvard has this beautiful house system, these gorgeous mansions, sort of, they’re large brick dormitories on the river, and they’re just beautiful. And I had hoped that he would be in one of those houses. They’re lovely, they have suites and everything. I mean, you pay a lot of money to send your kid to Harvard, a lot, and so I said, “I hope you’ll get one of those nice houses.” They don’t all get their first choices, but they have three choices, so he had choices based on his interests.

Next thing I know, they are sending him up where I used to live, the Radcliffe yard, to a sort of modern glass dormitory which was right across from where I first had my room when I was a freshman. But not at all as nice as these more traditional brick, large—well, they’re not exactly like mansions, but huge buildings that are very gracious and nice—and I’m saying, you know, I’m spending all this money so he can go up to the Radcliffe yard and live in a house that is considered the black house? No. I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to do it. So then I had to have an extended correspondence with the dean of students, whom I knew, and, “Well, you know, Jewelle, we don’t usually change, because every parent wants change.” I said, “Listen, I don’t care.” I’ll tell you what I told him. I said, “You know, and I know, because you’re from the same generation that I’m from, that we fought for integrated housing. My child did not grow up in a segregated environment. He is not used to a segregated environment. I did not send him 3,000 miles across this country to be in a dorm which is predominantly for black students. I’m sorry.” And I said, “I want him out of there, and I want him in one of his three choices, and I want you to take care of it.”

Well, after all that, he did take care of it. Because he knew me, he said. He said, “Well, I understand how you feel, and I know that you have always been an integrationist, and so am I. But you know, these kids put all these pressures on us.” And I said, “But you know, they’re kids. They are kids. Why are you listening to them?” And I said, “If some of them want them, fine. But I don’t think you should put all black students together. Don’t you understand, that’s ghettoization?” Well, yes, they understood that, but that’s what they want. And I said, “Well, who are the adults here? Who is running Harvard?” I said, “I object to this. My son doesn’t want this.” So he said, “Okay, I’ll take care of it.” This is after two letters and two phone calls, and so he said, “I’ll take care of it.”

He takes care of it. In other words, he was going to put Geoffrey back in—Geoffrey is already in the dorm, okay, by the time this all goes on. He was going to put Geoffrey back in the one place he wanted, which was Kirkland House, and guess what, of course, what happened? Can’t you guess with teenagers?

McGarrigle: Oh, he didn’t change his mind!
Gibbs: He decides that he likes where he is, because he’s made friends already. And because he’s on the basketball team and because, “Mother, I’m already here, I have friends, I’m on the basketball team, and I wish you wouldn’t interfere in my affairs,” after he told me he didn’t want to be there. But now, now he sees me as interfering in his affairs, after he was so unhappy, that he felt when he first got the letter. So I said, “Okay, fine. You know, I am never going interfere in your affairs again because I have egg all over my face.” Now I am so embarrassed, I don’t know what to do! [laughter]

So I had to call Archie [Epps], his name was Archie. I said, “Archie, I have to apologize to you. After all this sturm and drang, Geoffrey decides he’s going to stay in Currier House,” is the name of the place. So he just sighed. He said, “Well, that’s how they are, that’s how they are.” But I mean, it was just so ironic to me, because I was one of the leaders of the integration at Radcliffe and Harvard. Because this was also done at Harvard. And after all that effort, that this would come back in a different form, you know.

McGarrigle: Well, it’s interesting that the administration at that later date thought that all people of a certain minority background thought the same way. It didn’t view them as having independent thought.

Gibbs: That’s really true. Well, see, I think that they actually knew that they all didn’t want it, but they weren’t sure who did and who didn’t.

McGarrigle: And they didn’t make it optional.

Gibbs: Yes. No, they didn’t put them all in black houses, that’s what’s interesting. They put some of them in black houses, and they didn’t put them all in black houses. I don’t think they put the kids who went to private schools in black houses. Because it wasn’t an all-black dorm, it was a primarily black dorm, it wasn’t an all-black dorm. So they could say, it was like—well, it wasn’t even primarily, but it was like what they called a—oh, they had a word for it—a cluster. So they would put a significant number of black students together. They would call it cluster, but it would be a cluster which was large enough so if they wanted to segregate themselves, they could. So they would sit and eat together, they would do social things together, so that it was easy, it facilitated separateness, that is my point. It wasn’t that it was all black, but that they had a critical mass of black kids who would then kind of use that as an excuse to kind of segregate themselves.

McGarrigle: In your second year at Radcliffe, who was your roommate?

Gibbs: Well, that was interesting, of course, because this was—oh god, this story brings it all back [laughs]. I had a white roommate for the second half of my first year. A girl approached me, we got along, and we were both from Connecticut, a girl named Lorna [Briggs]. We just hit it off very well. We were both Scorpios, if you know the signs, we were both Scorpios. We used to
play bridge together during the fall. I became a bridge addict at Radcliffe. And one night she said to me, “Well, you know, Jewelle, I’m looking for a roommate. Do you want a roommate?” And I said, “Well…” I sort of enjoyed this, having my room alone. She said, “Well, there’s a nice double, a really big double, upstairs that we could probably get.” So I roomed with her until the end of the year—and we got along beautifully. We were lifelong friends until she died about ten years ago, lifelong friends.

She got married, she eloped at the end of our freshman year. She went home that summer and eloped with a guy from Princeton. And let me know after the elopement before school started. And then they did the same thing, they put a black girl with me, who was a freshman, which I really—see, this was why I say that they hadn’t quite finished the job my second year. And then I just really was so angry, and I went back again to see—this time I went to see the dean, and I told her I was really going to protest, and that it was unconscionable that they would give me not just a freshman, but that they would give me—again segregate me, in a sense, with a black freshman, who turned out to be a very depressed girl. She slept all the time, she didn’t go to class, I mean, from almost the first week. She slept, she didn’t go to class, she missed meals, and then she would hoard food in her room—she was disturbed. That was even before I had ever had a psychology course, she was really quite disturbed, and at Christmas she didn’t come back. So I had, you know, sort of bad luck for different reasons with roommates—and then after that, I think I stayed in my room by myself, the second half of my second year and then—

[begin tape 5B]

Gibbs: But anyway, Linda [Johnson Barnhart] had gotten married over the summer, and she needed a room, and could she room with me? And she was white. So she and I roomed together my senior year, and we got along. We are still—the two roommates that I had, the two white roommates that I had, I’m still very friendly with. The black girl I never heard from after she went home. She really, essentially, I think she had a nervous breakdown, but she was very depressed and wasn’t able to function. She just couldn’t function as a student at Radcliffe. I think she was overwhelmed. I think she had probably come from a not very good high school in Baltimore, and she hadn’t had the preparation. And I think from the first week of classes she just was overwhelmed, so she just couldn’t function. I never have heard another word—once she left, I never heard from her again. And I’ve often thought I should look her up—I mean, through the years—but I don’t know whether she married, and I’ve never looked her up, and I really feel I should have, but you know, there’s a part of me that feels guilty that I never looked her up.

And then Linda, my senior roommate, the one who was the white girl, she is still living in Massachusetts. We’re still in touch, and the other two roommates are dead, they died young.
In my junior year at Radcliffe I had another complicated roommate situation. In order to live with my friend Jane Bunche, I moved from Moors Hall, the newest dormitory on campus, to Cabot Hall, an older traditional ivy-covered dorm closer to Massachusetts Avenue. Jane, the daughter of the UN diplomat Ralph Bunche, and I had become close friends during my sophomore year and she had asked me to be her roommate. Jane and I were polar opposites: she was an introverted soft-spoken senior and I was an extroverted, assertive junior. While she was usually shy and reserved in public, in private she was chatty and had a wry sense of humor.

It wasn’t long before I realized that Jane was troubled and wanted a confidante, whose shoulder she could cry on, more than a roommate. She complained constantly about a variety of anxieties and fears about her body image, her studies, her social life, and her safety. Shortly before Thanksgiving, I was so concerned about her that I asked to talk to her parents in private while I was visiting their home in Kew Gardens, New York for the weekend. When I suggested that she might benefit from seeing one of the college counselors, Dr. and Mrs. Bunche were appalled at such a suggestion. They were very dismissive of my concerns and did not seem very sympathetic to her distress. Before we returned to college, she told me that they had told her to “get hold of herself,” to return to classes and to “stop this nonsense immediately.” I was struck by how docile she seemed around her parents and how fearful she was of their disapproval.

On the train ride back to Boston, Jane cried most of the way and commented that her father was overly strict and demanding of his three children. She felt her mother was dominated by her father and afraid to challenge him, even when she thought he was being too hard on them. Jane also felt that her parents wanted their children to appear perfect in public so as not to cause any embarrassment or shame to the family, thus counseling was not an option for them to consider.

After that visit to her family, Jane grew more depressed, spent most of her time in the room, and withdrew into a shell. At the end of the Fall semester, the situation became intolerable to me and I requested a transfer to a single room. Although I was very sympathetic to Jane, I could no longer study or entertain friends in our small room, which was always in a state of disrepair with her clothes and belongings spread all over the closet and the floor. We parted as friends but I was never able to understand the reluctance of Jane’s parents to seek psychiatric help for her.

Later that spring, the dean of the college contacted Dr. Bunche and asked him to come up for a meeting about Jane’s deteriorating mental health. After that meeting, Jane received regular counseling at the college health center and just barely managed to graduate in June. Looking back, I think my experience with
two depressed college roommates were major factors in my interest in a career in mental health, because I had had first hand experience with the devastating impact of untreated psychological problems on young women and those in their orbit.

[end of June 21, 2007 insert]

McGarrigle: So the student government went to the dean and got this policy changed—but they still—that was your second year?

Gibbs: Well, they got it changed, actually it was my second year they got it changed, but that was—so I think it actually, in time, it was after they put me with the black woman. I think that was in some ways the catalyst. We had started discussing it, and we had gone to the president in the spring, so the policy had not been changed. But then when this happened, I think that was the catalyst. I mean, I really created quite a stir there. I mean, they knew they were wrong. I said, “How could you do this to me? I have a lot of friends who I could have asked, ‘Would you have liked to room with me?’ White or black.” Not so many black friends, because I was the only one in my class, so I can’t say that, but I had white friends who I could have roomed with, easily. But they never even told me. They just—I just showed up one day, and there she was. The first day of school, there she was. You can’t imagine how shocked I was. And so I said, “You know, this just isn’t right,” and then went back to the student council—I’m glad you asked me to clarify that—went back to the student council and I said, “Now this is what happened to me this year.”

By that time, I was vice president of the student body and I knew a lot of people, I had a lot of friends, and I had a lot of support.

McGarrigle: I want to get to your role on the student council, but to back up, you probably didn’t visit Radcliffe before you went there.

Gibbs: Yes, I did.

McGarrigle: Oh, did you?

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: And what kind of visit was that?

Gibbs: Oh, that was—[laughing] you’re asking me all the right questions, you’re asking me all the right questions. Sometimes you forget certain things. Well, I went up to Radcliffe, my father drove me—you can tell that I’m a talkative person, I’ve always been, I’ve never had any trouble talking, I am not shy, and I have never been shy. I always think when people say, “Oh, I was shy when I was younger,” I wish I could say that. I say I never have been shy. So I went up, and the dean who interviewed me, she was the associate dean, was really
kind of an uptight lady. I found out later that she was not well liked by the students. There were three interviewers in the office, and I got the worst one in terms of personality. She was kind of, let me put it this way—her name was Dean Elliott, an uptight New England spinster. Do you have the vision?

McGarrigle: The image, yes.

Gibbs: Do you have the vision? And I mean, even as a seventeen year old, I could see that she was an uptight New England spinster, you know. Very prim, a suit, and low heels, and you know, sat like this, you know—just the whole picture. And something signaled me, Jewelle, you have to be not so talkative, you have to be, you know, a little bit—you have to repress your natural enthusiasm. But I guess I couldn’t do it. Anyway, so she said—oh, she said to me, and later I realized it probably was a test, “You can sit in the chair or you can sit on the floor,” she said some girls liked to sit on the floor and be comfortable. But I did sit, I sat in the chair. So I thought maybe the people who sit on the floor were kind of Bohemian or something, and I’m not that Bohemian, so I’m going to sit in the chair. And I thought, ‘For you, I’m going to sit in the chair.’

So anyway, we talked, and she got me going on what—they wanted to know what kind of person you are aside from your grades in an interview. Now they probably don’t do interviews. And then, as I told you, they weren’t that many people, so everybody got an interview who wanted one, if you could get there. So my father drove me, and by the time I got there I was a little tired, but anyway, she said, “Just tell me about yourself, tell me about your hobbies, tell me about your family, tell me about what you want to do, why you want to come to Radcliffe.” Well, most of those things I had thought about. I was not sure what I wanted to major in yet, and I told her that. I said, “You know, I’m not sure of that.”

But in any case, whatever she asked me, I had plenty to say about it. So when we came out of the interview room, she said to my father, who was a minister, said, “Well, I hope my daughter comported herself well,” or something like that. She said, “Reverend Taylor, you don’t have to worry about your daughter. Your daughter can take up for herself.” [laughing] I’ll never forget that. So my father said later in the car, “Well, I don’t know whether that means you’re in or you’re not. I could hear you talking out in the room where the parents sat, I could hear you talking!” I said, “Well, I have a loud voice.” But that’s what she said, “Reverend Taylor, you never have to worry about your daughter. She can take care of herself.” But I did get in. So whatever it was, I guess she thought I was, as they say, Radcliffe material. And they do like, they did like independent girls. They liked girls who could come up and compete with the boys, and do their own things, and I guess I must have let her know that I could do that.
I was a little concerned, I think she said, “Well, tell me about your high school,” because at that time at least probably nearly one half of the girls went to prep schools—almost, not quite, maybe about 40 percent of the girls went to prep schools, and the other 60 percent went to these top schools like Bronx High School of Science, Manhattan School of Music—places that were not prep schools, but they were such highly competitive public schools that it was almost the same. So here I’m coming from this little small town, Ansonia, Connecticut, who nobody has ever heard of, they’d never had a student from Ansonia, she told me, which I was not surprised to find out. And so I was the first student from my high school to ever apply, so she wanted to know a lot about, “Tell me about your high school. What courses do they offer?” This was before the days of the AP [Advanced Placement] courses. In those days, there were no AP—you either went to a private school or one of the fancy public schools. But public schools did not have AP courses, that’s a much more recent kind of thing. I think that probably started in the sixties or seventies, maybe sixties.

So, I told her what I had taken and what I done, and she said, “Well, you have a good record. You know, you did well on your exams, your SATs. You have a good record.” So I think I tried to convince her that I’d had a pretty good public school education, although I wasn’t even sure that was true.

McGarrigle: Did your first visit to Radcliffe fit with your image that you had since you had read the article at age eleven?

Gibbs: Well, it wasn’t—you know, I was looking for more of a typical campus, but I will say, I was a little disappointed. It wasn’t a beautiful campus, it was not beautiful. I was thinking it was going to look more like Wellesley or Smith or Stanford, a beautiful green campus, you know, and beautiful buildings—it wasn’t. It was a city campus, very small, what they call the Radcliffe Yard, and then we walked over to the Harvard Yard, which is bigger. But it’s in a city that itself is very, very old, a very old New England city. So you pass these markers, you know, pre-Revolutionary, built before the Revolutionary War. And that was interesting. Cambridge is a very historic city. And so you would pass these old, old houses with these little markers, and cobblestone streets, and Harvard Square, and everything looked old. So it was a little disappointing to me in terms of a campus environment, but you get used to it. I mean, it’s convenient. There was a subway stop right in the middle of Harvard Square, and it was very busy, so that part I liked. I mean, it’s a small city, but it seemed more like an urban environment, so I liked it.

Anyway, I was excited just to go and see what it looked like, and they gave us a guide to take us around, who was very nice to me that day. And I had lunch in the dorms with my father, so the whole experience was interesting, and I liked it. I just was a little disappointed in the look and feel of the campus.
McGarrigle: What was the reaction in your high school and your hometown about your—you know, local girl going to be the first at Radcliffe?

Gibbs: Oh, I think people were pleased—my teachers were very excited when I got in, they were very excited. You know, I’m sure they announced it at an assembly. It was in my local paper—when I went away, they had a little article in the paper. And if you really want to hear a funny story, they have in our hometown, they have a column “Twenty-five Years Ago,” so on my twenty-fifth class reunion from Radcliffe—and I lived out here then—there was actually this little item in my hometown paper which was called the Ansonia Sentinel, saying, “Twenty-five years ago on this day…” (well, it was actually that previous September), “twenty-five years ago on this day, Jewelle Taylor left to go to Radcliffe College.” [laughter] I mean, that’s history! My mother sent it to me. But they had put it in the paper! So they look in their files, well, what was happening twenty-five years ago? So in that small town, my going to Radcliffe twenty-five years ago was a big thing.

McGarrigle: It was news.

Gibbs: Well, I was the first girl to go from my high school, and it’s a small town, 18,000 people. So it was news. And people were very nice, you know, they gave me a nice going away party, almost like a bridal shower. The people in my father’s church gave me a beautiful party, and everybody bought beautiful gifts, sweaters and belts and scarves, you know the kind of thing you want when you’re going away to college. So I ended up with a lot of gorgeous things that people gave me—some jewelry, costume jewelry, but nice pearls and things. So when I arrived, I had all these lovely new things that people had given me, so that was nice.

McGarrigle: Were there preparations that your mother helped you with? I don’t know what kinds of preparations did she do for you.

Gibbs: Oh, yeah. Well, I guess what all mothers do. My mother at that time was sewing, and you know, as I said—I mean, it was an expensive school at that time, it’s more expensive now. But relative to my father’s salary, it was an expensive school. And so she spent the summer making me some things, and she made me this gorgeous—I’ll never forget it—beautiful red velvet dress for parties, and I love red, red is one of my two favorite colors. And so she made me this beautiful red velvet with a heart-shaped top and a sort of bouffant skirt. I kept that dress for about ten years because it was so beautiful, I couldn’t give it up. After I graduated, I certainly wore it several times, usually during the holidays, it was red velvet. After we married, I couldn’t give that dress up, so I took it to a dressmaker, and of course I was a married woman then, and I had it made a little more sophisticated. So I made it straight like a sheath with a split probably up in the back and a halter neck, so I changed the neckline. I think I kept that dress for ten years.
So she made me that, and then she shopped with me, and did the usual things you do, I think, with a child getting ready to go to college. We would go to shop for sweaters and skirts and the kind of things you would buy, mainly those things.

**McGarrigle:** Was that hard for you to leave home, and hard for her to see you go?

**Gibbs:** I think it was hard for them to see me go, but I don’t think it was hard for me to leave. I was ready to leave. As I said, it was a small town, and I wanted to see the bigger world. I wanted to see what was out there. I wanted to live in or near a big city. So Cambridge, of course, is right next to Boston, and I really wanted to—a small town in some ways is, how can I put it? It’s very reassuring, because everybody knows you and it’s safe there, pretty much safe. In the sense that, because my father was a minister and a very well-known person in the town, I couldn’t go anywhere in town, like being on the wrong side of the tracks—there was a wrong side of the tracks, people would call him and tell him, “We saw your daughter over here.” I think I told you about the boyfriend I had who lived on the wrong side of the tracks?

**McGarrigle:** Oh, no.

**Gibbs:** No? Oh yeah, well, in high school I had a boyfriend [Richard Leowe]. I really liked him a lot. And not only did he live on the wrong side of the tracks, but he worked in a market on the wrong side of the tracks, downtown—what they called lower downtown. Why is lower downtown always bad? You know, for some reason, but it’s sort of like lower downtown, and I would go out of my way after school—it was nowhere near my neighborhood—to walk in that part of town just to wave to him—you know, silly. When I was fifteen or sixteen, just silly. So my girlfriend and I walked way downtown, out of the way, so we could just wave to him through the window. [laughter] That was the highlight of my day. When you look back at that foolishness when you’re fifteen and sixteen. Then people would call my father to report it.

And that’s where the taverns were, there were two black taverns over there—we called them taverns, now we would call them bars. I don’t know, they don’t even use the word taverns now, and I think it comes from the Greek, *taverna*. But we always called them taverns. There were two black restaurant-taverns or restaurant-bars in that part of town, and he worked right near one of them. People would call my father and say, “We saw your daughter, she shouldn’t be in this part of town.” So you know, in the sense that it’s safe because everybody is nosy and talks about your business, and you couldn’t be out late because people would do the same thing, they would see you, and if they saw me walking with a boy who had a bad reputation, they would call my mother. So in that sense it was safe, but it was also smothering.

**McGarrigle:** Yes.
Gibbs: So it’s safe, and it’s nurturing, because people are supportive, but it’s also smothering. You know, you don’t want to grow up in a place where everybody knows all your business, sees everything that you do, and then reports it to somebody. So I was very glad to get out of that town in the sense that I wanted to, have some life which was my own, where I could be anonymous, and if I wanted to walk down the wrong part of town, it was my business.

McGarrigle: Did you have some kind of homesickness during your first year there, or no?

Gibbs: Yes, I think you always do. First of all, I was homesick, because I didn’t like the food, because my mother’s food had a sort of Southern flair. It wasn’t really true Southern food, but it had a Southern flair, meaning that she would use more salt and spices, and she would cook her food longer. Southerners cook their vegetables longer than Northerners. Like this idea of crisp vegetables, we never knew what that meant until we left home [laughs] everything we ate was pretty mushy. But that’s what we were used to. So, you know, she would cook the green beans for hours with bacon or salt pork pieces in them, and they were delicious—

McGarrigle: Flavor, you’re talking about flavor.

Gibbs: Yes, I’m talking about flavor and spice. And then I went to New England where nothing tastes at all, nothing has any flavor, really, I mean, boiled potatoes! We ate a lot of rice at home because that’s more Southern, a lot of rice and gravy, okay, my father loved gravy. My mother would make things like smothered chicken, lots of gravy and rice, or smothered pork chops with gravy and onions, they were delicious, and mushrooms. Well, I never got that kind of food at Radcliffe. You know, you get baked beans, and you get salt cod fish, and you get, oh, lots of Brussels sprouts and lots of beets. We had never eaten beets at home. Beets is a very New England product. I don’t know if you like beets.

McGarrigle: Well, I’m thinking turnips, that whole—all the root vegetables.

Gibbs: Turnips, beets—yes, all the root vegetables, and cabbage, and oh my God, and I tell you what. And boiled potatoes. I was never so tired of boiled potatoes, and peas. And you know, we did eat peas. But by and large, the diet was very Boston-New England diet, with very little salt or pepper, and the food was not cooked with any spices. So I was really homesick for my mother’s cooking for a long time. I never really liked the dorm food. We would have nice desserts, but even so, you gained weight, because it’s very starchy. We had a lot of starch, so by the time I got home at Christmas, I’d probably gained five pounds.

And I missed my sisters and my brother, but when you have siblings, there is always a lot of stuff going on in the house, so in our house, there was always a
lot of, not exactly turmoil, but noise. There was always a high level of noise, and people running up and down the steps, and the phone ringing, and people coming in and out of the house. And I guess to some extent you get used to that, and so all of a sudden it was kind of quiet, and so I missed, you always miss home. And of course I didn’t have to go to church every Sunday any more, so I didn’t. I sort of stopped going to church, because I used to have to go to church every Sunday, and I would sleep in and all. But I think going to a college which is not right near your home—because I didn’t see my parents except on holidays—is always an adjustment. But I was the oldest, and I think I was ready for a change, so it wasn’t—I guess I wasn’t that homesick.

McGarrigle: Last time, you mentioned wanting to talk about the pressure that comes from coming from a family that has very high expectations.

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: Did you have a sense, a fear that there was a way that you could fail, or that this wouldn’t succeed somehow?

Gibbs: Well, I guess I’ll turn that around to say, you felt like you couldn’t fail. You felt like there wasn’t room for failure. That’s the way you feel.

McGarrigle: And you had always succeeded—academically and socially—but was that a pressure that you felt particularly?

Gibbs: Well, I think what happened is that when you grow up in a family where it’s a pretty close-knit family, and my father talked a lot about his family. My mother remained homesick nearly all of her adult life for her home, which is in Washington, D.C. She always missed it, she always missed her relatives, even though, of course, she was not raised by her parents, but she had other relatives. And she missed living in a big city with a lot of educated black people, as did, I think, my father. So they spent a lot of time talking to us about their families, and especially the accomplishments of my father’s family were talked about a lot, and what they had done growing up, and how they had kind of enjoyed, even in a segregated society, how they had enjoyed a certain level, a fairly high level of status. And how they were insulated from the racism around them, which a lot of people don’t understand.

It’s hard to understand unless you’ve grown up in that environment, but if you grow up in a large city and, whether it’s Mexican or Asian or black, and if you live in your neighborhood, and if you go to schools where everybody looks like you, and if you go to churches where everybody looks like you, and all your social life is centered there, then you are insulated from the feelings of those people around you that you don’t see. Maybe you can go days and weeks without seeing whites. So my mother and father grew up in that kind of environment where there was a lot of insulation against day-to-day racism,
and they were supported and reinforced and praised for whatever they did, and they were expected to do well.

And so you know, we had a lot of talk about my grandfather and how he started—I think I’ve told you this already—a little tiny elementary school for his own children so they wouldn’t have to go to segregated schools in North Carolina. And how when he saw that things weren’t getting better in the South, how he moved first to Virginia and then he moved to Washington, D.C., to educate his children. And it’s always been a story of a struggle in our family, which really recapitulates the racial struggle. When you hear the real story of my family life, it is the story of fighting against racism in the South, it is a story of moving away from it, it is a story of social mobility. I mean, we’re not the only family, I want to make that clear, that did this, but if it’s in your family, then you feel like you, first of all, are the bearer—in some ways I always felt I was like the bearer of these traditions, and that I had to do as well or better than all the previous generations who kept improving themselves, who kept fighting racism, fighting segregation, and trying to establish yourself and your family looking for ways to affirm yourself as human beings. Looking for ways to succeed in your environment, looking for ways to insulate your family from the blows and the indignities of segregation and racism.

So that is what we heard, I will say not necessarily daily, but certainly weekly, on a weekly basis growing up. Their stories about what Granddaddy did to fight racism in the South, what my uncles did to fight racism in the South, what my father did. And on my mother’s side, it was education—my source of information, inspiration came from the fact that all of her cousins were educated teachers, and she grew up as a young girl with one of her cousins who was a principal of an elementary school in Washington, D.C., and another cousin was the vice principal of a high school in Washington, D.C. True, they were segregated, but they were good high schools.

I have a cousin who was the first black woman in America, on my mother’s side, to get a PhD in anatomy from Western Reserve. The first black woman, and she was a professor of anatomy at Howard University Medical School. And so all I had these role models—the first this, the first that, the principal here, the vice principal here. Another aunt who was a teacher in North Carolina, another aunt who was a teacher on my father’s side in Baltimore—and mainly in the South, you notice, they were all Southerners. And they worked within a segregated system, but they did very well within those systems. The cousin I mentioned who was, the first black woman to get a PhD in anatomy, had gone to Mount Holyoke and graduated with honors from Mount Holyoke years ago.

So these were my role models, the women on my mother’s side, basically, and the men on my father’s side, that I had as heroes. My uncles were like heroes to me. Again, my one uncle was the first black man to ever get a master’s in
art at Syracuse University. He went on to become a professor of art at a black school called North Carolina A&T, Agricultural and Technical, at Greensboro. He established the first art department at that university, and then it expanded under his leadership to art and architecture. It was one of the few colleges in the South where black people could study architecture. Subsequently, after he died, they named an art gallery after him, and it’s still there, the H. Clinton Taylor Art Gallery.

So these are the people I would hear about. Another uncle was the editor of a black newspaper in Washington, D.C., which had a circulation all over the East Coast called the [Pittsburgh Courier], and it was like a regional newspaper. He was one of the leaders of the legal suit to end segregation in Washington, D.C., restaurants. His name was Robert Taylor, and he was an important figure in my life. He was a real fighter because he used his paper. As the editor of the paper every single week they would run stories about lynching, when I was a little girl, lynching, white men raping or taking advantage of black women who worked for them, and of course all the segregation. He led the fight before the Supreme Court to eliminate segregation in the restaurants of Washington, D.C., called the Thompson case.

And so I have—you know, I could just go on and on. Another uncle, my Uncle Bill, who was a dentist, he fought against racism. He had to leave North Carolina over an incident. I think to a white person, it might seem insignificant, but it was not insignificant to him. I may have told you about the incident where he had just established his practice as a dentist in a small town in North Carolina, I can’t even remember the name of it. I think it was outside of Greensboro [or maybe Greenville, North Carolina]. He had essentially gone back home, because he had been born there. And he went back and established his dental practice, which means all this expensive machinery and everything, and in order to save money, they bought a house where they lived upstairs, and the dental practice was downstairs—and he promised his wife, “When things are better I’ll get you your own house, but right now I can’t afford a separate house.”

So one day a vacuum cleaner salesman came, and he had told his wife to just introduce yourself as “Mrs. Taylor,” don’t ever let them know your first name, because they will call you by your first name, and it’s not, you know, dignified. So, he’s the first black dentist in town, and he wants his wife to be called “Mrs. Taylor,” not by her first name. So a vacuum cleaner salesman came to the door, a white one, and she answers the door, and he said what his name was, and “What’s your name?” And she says, “Mrs. Taylor.” And he said, “No, what’s your first name?” She said, “You don’t need to know my first name. What are you here for?” He said, “I’m selling vacuum cleaners, but I can’t you call you Mrs.” In the South, they wouldn’t call a black woman “Mrs.” She said, “Well, my name is Mrs. Taylor, and you can just leave, because I’m not going to buy a vacuum cleaner from you.”
So then he gets abusive, and he’s upstairs at the head of the stairs, and my uncle hears him. My uncle is in his practice downstairs and it’s around lunchtime, so he comes up to see what’s going on. He says to his wife, “What’s happening?” She says, “Well, this man is becoming very abusive to me.” He said to the guy, “Would you please leave? My wife is not interested in a vacuum cleaner. Would you please leave?” So then the man called him a name, and you can imagine what the name was.

McGarrigle: Mm-hm.

Gibbs: And [the salesman] was very abusive to him, and told him he was uppity, one of these uppity niggers. My uncle was a big man, and he said to the man, who was standing at the top of the stairs, “If you don’t get out of my house now, there is going to be trouble.” So apparently, the man—you know, they just clashed—and so the man called him another name, and my uncle pushed him, pushed him down the steps. And he didn’t fall all the way down, but he did fall down a few steps. And then at the bottom of the steps, he said, “Well, we’re going to get you, you’re not going to ever practice in this town.”

The minister—this is a very dramatic story—the minister, the black minister heard that something had happen, called my uncle and said, “You have to get out of town immediately. The Klan will come after you. Get out of town immediately!” My uncle and his wife packed their bags, left every single bit of furniture and equipment in the house, and drove off before dark that night.

McGarrigle: Oh, wow.

Gibbs: They never went back.

But I think he did the right thing. I mean, I think he did the right thing. But they were going to come after him, they were going to kill him.

[begin tape 6A]

Gibbs: And it can be the most insignificant insult, or what they considered an insult. But these are the kinds—so you grow up hearing those stories, of course you hear them over and over, and when we would go—every summer we’d go to Washington for a week—we’d hear more about them, they’d be embellished. Over the years, of course, they do get embellished a little bit. But, it’s part of our family, I guess you’d say every family has a family mythology or family stories or family traditions, and for part of our family is certainly the issue of standing up for yourself and not letting people treat you in a demeaning way or an insulting way, or really depriving you of your humanity. That’s been going on for several generations. And then doing well in the face of it all, doing well. So I guess growing up with that, you do feel there is a burden. Are you going to be the one to carry it on, or are you going to be the one to fail?
And how much do you have to succeed to feel like you have carried on your family traditions? So yes, it’s a burden.

And it’s also a challenge. I don’t want to say it’s just a burden, because it’s also a challenge, because you think in the positive sense that it’s something you want to live up to.

McGarrigle: And then are you in some way, when you go to a place like Radcliffe, the representative of the larger group of your people, also?

Gibbs: Oh, you are, whether you want to be or not. See, that’s an argument that I don’t really—I don’t think it’s an either/or. I think there are people who say, “Well, you know, I’m not a role model,” like these athletes who do bad things, and they say, “I’m not a role model, I’m just my own person.” But they are a role model to kids, whether they want to be or not. So if you’re a famous basketball player, famous football player, or famous whatever—Tiger Woods—you’re a role model. You’re a role model because the press and the media are always featuring you, and everything you do, good and bad, kids see it on TV, see it in the movies, and read about it. And they say, “Oh, if he can do that, I can do that too,” if it’s good, and also if it’s bad, “If he can get away with raping this girl and walk out of court, I can do that too.” You know, various things that some of these athletes get involved in.

So, I think when you are a black person in a visible role, whatever it is, whether it’s a job, or whether it’s a neighborhood, or whether it’s a sport, you become a symbol of your race and you become—people don’t think of you, ‘Well, there’s Jewelle, there’s the teacher.’ You’re always the black teacher. You’re always the black teacher. And if you don’t want to be the black, it doesn’t matter, you’re the black teacher. And you have to live with that, and I think people who say, “Well, I’m not a role model, or people don’t think of me that way,” they’re just crazy. They’re just in what I call deep denial. And there are people who will tell you that. There are minorities who will say, “I’m just myself, I’m not a role model.” If you’ve got a Spanish name, you’re a role model for Spanish; if you look Asian, you’re a role for Asians; and if you look black, you’re a role model. And you cannot, you cannot manipulate the situation so that people don’t think of you as whatever that ethnic group is. As long as they can visibly see that you look different or you have a different last name or you speak a different language, that’s the way they’re going to classify you. That’s the way our mind works, we classify people. We classify them by race, by nationality, by religion. You see somebody on the street with a black hat and curls, what do you immediately think? You don’t even have to stop to think, ‘Well, he’s probably an Orthodox Jew.’

McGarrigle: Were the girls who you encountered and who became your friends at Radcliffe, was there ever any discomfort around race issues with them, or was that a very natural—
Gibbs: Now see, I would be denying it if I said there wasn’t. But most of the time, it didn’t come up in your day-to-day, you know, when you’re in the dorm, you’re eating or sleeping, or playing cards, or when you’re in class. The discomfort comes around the social issues on the weekends. I think that’s when it always comes up.

McGarrigle: And that’s where in high school, where you had the weekends, where it was not an integrated social life.

Gibbs: Yes. And the same thing was true in college. Now, when I was in college, things were beginning to, as I told you, the winds of change were starting, because the winds of change in this country really started after World War II. When those black soldiers came home and had seen real freedom in France and Italy and other places, they saw that they didn’t always have to be treated the way they were treated in this country. So groups began to agitate and protest, and sort of demand better housing, better jobs, and so forth. And I think socially you begin to see change at colleges during those times, so that during my time in college they were beginning to bring more black kids into the elite top schools.

And secondly, interracial dating wasn’t very common, but it occurred, and that was something new. It was beginning to occur. So you would see some couples, interracial couples, on weekends. Not a lot, and not frequently, but you would see it. And so that again was a change. My freshman year I invited a girl, a white girl, from St. Paul to visit me in Connecticut. And she came, and we still are lifelong friends. I just got a note from her the other day because she heard about my mother. We are lifelong friends. I told you, the girl who was the one who asked me to room with her the second part of my freshman year. Her parents lived in Connecticut, very liberal artists, extremely liberal artists. He was a famous artist, a famous illustrator. I would go down and spend weekends with her, and it was unusual, though. She would take me to the beach—they lived in Westport—and the people would stare. We would see them, but she fortunately didn’t worry about it.

But on weekends in general, at school the kids did separate themselves into, there were basically three groups: the white Protestant group, the Jewish group—they had their own social life, their own clubs—and the black group. We didn’t have in those days, we had almost no Asians and no Hispanics, believe it or not. This was, of course, the way it was then. So you had three groups. You had the white Christians, you had the Jews, and you had the blacks. There were very, very few other people, and a few foreign students.

McGarrigle: So even though the Jews and the blacks came together over the student government—

Gibbs: Oh!
McGarrigle: —they didn’t come together in the social beyond—

Gibbs: No.

McGarrigle: They came together on the political, but not on the social.

Gibbs: They did not, oh no, they did not. And I mean, I think there was a real concern that the Jewish girls would marry Jewish boys, and there wasn’t much mixing of Jews and Christians. There was mainly a segregated social life, mainly. As I said, there were some exceptions, but it was mainly—and it was just, you assumed that on the weekend you would be seeing people from your own—whatever your own ethnic group was. Now, at school dances, everybody mixed. So the school dances were not segregated. I mean, we’d all go to whatever—they had what they called mixers, which are horrible, but freshmen mixers where you’d stand, and the girls would be—you feel like you’re in a meat market, and all the boys from Harvard would come over, and some from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and look you over to decide who they were going to dance with. That was a horrible time, you know. But, aside—and then, of course, you had your regular dances, you know, class dances, senior prom. And then they were of course mixed, but it was the private parties that were not very mixed. It was when people went away to their private parties, and also they had—I’m of the era when they had these big debutante parties in New York, and they rarely invited the black girls or the Jewish girls.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Not to say they never did, but they rarely invited blacks to debutante parties. And you just kind of shrugged it off, because you figured you had your own parties. The Jewish girls had deb parties, and some of the black girls did, too. So you figured you were kind of mimicking—the blacks and the Jews were really mimicking the upper-class whites, that’s what it was. Because it was the upper-class whites who had these lavish debutante parties. So in order to sort of have your own social life, you began, I think people began to mimic all these things then. It seems silly now, but it still goes on.

But I will say that I don’t—I look back, and my sister and I were talking about this recently, she went to Wellesley and my husband went to Cornell—we never had the feeling that we were being excluded, because we didn’t expect to be included. You know, it’s a funny psychology. It’s only if you expect to be included that you feel excluded. So we went to college knowing that, you know—like I joined a black sorority, and we gave frequent parties. My sister [Shirlee] also joined the same sorority. We gave frequent parties on the weekend in Boston, drawing black students from all over the Boston area. We had wonderful times. So we weren’t sitting around all the week thinking, ‘Gee, will we be excluded from the white kids’ parties?’ Because we were planning our own. So I think it’s a very different psychology. As long you feel
you have a group to which you belong and you feel comfortable with, and you have a good social life—. I mean, I think that in those days, that’s the way we were thinking. Now, I don’t know how they think today, but that’s how we were thinking then, we felt we wanted our own parties. In fact, the truth is I think they are still mainly separate parties, even today. I think they are still mainly separate.

McGarrigle: What is the name of the sorority that you joined?

Gibbs: It’s called Alpha Kappa Alpha. And it’s the oldest black sorority. You have to be in a college to join it. So I joined it for purely social reasons. Everybody says, you know, when you go to Boston, you should join—there are two. There’s another one that’s called Delta Sigma Theta. But I joined the AKAs, I liked that group of girls a little better. And you just end up, that becomes—and in some ways it’s unfortunate, because it’s off-campus social life, so that becomes the focus of your social life on the weekends. You have to go off campus, usually to Boston. Sometimes we would have parties, house parties in Cambridge or Boston, but mainly you were off campus and you were mingling with other students. But the advantage of it is that you met kids from all the schools. So we would meet kids from BU [Boston University], Simmons, MIT, Emerson, that we would not have met, I think, if we had been white. I don’t think we would have met these people. I don’t think we ever would have left, because we wouldn’t have left campus.

We met friends from Wellesley—and the guys would come down from as far as Dartmouth, Bowdoin up in Maine, they came down from Bowdoin, Bates. So we would meet these guys—of course, the girls liked that, you know. We would meet these guys, they would come up from New Haven, from Yale, because there was—this was a rather small group of us, really, in those days, there was a small group of black students. So we had this huge circle going, and as far north as Dartmouth and Bowdoin and as far south as Princeton, and Columbia—they would all converge, mainly in Boston, that was the center of the social life. That was where people would come on weekends. And the boys would drive up usually, or take the train, or down, and we would all go and we would all meet each other. And to this day I am still friendly with some of those people, to this day. So it had its advantages, too.

And I think that’s true of any minority group—you do establish your own social set and your own social customs. I think it’s true of every group and I think today it’s still true in our society. I think if you go to Stanford or Berkeley or any campus, you will find that the social life is still largely segregated, not to say that there is not more public mixing, but it’s largely segregated.

McGarrigle: Yes, I think that’s true.
I want to talk about your academic experience at Radcliffe. But it’s such a big piece, maybe we should save it.

Gibbs: Yeah, what time is it? It’s almost—yes.

McGarrigle: We can end, and then we could talk about how to structure that for next time.

[tape interruption]

Gibbs: I have to be somewhere by three. Did you turn it on?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: There was kind of an emphasis on titles in my family. I mean, the more titles you have and the more education you have, of course the more status you have, and I think that’s also true of black people in general. They’ve always felt that if you have a lot of education and have a title, that somehow that elevates you and gives you more status, and that in return, you get more respect from the white world, which I think is true, in a way, it is true. So everybody is interested in what you’re studying and what your title is going to be. So, when I finished my PhD, I had actually intended to open a practice in clinical psychology—my PhD is actually in clinical psychology—and it was a very bad time when we had just passed Proposition 13 in the state of California, and you can remember what that did to all the public services which were losing money. So the very year I finished there were almost no entry-level positions in psychology in the Bay Area and you have to have at least a year’s training in order to get your license. In order to get the training you have to have a job with a supervisor, and then at the end of that year of full-time work with clinical cases, then you can apply for your license.

Well, the truth is there were absolutely no entry-level jobs in the Bay Area because Proposition 13 wiped out all of the public jobs. I didn’t want to teach at that point, so I just wasn’t able to find a job in clinical psychology. And I actually entered the field of teaching as a second choice, and that is because, you know, Berkeley, and we’ll have to talk about how I was recruited to Berkeley at some point, too, because you’ll really—that’s a very good story [laughing].

McGarrigle: I know Ed Nathan had something to do with that.

Gibbs: Well, a little bit.

McGarrigle: A little bit, well, you’ll tell me.

Gibbs: But anyway, so I was recruited to teaching as a second choice. My whole career was based on the fact that I couldn’t get a job when I finished my Ph.D. in clinical psychology and so then I went into teaching. But two years later, I
then had to do what we call my post doc internship part-time. So I did it in two summers. I did it in two summers when I was not teaching at Berkeley, and part-time over two years. So that it actually took me a little more than two years, two academic years, to actually get the number of hours required for the license. And then once you get your number of hours, you then apply to take the licensing test in psychology, which is very difficult, they make it difficult for you. And then you take the test, and then if you pass the test, you get an oral interview, and then you pass.

So when I finally got my license, I did all those steps and took the tests, then I decided I was going to try to establish a part-time practice in San Francisco. And my life got very complicated because I was teaching at Berkeley two or three days a week over there, I had a part-time practice in San Francisco for two days a week, and I lived in Palo Alto, and it was absolutely like being a juggler. It was very, very complicated to try to figure out what day I was supposed to be where, what I was supposed to be doing when I got there, and what schedule I had for these three different places. So actually, I just kept that office for about three or four years, and then it really became physically too much to try to do all those things.

In the meantime, I got to be an assistant professor—of course, I was an assistant professor, and after six years you apply to be promoted, and I applied to be promoted—actually I took an extra year because I had some illnesses and other things. But the comment of my father was so interesting. When I first was hired at Berkeley and I was an assistant professor, he thought it was very nice and he thought it was an honor, and he seemed very pleased. But his real pleasure came when I finally opened my office as a psychologist, and his comment to me—I invited him to see my office when he was visiting—his comment to me is, “I’m so proud that now you’re a doctor.” So what really impressed my father was not that I was appointed as a professor to one of the top schools in the United States, but that I was now, I had a private office and I was a doctor and I could see patients on my own. And that, to him, was the highest honor that I could have.

And I thought that was really interesting, because I think that even though he knew Berkeley was a good school, and he knew getting a PhD was hard, in his world and where he came from and where all my relatives came from in the South, the real sign of independence from racial pressures was always having your own office and being a doctor, or a dentist, and more recently a lawyer, because having your own office made you an independent practitioner and you were essentially free of the kinds of barriers or the kinds of constraints or the kinds of evaluations that you would get being a university professor or working in an industry. So I thought it was a very, very interesting reaction.

McGarrigle: Yes. Says something about what he knew about institutions, also.
Gibbs: Yes. But I also said to him later, I said to him before he died, I said, “Daddy, you know, I don’t you think you understand that really, being a professor at Berkeley, when I was up for tenure, I don’t think you really understand that that’s really a much bigger kind of honor than just being one of many psychologists.” And he just laughed and he said, “Well, I do understand it, I do understand it,” but I don’t think he ever equated the two. I think for him that being a doctor of psychology was always the more important title for me.

McGarrigle: Yes. That might be true in a lot of minority groups, that doctor, to have a doctor in the family, is the ultimate achievement.

Gibbs: Yes. And to bring the story up to date, shortly before my mother died, the last time she saw my oldest son was on her ninetieth birthday. We gave her a party June 1 of this last year, and my oldest son is a lawyer and she always bragged about him, and we all thought she was so proud of him. The last thing that she said to him was, “You know, Geoffrey, I always wanted you to be a doctor.” And I think it made him feel somewhat bad, but I told him later, I said, “Well, you know, Geoffrey, that’s that generation. They thought being a doctor was the most important thing in the whole world.” And I explained it to him. Because that was the last time she saw him, that’s what she said to him, and I was surprised that she said it. But I think at her age, she—you know, you can’t censor yourself when you’re ninety. But all those years when she had been telling all of us how proud she was of him to be a lawyer and very successful in his field, she had always harbored this wish that he had gone to medical school and become a doctor. So there is something about minority groups wanting those titles and wanting that status. That’s kind of a little bit sad. But that’s the way the world is.

So that’s all.

[end of session]
Interview 5: March 18, 2003

[begin tape 7A]

McGarrigle: We’re talking about current events today, it’s such a, I don’t know, depressing, difficult time, but I’ve been reviewing my notes and I had a lot of things I wanted to ask you going back in time, to your time as an undergraduate. I was reviewing my notes from some conversations I had with friends of yours, Susan Hartzell and Carol Bowman in particular. Ms. Bowman said she was at Simmons College when you were at Radcliffe, and she had some things she was interested in knowing that I’d like to ask you. And Susan Hartzell did also. I guess in particular, Carol said that she thought it would be interesting at some point to do a project interviewing women who were in your cohort and hers about their experience of the more subtle forms of racism in the Boston area in the fifties.

Gibbs: Yes, I think that’s probably true, that’s true.

McGarrigle: She was interested in hearing you talk about that and she mentioned Camp Atwater.

Gibbs: Yes, right.

McGarrigle: And she didn’t know if you were there at the same time.

Gibbs: We were, yes.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: Yes, we were.

McGarrigle: Okay, could you tell me about that?

Gibbs: Did she tell you what kind of camp it was?

McGarrigle: No, no.

Gibbs: Well, that’s when I first met her, yes. We were young, we were—I think I’m a year older than Carol, so were about eleven and twelve. And this camp is outside of Springfield, Massachusetts, and it was set up—actually, you’ve heard of the Urban League?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: By people active in the Urban League years ago, I think it was actually probably set up in the thirties for middle-class black children who didn’t have camps to go to. And you know, even then the whites were sending their kids
away for camps for a month, or six weeks, or sometimes all summer, the middle-class whites in New England and New York. And they realized that black kids didn’t have a place to go, and so they would be staying at home with not all that much to do in the summer. So this group of people—who were real pioneers in that sense—were associated with the Urban League, bought some property which included a lake outside of Springfield and set up a camp. Camp Atwater was named after one of the founders. Just for middle-class black kids. And they started recruiting in New England, around Boston, and then it spread to the other New England states—Connecticut, Rhode Island, and places that were old established black communities, like Providence, New Haven, Connecticut, and New York City, and then it spread down to as far, basically, Washington, D.C., and then it got so popular, it spread out to Chicago and the Midwest, okay?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And so by the time Carol and I got there—Carol is from Ohio and I was from Connecticut—there were middle-class black kids from all over the country as far as Texas—we had some girls from Texas—whose parents had this goal to expose their children to nice things in life, and travel and recreation, that the average black family, the average community didn’t offer black families, I’ll put it that way. Just the idea of having a lake where you could learn to swim. So she and I went there and met a lot of friends that we still know, who later came to college in the Boston area. And that’s when I hooked up with her again, she was at Simmons and I was at Radcliffe and we hooked up again, and we’re very good friends, we’ve been friends ever since.

So that was the purpose, and I guess I’ll have to say that I think it was a good experience, and it gave you a sense of identity that you weren’t the only middle-class person because often in some communities there had been maybe half a dozen black professionals, and that’s all. You saw those people but everybody else worked in factories or were domestics, and they didn’t have all that much in common with you. So when you went to this camp, you saw kids, girls—we had a session, a month for girls and a month for boys—and you saw these kids from all over the country. Basically their parents were all professionals, business people, army officers and things like that, who could afford to send their children to a private camp for two weeks or four weeks. And it was a very good experience, and again, it was a way that shielded some of us from the indignities of racism during the summer where sometimes you couldn’t get a job, or there was nothing in your town. In those days, black kids couldn’t use the Y in many cities. That was how it was.

McGarrigle: It was public swimming pools.

Gibbs: That’s right, they couldn’t, and even in New England. That was the time when everything was really segregated and so it was a very good way for black kids to have those kinds of activities in a sheltered way. All the counselors were
black, and the people who ran the camp were black, and the people who owned the camp were black, and so we didn’t have any racism. So it was a good experience.

McGarrigle: So those kids who came from far away, they must have traveled by train, then?

Gibbs: Probably. In those days I don’t think they flew. Some of them, their parents would drive them from Cleveland or Chicago. You know, people did a lot of driving in those days. We didn’t have—most people weren’t using planes in those days. That was only for the really wealthy people.

McGarrigle: It was a long journey.

Gibbs: It was a long journey. Yes, but it was worth it. And the interesting thing is that the camp is still in existence. For a while, middle-class blacks, when they got other opportunities, stopped going to the camp, when they started buying townhouses, and condos at the beach, in the, oh, let’s say the sixties and seventies. That camp then was no longer so attractive when there were other options and so what happened was they turned it into an inner-city camp—almost the opposite spectrum. They turned it into an inner-city camp, and it was very good because those kids had even fewer opportunities. And in recent years, I think about ten, fifteen years ago, they decided that there was still a need for a camp for middle-class black kids, kids whose families didn’t have summer homes, didn’t have time shares, there was still—and they turned it back into a middle-class camp.

And so every year, or mostly every year, I send a contribution to the camp, and they give scholarships, still give scholarships to inner-city kids. But it’s more of, I think I would have to say it’s more of a mix now, of middle-class and some low-income kids. But they’re trying to revive what they call the Camp Atwater tradition. Now, what is that tradition? That tradition is that most of the kids who went to that camp grew up with—all of them went to college, most of them went to graduate school, and if you look at the professional class of educated blacks my age in this country you will find a very high number of them are Camp Atwater alumni, which is very interesting. So it’s almost like a little fraternity and sorority. So when we meet, get to talking, one of the questions that always come up is, “Did you go to Camp Atwater?” It’s interesting.

McGarrigle: And what was that experience? Did you go more than one summer, then?

Gibbs: I went two summers.

McGarrigle: What was that experience like?
Gibbs: Then I grew out of it, I got too sophisticated. My father sent me first when I was twelve or thirteen, I can’t remember. And I went two summers, and then after that I was a teenager, and I didn’t want to go back to camp. It was interesting, you know. You learned to swim, you played games, they taught you tennis, and badminton, and all those other games, and you had the usual things that go on in camp. And you sort of had your cabins, you had to make your beds up, and you had competitions between cabins, all that stuff. It was interesting.

McGarrigle: Were you at all concerned to leave home at that age?

Gibbs: No. No, I was always an adventurer.

McGarrigle: [laughter] Yes, it sounds like it.

Gibbs: Can’t you tell?

McGarrigle: [laughter] Yes, I didn’t think that you would be afraid.

Gibbs: No, you didn’t think that. You know it’s funny, I’m not, I’ve never been a fearful person. I’m glad because I know fearful people and I feel very sorry for them. I’ve never been a fearful person. I’ve always liked new things, and I’ve always liked adventures, and I’ve always liked challenges, and I’ve always liked travel. So when you put the four things together—I love to travel, I love new places, I love adventures, and I’m game for a lot of things. I mean, I’m game to do a lot of things that I don’t know whether everybody would even try. So it’s one of my characteristics. But I think that it is a characteristic that has stood me well because I’ve never been afraid to go into a new situation. So that is a characteristic of mine. As my husband will tell you. [laughter] And then I drag everybody else with me [laughter].

McGarrigle: I wondered, and we started to talk about Radcliffe, and then I want to talk more about your academic experience there, but I wondered in that era, what kind of advice was there for girls? What did you hear, or what did women in your family tell you, or the women at the church, about dating, about sex—

Gibbs: Oh, that’s a funny story! It’s one of my best. [laughter]

McGarrigle: I’m glad I asked you.

Gibbs: That’s a wonderful story. Now, and first of all, I had told you about, you know, I had role models for college and also—you’re not talking about that?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: You’re not talking about that. You’re talking about the kind—
McGarrigle: No, specifically to girls.

Gibbs: Personal advice. Okay. When I had started my first menstrual period, it happened when I was in the movies, and I was twelve years old and two months. It was during the Christmas holidays and I felt something wet, and Oh my God. But I managed to get home and because it was winter I had a coat. So I managed to get home and told my mother, and she was very matter-of-fact about it. She told me we had to go out and get something—at that time, napkins—and then, it must have been about a year later that she sat me down, and her advice about how not to get pregnant, so her whole—I won’t even call it a lecture because it was very brief [laughter]—but it was, I was about fourteen, and I had my first date, that was it. It was a movie date. I was about fourteen, so it was about a year and half later. And she said to me, “Now, you’re going out with boys, now, I just have to tell you, we don’t want you to get pregnant.” So she didn’t say how you got pregnant—I already knew anyway, you hear it from other girls—so she said, “So keep your panties up, keep your skirt down, and don’t ever let a boy kiss you beneath the neck.” That was my advice. [laughter] And that was my only advice.

And you know what, I used to give little talks to these girls over in East Palo Alto about life and sex and everything. I would invite their mothers to come because I thought mothers often don’t tell girls what they need to know, and then they get pregnant. So I would go into the sixth grade, seventh grade and tell them this. And I always told them this story. Well, the mothers would usually get a big kick out of it. I said, “So you know what? If it embarrasses you to talk to your daughter, that’s still good advice. If they keep their panties up, and their dress or slacks down, and don’t ever let a boy kiss you below your neck, you’re not going to get pregnant, I can assure you.” [laughter]

So then I told my dean this story one night, shortly after I was hired we were talking about this because I was interested in girls’ sexuality. That’s one of the early things that I looked at in my research. And he said—so he had to go, and I never thought he would repeat the story. And of course once the story is repeated, it’s never the same. He goes to an alumni function and says, “We have a new professor, and I have this funny story to tell you about her, what she told me. Now her mother told her to keep her panties up, her pantaloons down—.” [laughter] Now you know, we haven’t worn pantaloons in I don’t know how long, I mean, it was like the nineteenth century they were wearing pantaloons. He said, “To keep her pantaloons down,” and then everybody roars, you know, that I had worn pantaloons! [laughter] So I love that story because it is true, and everybody always alluded to things in a roundabout way. You just had to figure it out. So you really got your information I think always from the other girls that would tell you things, or you’d read things in these books that you weren’t supposed to read.

But my mother never ever sat down and explained to me the sort of biological facts about sex and how people get pregnant, never explained it to me. And
even on the eve of my marriage it was a topic that, she had sent me to the family doctor. And I wanted to be—in those days, Connecticut had very strict rules about birth control. Our family doctor was Catholic. So I told him that I was getting married and I was going to Africa with my husband and I wanted to ask him—and they didn’t have birth control pills then, they were just still experimenting with them. I wanted to be fitted for, you know—oh you can turn this off [laughter], I’ll just tell you.

[tape interruption]

Gibbs: sending me to this doctor who would explain to me everything, she said. And what he explained to me is what he couldn’t do which was going to help me to not get pregnant while I was in Liberia. So it was a strange time. It was not an easy time for a woman and that was the mid-fifties, after all.

McGarrigle: When you got your first period was it something that she had talked to you about so that you anticipated it, or do you remember what your experience was?

Gibbs: Yes, I knew, yes.

McGarrigle: You knew, it wasn’t something—

Gibbs: It wasn’t scary.

McGarrigle: For some girls, they have no idea.

Gibbs: No, I knew that it would happen soon, and it wasn’t scary. It wasn’t scary.

McGarrigle: Was there a way for you to connect the menstruating to your fertility? Was there any understanding, did somebody explain what the reason was?

Gibbs: No, except I guess I did have a book that explained about the cycle and when you shouldn’t have sex and since I wasn’t planning to have sex anyway, it didn’t really bother me. But my mother never told me that, and neither did any of the older women in my family. It was just not discussed in our circles and I don’t think any of my girlfriends had their mothers tell them any more than my mother told me, which is what I told you she said. The idea is if you conduct yourself like a lady and don’t let a man touch you any place, you won’t get pregnant. And actually that’s not bad advice. But you know, by the time you get to be eighteen or nineteen that advice is a little problematic and so you have to figure out, well, what are you going to do when you’re in college or graduating from college, this idea of, “Well, don’t let him kiss you beneath the neck,” [laughter] that becomes a little problematic.

But anyway, it was the time. It was the time. And did you see that picture about the fifties in Connecticut?
McGarrigle: I’m not sure I know that one.

Gibbs: It’s called—oh, it was the one with Julianne Moore, last year—

McGarrigle: Oh, *The Hours*?

Gibbs: No, the other one. She was also nominated for the other one.

McGarrigle: I didn’t see it.

Gibbs: Well, it was about perfect families and what was really underneath it all. And that really was the way it was, that everybody looked perfect, everybody went to church, everybody dressed perfectly—but there was a lot of stuff that was just not dealt with. It just wasn’t dealt with. It was made in Connecticut, in Hartford, that movie. I’ll ask Jim the name of it, we went to see it. And it was also about the racism in Connecticut at that time, which I thought was exaggerated, but anyway. Back to you—you said about the subtle racism. I thought it was exaggerated in the movie, but the movie was really about the time we got married, made about the middle of the fifties. That was when the movie was—that was what it represented. And I think that the whole culture was like that for women. The women didn’t work—you were expected to go to college, and if you went to college, you were to marry. And if you had a career, it was supposed to be really secondary to your family. So you could be a teacher, or a nurse, or a social worker, or a librarian, but don’t even think about being a doctor, or a lawyer, or a banker, because that’s a man’s career.

And so those are the kind of things that—messages were communicated without ever being explicitly stated. I always thought, I mean to our generation of college girls. It was clear that our primary aim was to get married, and everything else was secondary. And then to get a good education so you could rear your children, and you can be a good mother, a good support system for your husband, keep a nice house, be cultured, be a lady—those were the things that we were told, pretty much.

McGarrigle: Was that a message in your family as well, I mean as well as from the greater culture?

Gibbs: No, see, I think in our family, I tried to explain that to you before, I think black middle-class parents gave their daughters a different message.

McGarrigle: Well, it sounds like it was. So this is—we’re talking about the greater society.

Gibbs: Yes, the greater society gave that message. But see, I could have almost ignored that message, because my parents were telling me something different, and my sisters, and my friends, which was “You’re a black woman, you’ve got to get a good education. You may or may not find a husband who has a good job. You will probably work part or all of your adult life. And you
may as well get a good education.” And at that point, they could see things were opening up, opportunities, new opportunities for black people and they said, “Get a good education,” everybody would say, “so you will be ready when things open up. And when there are more opportunities you’ll be ready to step in.” And Condoleeza Rice got that same message in Alabama, and she’s younger than I am. But she got that exact same message, which is, “Do well, learn a lot of different skills, and when things get better, you’re going to be ready to step in.” And look at her. I mean, this is why she is where she is, because she followed that advice in a segregated—she went to segregated schools. I didn’t go to a segregated school.

So I think the middle-class black parents—and I can’t speak for other minorities, but I can speak for blacks, I know, because all my friends, we were all given that message. You have to go to college if you’re going to make it, you have to do well, you have to prepare yourself, and not just for marriage and motherhood, which we were expected to do, but for supporting your family and for sort of adding to the—how can I put it—a critical mass of educated black people in this country. I mean, that was sort of part of it, too, is that you have this obligation. You know, we’re educated, we’re giving you an education, and you have this real obligation to carry it on, to do something with it and to give back to your society, which is a really big theme with black middle-class people. I don’t know that white parents tell their children that. Maybe they do, I don’t know. I think they tell them they want them to do well and be successful, and be wealthy if possible, but I don’t know if they say to them, “And you have to give back. You have to do something useful in your community.” And that’s a very big part of what we all hear.

McGarrigle: Yes. That may be more a message that Jewish families, liberal Jewish families—

Gibbs: I think there are some who do, but I also think there are some who don’t. I think there are some, maybe Protestant, non-Jewish whites who are very consumed with success and money and don’t necessarily think you have to give back. They don’t teach the children that you have to give back to the community. Because if they do teach it, I’m not always seeing it with the young people I know. They choose careers in business, and stocks, finance, and law and medicine, and some of them do things in the community, and some of them just make money.

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: But we were taught that was not enough, that it’s not enough to make money. It’s good to be successful but you should share not only your wealth, but you should share your time and your energy with the community to make it a better place. And that’s a very strong message that I got, and my sisters got it, and my brother. He didn’t listen to it, but [laughter] he got it, too. So I will say I think that is one of the major differences between being a middle-class
minority family in America and a white family, that I think most minorities families say to their kids, “You’ve got to give back.” I know the Hispanics do, too. “You’ve got to give back to your”—a lot of them anyway do—“give back to your community.” And I think the Chinese do. I mean, I can’t say they all do, but from my friends who are from those groups, they hear these strong messages, “Stay connected to your community, help your community.” The Indians who come over here from India, most of them, when they make money, take it back and found schools in—did you know that?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Found schools in India—you probably do, because your husband’s in Silicon Valley. And they set up scholarships for Indian students, they buy land, and employ people. I mean, they do a lot of good in India. They’re not just buying these fancy houses and all, but they go back and do a lot of good in India. So I think it’s maybe just partly coming from a disadvantaged group, that your family tells you need to help people, you need to help your community.

McGarrigle: Yes. That makes sense. You had an uncle who graduated from Harvard in 1904, I read [John Tazewell Jones].

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: I wondered what kind of stories came down through the family about what that experience was like for him, how he went to Harvard.

Gibbs: Well, let me, let me, before I start that—do you want some more tea?

McGarrigle: Oh, I’m fine, thank you.

Gibbs: You’re sure?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Well, now, that’s the uncle who actually, he graduated from Harvard in the class of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I think it wasn’t easy. There were actually about four blacks in his class, four others, I think there were five all together. It couldn’t have been easy, but we don’t know much of the story because he is the uncle—actually, his wife was my aunt, he was not my blood uncle. But he when he graduated from Harvard in 1904—I think they married in 1917—he married my Aunt Ruth, my Great Aunt Ruth [Morris Jones]. Now, that is the couple who went to Brazil to pass for white. That’s the couple. And I never met him.

McGarrigle: When he was at Harvard, was he at Harvard as a black student?
Gibbs: Well, that’s a good question, because when I went back to Harvard—I helped my sister research the book in the areas where I felt I could be helpful, and I felt that—see, I could get access to the archives at Harvard more easily than maybe an outsider. So I went to the archives to get information about this uncle because again, it was one of those family secrets. It wasn’t so secret that he went to Brazil—everybody knew that. But what they were doing in Brazil, my mother never really knew that, because she was not in touch with that part of the family. But we knew they had gone to Brazil, and we presume they were living either as white people or mulattos. They both of them had very fair skin. But we weren’t sure whether it was, are they living as white people, or are they living as mulattos, because in Brazil you can be either, you can be almost anything, and depending on the color of your skin they accept you differently than they would here. See, in Brazil classifications are based on color, not race. Here they’re based on race, not color. I mean, it’s just so crazy. So if you’re light enough, you’re treated as a white person, or a mulatto person, or whatever they want to call you.

So we didn’t know exactly what their status was there, but we knew he went there to get a better job. He got out of Harvard with an engineering degree in 1904 and of course they gave him these crappy jobs. One job he was testing rails for the railroad in Arkansas, something like that. I mean, that is really not a good job for someone [laughter] who went to Harvard. And different things that weren’t good jobs. So finally he got fed up and he married my aunt in I think it was in 1917. They moved to Brazil and they lived there forever after. So I never—and of course, I wasn’t born then, and my mother herself was only born in 1912. But when my mother was five, this aunt was gone.

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: So my mother does not even remember—she’s sure she met her before she left, but she doesn’t remember ever meeting Ruth. But Ruth became this legend in our family because she took—talk about a bold step. Now here’s the interesting part about the story—where do you think they lived in Brazil? They lived in São Paulo, where my son is going to marry a girl now. It’s almost like it’s come full cycle. But they went to São Paulo to escape the racism in America and to live really, probably as white or mulatto in a multiracial society. He is going to São Paulo in a way to confirm his identity as a person of color. It’s very different. And yet they lived in the neighborhood not far from where my future daughter-in-law lives. It’s called the American Gardens. Isn’t that interesting?

McGarrigle: And you said you had gone there and—

Gibbs: Yes, we went there and found a place where she had taken picture near a little church, so I have that picture. So it’s interesting. I don’t know, it’s almost as if there’s some unconscious thing going on. But we don’t know much about his experiences except that he was unhappy after he left Harvard, he couldn’t get
a good job. But the interesting thing is he wrote letters back every five years for their class reunion, and I have all those letters. Copies of all those letters. And in the letters he always sounds very cheerful and very optimistic because I think what he tried to do is put the best face on it for his classmates. So you can follow his life through these letters.

So every five years, the letter is in the class book, which is—Harvard has wonderful records, by the way, as an archive, wonderful records. I suppose—well, they’re about as good as you find in the Library of Congress, or maybe better. But they really keep records on their alumni and that’s how you can get good information. So all I asked—and I’m going to get back to your first question—all I asked the librarian, I gave her his name and said, “I’d like to know if I could get some information, and a picture,” and she said, “Yes, you can get information. There are two pictures I’m sure you’ll find of him, one when he entered Harvard,” he had the freshmen yearbook of his class, and I got a picture, and then I looked at the others and I saw that there were about five others who looked like they were black people, four or five. And then I—fiftieth class reunion, he had a picture, and I got that picture. So I knew what he looked like. And then I copied all, Xeroxed—every five years, they had his class notes. So they have these huge vaults for every class and they keep all the freshmen yearbooks, they keep all of the—every five years the reunion books—and you can really trace a person’s life because most people do write back, so he had written back. And then I got his last address from the yearbook, which is how I could find him.

[begin tape 7B]

Gibbs: The interesting question was, what did he call himself when he was at Harvard? That very time when I was there, which was in the early nineties when I was doing this research, they had been compiling a list of all the black graduates who ever went to Harvard. I asked him if I could see the list—my name is on it, and my son’s name is on it. So I said, “Could I see the list?” I looked at the early classes, and I looked at his class, and his name wasn’t on it. So you know what I did? I said to the librarian, “I want to correct one thing.” Because I think it’s time we corrected all this stuff, it’s time we stopped playing games with this business. And it’s important for black people to know that there were black people in those early classes, and if he didn’t want to identify as black, then he’s dead now, and I wanted people to know that he was there.

So I gave her his name. I said, “I notice he’s not on this list.” You know what she said to me? It was very interesting. She said, “Well, when we were going through the pictures of the early yearbooks, we identified—we didn’t know who was black. It’s not that they identified themselves. We don’t have records—we don’t always know who was black and who was white from those early yearbooks, so we did it by sight.” Which is why the whole concept of race is so ridiculous. They did it by looking at the picture and of course
they are old pictures. A lot of the pictures were tinted brown anyway. And she said to me, “You know, I remember that particular picture, and we wondered about him. We weren’t sure, and so we didn’t put him down.”

I said, “Well, I’m here to tell you, he was a black man. He was a black man, he was born as a black man, he lived as a black man, and we knew he entered Harvard as a black man. And I don’t know how he identified himself while he was here, but he came from a Virginia family, an upper-middle-class black Virginia family. He had light, very light, skin, but he was a black person.” And she said, “Well, I remember that was one that we debated about.” Isn’t that interesting? And she said, “I can remember we decided not to put him down, because we weren’t sure.”

McGarrigle: Well, it’s just interesting to think about a group of people in the library deciding—

Gibbs: Whose race? Yes.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Well see, if they were dark enough and had Negroid features there was almost no question. And some of his classmates were really obviously black people and most of them came from the Boston area—Boston and New York—and they were obviously black, and they had no trouble. He came from Virginia and his picture—there was this slight shade, looked like he was a little bit, like olive-skinned, which is what he was apparently. And so they weren’t sure, but this is just—and when I’m talking about history, isn’t that interesting when you think about how decisions are made about people from looking at photographs? And so they missed him. So it’s not that he misclassified himself; it’s that they didn’t know for sure. So I said, “You know, I’d like you to add him. He was my great-uncle and I would like you to add him to this list of early graduates of Harvard, because I think it’s important.” And she said they would.

McGarrigle: I wonder what was required for someone like him to be admitted to Harvard? I mean, this was—

Gibbs: Well, the same—I mean, he was, I’m sure he was a very good student. And he graduated from a predominantly black high school in Hampton, Virginia. So that’s why I know he was admitted as a black student. I mean, not predominantly black, it was a black high school at that time, and it was in Hampton, Virginia. It was a segregated school. And he was admitted to Harvard so he must have been a good student. I don’t think they had—they didn’t have the SATs [Scholastic Aptitude Test] then, not in those days. And I don’t whether they had a national exam, that I can’t tell you, but they were admitted mainly on their records then, their grades and their recommendations, and maybe they had interviews, I can’t say.
McGarrigle: No, I don’t think there were any standardized tests at all.

Gibbs: But anyway he was a good student. So it’s just an interesting story, it’s just one of the interesting family stories, and now that Geoffrey is going back to São Paolo, it’s just kind of a strange, strange coincidence. Especially if he moves there.

McGarrigle: Well, it sounds like he has had an affinity for Brazil for a long time.

Gibbs: Long time, long time, long time. He likes the idea, he says, of going to a country where most of the people are brown. He likes being there. He likes Mexico, too, for that reason. He says he just feels comfortable there and people aren’t staring at you all the time like they do sometimes in Europe. He likes fitting in and feeling comfortable. We’ll see how he likes it—I said to him, “But you know you’ll be an expatriate. You won’t be a Portuguese, you won’t be a real Brazilian, so it may make life difficult—. Visiting is different from living, so you’ll have to see how you feel and how it works out for you as a person.” His Portuguese is not going to sound like a native. So we’ll just see. We’ll just have to see.

McGarrigle: I know I had read that you in particular liked literature and philosophy in college, and I just wondered if you could talk some about your courses, and also from your perspective as someone who has taught, your teachers.

Gibbs: [laughs] There’s another question. Yes, that’s a good question.

McGarrigle: Those are two big questions.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s a big question.

McGarrigle: [laughing] We can take them apart in any way that you want.

Gibbs: You sure you don’t want any more tea?

McGarrigle: Yes, thank you.

Gibbs: Okay. Well, let me say that teaching at Harvard—there were some famous teachers. Unfortunately I didn’t have many of them, I had a few. There were some famous teachers that all students wanted to get but the classes would just be huge, so you wouldn’t have any contact with these teachers, you’d just hear them lecture. I had only a few of those famous teachers, and one was a Professor Demos who was a Greek teacher, and he taught about Plato and Aristotle. I loved that course about early Greek philosophy. I just loved it, and I was surprised that I loved it. But I think I loved it because it fit in with—well, you know, we did a number of the actually Greek and Roman philosophers, and it really fit in with my background in religion. Because a lot of going to church every Sunday, when you’re hearing the stories of the Bible,
even though they weren’t from the Greek and Roman texts—well, actually, some of them were from the Greek texts—but they really were not so much philosophy as biblical stories and stories teaching moral lessons, so I grew up with that every Sunday, “What is the moral lesson this Sunday?”

And so when I went to college and took this Greek and Roman philosophy, it just really fit in, and in a different, much more, to me, intellectual and more stimulating way because by the time you go to church every Sunday for eighteen years, it is like rote. You know the stories, you know what my father’s going to say—I mean, I hate to say it, but I wasn’t learning anything new every Sunday. And of course, you know in every church there’s a cycle, you have your cycle of things, the text all year, with Easter, Christmas, et cetera. So you have the Christmas story leading up to Christmas, you have the Easter story leading—[laughter]—and I mean, you know those stories, right? I mean, those are the two big stories.

So this was new, these were new stories, and they were kind of more general stories, about right and wrong, and about the good life, and all the kind of things you learn about in philosophy. That was my freshmen year, it just really opened my mind intellectually. It was called Philosophy 1A, and it was the first term, and I just was so excited, I read everything—and I still have my books on Plato and Aristotle—and we read Epictetus and God knows who else. So I felt that it prepared me for a kind of intellectual journey at Radcliffe that I might not have otherwise had if I hadn’t taken that particular course.

The other course I enjoyed, the two courses I enjoyed best my freshmen year were, it was called Humanities 1A, and it too was a kind of survey course of great books, great books of the Western world. Most of the schools used to teach those. Unfortunately a lot of schools have gotten away from great books. They think that isn’t the way to educate people, but for me it was a great exposure. I had not read many of those books. I mean, I knew about some of them, but truthfully in a public high school you were not reading many of those books. Although it wasn’t English literature, it included some Shakespeare because of course you can’t talk about the great books without some Shakespeare being included.

So mainly we had some sort of overlap with the philosophy course because you also had the great books from the philosophers. But then we also had some of the—well, mainly Shakespeare. I don’t think they included any other playwrights, as I remember. And this course really just kind of cut off at, see, I would guess probably early twentieth century, but it included things like Karl Marx and those kind of books. I could try to remember all the books, but basically just some of the really great philosophers and writers, political writers of the—mainly eighteenth and nineteenth century, seems to me they were. So I enjoyed that.
And then I had English literature, I enjoyed that. I had modern English literature, so we were talking about the modern poets in the nineteenth and twentieth century—they called nineteenth century in those days modern—but the end of nineteenth and the early twentieth century. You got exposed to people that you probably hadn’t read in high school, names and literature that you would use all your life or recognize all your life, like Dickens and Milton, people whose names come up again and again for educated people and whose names come up again and again in articles and in books. I think the purpose, of course, at Radcliffe and also at all the other good schools in those days and today is to expose you to the great ideas of the Western world.

Now I learned later—because at that time we weren’t even thinking about it, we weren’t even thinking about it that of course there were very few books by women and minorities, and it wasn’t something we were keenly aware of. And fortunately my parents had exposed to me to Afro-American literature, which of course now people think is good and valid and all, but in those days universities weren’t teaching any African—even, I might have read Ralph Ellison’s book before I graduated, I might have, but I don’t think it was even published then. I’m trying to remember. Do you remember when *The Invisible Man*—?

McGarrigle: No, but I can look that up.

Gibbs: I certainly read it early on. I don’t even think Ralph Ellison was published. People like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison I think I read after I graduated from college. But there were some great black poets, that at least black people thought they were great, like Paul Lawrence Dunbar is one, Countee Cullen is another name that comes to mind. We were not exposed to any of that. I mean, we didn’t have Spanish literature, we didn’t have African American literature, and the only literature that you might have had that would be written by Spanish people would be in Spanish classes, which would be Spanish literature and Spanish language. Then you would read the Spanish literature in those courses, and you would read Chinese literature or novels in the courses about Chinese civilization. Well, if you didn’t take those, you didn’t see it, you didn’t get it. So I guess I have to say that looking back, even the minority kids, we weren’t even aware that we weren’t getting—and it’s a strange thing to say, but I wonder if you understand what I’m saying.

McGarrigle: No, I do. Yes.

Gibbs: I mean, it was missing from the curriculum, but we didn’t expect it to be in the curriculum.

McGarrigle: Well, and the awareness was different.

Gibbs: Yes, and that was before the civil rights movement in the sixties. I went to school in the early fifties. So there you get—it’s really strange, because later
on, of course, after I graduated, then I get angry because I didn’t—[laughing] But you realize that there wasn’t a sensibility at that time. And it was really beginning to happen right after I graduated—the late fifties, early sixties—people were beginning to recognize these issues.

So anyway, I think that those three courses—the philosophy course my first year, the humanities course my first year, and English literature—were three great courses for me because they really did give me a kind of foundation. And again, it's Western civilization we’re talking about, a foundation of the great books and the intellectually challenging ideas of the Western world. And it wasn’t until later that I really began to acquaint myself with other parts of the world and other literatures and other ideas, but it certainly gave me a good background and stimulated me to do well. I was always interested in what I was reading. I’m a great reader, I like to read. Later on, I took courses on the novel. I love novels, so I took courses on the novel.

Another course that was very influential to me—because I came from a small town without a real museum, I mean, I think they had art at the library [laughter] but we didn’t have a museum—was a course on twentieth century art, and boy, did I love that. Actually I had two courses. I had one on nineteenth century and then twentieth century. So we actually started with nineteenth-century art, but then the twentieth-century art began with the Impressionists, and I loved that course. So I have always, if you’ll notice, I have always loved art and collecting art and African sculpture and other kinds of art. But I was introduced to Impressionism and the Impressionists—actually, my favorite is Matisse. I’m not a big Picasso fan, but I know his work, though. But we learned about Picasso, and Matisse, and Van Gogh, and all those people in that course. I’m a very visual person, if you notice. [laughter] People who come into my house say, “Oh, Jewelle, you love bright colors.” But I do. But I’m a very visually-oriented person. They have a wonderful library called the Fogg Library, art library, Fogg Museum, it has a library. When you took the course, you’d have to go in and you’d have to view the slides of the pictures. I used to spend hours—I loved it—spend hours looking at the pictures with all their bright colors and especially the Fauvist movement, and the Impressionist movement, I loved those bright colors.

And I kind of lost interest in the really modern art—like I’m not a big fan of Kandinsky and people like that because I don’t see—I like form, so I like two things: color and form. And when you just have, you know, my friend calls it “the drip, squiggle, squirt school of painting,” drip, squiggle and squirt. Roy Lichtenstein—those things don’t interest me. I suppose its art, I mean, I guess it is art, but I don’t like it. I like art where you could look at the picture, and you could at least see something that you relate to that represents something besides lines, you know, lines and squirts and squiggles. I mean, that’s not my kind of art. But I do like—my favorite period of art, I would have to say, is the Impressionist period, and post-Impressionist. I just love Renoir, Degas,
Manet—any of those people, I just could sit and look at their paintings for hours and hours and hours. And Gauguin, you see, we have that big Gauguin.

McGarrigle: I did see that.

Gibbs: Gauguin. And I like the painters who did use themes, kind of ethnic themes—Gauguin was one of the first to use ethnic themes. So I especially like Gauguin because he did use people of color in his paintings. And I like Toulouse-Lautrec, I like his dancers. So you know, I just loved that period, and that really opened up a whole new world for me because in my home my parents had kind of traditional pictures of pastoral scenes and stuff like that, but they were not art collectors, and their taste was not very sophisticated, I will have to say that. But then again, I think most of my friends, they didn’t have—they had these sort of stock paintings that you would have, of a pretty scene, or fruit and a bowl or something, but nothing really exciting. So I didn’t get that at home.

I think that I would say in general about my undergraduate education—and you’ll notice I haven’t even mentioned psychology because I thought of that more as preparing for my profession, but I did love psychology, I loved psychology courses, and I thought of that, that was really very practical because I knew I wanted to be either a social worker or a psychologist. So I always thought of those things as leading to my professional goal, whereas the other courses were to educate me.

I loved history and sociology, those two courses. I always loved courses that dealt with events, and the relationship between people and events. There was a famous Harvard professor named Crane Britton, and he wrote a book, I think it was called Ideas and Men. That was an interesting course because his thesis basically is that the world can go along in a kind of stable way for quite a few years, and then you have some kind of cataclysmic event, but that men shape those events and that men rise to deal with those events. So he would say, for example, “Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt came along just at the right time to be there for World War II, to do what they needed to do, to shape that event, World War II, to defeat the Germans.” And he would say that it’s really not just accidentally that the way history moves is to produce great men at times of great crisis, and that if you don’t have that kind of conjunction, if you don’t have a great leader, then the crisis never gets dealt with.

So I loved that theory, I still love that theory—I mean, think about what’s happening right now—it’s a good theory. And what it is is that here is [George W.] Bush, and he is not equal to the task. And I think that in the long run—I’m going to predict, and it’s going to be on tape anyway—is that this will be a disaster for America, it will be a disaster for the world, it will lower our status in the world. I am going to predict, this is what I think: I think it will lower our status in the world, and I think that history will be very unkind to George Bush, probably to his father, too, but to George Bush. And he will
be remembered as a very—as a cowboy president, as a person who didn’t think much, who didn’t anticipate what I think are going to be probably terrible consequences, and who mired this country into great—we’re going to be in great debt, the long-term debt. And we’re going to lose much of our prestige and power in the world as a result of his actions. And that’s what I really believe will happen.

So in this case, he was not the leader needed right now, he was not the leader who could rise to the occasion to really deal with terrorism in a rational, mature way. As a result, I think it’s going to have very terrible consequences. But anyway that, I love that, I loved that course, and I always think about that when we have crises, who are leaders, who is coming to the fore, who’s going to help resolve this crisis? And I always think about Crane Britton’s *Ideas and Men*.

**McGarrigle:** It sounds like all of those professors had a style that was captivating. There was the subject matter, but there must have also been a way that they conveyed, for example, Greek and Roman philosophy—

**Gibbs:** Well, yes, and actually, some of them were really good lecturers. Demos himself was a quiet man, as I remember he was short and bald, but he had an intensity and he had a passion for his subject that just came across. He was actually kind of a quiet lecturer, and he had a strong Greek accent, as I remember. He wasn’t that charismatic, but his passion came across. Crane Britton was charismatic. Then I had a course with Reischauer, Edwin Reischauer, about Asia, and that course had so much detail, and I enjoyed it, but it was the kind of course were you’d cram for the exam, dates and places and empires, and then I must admit that I wasn’t able to keep as much of it, maintain as much of it in my mind. I wasn’t able to retrieve it ten years later. I could still remember most of the dates and titles of the paintings of the Impressionists. I can remember lots of things about that course. But I cannot remember a lot about the various Chinese empires, and the Japanese empires, and the dynasties and so forth. There was just too much detail. He was a very good professor, and talked fast—but too much detail. But I enjoyed it, and I think it gave me an appreciation for that culture, for at least the main two we talked about, Japan and China. An appreciation for what caused World War II, an appreciation for all those things. But as far as sort of being able to retrieve the information, you know, [laughter] I always have to go look things up.

And then finally, I think that there was one other course that—I guess the other courses were all in psychology, yes, that I really enjoyed. Of course, those were courses that stimulated me to go into that field. So I think that in general, those courses, and I had a very interesting sociology course, which was one of the hardest courses I ever had with Talcott Parsons, who was a very famous sociologist and a terrible lecturer.
But I must mention one other professor who really influenced me, and that was Gordon Allport. I really adored Gordon Allport. He was a very famous psychologist at Harvard, and he was one of the very first psychologists in America to be interested in the topic of race and prejudice. He wrote a great book about prejudice. Well, I was an undergraduate there. And he almost never took an undergraduate for an honors thesis, and when I was senior I wanted to do an honor thesis. I went into his office and I basically begged him to take me on and he said, “Well, you know, Miss Taylor, I don’t take undergraduates, but”—I knew he kind of liked me in class, I could tell, and I thought—he was a kind of forbidding tall guy from Iowa, but he adapted very well to Harvard. He took on that kind of Boston Brahmin kind of personality. He was very forbidding, and most of his students were afraid of him. And I think he liked me because he realized that I wasn’t afraid of him, you know, he just realized it. But they were afraid to go see him in office hours, they were just terrified of him. And I went in and sat myself down and said, “Professor Allport, I would like to talk with you about my senior thesis.” And he said, “Well, you know, I never—” and I told him what I wanted to do, which I knew was going to interest him. See, the *Brown v. Board of Education* big decision came out in the spring of ’54. I was a senior that September and I decided that I wanted to do little survey of a few schools in the South or the border states that were integrating the first year, and that was going to be my senior thesis.

He had been one of the major experts for that decision. They had, the first time ever, the United States Supreme Court invited social science testimony, and he and a guy name Dr. [Kenneth B.] Clark in New York, who was black, they had been the kind of two co-leaders who got the testimonies from psychologists, social psychologists, sociologists, all the big ones in this country, saying that segregation was bad for children and especially for their mental health, their self-esteem. And Gordon Allport had been one of the major people, because of his book on race and prejudice, who was called to the Supreme Court. So I knew that I had him. I said, “You know, you’re the only one who could do this for me because nobody here is even interested.” Well, he turned sort of red, sort of. [laughs] I think he knew I was manipulating him, but that’s okay.

So he said, “Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I have a student from the South who is interested in race, and he’s been working with me, and he’s a graduate student. I’ll be your official tutor but I want him to work with you week by week and you can check in with me about once a month. But he will meet with you every week, and I will supervise him while he supervises you,” so that was our agreement. And that’s how I came to meet Tom Pettigrew, who is a very famous professor at UC Santa Cruz, now retired. He was at Harvard then. He’s a very famous professor in race relations. And that’s how I came to meet him and to be his lifelong friend.
Life has funny ways of doing things. Last year when I was a visiting fellow at the research institute here on campus, the new research institute in comparative studies on race and ethnicity [Stanford’s Institute for Comparative Studies on Race and Ethnicity], guess who the other visiting fellow was? Tom Pettigrew, my tutor from my senior year at Harvard, and we laughed about that. We told people—he looks much older than I do, because he’s aged and he has gray hair, and he’s got fair skin, so he’s—kind of lots of lines and wrinkles, and he looks much older. People couldn’t believe—I said, “Well, you know, he was in graduate school” [laughter] And his wife was a friend of mine, she was an undergraduate at Radcliffe a year behind me. So we’ve been friends all of our lives, I mean all our adult lives. They moved here to Santa Cruz and we see them, and just really we’ve been good friends. So that’s just the way, it’s interesting how—you talk about six degrees of separation.

Anyway, going back to Allport, so I did do my survey, I collected information on four cities, two in the South, two in the border states. Their first year of integration, they answered the surveys, and I got it all analyzed by—and we didn’t have these fancy computers then. A lot of stuff you had do by hand. I had to hand it in in May, and I did make it, and I got a magna cum laude on my thesis.

McGarrigle: How did you set the parameters for the research that you were going to do? I’m just going to change the tape.

[begin tape 8A]

McGarrigle: —of what was the research was that you were analyzing, that you were collecting—

Gibbs: Yes. What I was doing was I created, with the help of these two professors—well, actually one was a professor, Allport, and he was delighted to work with me it turned out because he was very excited about what I was doing—I was doing what you call contemporaneous research, when there’s social change. I mean, it was happening that September and I got the approval before I left school in June because I could see, this is going to be so exciting. And he was very excited about it, and so was Tom. So right away we got started, right after I got to school in September because we wanted to hit it right away. And so we got our survey out probably within—I got my survey out probably by Christmas, which was three months it took us to figure out what were the questions we wanted to ask.

What we were looking at really was sort of three or four different things, but mainly what we were looking at is, “How did this transition happen?” And we had some specific questions about how did the school board deal with the transition in these four communities. What did they do to prepare for blacks coming into the schools? Because it was always the black kids that came to
the white schools and not the other way around. How did this impact on the school, the family, and the community? Was there any organized resistance? And what we asked is, we sent the survey out before Christmas, and we asked them to return it to us within something like sixty days, so we would have the whole first—they’d be able to comment on the first three or four months of school. And then I needed time to analyze it.

McGarrigle: And it went to the students, actually?

Gibbs: No, no, no, it didn’t go the students. It went to the principals. It went to the school boards and we asked them to distribute it to the principals. So there were questions for the school board president or whoever was going to answer it, “How did they make this transition?” And then there were questions for the principals in—I think we asked for two schools in each community. You have to limit the data when you have so few months to analyze it. What we were looking at was about—I think there were about eight schools. In any case, we said we’d like to get the principals of two schools which are integrating this year to answer these surveys and then we asked them, how did the kids get along, from their observations. How did the kids along? What about the academic progress of both sets of kids, the whites and the blacks? How did they do in their first—I guess like a semester. We wanted them to look back at the first three months, how did it go?

It was really a kind of process evaluation of how did this transition go. How is everybody getting along, did you have any organized resistance. And the final question was something like, “How would you evaluate the first few months of integration in your community, in these schools?” And I got—everybody sent back, I had wonderful—I had 100 percent. It’s interesting. People really wanted to answer these questions. And of course, when something comes from Harvard, people are always interested and I had the letter from Professor Allport, who wrote a letter with my survey that I sent out. It was wonderful. And so people—of course, he was famous—and people understood that this was probably an important—you know, undergraduate survey. And I got the stuff back. I had to nag a couple of the schools to sent it back on time, but I did it get back. Everybody sent it back. They didn’t all answer all the questions as thoroughly as I would have wanted, but that’s what happens. But I did get enough information so that I could analyze it—write my conclusions, and basically it was pretty optimistic. They were pretty optimistic, there had been very little organized resistance—except in one community. So I got it in on time, and I was able to get—they had three levels of honors, and they did give me the magna cum laude, so it was pretty good. I felt good about that.

And then to follow that up, a few years later—my husband was also his student, and actually I got along better with him than my husband did. I think my husband was more afraid of him, I was not afraid of him, I think my husband was a little afraid of him. Well, we went to Africa and came back, and he was then head of the committee that has to approve the PhD
dissertations, because Jim was in that department. See, there was a combined department, which combined anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and Jim was in that department. There was another department of anthropology which was only for physical anthropology and archaeology, which was different. But the social and cultural anthropology, that was in this one combined department, and actually the department was called Social Relations. So they had anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and you could take courses in all of them, which is why I liked that department.

So we came back from Africa and Jim was doing his dissertation, and the Allports invited us to dinner. And I can’t tell you what an honor it was because as an undergraduate I had never been invited to a professor’s home. So I was just so thrilled that the Allports invited us to dinner. I had never met his wife, and now I was a graduate, but still very young. So that night they told this wonderful story which I have never forgotten. I saw him in his home serving dinner, he was much more relaxed, and he was treating us much more like equals. Jim was finishing up his dissertation, so you know, you treat people at that stage more like an equal because they’ve finished all their course work. You don’t have to grade them any more. And all they have to do is finish their dissertation, so Jim was on the job market looking for a job. And so we had dinner at his house.

He’s telling us about going to South Africa as a guest lecturer for one term at the University of Witwatersrand, which is in Johannesburg. It really was a university that was kind of the university for the Boers who were—that whole population, the German-Dutch Boer population, who were the rulers of the country. And they had invited him to talk—he wanted to do research over there about race and racism—and he had to be very careful about how he planned his proposal and what he said. So he couldn’t tell them exactly what he was looking for, so he made it made kind of broad.

Anyway, they invited him, and they let him lecture there. And there was a somewhat liberal element on the faculty—the faculty is always more liberal than the politicians, in general. And they wanted him to come and kind of start talking, having a dialogue about race and what kinds of solutions could they find for South Africa. So he tells this story, and he says, “My wife, I had to warn her, she’s very outspoken.” Now, she was from this Boston Brahmin background herself, and they are outspoken as a group. They’re very arrogant. The Boston Brahmins, the original pilgrim people, the descendants of those people, they really feel like they can say anything they want to, that they’re kind of the founders of this country. And they have this tremendous arrogance, and also a sense of complete control over things, okay? So she would just say whatever was on her mind.

He said, “I warned my wife, ‘Don’t talk about race in front of these people because you know we have different ideas in our country. Just observe and don’t talk.’” The night before they left this university department gave him—
and I guess it was the Psychology Department—gave them a farewell dinner to which they invited a lot of community politicians and important people and people in the university, all very important. And of course, this dinner, this university at that time was all white. There weren’t any black students, there weren’t any people of color at all in the university. So they were sitting up on the dais, and see, there were lots of people. And here he’s this famous professor from Harvard, now he’s going back, and we want to thank him, and we want to give him this honor and everything.

So he said there was a lull after the prayer, you know, the blessing, and she had a very loud voice, Mrs. Allport. And she turned to him—she had looked out in the audience, and she turned to him and she says, [loudly] “Gordon, I thought you told me there weren’t going to be any colored people here.” [laughter] And so we’re waiting for the punch line! And he said, “Please be quiet,” he said. And then he said, and he turned to me—and I’ll never forget it—and he still called me Miss Taylor even though I was married now—he said, “You know, Miss Taylor there are people your color in the audience who call themselves white, but everybody knows that they have some black blood, but in South Africa, if you declare yourself white and your skin is light enough and your hair is straight enough, people don’t challenge you because it’s so widespread, this”—miscegenation, really—“it’s so widespread, that the people we call the ‘colored people,’ some of them had one white parent and one colored parent, so they’re maybe three-fourths white. And they look like—their skin color is your color, but they have the straight hair, and maybe light eyes, hazel eyes, and they call themselves white.”

And he says, “And the other people don’t challenge them because in every one of those families there has been some miscegenation. So when my wife said, ‘I thought you said there weren’t going to be any colored people here,’” he said, “she was hitting very close to the bone.” [laughter] And I laughed! After that night, I always felt very comfortable with him because obviously he felt that he could tell us that story, and he could say to me that what earlier on in the class he had said once—that I forgot to tell you, because that will connect the two stories—when near the end of the class that I took with him as undergraduates, he had said—someone asked him, one of the white students from Harvard asked him, what did he think was the solution to racism in this country? Now, keep in mind, this was in the 1950s. I graduated from Radcliffe in ’55—keep in mind, this is an older, very distinguished gentleman from Iowa.

And you know what he said? I was the only black student in the class, and he pointed at me and he said, “Miss Taylor, I don’t want to embarrass you, but my feeling about a solution is people will intermarry and we’ll have a race of people in America and they’ll all look like you. They’ll all be brown, they’ll be light brown. And that is the solution to racism, because once we eliminate skin color differences, people will have to look for another way to classify people and to discriminate against people, and it won’t be race, it’ll probably
be something else. But my prediction is some time before the end of the twentieth century, people are all going to be brown like you, light brown like you.” And he did say that.

Now you see his prophecy is not quite—we haven’t quite reached it, but by the end of the twenty-first century, I think he’ll be right. I think his prophecy was too early. But when you just look around, you see all the people marrying interracially—now internationally. And every Sunday I read that—do you read the Sunday weddings?

McGarrigle: Yes, yes, I always look at them.

Gibbs: Don’t you notice how many interracial couples and intercultural couples—Sunday it was a Vietnamese woman, was it?

McGarrigle: Yes, I do, I always notice that.

Gibbs: Or was she was Cambodian? Whatever she was, she was Vietnamese, and a Jewish guy.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And every week there are two or three. I look at every picture just to see, every week there are two or three racially mixed couples. And also more and more international weddings, I’m seeing. So you know, he was ahead of his time. But imagine that in the mid-fifties he could say that. And the class, some of them just shook their heads because they couldn’t even envision what he meant. I could because of my family background. They couldn’t even envision what he meant, but I think that it is eventually going to happen. I think we’re going to end up so homogenized, that everybody is going to be kind of a light brown. But it might take another century, but it’s going to happen. And it’s certainly already happening in California, and some places in the East. Because you know, the majority of babies born now—you read that—in California are Mexican.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And José is the top name, the number one name of new babies in California is José.

McGarrigle: Oh, that I didn’t know.

Gibbs: As of last year, they said that in the paper. So what does that tell you? And then more and more of the Spanish are marrying other people, so you’re getting this kind of browning effect.

McGarrigle: How are you on time? Are you good on time?
Gibbs: Yes, I think up until one is—I’m good until one.

McGarrigle: Okay. Did you have women teachers? Professors?

Gibbs: Well, I had—that’s another good question—I had several women who were graduate students including my next door neighbor, who taught me sociology. But at that time, you know how the TAs [teacher’s assistant] were. They were advanced graduate students and they would teach a section, not a whole lecture. I did not have one woman professor in all the time I was an undergraduate. I did here at Berkeley when I got my master’s. They were all male professors but I had two or three women who were graduate TAs. And one of them is my neighbor here. Another one is a famous professor here—she is now retired—of psychology, and she’s here. She was a TA, that’s two. I think had three. I’m trying to remember what other course the third one was in, but it was probably sociology. And everybody else was male.

McGarrigle: I guess I’m just naive to that. I didn’t understand that at Radcliffe there weren’t women faculty.

Gibbs: Oh, no, Radcliffe, well, that is because we actually didn’t have our own faculty, we really had Harvard faculty. A lot of people didn’t really understand that relationship. Radcliffe always used the Harvard faculty, and now there is no Radcliffe any more, you know, Radcliffe has been kind of dis-established. But that’s nothing new to us. I mean, we always had the Harvard faculty. Even when I was there, we had all our classes with the boys, so we didn’t have our own faculty. And there were very few women graduate students then. Now there are many more and now there are a few professors but Harvard is actually kind of backward about female professors. They’re very old fashioned. They don’t have as many female professors as you would assume they should have because of the Harvard-Radcliffe history. They just don’t. The Radcliffe alumni are still fighting them, and complaining and trying to get—.

You know, we’ve even created, I think we’ve created two professorships, our group. My class endowed—we had a ten-year campaign, and it’s quite expensive to endow a professorship. But we endowed a professorship that is—when I say “my class,” that’s not exactly truth. It’s the Radcliffe club, two clubs of northern California. There are two clubs here, one on the peninsula and one in San Francisco. We actually raised money over about a ten-year period, enough from just our two clubs to endow a professorship, and we said it had to be a woman. See then, that’s how they hire women. And then there is another group from Radcliffe who endowed a chair, so they got two endowed chairs, that require that the only way they can use it is to hire a woman, and they have no choice. But you know, they have been very slow about hiring women, very slow. There is still a lot of discrimination in places like the medical school, very slow, so—.
McGarrigle: What is the name of your neighbor who was one of your TAs?

Gibbs: Elizabeth Cohen. She was great.

McGarrigle: Okay. And the woman you mentioned who was at Stanford?

Gibbs: Eleanor Maccoby. She’s been retired a while. When she was my teacher, she had a different name, when I knew her, she was not married, but she’s now a retired professor at Stanford. I see these people all the time. They all remember me as a student.

So anyway, I had a good education, and again, the idea of female teachers, we weren’t very sensitive to in those days. All these things are now concerns that came out of the women’s movement and there were just certain assumptions you had, like your teachers were going to be male, your doctors were going to be male. We didn’t necessarily challenge those assumptions until after I finished college. We began to think, ‘Why does this have to be? Why do we always have to have male teachers, and male doctors, and male leaders, and male politicians?’ And that movement really came later, along even after the civil rights movement. And it’s important for us to remember that, when we look back.

McGarrigle: What the chronology is.

Gibbs: Well, yes, it’s just important to remember that you are a captive of your time and your thoughts, it’s hard for the thoughts to break out of what everybody else is thinking. You have to be a real visionary. But some of us were beginning to rumble around—certainly with me it was race, so that I was very aware that we needed to change. But my focus was on racial equality, not so much female equality as racial equality and it was later that I became obviously a convert to and more aware of female equality. But my main focus in college was certainly racial equality.

McGarrigle: Yes. I want to go back and talk about some of that more next time, and then also how you met Jim. He told me his part of the story.

Gibbs: He told you his story, yes, right. Okay, did you ever ask me the thing about what Susan said, you said Susan—

McGarrigle: Susan had said she was interested in knowing what your self-perception was about your role in college, you know, at the time.

Gibbs: Yes, well, I think we talked about that, don’t you think we did?

McGarrigle: I do.
Gibbs: Yes. That’s interesting, though, that she would say my self-perception. I’m not sure that I was—I think to be fair I’m not sure that I was that self-reflective in college. I think what I was doing was acting on this kind of strong internal—what was it—well, it was really a drive, I guess. It was a strong internal drive to make changes about race. And it wasn’t just for me that I was making it. So I don’t think it was—I don’t think I would sit down in my room and sort of self-reflect on, “How can I be a leader?” or something like that. I mean, that was not what I was doing. It was more, I’m more of an activist, so I wasn’t reflecting on it as much as I was doing it—you know what I mean? There is a difference.

McGarrigle: Yes, good distinction.

Gibbs: There are a lot of people who reflect on things and write about things and maybe don’t do them, but they create a climate for other people to do them. I’m probably just the opposite. What I do is I do things and then I may write about them later, or may rationalize them intellectually after I have done them. So I don’t set up the sort of rationale first and then do it. I do it because there’s this urgency within me—and there’s always been—to react to situations that I find unfair, and unjust, and discriminatory. There’s a very strong—and I think I’ve mentioned this to you several times—there’s a very strong urge in me to react, and sometimes it can be almost immediately where I don’t give it much self-reflection, and sometimes it isn’t immediate, but it’s a process. But in any case, I’m acting out of a feeling that something is wrong, and something needs to be corrected, and that I have to take some responsibility for it but I don’t have to take all the responsibility for it because I try to also organize other people, but that’s also part of my activist role, that I want to take some responsibility but I also want to get other people to see this wrong.

Like I told you the story about the roommates. But I got two other groups to deal with it. I mean, I got the Radcliffe Association on Minority Problems activated to say to deans—I didn’t want at that point to be out there by myself, the only one. I wanted to have some consensus that there are other people in the community—because if no else supported it, it wouldn’t have gone through. See, I knew that. In some ways I’m sort of political, so I want to organize people to identify, this is a problem, and then next, what can we about it, and then third, can we agree on some strategies to do it, to implement it? That’s the way I work. And then I went to the student government and I said, “Look, this isn’t only happening to me. It’s not a personal issue. It’s an issue for the black girls, it’s an issue for the Jewish girls, it’s an issue for the few Asian girls”—who often came from Hong Kong or other countries, who always ended up with single rooms. I said, “We need to make some changes, we need to practice what we preach, we need to make Radcliffe a better place.” And that was the argument that I used.
So that again, I don’t think of myself as—I have over the years become more self-reflective, yes, because sometimes I want a longer time to think about things and a longer time to figure out what really ought to be done, and how I can be effective in implementing it. Because I don’t want to start a process that fails, and I don’t want to start something that I can’t see the goal being implemented, you know. Then I feel worse, and I feel like maybe I’ve gotten other people’s expectations high and other people involved, and then we’re all disappointed. So I think I’ve become more—certainly with age, I’ve become much more self-reflective, and I’ve become a little slower on the uptake than I used to be. I used to be, boom! You know, right there if anything happened, I would respond really sometimes too quickly, probably. And sometimes maybe I was not diplomatic enough, and then it takes longer to get what you want accomplished because you—it’s like a racer who starts the race before the gun goes off. Sometimes I would do that. I have done that in the past.

So now I’ve become a little more thoughtful, a little more self-reflective than I used to be. But this urge is still there, I’m sure as long as I live, it will never go away. If I see injustice, and it’s not just racial injustice, it’s almost any kind of injustice, I still speak out. I still act on it. I still write letters to the editor, I mean, I will do that still when I see injustice, and try to—at least, as one person, I want to make a statement that I think this is wrong. It’s unjust, it’s discriminatory, it’s unfair, and this is why I think so, and this is what I think you ought to do to change it. So I still do that.

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McGarrigle: It’s a good theme.

Gibbs: Well, it’s me. And, you know, sometimes I think someday I’m going to run out of energy, but—. [laughs] I have a friend who used to say, in her day—she was a Jewish girl—when I worked at the Pillsbury Company—we have to talk about the Pillsbury company sometime, I don’t know if we did—

McGarrigle: Not yet.

Gibbs: We didn’t get to my early career yet! Oh, my God! We’ve got a long way to go, and what I did at the Pillsbury Company—. [laughs]

McGarrigle: I’ve read a little bit about it. We’re going to talk about it.

Gibbs: Yes, but Judy used to say to me, “But Jewelle, if I don’t worry, who will?” And I’ve kept that with me—she was a real worrier about everything. She was Jewish, she worried about the Holocaust, she worried about everything. And very attuned to Jewish discrimination, and so she used to talk about things that happened to Jewish people. We’d go out to lunch, and she would look for things, you know, and I would have to talk about the things that were happening to black people. So I often say now when Jim says, “Jewelle, are you writing another letter to the paper? Where do you find the find time?
Don’t you need to do something?” I say, “Jim, if I don’t worry, who will?”
[laughter] So that’s my theme, “If I don’t worry, who will?”

[end of session]
Interview 6: May 12, 2003

[begin tape 9A]

McGarrigle: We were talking about one wedding. I want to talk about your wedding to Jim and how you met Jim.

Gibbs: Oh, my God! [laughs] I thought we’d talked about that.

McGarrigle: Not extensively, but I wanted to—

Gibbs: We talked, didn’t we talk about it? Okay, go ahead.

McGarrigle: But before that, I wanted to ask you about dating at Radcliffe and meeting Jim, but also about socializing, because you mentioned that there was this broad network of people in sororities and fraternities at colleges throughout the Northeast who would meet. And I wondered did that seem like a natural transition for you during the week, to come back to your social life at Radcliffe, which was different, and then on the weekends to have this—

Gibbs: Well, actually, it was the boys who traveled. At least, most of the girls didn’t travel. It was the boys who came to see us.

McGarrigle: Oh, they would come from Maine and wherever?

Gibbs: They would come from Maine, all over Massachusetts, upstate New York. The boys would do the traveling. West Point sometimes. But it was the boys who were in the Ivy League schools, and places like MIT, which was right in Boston, and places like—well, Cornell was a little bit out of it. As a matter of fact, I was teasing my husband. But mostly the Ivy League schools and MIT and Boston University, which were all there. So the boys would come and some, a lot of them at B.U. and Harvard were graduate students. They had apartments and we’d have parties. And, you know, we only went away when we were invited to a weekend away at a—like Dartmouth Winter Carnival or something. But by and large, we, the girls, did not travel [except for the big football weekends like the Harvard-Yale Game]. The boys would come and date the girls.

I have to stress to you that you knew there was a segregated social life and that you could go to class, you could live in the dorm, but after hours and on the weekends, black kids, with very few exceptions, were not included in the social life. And the exceptions tended to be the very prominent athletes, the prominent—and I want to add, handsome light-skinned athletes, too. So that there were a few boys who were great football players or great basketball players. They were very handsome, charming, and pretty much, pretty light-skinned. And often they would be invited to things that nobody else ever got to be invited to, but it was partly because of their prominence as athletes.
McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: So the rest of us understood that that was the way it was in the fifties. And it didn’t change until the sixties, it began to change. But you know, it’s still true. Have you been following this thing about the high school in Alabama or Georgia—I think it’s in Georgia—the segregated prom?

McGarrigle: Oh, no, I haven’t.

Gibbs: Well, it’s the same. It’s still true. Well, it’s been on CNN a lot. CNN has certain stories they like to play up. And this is a story. It’s just now, going on now, or the prom actually I think took place a week ago. A high school in Georgia that is completely half and half, half black and half white, and for the first time last year they tried a prom that was integrated. Because, you know, quite truthfully, the real fear in the South is not of equality. The real fear in the South is of interracial dating and marriage. That’s always been the fear. I think if they thought you could be equal and not have any social interaction, everything would be okay. But the fear is that the social events, the equality, leads to this social dating and stuff.

So they had kept their prom separate all these years since integration, and last year they decided that that was wrong, and they were going to have an integrated prom, and people did have an integrated prom. It got a lot of attention in the country, and Time magazine and all said they’re really making progress. Well, what happened is—and there were no incidents that were reported, I mean, no incidents of violence or anything out of the ordinary. This year they went back, the white kids decided—and I think probably their parents—that they really wanted to have a separate white prom in a private place. And so the black kids went ahead with the public high school prom, and they were very hurt and so all the—actually several networks covered it. This white prom did not include the black kids. But the public prom, which was mainly the black kids then, some of the white kids did come, which I thought was—I give them credit for that.

And so the announcer last—I think it was Sunday night it was on 60 Minutes—he was saying, “Northerners looking at this program shouldn’t feel superior,” he said, “because we still live in a segregated society. Blacks in every city live in their own neighborhoods. They go to their own churches, and their social lives are separate. So when you’re looking at this, Northerners shouldn’t feel superior, because this goes on all over the country.” And that’s true. And I was thinking back to, you know, the 1950s, so what else is new?

But I think that there in the suburbs and in some liberal communities, certainly like Berkeley, there certainly is more integration socially. Kids date. At all the colleges, there’s interracial dating now, even in the South, where it’s not banned. But there is interracial dating everywhere now, so it’s much different than when I went to school. But there’s still, in sort of up to age about
seventeen in high schools, I think there’s still a lot of separation in the South and in conservative communities. There is this fear of interracial dating, leading to interracial sex, leading to interracial marriage. That’s what they’re afraid of. But it is happening, I think, more and more, if you look at your college campuses, and it’s happening in liberal communities all over this country. And that’s why we do have an increase, that is true. I mean, they were right! That’s the funny thing. They were right. And we do have an increase in interracial marriages. And we do have an increase in interracial children, biracial children. And that’s a natural consequence of contact between people.

So I guess what I would say is that when we were coming along, we understood that there was not very much integrated social life, and that it was going to be mainly segregated. And so you enjoyed it at that level. You know, you found your own friends, you created your own networks. If you were a girl, you might join a sorority, and if you were a boy, you might join [a fraternity]. And that gave you access to social activities every weekend all over the East Coast, we would have parties. Like we would go down to the Yale-Harvard game in New Haven. There were annual things, like there was a famous track meet at the University of Pennsylvania, which my father never allowed me to go to, because it was kind of a wild party. And the black kids from all of these schools would go there for those weekends, and we’d meet each other and, you know, a lot of people married out of those contacts. Certainly dated. And there were other sort of regular events that occurred. Dartmouth Winter Carnival, a lot of the black students would always invite girls up. So we had a very active social life. I mean, we didn’t feel excluded, because we didn’t expect to be included. Once you have that expectation, it’s different. But if you don’t have it—we never actively felt, consciously we didn’t feel excluded. We felt that we had our own social life and we were perfectly happy with it.

McGarrigle: Do you think there’s a sense at all for some of you, for any of the people who you knew in that group, that there was a stress that you had two parts to your life, that you had to maintain two—

Gibbs: No, I never—I can say that for some people, it might have been true. I think the people who had the hardest time were the people who had gone to white prep schools as high school students. And I think they had different expectations when they came to college. What they found was that the college social scene was very segregated, and I think some of them were very disappointed. Yes, I think those were the ones who had the most stress. I knew of two kids who committed suicide because I think they couldn’t handle the dual social life. But one did not commit suicide until he was probably in his thirties, but all the time he had been at Brown University, he had been very friendly with white kids, and he had very fair skin, and he expected that to go on all his life, and when it didn’t, he couldn’t handle it. He just couldn’t handle it, that he was expected to socialize with black people. And so in his
thirties he committed suicide, and I think in large part, we all decided that a large part of that suicide had to do from the inability to bridge that gap.

And then another young woman at Radcliffe eventually, who had been very active socially, and went down to New York and kind of lived in Greenwich Village and had a very active social life in—in fact, she was part of Andy Warhol’s group, one of the hangers-on, later in her life, I mean, not right after she got out of Radcliffe. There was this wild group that surrounded Andy Warhol, and they did all kinds of things. She was part of that group. But at some point, she realized that she was really not an equal part of that group, and she was being used by the men in that group, and she committed suicide. And again, we’re not sure, but we believe that she committed suicide because she one day woke up and realized that she was really being used to prove they were liberal, to prove they were with it, to prove whatever they were trying to prove. And yet, you know, she never got married to any of them, and basically it appeared that she had been, you know, used by them. And I think one day she woke up and realized that that was not what she wanted for the rest of her life, so she committed suicide.

So I think there were a few people for whom it was very painful, and they really couldn’t accept the fact that the white world was not ready to be completely integrated at that time. But I did not have that problem. And most of my friends didn’t have that problem. We were very happy with our own social life.

McGarrigle: I think we did talk about your meeting Jim. Last time we talked more about your academics and your different courses and mostly the liberal arts courses, and then you said that you had, earlier in your college coursework, you did the philosophy and the literature and the history, and then you reserved the psychology that you knew was preparation for your career.

Gibbs: Right. Later.

McGarrigle: Until later. And we talked about your thesis topic, also, with Professor Allport.

Gibbs: Well, anyway, you want to talk about Jim? I met him, actually, I think I met him—I first met him when I was a sophomore. But we weren’t even friendly. I mean, I would see him in the halls at Emerson Hall, which is where the Sociology and the Psychology Department were. And I wasn’t really friendly with him. He was a graduate student, and I would sort of, you know, smile at him and say “Hi,” and he would say, “Hi.” We never actually were formally introduced. So I had no idea that all that time he was interested in me, it turned out later that he was. Then he went away the next year to England to study. He got a fellowship to England, to Cambridge University. So he was gone my junior year. And then he came back my senior year, and asked someone to set up a date with me, a blind date.
Now, keep in mind that for a year, he had never even come up to—I think he was shy or something—to introduce himself to me. And all I did was say, “Hi,” and keep moving. So we never had a conversation. [laughs] I was a sophomore.

McGarrigle: Was there a protocol that a person would have to be introduced? Was there a sort of formality that he would have—

Gibbs: Well, if you were to ask him, he would say so. I think that this was New England in the fifties, and most girls were sort of reserved and, you know, you met boys at parties. You met boys in the dorm, you met boys in classes. But if you were walking across the Yard and saw someone and hadn’t been introduced, you would expect the guy would either come up to you and say something, or if you were very aggressive, you would say something to him. So I think that was it. It was kind of a protocol that a girl didn’t want to seem too aggressive, so she didn’t introduce herself, and if the boy introduced himself, he usually had to do it in such a way so he didn’t look like he was being too aggressive. It was just silly, but that’s how it was in those days. It was partly because it was New England, and partly because it was in the fifties, and, you know, people were just different then. I mean, there was a different sensibility.

So anyway, in my senior year he asked a friend of his in the law school—he was a graduate student, you know—to introduce him to me. Now, the funny part of it is that I thought I was meeting somebody else. I had my eye on a guy who was a teaching assistant in history. He was tall and handsome and I had been trying to catch his eye for two years. [laughter] But he kept ignoring me. I didn’t like it, either. I said, “Why is this man ignoring me? Why doesn’t he respond when I smile to him?” And he was very businesslike, you know. I didn’t even have a course with him, and I was trying to figure out—how could I have a course with him? What does he teach? But I knew he was in history.

Anyway, I had really tried to figure out how I was going to meet this guy, because I didn’t like being ignored by him. He just treated me sort of like a little sister or something. So anyway, he did speak, but it was never, you know, never showed any interest. So I thought I was meeting this guy, and I was very excited. Went to this restaurant. Now, the romantic part of this story is that—did you ever, are you old enough to remember the movie Love Story?


Gibbs: Well, the movie Love Story was filmed at the restaurant, part of it, where we met. It was called the Midget, on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge. It was called the Midget Restaurant. And we went there to meet on a blind date. And that was where the movie was filmed. So I think for Jim that had some special significance.
But anyway, so I walk in with my girlfriend. I don’t know who arrived first. I think we were there and they arrived later. Yeah, we were there, we met them. And I was very disappointed that this was not the guy that I’d thought it was. Okay? Not that he wasn’t perfectly nice or anything like that. But I was disappointed because I was expecting somebody else. So I was kind of mean to him. I was mean because I was frustrated. I was thinking, ‘You mean to tell me I’m wasting my time meeting this guy,’ and, you know, I thought I was meeting this other guy. So I was kind of mean to him. He always says I was so mean. I was just not very friendly. And he was trying to tell me about his year at Cambridge, and I was acting like I wasn’t interested, when I really was, that was the funny thing. You know, women can be so silly. So I was trying to make believe that, you know, I’m not really interested in you, I’m not really interested in your year in Cambridge. I don’t want to hear anything about it.

But he didn’t give up. But I will admit, and I look back and I realize how mean I was, first date [laughing]—but somehow it intrigued him. You know how that is, if I get too sweet—it intrigued him that I was mean. So he called me a couple of weeks later. He says it was three weeks, I say it was two, but it doesn’t matter. And asked me, of all things—it was near Easter—to go to church. Because he knew I was a minister’s daughter. And he thought that would win my heart or something. So we did. We went to Memorial Church, which is a beautiful chapel at Harvard. We went to Memorial Church for Easter, and I think he took me out to lunch or brunch or something. And so that was our first, I’m not sure you’d call it a date, but I guess it was a date, and in the meantime, later he would ask me to coffee after class. There was this place in the Harvard Square that everybody went, the Donut Shop. And we would go and gorge ourselves on donuts. I didn’t even drink coffee, but donuts and hot chocolate or whatever. So he would say, “Oh, well, why don’t we go to the Donut Shop after class?” So I realized he was getting interested.

In the meantime, I had another boyfriend. So the long and short of it was, this other boyfriend [Richard Johnson] was from Boston University. I had met him through these parties in Boston that I had told you about, these fraternity and sorority parties. He belonged to one of the prominent black fraternities, and I had met him at one of their parties. He was very tall and handsome, and he was a basketball player. So he was considered quite a catch. So I caught him. I actually was pinned to him. Then he went in the army—it must have been around—well, it was after the Korean War, because the Korean War was in the late—when was the Korean War? Late forties, I guess. I don’t know why he was in the army. But it was in the mid-fifties, so it must have had something to do with the Korean War.

Anyway, he went in the army. And I realized that, when I wasn’t seeing him every weekend, what I realized was that I was finding Jim a more interesting person, a more interesting conversationalist. And the other guy used to like to talk about sports all the time, and I wasn’t that interested in sports. I wasn’t then, and I never have been, that interested in sports as a topic. But he used to
quote to me all the scores of the basketball players and tell me all these things, and I wasn’t interested. And that was his major interest. So I started thinking, ‘Do I want to spend the rest of my life listening to basketball scores? [laughs] And going to basketball games? Or other games? Is that how I want to spend the rest of my life?’ And I thought, ‘No, I don’t.’

So gradually, gradually—Jim was very persistent. Then we’d go to a movie sometimes. It was all very platonic for a while. And then I realized that he really was interested in me, and finally, it was not until the spring of my senior year that he let me know that he was interested in me romantically, not just as a friend. So at that point I returned my boyfriend’s pin. Unfortunately, I wrote him—I always feel bad about that—I wrote him a “Dear John” letter. But fortunately, he wasn’t in the war, you know, there was no war then. But he was in the service, and I wrote him this “Dear John” letter. For years I felt bad about that. But anyway, then that summer, I graduated, the year of ’55 I graduated, and went to work in Washington for a year.

McGarrigle: Being pinned to somebody, was there the expectation that you would be married? Was it a pre-engagement?

Gibbs: Yes, it was pre-engagement. Boys used to use—see, I guess all those things are out the window now. I don’t think people do that anymore. Boys would give girls their fraternity pin as a pre-engagement. That meant you were really serious and you weren’t supposed to date anybody else. Both of you, that was a commitment. When you give the girl your fraternity pin, she is not to date anybody else and you’re not, and it leads eventually to an engagement and then marriage, yes. So I did have his pin. And I sent it back.

So anyway, the long and short of it is, I went to Washington that July 1st after I graduated. I got a job at the Labor Department. That’s another interesting story, too, because they used to have this exam called a junior management intern exam. Well, it had two names. First it was called junior management assistant, I think, JMA, and then they changed it a couple of years later to junior management intern. And you would take the exam, it was a national exam. It was very much like a graduate school exam, mainly general knowledge, and then it was very competitive. They would cull it until they got to I guess the top 5 percent, and then they would interview the top 5 percent in cities all around the country.

So I took the exam, and I got an interview in Boston. Let’s see—well, sometime that spring, anyway. And it was clear—one of the interviewers, said something that it was clear to me that they were surprised I was black. So afterwards, one of the interviewers said to me, “Well, you did very well”—it was a group interview—“You did very well in the group interview, and we’re going to recommend you, but I don’t know if they’ve ever accepted any black people in this program.” That’s what he said to me. He was very honest. So I
said to him, “Well, thanks for telling me, and thanks for telling me that you will recommend me. I guess I’ll just have to see what happens.”

So anyway, I was recommended, I was chosen, and I did get several offers from different departments in Washington. I finally decided that if they gave me an offer at the Labor Department, I would take it. And let’s go back to talk about this, because this is again of one those racially-tinged stories that all my life I’ve had to deal with. But anyway, I did get the position at the Labor Department. And then I want to go back to that, because that’s the beginning, my first career job. So that July, I guess, I went down. That August, Jim came down to Washington and proposed to me on the Capitol Mall, he proposed to me on one very hot, muggy night on the Capitol Mall, he proposed to me. And I said, “Yes.” And then the next year—so I spent a year in Washington from that summer, and the next August we got married, about a year later.

McGarrigle: How did you decide to apply for that junior management position, or management internship?

Gibbs: Well, when I actually did it, I think it was called JMA, junior management assistant, and then later they sort of upgraded it and said, because there’s more—the other title is more representative—we were interns. And we interned in one of the major government departments. And after a year, if you did well, you were given an immediate raise. You started at—then they had these levels, they’re called—do you know about government levels?

McGarrigle: Some.

Gibbs: Well, at that time, the first entry level in what they called the professional ranks was actually a GS5. I’m sure it must be higher now. And the salary for a young girl just getting out of college looked terrific. Now it would be peanuts, literally. But, you know, government salaries have never been that good anyway. But I had never had a fulltime job, so to me it looked like a fortune. I can’t even remember what it was. Probably $6,000 a year or something. And so they offered me—and they only picked, in the whole country, I think 5 percent of the people who took the exam were then weeded out by this national, by these panels, where you had to be interviewed, and I think it ended up like 2 percent of the people who initially took the exam actually finished the process and were appointed.

And the reason I did it, because a friend of mine at Wellesley the year before had done it. She thought it was a wonderful opportunity to live in Washington, and she told me how exciting it was to be in Washington. And I had a big family in Washington.

McGarrigle: Well, I was wondering if you connected on your mother’s side.
Gibbs: Yes, both sides, I did. So I had a huge family, I mean on both sides, just lots and lots of cousins and relatives, uncles and aunts. I was, just barely twenty-one, and I said, ‘If I’m going to leave home, what I should do—I think I’d feel better’—I had thought about New York, but New York is a hard place to go for, I think even then, for your first time leaving home. And I thought, ‘I think New York might be overwhelming, and I’d rather try Washington where I have a lot of friends already, relatives, and a support system. I’d rather try that than New York, or stay in Boston,’ which I had no intention of doing.

So those were my options. I could have stayed in Boston. I didn’t really like Boston very much. Then there was New York, which was not far from where I grew up in Connecticut, and I could have gone home every weekend if I had to. And then the third option was Washington. I wanted to stay on the East Coast, and I wanted to be near family. So really, that was the perfect job for me. It was in a big city that was manageable. Washington is really a small city, you know. When I say big city, it was big then, to me. It was also—government jobs are always jobs that—black people tend to gravitate toward government jobs, because they give you a lot of security, and at that point I didn’t know when I was going to be married. I knew that I would eventually go to graduate school, but I wanted to be in a place where I could work a couple years, save some money, meet some other young people, and maybe, at that time, as I said, I wasn’t engaged—maybe meet a husband.

And the other thing about Washington, quite honestly, is it has probably the largest group of middle-class black people in America that live there, and they have a very good university, a black university—now it’s mixed, but it used to be black—called Howard University, with a medical school, dental school, and law school. And of course, I knew that. I also knew some of the people who were in the schools, and it was a good place for girls, quite frankly, who were looking for eligible husbands. A lot of them graduated, a lot of my girlfriends went to Washington to work because they figured, well, I might get an eligible husband at Howard University medical school, dental school, or law school. So I think we all had the same thing in mind. So there were many reasons that I went to Washington, many reasons. That was one of them. And as I said, that decision was made before I really got very involved with Jim.

So I went down there and spent just a year, and after he proposed and told me he had to go to Africa to finish his research, that was it. If I said yes, that meant I was committing to going to Africa with him the following year.

McGarrigle: Where did you live when you first got to Washington?

Gibbs: I lived in an area that was then really mixed. It was one of the few areas of Washington that was kind of still racially mixed. It was between the white and the black sections, and it was in northwest Washington. It was on 13th Street, 13th and Clifton. And there were still a few whites in the neighborhood, but the neighborhood had become increasingly—it was a middle-class black
neighborhood. We had a beautiful apartment building. We lived on a slight hill, and we had a nice view. And it was a safe neighborhood. I never had any fears there. And as I say, it was kind of on the edge between the white areas and the black area, and then we had a nice shopping area called the 14th Street shopping area, which had nice stores. So it was a nice place for—and we were in an apartment building with lots of singles and young couples.

McGarrigle: So did you go there with the idea that you had roommates already, or—?

Gibbs: No, I lived with a distant—one of my mother’s elderly cousins for about six months until they drove me crazy. They were overprotective and nosy, I thought, and I felt that I couldn’t really have an active social life with them, because they were very suspicious of all the young men that came to see me. I always had the feeling they were lurking behind doors and listening to me and watching me. I didn’t like it. They were both spinsters. They were two really elderly spinsters. And they acted like that. Although they were very nice to me and loving and nurturing, and cooked wonderful meals, they were just difficult. I felt like I had keepers, you know? And I didn’t want to have keepers. I was now twenty-one, and I didn’t need any keepers.

So I lived there until I met a couple of girls who were in the same situation. They’d just finished college, and they were middle-class girls from what we used to call “nice families,” which everybody used to worry about. Because that was very important in those days. I don’t know, it probably still is. But then, you know, you had to be very selective about your roommate and friends.

[begin tape 9B]

Gibbs: [I’m still friendly with one of those roommates—Grace Young Bruce, who lives in Chicago. The other one, Evelyn Rich, lives in New York]—and I’m not quite as friendly with her. But we roomed together for what turned out to be only six months, from January to June. And then I got married, and then in August [Grace Young] got married, and then [Evie Jones] kept the apartment for the summer and then she got married. So we all got married that same year. Two of us maintained a very close relationship, and [Evie] was less close to us at the beginning and is still less close. But we still exchange Christmas cards after all these years.

McGarrigle: Was Washington more segregated in your experience than Boston had been?

Gibbs: More openly segregated.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: Yes. More openly segregated. But not more segregated. So again, it’s a matter of degree. Because in Washington when I went there, they had just, as I
remember—and I’ve been meaning to look this up in a history book, but I think it was 1954 when they had the Thompson case, which was a restaurant case. So they had just integrated their restaurants. I’m pretty sure it was the year before I got there, it was called the Thompson restaurant case. Because that fall of 1954 when I went, my aunt took me to a very famous fish restaurant. She said, “You know, we couldn’t go here before, and now that we can go, I go every week to one of these nice restaurants. Now that we’re integrated, I’m really enjoying it.” And she took me. So they had only recently been integrated—I think it was 1954.

So I came at a time of really great social change in Washington. The year before, it had also been the Brown v. the Board of Education case, was the spring of 1954. They were just opening up the restaurants, the hotels—some of the hotels were now open for blacks, where previously there had been very few of the big hotels that allowed blacks. So actually, it was a segregated city. But in the government buildings, things were pretty desegregated. You had a lot of blacks working, many of whom had good jobs. So as long as they were at work, it was like more integration. And then when they left work, you had the segregated neighborhoods, the segregated everything else: theaters, restaurants, hotels. But when I got there, it was just beginning to move into integration. So it was really historic time to be there, really an interesting time to be there. And there were more job opportunities [for blacks].

The other thing that’s not a part of my CV [curriculum vitae], because I didn’t follow through with it, but the same spring I graduated, I had an offer from the Washington Post to be the first black reporter. And I often wondered what would have happened to my life if I had done that instead of the government internship. I went down, and that’s an interesting story, because—would you like me to tell it now?

McGarrigle: Yes, please.

Gibbs: I had never been particularly interested in journalism, but I had been editor-in-chief of my high school yearbook and on the staff of the high school paper, and I had written occasionally for my college paper. But journalism was not high on my agenda. I think I mentioned to you last week, I always liked English courses and English literature courses. And I took enough English literature courses and drama courses almost to have a minor. I mean, I had several English lit and drama courses. I always loved English. I just love the language, and I like to talk, so—[laughs]. You know, and I was always interested in things like roots and words, and I took four years of Latin in high school. So I was always interested in language and the use of language, and good books. I always liked good books, novels. So in that sense, I had an interest in writing and literature, but I had never thought at all of journalism as a career. It had never crossed my mind.
However, my uncle, my father’s middle brother, named Robert Taylor, Robert Lee Taylor believe it or not, named after the Civil War Confederate general, was the editor of a black newspaper, a weekly newspaper in Washington, D.C. He was the editor of the Washington edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, it was called. And they still publish it today, to this day it’s still published. And in his role as editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he was one of the plaintiffs in the Thompson restaurant case. That’s why I know about it. I think it was either ’53 or ’54. I don’t know whether it was his name or the paper was the plaintiff. I think his name is in the case, but certainly as the editor, he represented the paper. They were among the plaintiffs seeking integrated restaurants in Washington.

Because of his role, my uncle knew people on both sides of the racial divide in Washington. He knew everybody. I mean, he covered the black community, but he also covered the impact of the white community and legislation on the black community. So he knew the congressmen, he knew the white reporters, he knew the white media. So apparently one day he was having a conversation with Mr. Graham, who was then the husband of the famous Katharine Graham—the husband, not the son. He was having a conversation with him. I think his name was [Philip], if I remember, I think his name was [Philip], but I can’t remember right now. Anyway, there were several Grahams in the company, and [Philip] Graham, I believe, was her husband. But there was another Graham, too, who might have been his brother. I’m not sure.

In any case, my uncle was telling him—you know, just social conversation—about his niece coming out of Radcliffe. And some of the Graham children or some of the Graham family had gone to Harvard, so they were interested in this black girl who had gone to Radcliffe. So Mr. Graham said to my uncle, “Now, why don’t you tell her to call us when she comes to Washington. We’re looking—it’s time for us to have a black reporter. And I bet your niece would be good, since she went to Radcliffe.” My Uncle Robert said, “Oh, you know, she”—you know how people are, your relatives—“she’s graduating from Radcliffe with honors and everything.” Mr. Graham said, “Well, tell her to give us a call.”

Well, my uncle called me in Cambridge. I said, “Uncle Bob, I’m not interested in being a reporter.” He said, “Well, look, this is a historic opportunity. At least go see them. At least just go see them.” So he gave me the Post’s address, he said, “Write a little short note. Tell him when you’ll be in Washington for your interviews for the government position,” which see, my expenses were being paid, they were giving me my train ticket. My uncle said, “Since you’re going to get a free ticket anyway, I mean, the government is bringing you down, why don’t you go and talk to him?” I said, “Are you sure Mr. Graham will see me?” He said, “Yes, he’ll see you. I’m sure he’ll see you.”
So I said, “Okay,” then I did write a little note on my old-fashioned typewriter, where I used to make lots of mistakes, but I made sure it was perfect. [laughs] So about a week later I get a call at the dorm from the Washington Post. I can’t remember exactly who called me, but I think it was the secretary. And she said, “Well, Miss Taylor, Mr. Graham got your note, and we’d like to set up an interview with you.” And I was just shocked, you know. She says, “We are looking”—and they were very honest! She said, “We are looking for a black reporter to cover”—and she said “the black community.” See, that’s how it was in those days. It wasn’t a black reporter to do general reporting. It’s a black reporter to cover black people, which didn’t interest me very much anyway.

So then I called my uncle back, and I said, “Uncle Bob, I’m not coming to Washington just to be a reporter and just report on the black community. That doesn’t interest me.” He said, “Yes, but it’s an opening. Somebody’s got to be first, and if you do a good job on the black community, I assure you, you’ll get more general jobs. I’m sure of that, and I’ve already talked to Mr. Graham about that. Yes, you’ll start in the black community. But if you prove yourself to be a good journalist, and get good stories, and know how to write, he says you will eventually get more general assignments.” I said, “Okay, fine.”

So anyway, I went down and had my little suit—you know, in those days you dressed up for your interviews. You had your little business suits and your little Cuban heels—when I think about it, it was very funny.

McGarrigle: Would that be navy blue blazer or—

Gibbs: No, actually I wore—I liked suits. It wasn’t navy blue, I’m sure, but it was probably beige.

McGarrigle: Beige.

Gibbs: Yes. And I never wore black, so it was probably beige.

McGarrigle: That would be a jacket, like a close-fitting jacket, or more a blouse jacket?

Gibbs: In those days, it was probably a kind of boxy jacket or a nipped-in-the-waist jacket with a nice shirt with a little tie. You know, that’s probably what I wore. Can’t even remember it, to tell you the truth, but it was a nice suit. My father went out and bought me a special suit for the interviews.

So I was ushered into this huge office—I’ll never forget it, because you know I was just at that time barely twenty-one. And there was another man, and I had a diary, which I can’t find, but someday I’ll find it, I hope—also named G. There was [Phillip] Graham and there was another man who was the top editor there. And his last name—I’m just going to look it up some day—it began with G, but I cannot remember his last name. There were two, both
their names with the beginning initial G. Huge, beautiful office, and Mr. Graham was a little bit intimidating. Here is a man with a lot of money and a lot of power, nice looking, carried himself with great confidence. I was a little bit—you can imagine!—little bit nervous, little bit intimidated. But see, I had an advantage of not wanting that job, that I didn’t ask for this job, that this was something my uncle had concocted and that I could refuse so after I while, I just relaxed.

So anyway, they talked to me. They both talked to me, and I mean, really gave me the once over, I will tell you. I mean, it was almost like your interview. What courses had I taken in college? How well had I done? Had I grown up—I had grown up in Connecticut—had I grown up in an integrated world? And I said yes. And how comfortable did I think I would be in Washington, which was still, as I told you, just largely segregated, but beginning to change. And I said that I had been coming there every summer for years they said, “Oh.” I said, “For all my life I’ve come here every summer. I know the city, particularly the black community,” because all my relatives lived there. Mr. Graham said, “Yes, you’re Bob’s niece, Bob Taylor’s niece.” I said, “Yes, and I have an uncle who’s a dentist, and another uncle who’s an organist, and my grandfather founded a church on Florida Avenue,” which is still standing. He said, “You’re the one we need.” That’s what he said. He pointed his finger and he said, “You’re just the one we need.”

And I’m sitting there thinking, ‘What does this mean?’ Well, I decided that I needed to be a little more proactive. I said, “What are you really looking for? When you say I’m the one you need, what are you really looking for?” And I mean, I sort of—now that I look back at it, I thought, ‘What nerve did you have to talk to [Philip] Graham like that?’ He says, “We’re looking for a general reporter who will go out and cover the black community and tell us the stories of the black community, because basically our white reporters only report the bad news, the crime, the drugs—.” Well, even then there weren’t that many drugs, but you know, mainly crime. He said, “We want somebody who can tell us about community activities, about social activities, about political movements. I think you could do that.”

I said, “Well, is it only the black community that you want this person to cover?” Mr. Graham understood my question. He said, “Well, at first.” I said, “Because I didn’t grow up in a segregated community. And I have friends of both races. I’m interested in issues affecting both races. And I’m very interested in politics, so if I were to take this job, I would want to be able to do some reporting about politics and on Capitol Hill and other issues.” So he says, “Well, time will take care of that,” something like that. I mean, I don’t remember his exact words, the truth is. I do remember what I said. But he said something like, “Well, time will take care of that.” “And, you know, if you do a good job,” he said, “I’m sure you’ll be able to choose your assignments,” was the term I think he used, that “you’ll more and more be able to choose your assignments.”
So then Mr. Graham said, “Well, are you interested in the job?” I mean, he’s getting ready to talk turkey now. I mean, those two were going to give me that job that day if I’d wanted it. And I said, “Well, I don’t know. I guess I need more details.” So then he said to the editor, “Well, why don’t you take her to your office and work out the details.” Because he was through now. He had given me his blessing, and he had seen me, and ‘if you’re going to have a black reporter, this woman looks good. She went to Radcliffe, she can speak English, and she’s well-connected,’ which I was, in the community. And he said, “Take her to your office and sit down and talk about the details.”

So the editor took me to his office, a much smaller office, and he said, “Well, this is the salary we’re offering.” And the first thing, it was very low. It was lower than the government salary. So I said to him, “You know, that’s lower than some other offers I have been getting.” And he said, “Well, what other offers?” So I told him about the exam, about that I had just been interviewed by the Labor Department, and that their salary was like a thousand or more. He said, “Well, that may be, but you know, journalism doesn’t—we don’t pay high salaries to beginning reporters. But, you will have an expense account. So whenever you cover a story, if you have to get dinner or breakfast or lunch, you have an expense account. And you can take taxis, so that will help out.”

So I said, “Well, what about the hours?” Well, then, that really killed it. They wanted me to work evenings and weekends, because, of course, in the black community that’s when a lot of things happen. Because most blacks work during the day. So you don’t have all these society matrons planning charity balls. [laughs] You don’t! So they work all day, and so the news comes out in their evening meetings, like the NAACP and their weekend activities. The editor said, “Well, we want you to work evenings, the night shift.” And that killed it. I said, “Well, you know”—I said I was familiar with the city, I said, “but I don’t really feel that as a single woman, I want a job where I will work nights and weekends. That is not the life I’ve envisioned for myself for the next couple of years.”

So the editor sort of looked strained. He says, “Well, it’s a wonderful opportunity. Your uncle told us you’d be interested.” I said, “Yes, I know he did.” [laughter] He said, “It’s a wonderful opportunity. Well, at least think about it.” Well, I realized that the smartest thing was not to say no then, but to talk to my uncle and my parents first of all, I didn’t have anything else on the dotted line. That’s the first thing. Secondly, I did realize what an opportunity it was. He said, “You know you’d be making history if you took this job?” I said, “Would I? Well, what would I be called?” He said, “Well, you’d be called a cub reporter. You’d be making history. We don’t have any blacks on the reporting staff. There are no blacks on the staff at the Washington Post in that capacity as reporters.” They had elevator operators and I think they had some skilled workmen, like in the printing plant. He mentioned that there were a few black workers and, you know, janitors. They didn’t have one black reporter at that time.
It was later that they hired, actually, it was a friend of mine, Carl Rowan. You may have heard his name. Carl Rowan was hired many years later, as a matter of fact. I don’t know if he was the first, but he was hired several years later. And then I think there were some others who came later. They did hire somebody shortly after that. But anyway, the editor said, “You’d be making history.” I said, “I know you’re right, but I also have to live and pay rent, and it sounds really to me like the salary would be very difficult for a single woman, that I wouldn’t have much money to go out to plays or anything like that.” He said, “Oh, I’m sure we can talk about that, and in six months you get a raise if you do take the job,” all this business.

The editor was very cordial, and he said, “Well, you’ll let us know soon, please?” I said, “Yes, I’ll let you know within a week or so. I do have some other interviews here in Washington, and I will let you know.” And I did tell him honestly that I was interviewing with several departments of the federal government. So he said, “Well, let us know in a week or so, because we’re very interested in you. If you want the job, the job is yours. We don’t need to interview anybody else. The job is yours.” See, all the personal contacts, how that works. And also the name of the school always—you know, everybody used to be—I don’t know if they still are—but they used to be very impressed if you said Radcliffe, Harvard, it was always very impressive. So, I said, “Well, let me get back to you.”

Then I left, and I called my uncle that evening, told him all about it. Of course, he begged me, practically, to do it. He said, “You can stay with us, and we will charge you almost nothing. You can stay with us,” and, you know, blah, blah, blah. I said, “Uncle Bob, do you really think that Daddy is going to want me out every night, and on the weekends?” So he said, “Well, that is a problem. But you could take a taxi home,” and blah, blah, you know, everything. So anyway, he said, “Jewelle, it’s a wonderful opportunity, and your father would be so proud,” because that’s where they’re all from, you know. And I said, “Well, let me think about it.”

Anyway, I got a better offer at the Labor Department, working days and had my weekends, about a thousand dollars or maybe even more—I can’t remember. There was a big differential, a thousand or more. In those days, that was a lot of money for a young person. And working down on Constitution Avenue in a beautiful big building right near the Mall. I mean, there was almost no comparison. And again, I hadn’t planned to be a journalist. And this other job was very interesting, working in the Labor Department, it was more like what I was interested in doing: social work. And I was going to have two or three assignments during the year. So anyway, I took it.

But I often think, you know, if I ever write my autobiography—of course I may not have to—but that is an interesting story. I think it’s an interesting story. To me it’s interesting because it illustrates a lot of things. First, it
illustrates the importance of contacts in American life, especially if you’re a minority. That you get your foot in the door sometimes because of who you know, like that conversation with my uncle. Somebody knows somebody and vouches for you.

Second, it illustrates the importance of going to certain kinds of educational institutions, that sight unseen they figured I would do okay because I had gone to Radcliffe and had a Harvard education. Sight unseen. I think they had made up their minds before they ever saw me, and just talking to me was like the frosting on the cake.

And I think the third thing it says is about the institutions in the mid-fifties. This was ’55 I’m talking about, the spring of 1955. Of how still segregated the media was in the spring of 1955, that a major paper in the nation’s capitol did not have one black reporter. So it’s a very—don’t you think? I think it’s a very telling story. So anyway.

McGarrigle: Did you follow what happened with that position for them?

Gibbs: I think they did hire somebody within a year or so, but I didn’t really follow it. And then over the years, they hired several people. And of course, I knew Carl Rowan. I know several of their reporters. I also knew the guy who was on PBS, the radio. Oh, what’s his name? He writes a column. I’ll think of his name in a minute, but I know him [Juan Williams]. I know a woman named Dorothy Gilliam. I know about four of their reporters. Now, Carl Rowan is dead. But he used to work first for the Minneapolis Tribune. Then he left the Minneapolis Tribune, where we first met him and knew him fairly well, and moved to Washington to be on the Post. But that was years, some years later. That was in the sixties, probably mid-sixties, that he went to the Washington Post. Before that, there were maybe two or three others, but he was the most famous.

McGarrigle: I wonder, at—you were—twenty-one is so young.

Gibbs: Really, when you think about it.

McGarrigle: To have that expectation, you know, and hope that your uncle had that this was a period of change, as you said, and that—

Gibbs: Yes. But it was! It was! And, you know, I have some time in my life looked back and thought, ‘What if I had done that?’ My life would have probably been very different. I probably would have become a journalist. And who knows? It would have been very different. Who knows? I mean, I have no idea how it would have turned out. But it might have led to other opportunities, in the media. So who knows? I might have been a talk show host. [laughs]
McGarrigle: Because your sister pursued a career with media.

Gibbs: Yes, in television. Hers was in television, yes. Mine might have been in journalism. So it’s just always, I think, interesting to think about what might have been. So that’s one of my interesting stories I often tell people when they bring up the issue of blacks in the media, to show how recent, really, it is that blacks have been in the media and have had those opportunities.

McGarrigle: Well and in all these different fields, there was this situation. It was like, and people often use the shorthand talking about Jackie Robinson. That there was this continual evaluation about who could be the person.

Gibbs: The first.

McGarrigle: Who could be the first, and what it would take—

Gibbs: That’s right.

McGarrigle: And the psychic scars, sometimes, that it caused.

Gibbs: See, you’re very right—that’s another point which I didn’t mention, which was sort of always there, but I don’t always say it. But that is another point, that being first has its ups and downs, has its downside, its upside and its downside. And people often think of the upside of, it’s an honor, and it’s great, and we’re making progress. What they rarely think about, unless they’ve done it themselves, is the downside, and it’s a psychic burden. There is a tremendous psychic burden of being the first, whether it’s first black or first minority or first woman or first disabled—it doesn’t matter. There is a cost because what do you carry on your shoulders? The entire group that you represent. You carry the entire group. If you make it, fine. You know, then they’ll say, “Oh, well, we can let in a second person.” And if you don’t make it, it’s the group has failed, not you, as a person like this young black man who’s just messed up with the New York Times.

Now, I bet you anything that the New York Times is going to wait a while before they have another black reporter. I mean, they may wait a while. They do have several, including the editor. But it’s not going to be so easy for the next one, because this guy has, in fact, messed up. But if he had been white, it would be just another white person who did something wrong. But you see, if you’re a minority, woman, any special category in our society, when you fail, your group fails. You represent a group, you symbolize the group. And people don’t make that distinction, that this was just the wrong choice of the wrong person at the wrong time.

McGarrigle: Right.
Gibbs: So it’s a terrible burden. And my husband and I, between us, have been first so many times, I mean, I’ve lost count, between us, and my sons. And it still goes on. I mean, there’s still these areas where there’s still people that have never—you know, there haven’t been minorities. And so you go and you do have to have a lot of inner strength to do it. And you also have to have sort of body armor. That’s the way I would put it. You have to have body armor. You can’t be too sensitive. You cannot be too paranoid. You just have to be all the time alert and on your toes and trying to do the right thing, say the right thing, not make mistakes. So it’s a terrible burden, it’s a terrible psychic burden.

Now, once you’ve done it a couple of times, after a while you just, you sort of know what your strategies are and you just do it. But if I write one more book, that may be what it’s about, about the sort of ambivalence of being first in anything. It’s just really difficult.

McGarrigle: When you think of strategies, can you describe what kinds of strategies those are?

Gibbs: Well, as I just said, one of them is you put your body armor on. You know, you sort of gird yourself, because you know you’re going to have to put up with a lot of c-r-a-p—like teasing, sometimes outright name-calling, denigrating things are said to you, done to you. Sometimes people sabotage your work. Sometimes people leave horrible things on your desk—messages or dead fish or horrible things that can be left on your desk or your seat when you sit down. I mean, there are unimaginable things that can be done. I actually was lucky. I didn’t have much of this done to me. Sometimes people call you anonymously or write you anonymous notes to let you know you’re not welcome.

[outside interruption with question to Taylor Gibbs]

McGarrigle: I’ll change our tape.

[begin tape 10A]

Gibbs: I will have to say I was probably luckier than most people, because I didn’t have a lot of that, but I’ve had friends who had a lot of it. But you do have things like not being included in—like, people who invite everybody to lunch and maybe you won’t be invited. If they socialize after work, especially at work settings, you won’t be invited for cocktails with other people. You can be there and be equal during the day, but not afterwards. And it’s just, you know, little things like that that continually happen when you’re first. There’s envy sometimes in your own group. So you’re caught between those two poles of the white people, who are sort of testing you and making it difficult for you to succeed, and then on the other hand one’s own group, and in my case, a black woman, other black women who are saying you’re a sellout. And
calling you, well, if you were a man it would be an Uncle Tom. Calling you names because you are in this maybe very prestigious position.

So you can’t win. So you have to be very strong internally. The biggest defense is, you have to have a lot of inner strength to be able to deal with both of these, the two sides of these pressures, the pressure coming from the white world, where you’re trying to be the first in a particular school or job or situation—could be a golf club, whatever—and then on the other hand, the blacks who are criticizing you and either saying that you think you’re better than they are, or that why do you want to be around white people anyway? Are you a sellout? And you have to act white—all that stuff that you hear about—the thing that always comes to mind about the one time I really did sort of have to overcome, when I was the first black junior executive at the Pillsbury Company. I don’t know if we’ve gotten to that.

McGarrigle: No. We’ll talk about it, I don’t know, the next time.

Gibbs: Yes, we should talk about that next time. Because I do have to—and I’m sure you have to get back home, but I do have to leave by three, so in about ten minutes.

I was the first black hired at the Pillsbury Company. When I went into the building, there were no blacks in the entire building in 1959 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the headquarters building. There was not one black person, not even—I didn’t even see a janitor who was black. I mean, if they were there—let me put it this way. If they were there, I never saw them. So when I went into that building for that job, everybody was white. There were no Asians, there were no Hispanics, and there were no blacks. And the first day, I got on the elevator. There was a really grumpy old man. He seemed to be probably a disabled veteran. He was slightly disabled, and I would assume, because of the time, he was middle-aged, I would assume he was a disabled veteran. He was very grumpy.

And I said, “Good morning.” You know, I was in a good mood. In fact, this was the day I went for my interview. He didn’t answer. So then I told him what floor I wanted. And he said, “That’s the executive floor.” I said, “Yes, I know.” “Who are you going to see?” and I told him the name of the man who was going to interview me for the job. So he said, “Hmmph.” Well, anyway, he let me off, and I had the interview—and that is another story, because we’ll come back to that. The interview itself was fascinating.

So then I go back down in the elevator. He doesn’t speak, and when he lets me off, I mean, he had such a look of real hostility on his face, it was undeniable.

So I got this job and I started. The man did not speak to me for the first six months. He spoke to everybody else who would get on the elevator. He was very jolly with people, very, you know, “Hi, how are you, what’s new, how
are your kids?” With me, and especially—I didn’t notice it so much when there were other people on the elevator, but when I would be by myself—and there were times, you go for coffee, and you’d be the only one in the elevator. Because there were two elevators, I would try to avoid his. There was one guy named Lennie who I really liked, so I would try to go to Lennie’s elevator and he was always friendly.

Well, here’s what happened. So I just said, well, you know, that’s the way it’s going to be. He’s not going to speak. He’s going to be hostile. He was very hostile to me. Never said anything. But the feelings that he generated and the looks were mean. So I said, well, I’m going to live through this, I mean, this is not going to hurt me.

Lennie, in the meantime, got sick and developed cancer. And I really liked Lennie. He developed cancer. And I was the one, I was the one, the only black in the company, who suggested that we raise funds for Lennie and—you know, elevator operators don’t make any money. And that we raise money for Lennie and have a fund for Lennie that we could put in the bank and give to his family, a sick fund sort of. And I raised it. The day we had a celebration that we had raised a fairly good sum. I mean, these people were all junior executives and executives at the Pillsbury Company, and we sent out a memo and asked people to write a check. We raised a pretty good amount of money.

Apparently he heard about it, and that was the first day he ever spoke to me. And after that, he spoke to me every day. He never explained why he didn’t speak to me and I never asked him. But I did a favor for his friend, and he started speaking to me. You see what I mean? So again, it’s like you have these hoops that you’re expected to go through. If that had never happened, I’m sure he never would have spoken to me. I stayed at the company for a year and a half, and then I was pregnant with Geoffrey, and I left when I was six months pregnant. But when I left, he was just as friendly, told me well, he wished me luck, hoped the baby would be healthy—and I mean, I nearly fainted the day I left. [laughs] So it was very different from the day I came.

But it’s those kinds of things that you sort of have to ignore, at a certain level. You know they’re happening and you just ignore them. And some people, as I said, had much worse. But in every job I’ve had—I mean, I’ve had teaching jobs, other jobs, there have been some incidents, usually at the beginning, and it’s like there are barriers placed in your way and there’s sort of hoops you’re expected to jump through. Now, if you can either ignore those barriers or circumvent those barriers, or jump through the hoops successfully, then you get accepted, if you want to do it.

And what happens to many minorities, and I’m sure women, too, is that they get tired before they can succeed. They get tired of fighting and trying to surmount the barriers. Because you surmount one, they put another one in its place. And they get tired of jumping through hoops. And they get tired of
trying to prove themselves. And that’s why I think you see a lot of people dropping out of the race for whatever it is—to get tenure, to be a partner at a law firm, to be a partner in a corporation. They just—they’re worn out. And people don’t understand this. People say, “Oh, they just didn’t have it in them. They just weren’t smart enough. They didn’t work hard enough.” That is just not true for most of the cases I know about. But the psychic energy that you have to put out wears you down. And you have to put it out sometimes every day. So I have lots of what I call my war stories, lots and lots of war stories. And mine are better than most, you know. Somebody not speaking to you doesn’t really hurt you, physically. You know, it may bother you a little bit, but it doesn’t hurt you physically. But mine are not as bad as a lot of my friends have had, much worse things happen to them.

McGarrigle: You mentioned earlier about the Labor Department job, something about the interview that you wanted to go back to. Should we start there next time?

Gibbs: Yes. Why don’t we start with the Labor Department next time, because the Labor Department was my first job, my first real job after college. And we’ll start—well, it wasn’t so much the interview, it was what happened to me in the training period that I need to tell you about.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: See, that was my first hurdle. And I guess the other thing—and I’ll say this and then that’s all I’m going to say—because in general, and you asked me about the defenses, aside from sort of putting on a certain kind of armor and learning how to cope without striking back. It’s important not to strike back, because if you strike back, you kind of lose the battle. You know, they get to you and you kind of lose the battle. So you have to maintain your—I will say this. I think you have to maintain your equanimity and your integrity. And no matter what anybody says or does to you, you have to be true to yourself, and who are you and how do you want to behave. And you want to behave like a lady, in my case. I’m going to behave like a lady, no matter what you say, what you do, and how you try to impede my progress. I’m going to be a lady. And you’re going to be the one who looks bad in the end. And I think that is the way a lot of us feel. But I think that—let’s see, what was my point about the strategy here? The strategy was what I was talking about, right?

McGarrigle: You were talking about some of the defense mechanisms.

Gibbs: Yes, the defense mechanisms. Right. I think that you have to decide within yourself that—there’s a term we used in the civil rights movement, “We shall overcome.” It’s a very good term. It really is a very important concept, and I think again we take it for granted. But what that really means is that, as they say, there’s a song down in the South, “We’re just going to keep on walking, keep on talking, going up the king’s highway.” And that’s what it means. It means that you keep doing what you’re doing, and you do it as well as you
can do it, with as much competence and integrity and fairness as you can do it. And you sometimes wear down the opposition that way. And my technique has been that. My technique, my defense—and I think a lot of us feel this way—is, you do your job, you do it well, you keep on doing it, you smile, you don’t let people’s comments and little digs and little nasty things and exclusions bother you, and you keep on going, and as I say, you keep on walking, you keep on talking, you keep on walking down the king’s highway.

And that is the way we overcome. And that is the way that our race has overcome. I learned that from my grandfather, from my uncles, from my father, that we have to be true to ourselves, and we have to keep making progress, and we have to keep overcoming these barriers. Sometimes you go around them, sometimes you jump over them, and sometimes you go right straight through. And that’s the key to the progress.

McGarrigle: Well, I’m glad we had time to talk about that.

Gibbs: Yes. Well, I’ll talk to you some more about it. I mean, I have had some unbelievable interviews and treatment and experiences, including a certain amount of sexual harassment, but it has never been at the level where I brought a suit, but I have had that, too. And sometimes, you know, sometimes it’s subtle, but it’s there. As a woman, you know, just being a woman.

McGarrigle: You don’t miss it. It may be subtle, but you don’t miss it.

Gibbs: Oh, no. You don’t miss it. I mean, it’s so subtle you can’t sue. [laughter]

[end of session]
Interview 7: June 24, 2003

Gibbs: [My mother’s cousins like to talk about the black women pioneers like]—Mary Church Terrell. There was a group of what used to be called the talented tenth—black people who were college-educated, around the turn of the century. This term comes from W.E.B. Du Bois, who I’m sure you’ve heard of, the “talented tenth.” And I think they didn’t all know each other personally, but they were a loose-knit group mainly living in the East Coast and in the South. They didn’t have many ties with people out here in California because they didn’t even know each other because of the transportation issue. And there were some in Chicago, and probably, I’m not sure it even extended to Texas. But basically the East Coast and the Midwest was about as far as this group extended there were links.

These were the people who founded the NAACP. These were the people who were in the anti-lynching movement in the late, that would have been the nineteenth century, the late nineteenth century, early twentieth. These were the people who were doing the political writing and social writing. These were the people who formed the major black organizations that still exist today. So it was all sort of late, very late nineteenth century, in the 1890s, so that’s what I’m talking about, nineteenth century and early twentieth, up to about 1920. I think that was when the term was coined, somewhere in there. I mean, that’s easy enough to look up. But I know that W.E.B. Dubois wrote about it and coined the term. And he was talking about this group and they really were all college-educated. They were your early college educators, people who were founding black colleges and becoming professors and presidents of black colleges. The few doctors—we had very few lawyers in those days, I mean, there may have been a few, but not many. The intellectuals who wrote, the politicians, the business people, there were a few well-to-do business people. They were all in this group called the “talented tenth.” And so Mary Church Terrell, of course, was one of them.

And my cousin Bessie Everett Clay was loosely—she was not one of the leaders certainly, nobody would call her a leader, but she was very active in the YWCA [Young Women’s Christian Association] movement for black women. And so through her work with the YWCA in Washington, D.C., she was a friend of Mary Church Terrell, who was also in that movement. Although she was not one of the leaders of the overall group, she was—the word I would use is kind of peripheral to it, and she knew a lot of them, because a lot of [them] lived were in Washington, D.C. There were three centers, maybe four—Boston, Washington, New York, and Atlanta were about the four major centers where these black intellectuals were. They were places where there were black colleges, or, in Boston and New York, a long history of blacks being educated in New England and being active in the community. And in Washington and Atlanta, there were black colleges. So
this is how these people got together and formed their associations and whatnot.

For example, in I think it was 1904, because it’s the hundredth anniversary is coming—was it 1904? Yes. 1904, there was a group called the Sigma Pi Phi fraternity that was started, and this was a group of black males, all professionals, all college-educated. To get in it, you had to be college-educated, but it was after college. So they were kind of imitating the white college fraternities, but they were all out of college by that time. And so they started this in 1904, it’s going to be a hundred years old this year, in Philadelphia, which was also a center. And it spread all over the country, and I don’t know how many chapters there are now, but there’s one in San Francisco, and my husband’s a member.

So it still exists and it’s still going strong. And it’s grown a lot, because it started on the East Coast. And these were all community leaders, and as I said, professionals who set out to really try to create a better society for other blacks who didn’t have their background—they all had some advantages, you know, educational and economic. And so they set up these various groups.

So as far as my cousin Bessie, she was a woman who was very active in two things: her church—she was an Episcopalian—and the YWCA.

McGarrigle: Now, was that unusual, that she was Episcopalian?

Gibbs: Well, Episcopalians were considered very elite, a little bit snobbish for black people, even now today they are. Most blacks in those days were Baptist and Methodist, the majority. And then as they got more education, they began to join the Episcopal Church and the Congregational Church, and later the Presbyterian Church and churches like that. But she was, very early on, an Episcopalian, because she was responsible for my mother being christened as an Episcopalian. My mother was christened as an Episcopalian. And there was this one black Episcopal church, I think it’s called Saint Mary’s, which is only a few blocks from the White House, which used to be an area of black people. It’s called Foggy Bottom, if you know Washington, D.C.

McGarrigle: Yes. That’s near where Frederick Douglass lived.

Gibbs: Foggy Bottom was nearly all black and poor whites, and then, of course, over time, the houses were close to the Capitol, they were townhouses, they were historic. So it was regentrified, or gentrified, and blacks had to move out. The whites came in and fixed up the houses, which are now worth about—where my mother grew up, and where she was christened, those houses are all worth probably over a million dollars now, which is really funny. When they were living there, you know, they were working-class blacks, middle-class blacks, and poor whites. That’s who lived in that neighborhood then.
And so my cousin Bessie, as I said, was active in these main two organizations, her church and the YWCA. And through that, she met all these people. My mother as a child was exposed to some of those people. When my mother was a child, she lived across the street from Judge [William H.] Hastie, who was a famous judge, who, if he had lived long enough, might have been on the Supreme Court. But he was on the, I think, Fourth District. He was a federal district judge, or court of appeals in Philadelphia. He was one of the first major black judges to be appointed at the federal level. So he lived across the street from my mother when she was a girl.

So there was this group of black people who all knew each other, and they all were educated or had had advantages even though some of them were not what you would call, today—they didn’t have a lot of money, but they had education, and they had modest homes. But they had these aspirations to help the race and do better. Even though my mother’s family, because she was abandoned, as you know from the book, was actually—one side of her family was actually pretty poor. That’s why she was abandoned, her mother’s side. But she was sort of adopted, not actually adopted, but like a foster child in this family she lived with, the Jacksons. They were the family that lived across the street from Judge Hastie.

But in the meantime, her cousin—Cousin Bessie was my mother’s first cousin, their mothers were sisters—took a very active interest in her, but she was not married, so she really couldn’t, didn’t want to adopt a child, because she was a single woman and she worked in the government. As she got older, she actually lived at the YWCA in Washington. It was called the Colored Ladies’ Y, or the Colored Girls’ Y.

Gibbs: Oh, yes, it was separate. Still there. But it was separate. Cousin Bessie actually, as she got older and kind of infirm and didn’t have family, she actually lived there. So I mean, that’s what I can tell you about my cousin Bessie. She was my godmother. She was one of my two godmothers. She was always very nice to me.

McGarrigle: So when you go to Washington to join the Labor Department, you had this tremendous history there.

Gibbs: She was actually dead, yes, but I had a tremendous history. As they say, good news and bad news. I had a huge family there, relatives on both sides, several uncles, aunts, cousins, and what we call kissing kin—family friends, who were very close to my parents. And because it was a segregated city, the segregation was just breaking up when I went there—of course, all my relatives lived in the section which is called Northwest, but in the black section of Northwest. And over the years they moved up to, if you know Washington, the Rock Creek Park area. But when I was there, they were all
around an area called Florida Avenue, and that area, going up to Howard University, that was the area where most of them lived.

So the problem was that I was single, and I moved down there. And every time I would go out on a date, I would run into one of my cousins or my uncles or my aunts, and, “Well, who is this, and who are you with?” You know. So it had its good points and its bad points. I mean, I sort of enjoyed being around my family and lived with one of my mother’s elderly cousins. But what I didn’t enjoy was, I always felt like I didn’t have any privacy, because it was such a—for black people it was a small town, and for middle-class black people it was even smaller, because you lived in this one neighborhood, basically, at that time. And a lot of them worked in the federal government, or they were professionals, and that’s what they mainly did. And you went out and you saw them all the time. If you went to social affairs, you saw them. If you went to work, you saw them. If you walked down the street, you saw them. And if you went out to a movie at night, you’d see them. [laughs] So, I mean, I liked the fact that I could always find a place on Sunday to go for dinner, because I was single and didn’t want to cook, but then the other problem was I often felt like I was living kind of in a fishbowl.

But anyway, it was nice, because I had cousins who taught at Howard University, I had cousins who had high positions in the government—one aunt. My uncle, one of my father’s brothers, was a dentist, a very well-known dentist. And he had offices in the main business street where the blacks were which was called U Street. So he knew everybody. I couldn’t walk down U Street unless—he said, “Oh, I heard you were on U Street today.” Gee, thanks, Uncle Bill. So you know, he was on this main business drag where the black people did most of their business. Then I had another uncle who was—I think I told you the story—the editor of the black newspaper and got me in touch with the Grahams of the Washington Post. I think I told you that.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: So I really had people looking out for me in all kinds of good ways, and also being nosy about my social life.

McGarrigle: And the aunt who had a position in the government—what position was that?

Gibbs: I think she was in the Federal Trade Commission, or FCC [Federal Communications Commission], one of those two. I can’t remember. But, now this is an aunt of mine who looked white, and I’m not sure, until later years I think they figured it out, I’m not sure when she got the job, I don’t think they knew she was a black person. And she kept her social life very separate from her business life. And lived on kind of the edge—do you know where the Hilton Hotel is, on Seventeenth Street?

McGarrigle: Yes.
Gibbs: Well, she lived there, and that was a mixed area. That was one of the few mixed areas in Washington at the time, partly because of the Hilton Hotel. There were a few blacks. She had a nice apartment right practically a block from Hilton. And I think when she got the job, they didn’t know what she was. Over the years I’m sure they did. But by that time, she had done well and risen up, and she had a supervisory position, which was almost unheard of in those days. This was in, you have to remember, the mid-fifties. And she had a supervisory position over white people. And the government was still very segregated in those days. So she had a nice job.

Anyway, I had one year there and I enjoyed it, as I said, except for this business about feeling I was in a fishbowl.

McGarrigle: You and Jim, were you dating at that point then?

Gibbs: Yes. He was coming down. He was coming down. We weren’t engaged yet, so I also was going out sometimes with other fellows, who my relatives kept fixing me up with. [laughs] Which was kind of fun. But it was just a year—I had one year of what I call freedom before I got married. In those days, most girls got married right after college. I decided I didn’t want to get married right after college. I really wanted to have a year on my own, so to speak, to see how to manage a household, just how to manage my money. And I’m so glad I had that year. My sister married a week or two after she graduated from college, which I think was ridiculous. So she never, ever had a year by herself. As I say, she went from her father to her husband. And I had that year. It was good.

McGarrigle: And you had training at the Labor Department.

Gibbs: Yes. And it started out well, but there were some issues, again, about race. Race was always such an important part of everything. I mean, I think it still is. But then it was more blatant. So, first of all, I will say that—I think I told you—there was a competitive exam, and I did well. They appointed about, it was either twenty to twenty-five people from all over the country who took this exam, and so you really had to go through these three levels to get there, and the third, the last level was an interview. And I knew from the interview that race was going to be an issue. But anyway, I did get the appointment, and I was offered, I think, three jobs, or at least I got three telegrams, and I had three interviews when I went to Washington. But the one I liked best was at the Labor Department. I liked the person who interviewed me, and she was the head of the Women’s Bureau in those days. And she interviewed me, and I felt as if I got along with her, and I said, ‘Well, they’ll either offer me or they won’t.’ And then I can always work for the Washington Post.’ [laughs] And the other two, one was at Commerce and I can’t remember even where the third one was. I’ll have to think, where was the third one? It was not so interesting.
But anyway, I did get the offer, so I moved down there. I graduated from college about the second week in June, and on July first I moved in. We had a training period for six months. During the training period we stayed within—the Labor Department is a huge building on Fourteenth and Constitution is where it was—and we stayed within the main building, and all of us—and when I say twenty to twenty-five, those were just at, I should have said, the Labor Department. There were dozens of others. We never really got together as a class. I mean, each department had its own training program. So within six months, I must have had two or three assignments, like every two or three months they’d move you.

The one I liked the best was the Women’s Bureau because I was interested, even then, in the status of women. And you remember, I was only twenty-one years old, and this is not even a big issue in the rest of the world. I was interested in the status of women, and I was particularly interested in comparing what was happening to American women to women in other countries. So when I told my boss what I was interested in, she said, “Why don’t you do a report for us? That would be good. That would be a good assignment.” I think I was with that particular department maybe two or three months. She said, “Why don’t you do a little report, and compare the status on certain social indicators,” like infant mortality, voting rights, property rights, things like that.

So I did. And so I spent a lot of my time in the library, which was fun. They just let me do it, and every once in a while she would say, “How are you coming?” And she gave me a deadline. Of course, in those days we didn’t have computers and we didn’t have Xerox machines, so I took lots of notes. And I did this report. It was fascinating, because what I had to do was use all the documents from the United Nations, and Commerce Department, U.S. Census Bureau, and international reports, which they had, international labor reports. So it was fascinating, and I really, from that day to this, have always been extremely interested in the status of women and children around the world, because of that.

McGarrigle: And you formulated your own research question, then?

Gibbs: Everything. I did everything.

McGarrigle: Was there a question, or was it information gathering, or—?

Gibbs: It was mainly information gathering, and a few interviews with people in the Labor Department about women in America. I had just a few. But I told her what I wanted to do. We sat down, and I gave her my—I didn’t even have a hypothesis, it was really an investigation—that what I wanted to do was really compare the status of American women in the 1950s with women—and we chose just a few other countries, mainly English-speaking and European countries like France—I’m sure France and Germany were part of it. And
remember also, this wasn’t too far after World War II. I mean, it was in the mid-fifties, but we’d had the Korean War. I don’t think we used any Asian countries, because Asia was still pretty exotic in those days. So it was mainly comparing U.S. women mainly with European countries, and Canada. Maybe Australia was in there, too.

So anyway, what I did was, I think about ten or twelve countries where we could get good information from the UN or UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization]. We chose what social indicators we were interested in, where we thought we could get good statistics. Like how many women work, what’s their average income, things like that. Marriage rates, birth rates, the things that you can get pretty good information on in the Western world. And then I just went and did it. She would say, “I think you ought to talk to this person in this part of the Labor Department,” like I went over to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and asked them about comparing statistics between and among countries, and they gave me some tips on the methodology. And then I went to various other parts of the Labor Department, which is a huge department, and believe me, has all sorts of sub-departments, and finished this report in I think it was about three months, if I remember right, three months. But I didn’t quite finish it, and so when, at the end of our six-months probationary period, we were all given a choice to say what would be our three top assignments in the Labor Department, and I said I would like to stay in the Women’s Bureau, because I really was doing this report. I was very interested. My boss’s name, I think, was Mary Cannon, gave me a very high recommendation. She said she’d like me to stay to continue my work.

Well, we came back after Christmas, when I expected to be assigned to wherever. You know, they said they couldn’t assure you that you would get your top choice, but they would try to give you one of your three top choices, because it depended on availability of office space, availability of mentors and supervisors, and how you’d fit in, how your interests would fit in. And that made sense to me. So I come back, and there were two other black people in the program, but they were not from our—they hadn’t taken the exam. What had happened is, they had been identified as promising employees, and they were put with us for the training. One was a man and one was a woman, a woman slightly older than I was, named Catherine [McKenzie]. To this day we are very close friends, because she became like a big sister to me. To this day.

And so when I came back, Catherine called me and said, “Call me right away. I have something to tell you.” So I called her. But she had been—these two had been in the Labor Department at a lower level, and they were being bumped up because they had shown a lot of initiative and intelligence. She said, “Did you hear about your assignment yet?” I said, “No, I just came in. I haven’t heard yet, from Christmas vacation.” She says, “Well, I hope they didn’t do to you what they did to us.” I said, “What did they do to you?” The
two others who were sort of on special assignment. She said, “They put us over in the Employment Bureau,” the employment office for D.C. employment, in other words, matching people to jobs, which doesn’t take a whole lot of brain power, and is like the bottom of the rung of the Labor Department. It was a local employment office which was supervised by the federal government, because it’s in Washington, D.C. And the people who came there were people who needed jobs, poor people, mainly minorities, and the staff was mainly black, although there were some white supervisors, but mainly black. And she said, “Jewelle, that’s a graveyard. Don’t let them do that to you.” So I said, “Well, I’m glad you told me.”

So I got this letter, “Great, you’ve been assigned to this place.” And fortunately, I had been warned, because I wouldn’t have known it was a graveyard. So right away, I was very upset, so I went to Miss Cannon and I said, “I don’t know why I didn’t get assigned to your division.” And she looked kind of funny. She didn’t say much. She said, “Well, try it out and see how it works, and maybe we can get you back here soon.” And I knew something was funny. She was a white woman. She was very supportive of me and we got along. And I knew from the expression on her face that she was surprised, too, and that it was something that was—she said, “Well, we’ll try to get you back here.”

Well, I went over to this place, and it was horrible. I just cannot even tell you. It looked like it hadn’t been painted in years, and it was in an old, sort of decrepit building in a place, an area that I didn’t like, of the city, and the kind of people who came there were coming for jobs like cooks and waitresses and low-level clerks—I mean, it wasn’t professionals who were coming. So you weren’t dealing with—these are the people you’re dealing with. And the man who was going to be my supervisor, whom I shall never forget, happened to be a black man, and when I introduced myself, he said to me—his name was Mr. Daly. He said, “I’ve heard about you. I know your uncle. I play cards with your uncle.” See, I told you this was a small town. I said, “Which uncle?” He said, “Your uncle Bill,” the one who was a dentist. I said, “Oh.” He said, “Yes, we’ve been bridge partners for years.” Well, not partners, but playing in a bridge club. I said, “Oh, that’s nice.” So he said, “I told your uncle”—now see, he knew it before I did—“that you were coming over here, and your uncle said that I should look out for you.” And I said, “Well, thank you, that would be nice.” And that’s all I said.

That night I got home and called my uncle, and I said, “Uncle Bill, do you know what’s going on?” I told him I was very upset, that I felt that I had been discriminated against. And of course they’re used to this mentality. It’s what I call the Southern mentality. And he said, “Well, don’t rock the boat. You have this wonderful job, and if you work hard, some day you’ll be a supervisor.” And I said, “Uncle Bill, that’s not my goal in life. I don’t want to be a supervisor at the D.C. employment office. That’s not my goal in life.” He said,
“Well, you’re going to get married soon, anyway. As long as you have a nice job and they’re paying you a nice salary…”

They had given me the same raise they’d given everybody else. We went in as GS5, which in those days was the first level of the professional ranks. I don’t know what it is now. And after six months, we’d been promised if we did well we’d be promoted to GS7, so there was a promotion and there was an increase in your salary. But there was still the principle. I said, “Uncle Bill, I don’t think you really understand. You don’t need a Radcliffe education to do what these people are doing. I really don’t like it here, and I feel—.” Turns out that all the white trainees had gone to nice offices, gotten their choice of their top three. So I said, “It’s discrimination.” And you know, he finally said to me, “Well, just wait a while. Wait a few weeks and let’s talk about it, and maybe we can find a way to get you back to the main office.” Because he knew everybody.

So I waited about two weeks, and by this time I was fed up. I mean, two weeks it took me to be fed up. So, to make a long story short, he said, “I’ll tell you what I would suggest. But you have to be very careful because Vic Daly is very sensitive and he has a lot of power in the department,” since he was one of the top black supervisors in the Labor Department, but he was at this sort of place. There was at that time an Assistant Secretary, the first one in history who was black, named Wilson. He said, “Why don’t you call Mr. Wilson? He’s the Assistant Secretary of Labor”—no, it wasn’t Wilson, I’m sorry. I’m going to have to think. That’s not the name. I’ll think about it in a minute. But anyway, it wasn’t Wilson. And he said, “I know him, and maybe he can help you. Tell him that you just want to go back to main Labor. Don’t accuse anybody of discrimination.” You know, it’s all this, like, evasiveness, this denial. “But just say that you’re not happy there, that you’d like to—.”

So it turns out that—it was Ernest B.—it’s funny I remember his first name, and his son taught at the law school at Berkeley, so I’ll think about it. Anyway, he was the first black high-ranking official ever in the Labor Department, and I called him and told him who I was, and told him that my uncle said I should call him. So he said, “Oh, come over. I’ve heard about you, and I’m anxious to meet you.” At this meeting, he said, “I’m going to invite—” there was the other high-ranking black, who was a counsel in the department, and his name was Samuel Pierce. I don’t know if that name means anything to you, but Samuel Pierce [later became a Cabinet Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under the Reagan administration].

[begin tape 11B]

Gibbs: Sam Pierce was a very handsome young man, not much older than I was. So I go into this huge office, I mean, much bigger than this room, you know, this huge, Assistant-Secretary type office, so you can imagine the beautiful desk and chair and cabinets, and really about the size of this room and my dining
room, a huge office, beautiful office, a little bit intimidating. So I get dressed up in my little suit and I go in, and it was a Friday. I will never forget this. So it was kind of the end of the workweek, and in Washington—I don’t know if you know—everybody in the bureaucracy, everything slows down on Friday for the weekend. Friday is, you know, people start leaving early. I mean, our government bureaucrats don’t work that hard. They work from nine to five. In those days, I think it was actually from 8:30 to 4:30, and they don’t stay a minute after 4:30 unless they’re political appointments. They just don’t work that hard, okay? I will assure you they don’t work that hard. And on Friday afternoon, you could see this exodus, and you could see people doing other things and taking long coffee breaks and talking at the office cooler or whatever.

So I come in, and they’re very relaxed, it’s Friday afternoon. They’re just very relaxed, offer me a drink. Even though I was twenty-one, I didn’t drink. I said no thanks, I would have some coffee if they had any. So then we start talking. Remember, this was the summer and it was hot. And they had their ties loose, so it felt almost like a social occasion. There was something very strange about it. And I thought, ‘Am I going to get any help from these people, or are they just curious about me?’

At first they asked me a lot of questions about my family. And see, I will say—I don’t know if you got any of this from [Thelton] Henderson or Troy Duster, maybe they didn’t talk about this aspect, but one of the aspects of being in a minority group is that in a minority group, just like in the majority group, classes, social classes, and contacts become very important. And kind of defining yourself as a member of the in-group is very important, if you want certain advantages. And people have all kinds of ways of finding this out. Like they’ll ask you not only where you went to school, but did you belong to a sorority or fraternity? And you know what it is—they’re placing you. And they’ll say things like, who is your family—I mean, if the white people said it, you’d know it would be the Rockefellers and—I won’t say the Kennedys because they’re not even considered very elite in Massachusetts. But people who are of that background, Roosevelts, people like that. And we have a similar kind of dialogue that goes on, and it’s very interesting, because of course, the older you get, the more you realize the first question, where it’s leading. I was still young, but I knew what they were getting at. I mean, it didn’t take me but about ten minutes to figure out, well—“Do you have family in Washington? Who is your family?” You know, and it goes on and on.

So anyway, after you sort of establish your credentials, they said, “Well, how do you like it over there?” Well, I knew he already knew I didn’t like it, and so I sort of tried to be diplomatic. And to make a long story short, the guy who was the lawyer, Pierce, said something, there was some connection with Cornell, and I said, “Oh, my boyfriend went to Cornell.” And then it turns out he knew Jim, and Jim’s family, because he had gone to Cornell. Well, that sort of clinched it. That was the sort of clinching piece that I needed. And finally I
said, “You know, I really feel that the white trainees got a better deal than I
did, and I’m not really happy where I am. I really would like to be back here
in the main building, and I really would like to be in the Women’s Bureau.”
So he stood up, and he said, “Well, we’ll see that you get what you want.”

And of course, in those days men were very—what’s the word I want—very
condescending to women. And I’ll never forget, the secretary said to me, he
said, “A pretty little thing like you would cheer us up to have you in this
department, and we’re going to see that you get back.” Well, I didn’t care on
what grounds, you know. But that’s what he said, “A pretty little thing like
you.” And then of course, Sam Pierce agreed that—it turns out later I found
out he was quite a ladies’ man—he said, “Yes, you deserve to be over here,
where we can get a look at you every once in a while.” I mean, it was so
condescending, it was so condescending! But you know what? I did not care. I
certainly wasn’t going to complain at that point, about “Don’t be fresh and
don’t say these things.” It’s a kind of form of sexual harassment—I wasn’t
going to bring that up! I said, “Fine!” So I smiled and I said, “I hope you can
help me.”

Within a week Mr. Daly came out to see me. He was furious. He was
absolutely furious. And he said to me, “Come into my office. I have to see you
about something.” He said, when he were in the office, “Close the door.” I
closed the door. Now, this is my uncle’s friend. “I understand you’ve been
complaining about your treatment here.” I said, “No, that’s not true,” because
actually, that was not what I was complaining about. I said, “That’s not true. I
was not complaining about my treatment here.” He said, “Well, what were
you complaining about over there with those big shots at the Labor
Department?” So I figured I’d be truthful. I said, “Well, you know, I didn’t
ask for this assignment. I wanted to be in the Women’s Bureau. I was working
on a report which was not quite finished, and I asked for that as my top choice
of the other two choices. I did not ask to be in this department.”

And also, it was harder to get there, because I didn’t have a car, so I had to
change the bus to get there, whereas the other one was right straight down the
street from where I lived. I mean, I just took a bus and it took me right down,
without even turning anywhere. It was right down the street. I lived on
Thirteenth Street, and the Labor Department was on Fourteenth and
Constitution, so I would walk one block and take the bus and I’d be there. So I
said, “And transportation is harder,” and et cetera.

I said, “And Mr. Daly, I certainly think you have been very nice to me and
very fair.” I realized I had to clean that up. I said, “I was not complaining
about you or your treatment. I’ve enjoyed the people I’ve met here and
worked with. I simply felt”—and then I figured I would put the burden back
on him, I said, “You know, things are changing in Washington. I certainly
think you should be able to understand how I feel, that we don’t want to keep
doing things the old way, and what they were trying to do is discriminate against me so I would not have the same opportunities as the white trainees.”

And he sort of half-smiled. He said, “Well, I can see that point of view.” So we left as friends. Anyway, he said, “You’re to report to the main department on Monday,” the next Monday. He said, “So you got your wish.” But he never forgave me. He was very angry. Told my uncle that I was a troublemaker. You know, again, if you stand up for your rights, if you’re a minority, you become labeled as a troublemaker, and that I was very ambitious, and that I had caused him grief with these two higher-ups because I had complained about the department.

McGarrigle: I just wonder what kind of relationship he had with them. He didn’t—

Gibbs: Well, he was not at their level. He was not at their level. And he resented the fact that I had, in a sense, gone over his head. Because I certainly wasn’t going to ask him for a transfer, since I didn’t think he had the power to give it to me. And I thought he wanted me there, because in a way it gave him a little status to have this trainee from Radcliffe at this run-down, dilapidated place. So it gave him status. I knew that if I’d gone to him, that I wouldn’t have been able to do what I wanted to do, and I would have been stuck there for the rest of the year, because it was the beginning of my second six months. And I knew I was also going to be, by that time I was engaged, I think we got engaged at Christmas. Anyway, I knew I wasn’t going to be there but six months, but they didn’t know it, because I wasn’t going to tell them, you know. Because I know if you tell them, it’s like being pregnant, then everything changes.

So anyway, I went back to the main department, back with Miss Cannon, Mary Cannon, and I finished the report and did some other interesting things. And that was my one year in Washington. But I always was grateful to the assistant secretary, and to—I think it was Wilson. Anyway, I’ll ask Jim. Jim will remember. But the funny thing about Samuel Pierce, it turns out that my college roommate Jane Bunche married his brother later that year. So we always had a relationship after that. My college roommate married his youngest brother, who was also a classmate of Jim’s at Cornell. So we had all these ties. So we’d see each other. And then years later, he and Jim ended up on the Cornell board together. I mean, it’s really a small world.

But that story made the rounds, you can be sure, all over the East Coast.

McGarrigle: And did those two men continue a career in high government service?

Gibbs: No, well, Wilkins—I think, yes, he stayed there a while. He eventually I think went back to Chicago, because the administration would change. That was a Republican administration then. The administration changed and—let me see, my memory is that he went back to Chicago and was in private law practice, I
But the reason I asked you if you recognized the name Sam Pierce, he later became a cabinet member under the first Bush. He was secretary of housing and got in some trouble about housing vouchers. He played a lot of favoritism, and that was his way. He played favorites with who got grants and he had friends, he came from New York State, and he had friends that he did favors for. So there was an investigation of him. He was never indicted, but I said to Jim, “That sounds like Sam.” I mean, he played favorites.

And there’s this famous story about, I think they had one black secretary, he was it, in the cabinet. He came to a reception at the White House once, and Bush, Sr.—now, was it Bush? No, it wasn’t Bush. Sr., it was before that, because that was too many years later. Wait a minute, it wasn’t Bush, Sr.

McGarrigle: Was it Reagan?

Gibbs: It was Reagan, I think, yes. It was Reagan. Because there were too many years in there, so it must have been Reagan. Reagan says to him—or maybe—no, it was Reagan, I think it was Reagan. Reagan says to him—he called him by the wrong name. He called him by—no, they had two, that’s right, they had Pierce and another one. So Reagan says to him at the beginning of the reception, “Hello, Mr. Whatever”—but he called him by the other black man’s name. [laughing] And it was all over the papers, it was a joke on late night TV, how the Republicans appoint black people and don’t even know their names, and you know, one black looks just like every other black. And he didn’t look anything like this other guy.

So that took care of my year in Washington. It was an interesting year. And that spring, when I was back at the main Labor Department, I did this report, and that’s when I was planning my wedding. By April, I kind of lost interest in the whole business of a career in government, which might have been possible if I hadn’t been getting married. But I kind of lost interest in it. I was nearing the end of my report, and I kind of just lost interest in government, and I began to notice a lot of things about who got promoted. I began to notice a lot of things about the waste in government. I could write a whole book about that, about the bureaucracy, about what is it, the repetition. You do something, I do the same thing at another desk a few feet away, and how there’s just so much repetition and so much work that is busy work in government, so many forms you have to fill out for everything.

And the thing, the other main thing that I noticed is the mediocrity of the—now, this was under a Republican administration, but some of these people were covered by civil service. Because remember, it was 1955 when I graduated. Some of the people who came in under veteran status after the Korean War, which was what, 1948, ’50, somewhere around there, were beginning to rise up through the ranks, because they came in right from either being soldiers, or they may have gone to school on the G.I. Bill, and that would have been four years later they entered the government. So that was
about ’54. You cannot imagine the number of really mediocre people who had become supervisors by this time.

I remember having a—he happened to be a white male supervisor—and as part of that training, the early training in my first six months, one of our trainees had to write his reports for him. So when they talk about affirmative action, you know—. And we ran into several people, and we used to laugh about these people who couldn’t write, couldn’t spell, their grammar was bad, but they had veterans’ preference, which was something like ten points. And so when they took the civil service exam—I don’t know if you remember that—they would add the ten points. It was very much like what they did at the University of Michigan. And it was because they were veterans. It might have been ten points, it might have been twenty points. But that would put them on a higher level, when you look at the number of people on any list. And so they were getting these jobs.

And this particular man who was the supervisor was really just dumb. There’s no other word for it, just dumb. But he was very charming. So he worked his way up, I think, partly through charm. He had very good social skills. But other people wrote his reports for him, including his secretary. I mean, he just really couldn’t spell, couldn’t write, didn’t speak all that well, either. But this is what was going on in the government in the mid-fifties. I’m not sure it’s much different today.

McGarrigle: Did the woman who had come from government service, Catherine, did she spend her career in government?

Gibbs: She stayed over at the employment service for much of her career. But she rose up. She didn’t complain, because she felt that she, in a way—in fact, she had come from there, and in a way she was gaining, sort of going up through the ranks, and then they gave her this special training. And so I think for her, she knew she was going to get ahead there, because it was a largely black staff, whereas if she had been over in the main Labor, she would not have done as well. And she knew that. She did later, before she retired, go back to main Labor, but I can’t remember what department she was in. But we’ve kept in touch all these years. We’re still in touch.

McGarrigle: When you would go to other areas for your report writing, to interact with people and get information, what kind of reaction did you get?

Gibbs: Well, the overt reaction was, always polite, always cooperative. I don’t know what was said or what was done or what was thought. But, it was a civilized, congenial environment. But of course, what you would notice, by the way, is that at lunchtime, it was like college is now, everybody is separated. So the black people ate at their tables—all the big government buildings had cafeterias. You didn’t usually go out because it was too far to go out, because they were all down there on Constitution Avenue in that area, and so there
weren’t any restaurants down there. You’d have to go all the way up to sort of the main central area of Washington, downtown, to go to a restaurant. So you’d stay in the cafeteria.

Black people would sit with black people, and white people would sit—and of course, there weren’t any Chicanos or Asians in those days, none. There just weren’t any. There was just black and white. So you would notice the pattern. And then on weekends, the whites would not invite you and you would not invite the whites. I mean, it was just assumed that there was a segregated social life. And it was just part of the world then, and that’s what you—you lived in segregated neighborhoods, you, even if you worked in the government—after all, you remember, this is just a year after the Supreme Court decision that I’m talking about. Most of the schools were still segregated. I guess they had started the process of integration, but it hadn’t gotten very far in Washington. The restaurants had just been desegregated by the Supreme Court the year before I came. I mentioned that to you last time.

And so it was a very segregated city. You could go to the theater and all, but you didn’t see a whole lot of black people downtown on the weekend. You didn’t see them going to theaters and all. Because I was young, I did. I said, you know, I have this opportunity. I’m going to go to these things, concerts and things. But the blacks in those days mainly stayed in the black area for the weekend for their entertainment, or had parties in their homes. The hotels were still not very friendly. So it was a different time.

McGarrigle: Yes. When Judge Henderson got to Washington after this, housing was still very segregated.

Gibbs: When what?

McGarrigle: When Judge Henderson ends up in Washington and worked for the Justice Department in the early sixties.

Gibbs: Yes, it was still segregated. That’s right. So he came after I did. But it was still segregated. It was actually a very segregated city until the Kennedys began to break that down. You know, they just began. They didn’t finish the job. He was only in three years. But there was some change because when the Kennedys came in the city just became much more cosmopolitan and much more open than it had been. So even in the early sixties while they were there, it was still primarily segregated.

So my friends were primarily—now, I had one or two close white friends among the trainees, and I kept in touch with one of them for a very long time, a man name Elliot. And about ten years ago I went back and Catherine, my friend, said, “You know, Elliot always asks about you. You should call him sometime.” And I went back and called him, and we had lunch. It was very nice. But his life had been very different than mine. He had become a
government bureaucrat and had never left the government. Our lives had been very different. I saw in him what I think I would have ended up if I had stayed in the government—a very parochial concern about Washington and what’s going on in Washington, and the conversation was mainly about the city of Washington and what was going on, and his family and my family. But it was, he just had not changed much since we had known each other as very young people, right out of college.

And I always liked him—we were very close. I always had the feeling that if Elliot and I had been in the same race, it would have developed into something else. But in those days, you know, very few people were dating interracially. But we saw each other every day for nearly a year, and we just developed a real closeness. I would have lunch with Elliot. I didn’t care what anyone thought. So you know, the trainees, we would have lunch together, and I was the only black, and Catherine would sometimes come with me, because she was, as I said, in the group. But we would be the only integrated table in the Labor Department, in the cafeteria, the trainees. And then sometimes I would go with Catherine and the black guy who was a trainee, and we would eat together.

So this particular guy named Elliot, he and I always got along. We thought alike. He came from a New England college. I think he went to Colgate, if I’m not mistaken, in New York. And he was very enlightened. He was from a small town in New England or upstate New York, and he was very enlightened and very what we would now call liberal. So we got along very well. And he is the only one of all the trainees who I kept in touch with for many years, and then lost touch with him, and Catherine would see him, and say, “You know, every time I see him he says, ‘Have you heard from Jewelle, how is Jewelle?’” So he was always interested in me. So I would say about ten years ago, maybe, ten or twelve years ago, I went and called him. He was so glad to hear from me, and we met for lunch in downtown Washington. By this time, it’s a whole different scene. There are all kinds of integrated tables and people, and it was, it just warmed my heart, that things had changed.

McGarrigle: At what point is it that you decided or knew that you would go with Jim to Liberia?

Gibbs: Well, you know, if I married him, there was the choice.

McGarrigle: That was the plan already?

Gibbs: Yes. Yes, see, he had applied for a big fellowship. I think it was Ford Foundation, what they called area training in anthropology, in Africa. And he was hoping that he’d get it, because then he could afford to take a wife. Without it, I don’t think I would have been going—in fact, neither one of us would probably have gone. But he was fairly certain he was going to get this fellowship. He had passed his orals, and now he’s ready to do his dissertation,
so he had to do his research, and he had to do it in Africa to be an African specialist. So he had some good references. He went to Harvard for his PhD and he was fairly certain he was going to get it, and he did. I guess they announced it in the spring, and once they announced that he had gotten it, then we began to make our plans. So we decided a lot of academic couples, if you ask them when they married, they almost all marry in August or September. You know why?

McGarrigle: They’re getting ready to go off and do—

Gibbs: Well, no, even if they’re not anthropologists, because then they don’t have to have a summer rental. [laughter] So many of our friends, if you marry in late August, if you’re academic, your new job will start in September. Now a lot of schools start in August, but when we were coming along, almost all the schools started after Labor Day. And it’s amazing to me how many of them now start—the freshmen have to come in the last week of August, so they can be fully ready to go to class the day after Labor Day. But in those days, you didn’t report to your job until usually September first, and you’d probably meet your first class after Labor Day. So a lot of our friends in the academic world would get married about maybe the middle of August, have a one or two week honeymoon, and then go back home and move to wherever they were going to move. So it’s very funny, you meet any academic couples, and you ask them when they were married, you will be amazed the number who say between August 15th and September 1st that they got married.

So we got married August 25th because of that. Then we had about a ten day honeymoon. But we didn’t actually go to Africa right away. We spent the first four months of our marriage in Hartford, Connecticut, where we were learning this African language at a missionary college. Actually, it’s the Hartford Theological Seminary. So we were in Connecticut from the time we came back from our honeymoon until about the middle of January, when we sailed. We took a ship, a freighter, to Africa. So that was nice, because I was close to home. I was really just about an hour and a half away from my parents, who lived in New Haven.

So our honeymoon we took in upstate, we drove through New England and went to upstate New York and visited his parents at the end of it, and then came back and moved to—we actually rented a room in a lady’s house because we knew we’d only be there about four months. So the first place we lived after marriage was in a rented room in a divorced lady’s house in Hartford, on Main Street in Hartford.

And then we’d go to school and study the language every day. You know, we were footloose and fancy free, but we had to study a lot, because the language was very difficult, the African language. When we weren’t studying, we’d do the usual things, going to the movies and—this group was fairly sociable. They were mainly training to be missionaries all over Africa. They came for
language training. One of the languages was, of course, our language, which was called Kpelle [spells], very difficult. So we would sometimes get together with them on the weekends for things like, spaghetti and pizza, cheap meals. We met two or three young couples, professional couples, in Hartford, who were black people, and we got to know them, and one couple is still among our best friends, even today. So we began forming the friendships that lasted—and some of the people who were missionaries, we’re still in touch with. We’re not as close to them, but we send Christmas cards and things.

McGarrigle: I’m going to change the tape.

[begin tape 12A]

Gibbs: There were some interesting things to do in the Hartford area when we weren’t studying the language, so it was not a bad place to be.

McGarrigle: Who were the instructors at the missionary college?

Gibbs: They were professors of linguistics at this school because they train missionaries, and in order for missionaries to be effective they have to know some of the language. So they would give them a kind of quick course, an intensive course. I think we met every day, maybe three times a week. But in any case, and then when they go to the place where they’re going to do missionary work they have at least a kind of introduction to the language, and then when you work with people every day, you do pick up the language. So we were the only non-missionaries, and boy, did they try to—what’s the word?—proselytize us. It was interesting how they tried to proselytize us. There was a lot of talk about religion and God and faith. Finally after a while I said, “You know, I’ve been baptized as a Baptist, and I have my own faith and my own belief,” so they would leave me alone. And they sort of did. When they found out my father was a minister, they figured out, okay, she’s okay.

McGarrigle: What was the reaction among your family members, that you were going to be on your way to Africa?

Gibbs: Oh, they were on the one hand scared and apprehensive, and on the other hand kind of, you know, it was exotic and kind of exciting. But they were very fearful for me, because in those days, before the Peace Corps, these were unexplored territories and people didn’t know much about them. Fortunately, again in my family, a distant relative by marriage years ago—this is really very fortunate, I think—had been in the embassy in Liberia. He was my cousin’s husband’s brother, and he was a very well-educated, Ivy League-type who had gone into the foreign service. His name was Rupert Lloyd, last name was Lloyd. And one of his early postings was to Liberia. So my parents knew him and were familiar with the idea of Liberia and that this guy came out alive, so to speak. I don’t know how many terms he did, I can’t remember.
But he lived there, probably about two terms, and came back, and then went to other assignments.

The other thing is in my father’s church, his organization, the national Baptists, had missionary work in Liberia. So he knew people who had been missionaries, and every year at their annual conferences they used to talk about Liberia and the mission work they were doing there.

So on two counts, on my mother’s side we had the contact, the diplomatic contact with Liberia. On my father’s side, we had the religious missionary contact with Liberia. And it made it, I think, somewhat easier for them to sort of envision us in Liberia and realize that it was not the end of the world, that they had some Westerners there, there were some amenities there, that if we took care of our health and boiled our water, we’d probably be okay, and that’s exactly what we did.

So I think it made it easier, but the scene that—I mean, if anybody ever made a movie about it, I don’t know, people would either think that it was very sad or very funny. The day we sailed from Brooklyn—we sailed from Brooklyn on a freighter, a small freighter, I think there were twelve people on this freighter—because that was the cheapest way to get to Africa, and it took a long time. So when we sailed—wait a minute. The first time, no, the first time we actually we went to Europe on the way, so we didn’t sail from Brooklyn. First time, we actually took a regular liner to England, I’m sorry. And it was sort of like a delayed honeymoon. And then we went from Marseilles to Liberia on a freighter. So that’s not correct when I say we sailed from Brooklyn on a freighter. We sailed from Brooklyn on a regular liner, in fact Holland-America, and went to on the Maasdam ship, and went to London and Paris, and then ended up in Marseilles and took the freighter to Liberia.

So we’re there taking this liner, actually. My mother and father, one of my uncles who lived in New York, my brother and his wife, my two younger sisters, Jim’s aunt from New York, and Jim’s parents and his younger sister—there must have been about twelve people on the dock, all lined up, crying, as we walked up the gangplank and turned to wave, everybody is crying, and everybody [laughing]—tears running down their faces. There wasn’t a dry eye at this dock! Twelve black people [laughs] lined up! I tell you! Of course, we were crying too. And later in years—it was only about five years ago that my mother said, “You know that first time you went to Liberia?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “You know, your father and I never thought we’d see you again. We never thought you’d come back. That’s why we were all crying.” I said, “Well, I guess I surprised you.” But it was really quite a scene, if you can imagine. And in those days, women always wore hats, so my mother had on a hat, Jim’s mother had on a hat, Jim’s aunt—and a big hat, too. Here they were, all dressed up, because they got dressed up to come to New York, you know. They’re all dressed up—it’s a winter day, it’s in the middle of January—and here they are, arrayed with their winter coats and their hats, probably velvet
hats or something, arrayed on the dock, all crying. So I thought it was so funny. That was my last view of them for eighteen months. Anyway, we were there the first time for eighteen months, and it was quite an adventure.

McGarrigle: And what do you—they’re all in their winter finery, and what do you wear to go on the voyage?

Gibbs: Well, that’s the funny thing is, because we were going to Europe first, so I had one suitcase of cold clothes, so to speak, winter clothes. I had to take a suitcase of winter clothes, and I had on a winter coat. And then what we did was to ship them back in Marseilles, we put all of the winter clothes, because we knew we’d probably not come back through Europe, and we shipped them back. I have pictures somewhere. I don’t know where the pictures are, but of us in our first trip to Europe. That was our first trip to Europe. Of course, that was fun. And it was great that we did it, because there were many days later in Liberia when I would just sort of dream about being back in Europe.

We had a nice journey to Europe, after renting this room and always sort of having this older lady around. So then we were by ourselves for—I think we were in Europe almost three weeks. We had a nice trip. I think about three weeks, because we went to London, and Jim took me up to Cambridge. He had been a student at Cambridge. So we went up to Cambridge, and then we went to Paris and Rouen. I think we went to Paris, Rouen, we went to the French Riviera. All this—now, we’re students, you know. And so we went to Nice, Cannes, we went to Monaco, and then we ended up in Marseilles, where we were going to catch the boat, so it was a very nice trip.

McGarrigle: Do you have any particular impressions that stand out about being a young American in Europe at that time?

Gibbs: Well, the impression I had was that everybody was friendly. The people in France were much friendlier than than they are now to us, and if you could try to speak a little French, they would be so pleased, they would help you. And we—I fell in love with Paris the first time. I just loved Paris. I think the first time anybody sees Paris, that’s what happens. It’s so beautiful. I didn’t particularly like London, then. I didn’t particularly like London. The English were not as friendly, and the food was awful, just awful. There’s no other way to describe English food. Everything was overcooked. I think it’s better now than it used to be, because now I think they really have learned a little about other influences. But then, it was just awful. The only good food you could get would be in Indian restaurants. You’d go to Indian restaurants and you’d have curry, so that’s the only thing that tasted of anything.

But we had a particularly interesting time, because Jim had been a Rotary International fellow in England when he went to Cambridge, and as part of his fellowship he had to go around in all these little towns and talk to people about the program. So he met these Rotary people all over England in these
small towns, and we visited two or three couples that he particularly liked. Two or three that he particularly had kept in touch with, had written, and stayed in their homes. So we did get a different glimpse of England than you would get ordinarily. And these people were very friendly. And we would stay overnight, usually just one night, and that made it cheaper for us to take the trip, because we had some home hospitality. I think we stayed with three different people, and met them and their families, and ate in their homes. The home food was a little better than the restaurant food at that time, it was a little better.

But my first impression of England—and don’t forget it was January—was it was cold, it was damp. I thought the people were unfriendly. Now I realize it wasn’t so much that they were unfriendly as that they were just reserved. When I was young, I just thought they were all so unfriendly. Since then, I have figured out that they are more just reserved than we are. I sort of liked London. It was a very big city, but I just didn’t like it as much as Paris. Paris I fell in love with. And then of course, just Paris was so exciting, and then we went to the Riviera, but it was too cold to enjoy the Riviera, but we enjoyed walking up and down. It was a little bit warmer there.

Marseilles was very interesting, a little bit scary. That’s where you have—you know, that’s a port. And people would warn us not to walk at night. It was a little bit—you saw a lot of people who looked like thugs in Marseilles, because they were probably sailors and they worked at the port. We saw all these sinister looking people in Marseilles. I’ve never been back, but I think maybe it’s because I was young. I say often now that if I’d go back, they wouldn’t look so sinister. But there were a lot of big, burly men who wore these French berets, and a lot of beards, and they kind of looked at you. [laughs] It was a little bit intimidating. But it was certainly interesting.

So, you know—so that was my first time in Europe. I had a lot of different impressions, and over the years we’ve been back several times. Over the years, I’ve learned to like the English people better than the French people, but in those days it was different. The French now I find very, well, just arrogant. I think they’ve become racist. I don’t know if they always were, but they’ve become very racist, because of the Arabs and the Africans who have come there. They’re really very racist. And I just don’t like going certainly to Paris as much as I used to.

McGarrigle: Were there preparations for the time in Liberia? You had learned the language.

Gibbs: Oh, yes, besides the language we had to buy pots and pans and medicines, all the household goods, blankets and towels, we shipped over a huge trunk. And guess what? It was lost. Probably it was stolen, that’s what happened. It was stolen in Liberia. Somebody took it off the ship, and we are sure it was stolen. It didn’t go down in the sea. It was stolen. And in lots of third world countries
that happens when things come through customs or things come unattended in the mail. They get stolen, because the people are so poor. I understand why. But this was a complete set for a household, of pots, pans, sheets, towels, everything, plus some household medications. We had to tell the—and we were lucky they believed him. It was true, but he had to wire the foundation, and at least we had carefully estimated how much this was going to be, and they had to send him several thousand more dollars, so we then had to do it all again.

The problem is, in Liberia they didn’t have as many choices, so you had to buy what they had in their little sort of general stores. Most of the stores were like general stores. They didn’t have any big department stores in those days. And I don’t think they have today. So it was kind of difficult for us, because we were there for a month, you know, living with somebody else before we went up to our own village, and we had to buy everything all over again.

So the main preparations were getting the household things. Also taking our medication: we had to prepare for malaria, so we had to start our malaria treatment about, I think, a couple of weeks before we left, and we had to read a lot of instructions about living in the tropics, a lot of manuals from the State Department about boiling your water, being careful not to eat fresh foods, and all that. You know, they were telling you way back then all about that. And then buying our stuff. So that was mainly it. And then of course, we took a lot of books for reading ourselves, and we bought a short-wave radio, and stuff like that.

McGarrigle: We could either continue talking about Liberia today, or we could pick up and talk more tomorrow. It depends on your time.

Gibbs: Yes, well, if you wanted two more minutes, but I guess I was thinking if we could stop by no later than quarter of, it would be good.

McGarrigle: Yes, that’s good.

Gibbs: Okay? Or if you want to stop before then—what time do you need to be home?

McGarrigle: Actually, my schedule is good, it’s just whether we’re at a natural stopping point or not.

Gibbs: Yes. Okay, unless you want to talk a little more about Liberia, that’s fine.

McGarrigle: Let me just ask a few questions and we’ll take up with that next time. You must have had regular correspondence with your family about—.

Gibbs: Yes. That was the most difficult point. We didn’t have email. We didn’t have a phone. We didn’t even have television or anything. So we were pretty cut
off from the rest of the world most of the time, and the short-wave didn’t always work, either. So we mainly got BBC, and we didn’t get much about America. So the most difficult point was that the letters would take two or three weeks to reach them, and then they would answer and it would take two or three weeks. So it would be like a month or more, before you would hear from your parents. So we would just keep writing and figuring, even if the letters crossed, you know. So I would write at least once a week to my mother. And in those days my mother was a better correspondent than she was in later years. And to friends, and you know other people. The big highlight of our week was getting mail—there were these various missions of the U.S. government, economic missions, military missions—and so we got our mail through the embassy. There was always somebody who would be coming up—we called it upcountry—and they would bring us our mail about once a week. And listen, that was the big day. We’d be so happy to get that mail. No matter we were doing, we’d just stop and read our mail.

The other thing that was a challenge is that because we lived in a mud hut—literally, and I’ll show you a picture of it—a mud hut, no running water, no refrigeration, no electricity of any kind, no washing machine, nothing like that, no electrical appliances. We had to figure out, well, how do you do all these things, when you come from a very advanced Western country. It was clear that the missionary people that we met very early on said, “You have to hire people to work with you.” I didn’t want to do that—just this democratic idea that you can’t be hiring what they called “boys.” I figured they were talking about grown men. Well, actually, we did end up hiring two teenage boys, because I had to. We had to get water from the well that was a couple of miles outside the village. We had to wash all the clothes by hand. Everything had to be done by hand, everything. And so we hired these two boys. One was about fourteen and one was about sixteen. And to make myself feel better, I said, well, we’ll keep them in school as long as we’re here, and I’ll teach them and help them really to finish high school, which is what we did.

So anyway, I hired these boys, and we had to set up our house around the fact that you didn’t have electricity, so it’s like camping. Only nowadays people camp with fancy things. So we did have a kerosene stove and kerosene lights. I had to learn to make bread with a contraption that, I guess it’s like a camp stove. You put it over a burner and you bake it. It looks like a little oven. And I learned to make bread that way. It was the best bread I ever had, too. If we had chickens, the boys would kill the chickens and dress them for me, and then I would cook. We taught one boy to cook. He never became a great cook, but he would cook the local, what we called the local chop, palm oil chop, they called it. And so he would go out in the bush and come back with greens. I never knew what kind of greens, just some kind of greens, onions and greens, and you fry them in this palm oil well, they’re delicious. And rice, he’d make the best rice, like Chinese restaurants make the best rice you ever wanted. To this day, I can’t make rice as good as Alfred used to make it.
So, you know, we learned. We had to be very creative, even though we didn’t have children, I mean, there are certain things you have to have in your household. You have to wash your clothes, you have to cook your food, you have to keep it clean. And you have to keep things antiseptic. We had to boil large pots of water every day to drink, just to drink. But we also had to have a contraption, an indoor commode, and that was interesting. Jim built this little box and then you put a pail inside.

I mean, I’m telling you, it was extremely challenging. But within a few weeks we had figured out what we needed to do. I made curtains for the windows in our hut, which had the wire screens in them, and tried to fix it up. We bought some tables, like camp tables, and chairs, like you’d put on your lawn. And we fixed it up. Jim had his little corner for his office. We had a little dining room table, which was one of these fold-up camp tables, and a hammock to rest in, and we created a bed with—we used an air mattress for eighteen months, and believe me, I’ll never use one of those again. But for eighteen months—and sometimes in the middle of the night you’d have to get up and pump it up.

So I’ll tell you what, it was very challenging. And you know, my friends had predicted that I would never make it. And of course, I think if they hadn’t predicted it, I might have come home. [laughter] But then I said, no, I have to stay, I have to make it, I have to learn to adjust. And it was probably a very good thing at the beginning of the marriage. We had no in-laws to deal with, which I think was probably good. We had no friends to decide, who are your friends and who are my friends. We had no friends. There were very few people who spoke English in the village, so we depended on each other. And that’s the way you either make it or you break it.

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: It was a very intense time for us in our lives, and we were the only two who spoke American English in the village. I mean, there were people who spoke English with an accent, like the merchants who were all from Lebanon spoke with a very thick accent and very limited vocabulary, but you could talk to them, “How are you? What do you want today?” and I would buy canned foods from them. We also ate a lot of canned foods. And we just had a lot of things that we had to adjust to. But we did, and we managed to have a lot of fun, because we were still newlyweds, and just learning the language and walking around the village and making friends with the local people and the chief. And we had some friends in Monrovia, and when we really got fed up with the village and fed up with living like that, about every six weeks we would spend a weekend in Monrovia, which was the big city there, and that was pretty nice. We’d stay in people’s homes because they didn’t have many hotels they had one fancy hotel which was too expensive for us, so we had friends and we’d stay with them, and then we’d go to parties, we’d eat at a
restaurant, and boy, that would last us for another six weeks. So it was interesting.

But anyway, there were a lot of adjustments to make that people ordinarily wouldn’t have to make here, if you live in your own country. But we did it, and it was interesting.

McGarrigle: Well, let’s stop there, and next time we can talk about the work that you did there.

Gibbs: Yes, okay.

McGarrigle: And Jim’s work there.

Gibbs: Yes, okay.

[end of session]
Interview 8: July 10, 2003

[begin tape 13A]

[lengthy discussion of cookies that Taylor Gibbs brought to the interview]

McGarrigle: Well, last time we talked about how you and Jim went to Liberia, and a little bit about your life in the village, and I wanted to ask you, during your eighteen months there, how your research interests were being influenced by your experience or how you—

Gibbs: Or vice versa.

McGarrigle: Yes, exactly. How you were starting to think about what you later did.

Gibbs: Okay, well. And that’s really a good question, and I have thought about it over the years many times. He was the anthropologist. I was the wife. I had, at that point, never gone to graduate school. And we had just been married, as a matter of fact, as I told you, and we went there about four months after we’d married. I told you about the scene in Brooklyn, where all my family were crying and thought they’d never see us again.

McGarrigle: Your mother said she’d thought she and your father would never see you again.

Gibbs: Yes, they would never see us again. Anyway, it was sort of fun at first, because at first it’s like camping, you know. We’d stay two weeks in Liberia, in the capital, Monrovia, which you see on TV now, and it looked pretty much like that before, only it was less developed even than it is now. But we had to set up a household in a village, in the bush, and so we were newlyweds, and it was meeting new people and meeting people at the embassy, and it was just kind of fun. We were the new couple in town, because, they didn’t have a big American community, but they had a small Americans community, which was mainly the embassy and the missions, they had a military mission, even then. That was 1957 that we went there, and 1958. They had a military mission. They had an AID mission, AID, Agency for International Development. They had a lot of missionaries, and those were the American—and some businesspeople. But it was not a huge community. So whenever a new American couple came, who were going to be there for any period of time, I mean, you were wined and dined and welcomed—people were so glad to have somebody new to talk to, someone new to invite, you know, just a new face in town.

So people were very nice to us, Americans and Liberians, very nice to us. And we made some friends, found some old friends, some Liberians who had gone to school in America, a couple whom I had befriended years ago—well, not so many years at that time—but as an undergraduate. We reconnected. And so
basically, it was sort of fun at first. And we went to visit the village, we chose the village where Jim thought he could do his research, way off the road, several hours from Monrovia, and I thought, ‘Well, this is going to be interesting.’ And as I told you, we didn’t have any modern conveniences, none. No well, nothing. And so we had to set up from scratch, and I hired these young boys. I think I might have told you that last time.

McGarrigle: And about the English lessons.

Gibbs: Yes. I told you about the lessons that I taught them. And after a while it wasn’t so much fun, quite frankly. After I while I realized, well, this is how we’re going to live for eighteen months, I wonder, can I make it? I’ve got to find something to do after we set the house up, after I got everything under control, after I hired these two—they were boys, teenagers. Then I realized, you know, I have day after day, it’s hot, no air conditioning, what am I going to do with my time? And I am a person who does not like to waste time. You can probably tell that from me. I am the kind of person who uses every minute. Unfortunately, the only time I drop that is sometimes on vacation, I will not use every minute. But then I’l be reading, so that’s still using time. But if I go to the post office and I know it’s going to be a long line, I take a book or a magazine to read in line. If I am going to the hairdresser, I always carry a book, because sometimes she has good magazines and sometimes she doesn’t. If I go on a plane, when I was teaching, I would take papers to grade. I would never look at the movie, because I just have this Calvinistic attitude, growing up in a home where you didn’t waste time. Time was precious.

New Englanders are really reared to believe that wasting time is really sort of sinful. I mean, that is the very big attitude in New England. You’re reared from young children—even blacks, whites, I don’t care who it is—you’re reared to believe that you have to make the most of your time. You have to be industrious. That’s a big word in New England. And that comes from the Pilgrims and all these other people, and even though my parents—my father was from the South and my mother was from Washington, D.C.—they certainly picked it up. This idea that we couldn’t waste time. You know, you just can’t stare into space. You just can’t daydream. You have to do something. I was reared that way, and you cannot get over it. You really—maybe with therapy you can get over it. [laughs] But then I never thought it was a problem until I got somewhat older. I never thought it was a problem.

So anyway, I figured out that I had to do something with my time. There were two things I decided I was going to do. One, I was going to help my husband by interviewing the women, because he really—in these tribal societies, a strange man does not have access to the women, just like what you see about in Afghanistan or Iraq or Muslim societies—any tribal society, a strange man does not ever have access to the women. You have to be in the family and married in the family, by blood or by marriage, to have access, to even talk to them in general. So I figured that if I could hire an interpreter who spoke
English and this language, Kpelle, that I could help Jim by interviewing the women. And then in the course of interviewing the women—remember that we had eighteen months—I used to hear a lot of folk stories, so I said, ‘You know one thing that’d be great—I’m going to collect folk stories, and maybe I can do a book when I go back.’

So first of all, I identified a very intelligent woman who spoke about seven languages. She had been married to a soldier, and she had traveled all over Liberia. She could speak about seven of the tribal languages, plus pretty good English. And she was charming, and I liked her, and we got along, so I hired her. She also helped me with my language, because I wanted to learn more, so I was learning the language while I was doing this. I would pick up phrases and I was learning more of the language. We had taken some classes at the Hartford Theological Seminary.

Am I talking too fast?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: And so those were my two major projects—interviewing the women and getting data for Jim about child-rearing, about marriage customs, about health issues, about women’s farming and the labor that women did in the community. Some of them did farming. Some of them had these little markets, the older women who were too old to farm—you know what I mean by little market?

McGarrigle: Where they would set up in stalls?

Gibbs: Yes, yes. They have that in all third world countries. Sometimes you do it in front of your house. Like you mentioned your aunts with the nuts? Just in front of their house, they’ll sell cola nuts or little bottles of palm oil, which is a staple that they cook with. So the older women often did that. And then I wanted to know about the midwives, because they had a special sort of secret society that the older women who delivered the babies—because of course they didn’t have health clinics and prenatal care, and they had a lot of—well, beliefs about childbearing and pregnancy, some of which were certainly, let me just say, not scientific is the best word to use, in our sense, anyway. And some of them were probably harmful to them. But on the other hand, they had a high, high, high infant mortality rate. I wanted to find out what were their attitudes about child-rearing, what were their fears, what kind of health practices did they practice traditionally, and so forth and so on. And I really wanted to find out about the role of the midwife, because the midwife seemed to be very powerful in that society, very powerful. I thought that they were probably special people who had special status, and as it turned out, they were.
I spent part of every day interviewing people in the village. At first, some would not talk to me, but after they got to know me, because I’d walk around the village, it was a small village, every day, and I’d be shopping. They had one little sort of main street, not paved, where you’d go and you’d see your neighbors, and you’d chat with the shopkeepers, all of whom were Lebanese shopkeepers, and the barber. And they began to know me and know my—the first time I didn’t have children. The second time I did. And so after a while, they would invite me to sit with them in front of their huts and just chat. What they wouldn’t always realize is that I would be asking the questions that I wanted to know, because it would seem to them, well, she’s just friendly and she’s just chatting. So I would just chat with them and talk to them, and ask them questions, very informally, and then I would come back every night and write my notes. So I kept very extensive field notes.

Then later I began to get these folktales. They were just wonderful, the folktales, and I’ll give you an update on that later. But I collected about thirty folktales. They have a series called the Spider folktales. Spider is a rascal, and he embellishes all of the—sort of like B’rer Rabbit, very much like B’rer Rabbit. The Spider is the rascal. So they would have Spider folktales, and they had some folktales about snakes. They had some folktales about the water spirits, things like that. So I had this wonderful collection.

And then the third thing I did, because I realized that I wanted the notes to be in readable form so that I could preserve them, somebody else might need to some day read them or edit them, so I taught myself to type. I had never learned to type. So I got one of these books where you teach yourself to type, and I taught myself to type.

So every day, I would have this routine. I would get up in the morning and first do my typing lesson, so you don’t have to look at the keys. I can type pretty well with just teaching myself. I would teach myself to type, and then I would organize the household for the day, and then—well, first I would organize the household for the day, with the boys, and then I would take my typing lesson, and then in the afternoon after lunch, because lunchtime is very hot there, I would go out about two, three o’clock, and I would start my interviewing. Maybe I would stay out three or four hours, and then come home in time for dinner. And then at night, we didn’t have electricity or TV, so both of us would sit up with our kerosene lamps and we’d write our notes for the day. And hopefully some mail might have come. Once or twice a week we’d get mail. Then we’d read our mail or write letters home, and that was your day. That was our day for just about eighteen months. Except when we went to Monrovia, and that broke it.

So I really did accomplish some things that I felt I was not, as my father would say, wasting time. But also it really began to sink in on me how these women from a different culture with very little education, how they had such different belief systems, and yet we all have the same basic needs, but the way
we express those needs are so different. The way we rear our children may be very different. The way we punish our children or reward our children. The way their day had to be consumed with doing everything by hand, because they had no machines, so they had to beat the rice, they had to make the flour, they had to make the bread, they had to cut the chickens, they had to dress the chickens. I mean, wash the clothes by hand—everything. And how their whole lives were organized around their daily tasks in a way that’s really quite different from American women. And the insights I had about culture and how it impacts on behavior and values. I don’t know if I mentioned it to you, I mentioned it to somebody, about one of the big lessons I got from there is that you don’t have to be sick when you’re pregnant.

McGarrigle: No, we didn’t talk about that.

Gibbs: Did I mention that to you?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: Because of course, I grew up in a society where nearly all the women I knew, all my mother’s friends, when they got pregnant, they said they were sick at first, they had the morning sickness. So I thought that was normal. I mean, I thought, ‘Well, women have morning sickness.’ And of course, I was not looking forward to it. But when I asked the women there, they didn’t even know what I was talking about. So then I said, well, maybe I’m using the wrong words, or maybe it’s a different concept, or whatever, but they didn’t know what I was talking about. I kept saying to my interpreter, who had had several children, I said, “Sarah,” her name was Sarah, I said, “Sarah, do you know what I mean?”

She said, “Well, I’ve heard of it, but we don’t have that much here. I’ve heard of it, because I’ve traveled all over Liberia. I think that’s a Kwi women thing.” “Kwi” means white. She said, “I think that’s a Kwi women’s thing.” I said, “What do you mean, it’s a Kwi women’s thing?” She said, “We don’t have that. We don’t get sick. We have to work. We don’t have time to get sick.” That’s the way she put it. “We don’t have time to indulge ourselves and sit in the bed and be sick every morning. We have to get up every single morning and go to our farms.” This was in the village. She said, “We go to our farms. We work all day. And as soon as the baby is born, we go back to work. We don’t have time for all that nonsense.” I had to laugh. She said, “Well, you might ask your friends in Monrovia. Maybe they know about it.”

So then I went to Monrovia, and sure enough, some of the Western women, Western-educated Liberian women, who had been to America, who had grown up speaking English, who were what we would call middle-class or well-to-do, and had gone to American schools, sure enough, more of them, not all of them, but more of them had had morning sickness, because I finally asked them. So I said, ‘You know, there must be some cultural component
here. There must be some way that the mind affects what your body is telling you.'

So I came back, and when I got pregnant—before I even knew, but when I was ready, I said to the doctor, "Does everybody suffer from morning sickness?" He laughed, and said, "Well, most women, but not all women suffer from it." So then I decided I wasn’t going to be sick. I actually said to myself, I’m not going to be sick. I don’t want to be sick. I don’t like being sick. I don’t like being in the bed. I don’t like this. I was never sick a day with either one of my children. And I am sure that if I had not gone to Liberia, that would not have happened. I really believe that there is a cultural mechanism, that we are expected to be sick, to have morning sickness, and then it happens. But I was never sick. Not one day.

McGarrigle: I know I’ve read of studies, cross-cultural studies about pain medication in childbirth, and even some western European countries—I think it’s the Dutch—they use much less pain medication than Americans do in childbirth. And the women don’t, when they’re interviewed, they don’t register the experience as being more painful than the American women.

Gibbs: Some of it just has to be the way you process pain and the way you process these things. Anyway, so I learned that, and that was a good thing. But that is where I began my really lifelong career interest in cross-cultural mental health. That’s where it began. It began in Liberia. And I didn’t know at the time that that’s what it was going to be, but looking at the way these people coped with terrific poverty, what we would call poverty anyway—not much income, I’ll put it that way. They didn’t consider it poverty, by the way, but they always had something to eat, and they had a hut to live in. That they really weren’t working much on a—it wasn’t a capitalist economy, so they shared everything. They bartered things. But the way they coped with stress, with childbirth, with pain, with death, with the loss of—some of them would lose in a lifetime ten children or more in infancy, and how they rationalized it, how they continued to cope. You rarely saw a person depressed, what we would call depression. I mean, depression also has slightly different symptoms across cultures, but there are certain things that it has in common across cultures. You rarely saw depressed people. I mean, they got up every day and did what they had to do, and coped with their lives.

And again, you know, we can get depressed over the silliest thing, and be depressed for weeks and months. But I rarely saw it. The women I would see every day in this small village, every single day, doing their work, laughing, having a good time, with very, very little in the way of material goods, household goods. I mean, they lived a life just somewhat above subsistence level, somewhat above. They might have two or three changes of clothes, saving one for ceremonies and weddings and funerals, and the rest of the time, the same two. You’d see them, they’d wash one, and the next day they’d wear the other one. Floppy sandals would be their only pair of shoes. I mean, forget
about socks and stockings and sneakers. Even in the downfalls, the rain, torrents, they did not have shoes. They did not have rubbers or boots. They wore those floppy sandals all year round. And they were happy people. I mean, there’s no question. There were some who had endured great trauma, and they would be somewhat more withdrawn, but most of the people would be on a daily basis in very happy moods. They’d call out to you when you walked past, they would tease you. There’s a tradition of teasing in a lot of African tribes, and so they’d say something to you teasingly about something.

So it was an experience that taught me first of all, you don’t have to have a lot of material goods to be happy. That was an important thing to learn as a bride. And secondly, you really can get along with so little to live your life. You don’t have to have all the machines, all the TV, all the newspapers, all the magazines, all the fancy hotels and resorts, to live your life. You don’t have to have that. And they were so dignified in the way they approached death and pain and trauma and tragedy. They were just so dignified. So I did learn a lot. And those ideas, those things that I saw and experienced myself, really had a lasting impact on my thinking about human behavior and about mental illness and mental health.

There were one or two people in the village who we would call over here probably schizophrenic, mentally ill. But they were tolerated. They were taken care of. They were not put—“Where were you going to put them?” They would walk around the village talking to themselves, picking at themselves sometimes, yelling out, and people would just ignore them or tease them or laugh at them or sometimes laugh with them, but they were not shunned and they were not segregated from the other people. There was one named Flumo who, I don’t know where Flumo lived, he was probably homeless. But people fed him. And they laughed at him, and sometimes with him. He became a great fan of mine, because I was always nice and kind to him. So Flumo would show up whenever he knew we were eating. He knew our dinner hour. So he was not so dumb. That’s what I was going to say about schizophrenics. There’s a part of them that is very often very in touch with reality, especially when it affects their own survival. So he would show up.

But some of the funniest incidents I had also happened with Flumo, because he had one eye. And as I said, he’d probably be diagnosed as schizophrenic over here. But you know, he made some sense in conversation. Anyway, Jim had put windows in the hut, and he had put these shutters that you prop up, you know, like if you’ve been in certain cabins have them. So he put a screen in the window, because there were no screens, of course, when we came. Then he fixed it so that the shutters propped up. So when it was sunny or daylight, we’d have them open, and when it was nighttime or raining, we’d close the shutters. This was in the bedroom and the bathroom. The bathroom was really one big room where we washed up and went to the bathroom.
Flumo would come by almost every morning when I was standing there washing, naked. We had no showers and we washed in the open room. There was a door, but if the shutters were open, he’d come by and he’d put his head, with his one good eye, under the shutter, and say, “Morning, Ma. How-do, Ma.” [laughing] He called me “Ma.”

Then I realized, all the woman in the village are naked above the waist. They had a lappa which they would tie on the side, which is like a sarong. The lappa and the sarong are the same identical thing. And they would do their work and go about their business often naked on top. If they were dressed up, because that’s the American concept, they would put on a little top, on Sunday, when they were dressed up. And if it was cold, they would put the lappa and tie it around their breasts. But very often they’d roll the lappa up, and when they were working or sitting down, the breasts would be out. So he would come almost, not quite every morning but almost every morning, and he would greet me, and as I say, my husband used to say, “Flumo’s your biggest fan in the village.” So finally I realized, you know he sees this all the time. Why am I going to worry about this? I’m not worried about his attacking me. He would just pop up. I mean, you wouldn’t have any notice when he was coming, he’d just pop up. And you’d see this head under this thing and he’d say, “Morning, Ma. How-do, Ma.” I’d say, “Morning, Flumo. I’m fine, how are you? Now, would you please go away?” And then he’d just disappear. He was very funny.

So I had some fun with those kinds of things happening. So basically the year and a half, I think, because I got myself busy and doing things that interested me, it went a little faster than I think it would have gone if I had sat in a chair and sulked, and said, “Oh, I’m so unhappy.” I spent a lot of time writing letters to my friends and family back home, letters about my life there. Some of them kept those letters over the years. They said they were very fascinating. Some day, now that I’m retired—I kept saying I’m going to write a book about Liberia, but I haven’t done it yet for a lot of reasons. Well, if I ever write a book about my own life, I will write more about the impact that year and a half really had on me, and also the folktales which I brought back. It took me several years to find a collaborator to do the sketches, the illustrations. She was a black woman who married a friend of Jim’s who had gone to Cornell. We worked together by mail for several months. Then they got a divorce, and that was the end of the project, because I never got back to it. I never got back to her. We lost contact with her after they divorced. We had actually gotten to the point where we were going to get a book contract, and then I just never got back to it. So I still have to this day those stories in a folder, hoping that some day I’ll get back to it and find an illustrator. Now that Liberia is in the news, it would be a good time, come to think of it.

McGarrigle: What kind of a team approach did you and Jim develop so that you were sharing information? You were doing some fieldwork.
Gibbs: Well, we would talk every night at dinner about what I had done and what he had done, and then the notes that I had made for the women, I just gave to him. I would type them up and give them to him. I kept the folktales, they were my project. The field notes were helping him. So we would talk and go over it, and if he had any questions, I would give him the notes, I would tell him. I kept pretty good notes. And I typed up my own notes, so I always could tell him if there was something missing. He used some of it. He didn’t use a lot of it, because he was concentrating on law. But I think he used some of it in the general description of the tribe and their lives.

But it was a time when I was young and I was very curious about people and life, so I think I learned a lot, and also about myself, you know, you learn a lot about yourself in a situation like that. What I learned about myself is—which I think I already knew anyway, but more—I really learned how important it is to be self-sufficient. You’re not always going to have all these accoutrements that we have in our society. You’re not always going to have the television and the washing machine and the dishwasher. How important it is to be able to survive under those kinds of situations. So I said if ever we lose all our money or are in a major disaster or we lose our house, I’ll know how to cope. I won’t go to pieces, because I’ve coped under worse situations.

And the other thing I also did that I forgot to mention, I sewed a lot. I had learned to sew as a teenager. My mother taught me to sew. And they had beautiful fabrics, you know, in Africa. You’ve seen some of the African fabrics. In fact, I can show you two, I still have two tablecloths that I made. I always bring them out because they’re red, white, and blue. I loved, I loved all those exotic fabrics. I mean, they are beautiful! They’re somewhat similar—well, the Hawaiian shirts are not quite as bright, but you know the Hawaiian fabrics. But all of the tropical fabrics, whether you see them in Africa or in the West Indies, are almost always very bright and colorful, with palm trees and animals.

McGarrigle: I’m going to change the tape.

[begin tape 13B]

Gibbs: Some weeks I would see some pretty fabric. These Lebanese stores used to carry these gorgeous fabrics. Then I would just take something and I would make—sometimes I made skirts and tops. But I did become a pretty good seamstress. And then these are some of the materials. This I used for—this is pretty. [showing] See, with all the African animals and masks, see? Isn’t that nice? And I used these as tablecloths, because they’re red, white, and blue, and yellow, in this case. But I used these on July 4th. This is again very Liberian, with pictures of the village, and people doing weaving. So sometimes I use them for tablecloths. See the people doing different things? And sometimes—well, I didn’t make his shirts, the tailors did, but Jim has a lot of shirts made in Africa, because it was so hot there. You’d have to change
your clothes every day. You had to, you’d have to change, because you’d just be, if you were out in the heat, sweating all the time.

Between that and the beads, I had a little business. I would sell the beads in Monrovia. I would make these beautiful strings of beads, different kinds of beads, which now, the kinds of beads they call ethnic beads at Nieman-Marcus and Bloomingdale’s and Macy’s, those ethnic-looking beads, the big beads with different colors. They’re selling those beads for $200, $300 a string. I sold them at $20 in Liberia—and when I came back, and I would also sell them in Monrovia. And then I brought quite a few back, and I would sell them at $20, $25 a string. The same kinds of beads they’re selling $200, $250.

McGarrigle: That became very in vogue in the last couple of years.

Gibbs: Ethnic beads. And they were in vogue a few years ago, too. So they come back about every ten years, you know, the African look, or the Middle Eastern look, or the Hawaiian look, or the Indian look is big now, the Indian look. And with it, they always have these very exotic beads. Those beads cost pennies over there. Pennies. They’re just gouging people, which is I guess what retailers do. But I often say to Jim, “You know, I should have kept up my business by importing.” Because I had some beautiful designs, and liked jewelry myself, and people would buy two and three strings at a time, and then I ran out. I still have a few in the garage, but eventually, of course, you run out of the beads. So that’s how I kept myself busy.

But as I said, I think the main thing that came out of it was a way of looking at life and a way of looking at human behavior and culture, and understanding the really tremendous impact culture and environment have on people and their behavior and the way they view the world, and on their values, because it’s shaped by this environment, and it’s shaped by these cultural beliefs, and you can’t get away from it. It just has a tremendous impact.

McGarrigle: At that time, did you have a sense that your life would involve childrearing up to a certain point and that then you would focus more on graduate school?

Gibbs: Yes. First of all, I always knew that I wanted children. But I also always knew I wanted a career. But truthfully, I hadn’t figured out how I was going to work it out at that point, when we first got married. Because the first thing we knew we had to do, was Jim had to finish his PhD and go back to Harvard for a year. So I figured that since he was going to do that, I was going to go and do a business course, to try to see how I liked business. Don’t even ask me why I ever thought I was going to like business, because I look back now and I ask, ‘Why did you make that decision?’ I think it was a very practical decision, because there was a one-year course that the Harvard Business School offered to women before they would admit them for the two-year degree. So it was a one-year course. You got a certificate. You had classes at Harvard Business
So then you would go and do the two-year degree program at the—?

No, actually, when I took it, before the year I entered, you could not get an MBA at Harvard. No woman was ever admitted to the business school. They only had the one-year program. By this time, it’s the late fifties, and just the sort of early stirrings of the women’s movement. It really wasn’t even the full women’s movement until the early seventies, I would say. But it was the early stirrings of the quest for equality. I don’t even think it was called the women’s movement. But in the very late fifties, women began to say, “Hey, why can’t we be treated as equal citizens in all these graduate schools? We graduated from the undergraduate schools, and then in the graduate schools, they either don’t want us or they have a quota,” like Harvard Law School and all the others had.

So women were beginning to challenge this, and so what happened was I entered the program in the fall of 1958, right after we came back from Liberia, that summer, or that August, I guess. Jim was going to be at Harvard finishing up his PhD. He had one year. I wanted to do a program because I didn’t know where we were going to go. In other words, any other program I had started, I wouldn’t be able to finish, because I didn’t know where he was going to be. We did not expect him to get an offer in Boston. So the question is, what am I going to do? So I think it was just a very pragmatic thing. And I said, well, let me just try business. I didn’t know whether I’d like it or not, but I thought, Well, it’s a one-year program, and that’s what I’m going to do. And then if I like it, I’ll find a place where I can get an MBA because there were some schools around the country that offered an MBA to women. Harvard did not.

I entered in 1958. That spring, as I was about to finish this program—and by this time, Jim had an offer, he was interviewing for offers, and we were looking at places outside of Boston anyway—the Harvard Business School announced that it had decided to admit women in the fall of 1960. But in the meantime, in the fall—let me see, in the fall of 1959 or ’60. I think it was the fall of 1960. In the meantime, the people who were in my year could go and get—they were sent to the second year to get an MBA. So my class, from my class that entered in ’58, were the first class of women to graduate from the Harvard Business School in June 1960. And I didn’t stay the second year. I would have probably done it if we had stayed in Boston, because it would have made sense. It was actually historic. But the class of 1960, the women who got degrees, that is the first degree. But they didn’t spend two years at the business school. They spent the first year at this joint program called the Harvard-Radcliffe Program in Business Administration. That’s what it was called. But they did enter and get the degree in ’60, and then in the fall of ’60, you had the first full two-year class at Harvard Business School.
McGarrigle: Well, that’s a whole interesting subject.

Gibbs: It was another maybe historic opportunity missed, but I really could’ve stayed. Jim sort of encouraged me to. I said, “No, I don’t want to stay here. I don’t think I really like the courses that much, much less the macho atmosphere.” The Harvard Business School was one of the most macho atmospheres you could ever imagine, because as I said, there were no women when I started. Some of the professors found every possible way to put you down, because you were having classes with all women in this separate program. They would make comments and they would be nasty, up to the point that some of my classmates said of sexual harassment, although I did not experience it, so I can’t say firsthand. But you know, innuendos, nasty cracks, not taking you seriously in class, all those things which are typical, I think, especially in situations when there are mainly [male teachers and] men in the class.

I did finish, though, the program, and then we moved to Minneapolis. There isn’t much to say about the program except what I just told you. At that point, I decided I probably wasn’t going to go back and finish an MBA, because I didn’t think it was the field for me. But once having finished, I did go to Minneapolis, and that’s the next interesting chapter of my life, because this is where I encountered, for the first time, real job discrimination as an adult in Minneapolis.

McGarrigle: Jim got a position at the university there?

Gibbs: Yes, he was an assistant professor. He did not quite finish his dissertation that summer. He finished it later, I mean, that fall. But he got a job as an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota, with a very supportive chairman and very supportive program for him. It was a good beginning for Jim. It was a good place to be. And Minneapolis, we liked the city. But the first thing you noticed about Minneapolis, if you were a minority, was you didn’t see many people of color. The first thing I noticed was, I asked the question, “Well, where are the black people? Where are the other—the Indians?” We were lucky, in a way, lucky meaning that in those days the department rented the apartment for us. And we were lucky, but we realized later the reason they rented it for us. Because when we showed up, the manager was very surprised, and he was not very happy to see us. But he had signed the lease with the chair of the department, and so we moved right in. He never got used to us. He didn’t treat us very nicely for a long time, but I guess we were there about two years. He was never nice to us. We stayed there for two years and then we bought a house. But in any case, we realized that we were lucky that the chairman did that, so we wouldn’t have a big hassle.

So then I went on the job market. Jim has his job, right, and he started right away. He started July 1st. We got there in June and he started July 1st, in summer school. So I had to start looking for a job. Actually I had sent out about six CVs to big companies in Minneapolis, and several people had
suggested that I send to the food companies, because they had a better record of hiring women in high positions, for obvious reasons. So Pillsbury had the Ann Pillsbury logo, General Mills had the Betty Crocker brand. And they had a lot of home economists who tested their products. So they were used to seeing women, college-educated women, in fairly high positions.

I sent out these CVs and received the nicest letters from about four companies. But the two that I was interested in, the two big ones, were Pillsbury and General Mills. General Mills was the owner of the Betty Crocker products. And of course Pillsbury, Pillsbury Cakes and Pillsbury Doughboy, all that stuff. I set up two interviews. When I walked into the General Mills office, the head of personnel—I mean, still to this day I have saved the wonderful telegrams they sent me, about how I was so well-qualified, please come right away, set up an appointment—the man looked so shocked, I thought he was probably going to have a heart attack. And he gave me—fortunately, I had taken a personnel course—there was this new technique called the stress interview, so I knew that it was not just me. The stress interview, which is probably one of the cruelest things you can do to a new person you’re interviewing, is to sit and be quiet, to see how long they can maintain silence. That was it. He said hello to me, and sat down, and for the next ten minutes he didn’t say a word. Do you know how long ten minutes is when nothing is said?

Well, I knew what he was doing, and at first I didn’t take it personally. At first I said, well, I had just read about this in our course about personnel, that it’s kind of a test of how the interviewee deals with silence, how comfortable they are with silence. Yes, but you know, that’s a mean thing to do to somebody on a first interview. So I sat there and I sat there. He didn’t answer the phone. He didn’t look out the window. He just sat back in his chair and alternately stared at me and at his fingernails. Well, the truth is, I out-sat him, and he became more and more uncomfortable. Because I had read about it, and I knew that I was not supposed to break the silence. But on the other hand, I was getting very angry, because I thought that this was a terrible thing to do to a person.

So finally, he said, “Well! What brings you here?” Something dumb like that. So then he starts to talk with me. Then he proceeds to ask me a series of very technical questions, which again doesn’t make sense. I was actually interviewing for a position in market research. He begins to ask me these very technical questions about the food industry and stuff, which of course I did not know. So I couldn’t answer the questions. Finally he said, “Would you like a little tour?” By that time I knew that even if I were offered a job, I would not want to work there, and he gave me really a very brief tour, sent me to lunch with somebody else. He said, “Well, I’m busy, but if you’re free for lunch, so-and-so will take you.” And that other person showed no interest in me, and I knew then that this job was not going to be offered to me. So after lunch, the guy says, “We’ll get in touch with you and let you know soon.”
I went home, and I was really angry, because I said to Jim, “I do think it had to do not just that I was a woman, but that I was a woman of color. They were shocked to see me, and they treated me very badly, and so even if I ever get a job offer, I wouldn’t—.” Now, the other one, and I don’t think I’ve told you this story about Pillsbury, have I?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: It seems that my life has been a series of these encounters with really unpleasant people around the issues either of race or sex. And it just goes on and on. But I learned early how to deal with it, as I’ve told you.

So the second one was a guy at the Pillsbury Company. Now, these are the two big companies.

McGarrigle: The first one, you’re at General Mills?

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: And I have nothing good to say about General Mills, and I never bought a Betty Crocker product after that.

So the second one was Pillsbury. They had a headquarters building. I think I mentioned to you that when I went in, the elevator operator—

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: There were two white elevator operators. I didn’t see any black people in this building.

McGarrigle: We must have skipped around, because we went back to Liberia, to talk, sequentially. Because you did talk about how you did something for his friend.

Gibbs: Yes, but he wouldn’t speak to me.

McGarrigle: And then he became—yes.

Gibbs: Yes. But I don’t know if I told you about the interview itself, because that was important.

McGarrigle: I don’t recall the interview.

Gibbs: Because if I did, we can skip over it. But I went in, and to make a long story short—this guy, I sort of liked him right away. You know how sometimes you
just take to people? His name was Dudley. Not many people are named Dudley. You don’t meet very many people with the first name Dudley, but his name was Dudley. And he was almost like what I would call a typical Midwesterner, you know, friendly, outgoing, and like a lot of people you meet in the Midwest. So we talked. He said, “You know, you’ve got a great CV, and you’re interested in this job in market research?” I said, “Yes.” So he said, well, did I think I had enough background to do it, and I said, yes, I did. I said I’d done questionnaire construction and done a lot of interviewing in my courses and in previous situations, internships and things like that, and I certainly knew about research because of what I’d done at the Labor Department, which was my very first job out of college. So I said that I thought that I—and in their market research, it was a lot of interviewing, and you construct questionnaires and stuff, and send it out to people, surveys. I said, yes, I’ve done that.

I noticed that he was getting a little bit nervous, and then he said to me, “Well, you know, this is Minneapolis.” And I knew what was coming. “You know, we’re probably behind the East Coast in terms of having minorities in our work force. But you certainly have the qualifications. So I have to just ask you, I have to be frank. Do you think your race is going to be a problem in this job?” And I sort of was taken aback, because nobody had ever asked me that outright. Certainly the other guy, that’s what he was thinking, but he didn’t ask me. So I was kind of taken aback. And I was so taken aback that I guess the first thing that came out of my mouth was my thought, and my honest response, and I said to him, “You know, my race has never been a problem for me. My race is a problem for you. You know I’m qualified, and if you want to do the right thing, you’ll hire me. That’s really all I have to say.”

He turned beet-red, and said, “Well, that’s a very honest answer. You’re hired,” on the spot. And I came home and I told my husband, and he said, “You really had nerve to say that!” I said, “What else was I going to say? He didn’t beat around the bush, and I didn’t beat around the bush.” And I said, my race has never been a problem for me. I felt that if I really put it back on you, since you said I was qualified, now what are you going to do? Are you going to hire me or not? That’s your choice. And he did.

McGarrigle: Was that a good working relationship with him?

Gibbs: I always liked Dudley, yes. He was always very frank. And if he didn’t like something, he would tell you. I worked there actually for about a year, maybe a little over a year. Because I started work there—I can’t remember, it wasn’t July.

McGarrigle: I have the dates. It was July ’59 to—

Gibbs: Yes, I think late July, and worked there until, was it January of ’61?
McGarrigle: Of ’61. That’s from your CV.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s right. Because I didn’t go to work at the beginning of July. It must have been toward the end of July. So I worked there until I was six months pregnant. He was my second supervisor. He was up over my supervisor. But I worked with two other women. It was a segregated unit in the sense that we were all women who did the questionnaire construction. It was sort of a fascinating job. The home economists would develop new products, new cakes and new things like—now we have a lot of these mixes. But mainly what we had then were cakes. And they would develop these cakes, and our job was to write a questionnaire about the product and go out and test it in the fields. We would go out to small communities in the Midwest with the cakes, knock on a lady’s door and ask her to bake the cake and fill out the questionnaire. And guess what? They would do it.

McGarrigle: People were that trusting.

Gibbs: It’s so different now. I don’t think, if I came up to you at your house—and we would ask them to bake two cakes, one which was our product, and one which was a competing product, and they were not labeled. And then we would ask them to bake the cakes, taste the cakes with their families, and fill out the questionnaire. Which cake do you like better? And sometimes we would ask them, what should we call the cake? What should we call this product? Sometimes with one cake, which was a new product, we’d ask what was a good name. Then we’d suggest like five names. What’s a good name? Then we’d go back and tally it all and send it up to the big bosses.

But that’s what I did for a year and a half. And I’d travel mainly to towns like LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and Winona, Minnesota, little towns. And the people were so trusting. And you have to realize most of these people, almost all of them were white people. I would walk up to the door with my cakes and, you know, dressed appropriately, and I would explain to them who I was. I didn’t wear a pin or any kind of label, but I would say, “I’m from the Pillsbury Company, and here are some products and we’re asking ladies to test them.” And we would go around, usually there would be a team of us, and we would pick a neighborhood, and we would go in and we would leave like twenty-four cakes. Maybe each of us would go to twelve homes. Sometimes people would say no. Sometimes people wouldn’t be at home. But our job was to deliver twelve cakes in that neighborhood, or maybe twenty-four.

And I tell you, we had such a low refusal rate. I look back now and I say, that was a trusting time. It was middle America, which we laugh at, but those people were nice. They would invite you in. They would offer you coffee. I mean, for a lot of them—this is when most women were at home—for a lot of them, it broke the tedium of their day. It was exciting that somebody was coming from Minneapolis to ask you, the consumer, to bake their cake and tell them what we should call the cake. So they would be very—and sometimes
we would run into what they called at that time, they had in the Midwest the
custom of “coffee klatches,” I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of that. Well,
we just call it coffee here. But the neighbors, and most of the women did not
work, and they would go from various houses during the week, and at ten
o’clock—they had their kids in school—and from ten to noon they would
gather at one of their homes on the same block or in the same neighborhood,
and they’d all have coffee and coffee cake. So sometimes we’d run into them
having their coffees. “Come in! We have some coffee cake! Have a piece! Let
me look at these things.” And then they would tell their friends.

And I’m telling you, it was such an innocent time in America. It’s kind of sad
that we’ve lost that. I don’t know how they do that kind of research now,
except probably by phone and by mail.

McGarrigle: Focus groups.

Gibbs: But I think it would be focus groups that you would take weeks to set up. But
this was on the spot. We would go. We would not write them in advance. We
would just ring their bell, and we would say, “Would you do these cakes?”
Two now, in one day. And we would ask them to mail the questionnaire back,
or we would come back the next day. Sometimes we would spend overnight.

McGarrigle: So you were on some business trips, then.

Gibbs: Oh, yes. But mainly in the little circle of Wisconsin, Minnesota. I think maybe
we went to Iowa a couple of times. But those three states were mainly where
we—so it was really the Middle West that we were testing these products.

McGarrigle: And you’re seeing the middle of the country, then, for the first time.

Gibbs: The middle of the country. Myself. Because I lived in the big city. So little
towns that I mentioned, and they were very sweet, pretty little towns. They
always looked so clean and neat, and people were always friendly. Except for
the job interview, the first one with General Mills, otherwise we did not
experience a lot of that in Minnesota. We did not, in day-to-day contact with
people. There was more curiosity than anything else.

McGarrigle: And at this time, I think in your sister’s book she talks about how your father
was working for the Kennedy campaign.

Gibbs: In the sixties, yes.

McGarrigle: In the early sixties. So I’m just thinking about the national scene and how that
must have influenced you—

Gibbs: Yes, because the other thing I was going to tell you is that the two or three
things that were important about my life in Minnesota—we lived there six
years—is that number one, I had my first professional job. The first job was really like an intern, the one in Washington, I was more like an intern—I was an intern. This was my first professional job, and I learned a lot about business, and what I mainly learned is that I didn’t ever want to do it again. I learned that some people are suited for big corporations, others are not. I did not feel suited to a big corporation. There’s a lot of politics. People are not often judged on their merits, but they’re often judged on their personalities, and you know, how well do you get along with your boss. How many compromises are you willing to make?

The bottom line is always a profit motive. It’s always a profit motive. What can we do to make more money? What costs can we keep down to make more money? What kind of advertising can we put out to put our products in a favorable light, even if it’s not always 100 percent true? Who do we have to be nice to in other companies, other people in the community, to get our message out?

There’s a constant concern about image, company image. There’s a constant concern about company profits and keeping expenses low so you can make more profit. And of course, given that situation, and I’m sure it’s come out more and more in places now, with Enron and those situations, certain people will thrive in that situation and certain people will not.

And minorities at that time just weren’t even considered to be equal employees. I mean, I was lucky to get the job. I was the first black person in the Pillsbury headquarters to have a job at the junior executive level. In fact, I was the first black person in the building. I never saw another black person the whole time I was there who worked, except messengers would come and go. But they were external messengers. No black secretaries, no black elevator operators, no black janitors, no black, no Spanish, no nothing. Okay? I mean, it was unbelievable, when you realize this was the early sixties. Unbelievable. But they were not very different, although there were two or three companies that were hiring black engineers at the time. You know, Honeywell, and 3M, the people who make the Scotch tape, and two or three other big companies, because they needed good engineers, and they wanted the best, and they really did go out and find some very highly skilled black engineers, because they wanted people who could do what they needed to do. Whereas in the other kind of jobs, which don’t depend on such technical skill, there was still a lot of segregation in the market.

So I learned that I didn’t like the bureaucracy. I didn’t like the sort of constant checking on what time you come home for lunch, what time do you go out and what time do you come back. And it was as if they never trusted you—all the employees—because if you’re not punching a time clock, people should be able to trust that you’ll get your work done. But in that situation, even the professional employees, at least on my level, were constantly being checked and monitored. Your break was supposed to be fifteen minutes, and if you
took sixteen, your supervisor might say something to you, one minute. You
know, that kind of nonsense. So I realized that I could not thrive in that
situation. I don’t know what would have happened if I’d stayed at Pillsbury,
but I could not thrive in that situation. I got along with everybody, and when I
left they gave me [a beautiful luncheon and baby shower. All the people in the
marketing department came with gifts and were really warm and friendly at
my farewell luncheon.]

[begin tape 14A]

Gibbs: Otherwise, you know, I had made some friends and I had gotten along with
these people, and I think they were themselves surprised that, I think I helped
them to sort of rethink some—I’m sure I did—some of their stereotypes about
black people. So in the end, I had good relationships with everybody,
including Dudley. He came to my baby shower. So it was good in my
development that I had that experience, because it was the kind of thing where
I understood what kind of environment I did not want to work in for a long
time, so it was good in that way. As far as skills, it did help me in terms of
later—it’s funny, because everything adds up. The interviewing I had to do
and the market research I had to do certainly helped me when I did research at
Berkeley. I had to construct questionnaires for these cakes. Well, there’s not
much difference in constructing a questionnaire for cakes, and what best do
you like about cakes using a five-point scale, than constructing a questionnaire
for teenagers: how often do you use drugs? There isn’t that much difference.
It’s the skill of knowing how to construct questions. So that was a very good
thing that I learned, of questionnaire construction, which I have used in all my
research. And the other thing was, it helped me with my interviewing skills,
which I used both in research and in therapy. I used it in both ways.

So I feel like everything I’ve done, there’s been some positive outcome.
Everything I’ve done. You have to learn from experiences. You just can’t say
I didn’t like it, or it was a failure, or it didn’t work for me. I mean, I think
that’s a very narrow view of people’s lives. But what did you learn from it?
What did you get from it? What growth did you gain from it? And that’s what
I’m saying to you, that although I realized that business was not the career I
wanted to do, I also did gain in that way. It also helped me with people skills.
There were some people there I really did not like, and did not enjoy being
around, that I had to work with every day.

There was a guy, I’ll never forget him—I won’t say his last name, but his first
name was Frank. He was really obnoxious. He had kind of a Napoleonic
complex, and he was loud, he was rude, he was overbearing, he was
insensitive to women, all those things. I mean, the original boob, if you know
what I mean, the original boob. Nobody really liked Frank. I tried to get along
with him. But whenever I had to deal with him—he was an analyst, so they
were above us. They were the ones who did the planning after we came back
with the results. They would then launch the marketing plan, which we did not
do. That was the next step up. And every time he had to work with any of us, I used to go home with knots in my stomach. And yet I determined, I have to work with him, he is above me, he can impact on my evaluations.

So I worked with Frank, and in the end it really helped me the rest of my life to work with very difficult people who you really don’t like or don’t get along with, or are very abrasive, rude people. Because I have had colleagues like that at Berkeley, too. So it was very useful, helpful, painful at the time, but I learned some strategies of not taking his behavior personally, which is what you have to learn, because he was doing it to everybody, and just learning to distance him and not let him kind of keep me upset like he did at first. And once I learned that, I’ve been able to apply it to other people.

So I did learn, I did learn some things. I learned how to keep an expense account for the first time, a business expense account when I traveled, because we were on expense accounts. So I learned a lot of things at Pillsbury that were very useful later.

McGarrigle: And you said about your pregnancy, that you didn’t have morning sickness and that you were well all the way through.

Gibbs: Very well. It was a good time for me. I had to be on the bus at eight o’clock in the morning to get to work, because they like to work early in the morning in the Midwest. No, I was on a bus at 7:30, because we worked at eight. Our work day—it seemed so uncivilized, coming from the East, to get to work at eight o’clock in the morning. How can anybody work at eight? I’m not even awake at eight! But I did it. And I did it all through the pregnancy, all through that winter, and so I was very healthy. I never missed any work. I was very healthy right up to the end. And I didn’t gain a lot of weight, either, so it was a very healthy pregnancy. I had two very healthy, good pregnancies. I can’t complain about my pregnancies.

McGarrigle: Was there advice that your mother or other women in your family passed on to you about your pregnancy?

Gibbs: Well, not so much about the pregnancy, but about, you know, the child-rearing, of course, you always get lots of advice. But my mother also said to me, because I don’t think she was sick—maybe it’s genetic, who knows?—“You know, you don’t have to be sick. You have to get up and go to work every day.” She said that to me. She said, “If you feel a little nauseous, get up anyway and go to work, because it will just take your mind off it.” And that’s my mother’s philosophy. So I just grew up in a family with that philosophy, you know? If you get sick, take your mind off of it. But I didn’t get sick. So I had a healthy pregnancy, and I was glad to be at home, though, because then I had a few months to get ready for the baby, the first baby.
But the other thing I was going to tell you when you mentioned what was happening in the world, the other good thing about living in Minneapolis was that I got very involved in politics.

McGarrigle: I think Jim mentioned that to me when I met with him early on.

Gibbs: Wasn’t just my husband, it was my father, it was me.

McGarrigle: That’s right.

Gibbs: Very involved. So—

McGarrigle: And that was once the baby was born?

Gibbs: No, before the baby was born. We got launched right away. We arrived in Minneapolis, I believe it was in June, late June. And in early August they have an annual Democratic Farmer Labor party picnic. That’s the only place in the country where that’s really the party, the Democratic Farmer Labor party, is in Minneapolis. And we had a famous sociology professor named Arnold Rose, and I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of him, but if you took any sociology when you were an undergraduate, you probably read some of his work. He was at University of Minnesota, and he and his wife Caroline took a shine to us. They were neighbors. They took a shine. He was a new, young professor. He was a sociologist, and a very liberal, you know, very liberal in a liberal-Jewish-Eastern tradition of scholars. And he had done work on race relations. He had a book on race relations and discrimination. So they were very interested in us. They invited us to this picnic.

That was the beginning of my political education as an adult. At the picnic—now, this is the summer of 1959—we met Hubert Humphrey. We met Fritz [Walter] Mondale. We met Governor [Orville] Freeman, who was then the governor. We met a neighbor of ours, who later became—Art Naftalin—the mayor of Minneapolis. We met another neighbor of ours, who became also a congressman, Don Fraser and later the mayor of Minneapolis. They were all there at the picnic, just like—it’s very unlike California, where you have to pay thousands of dollars to meet a politician. First of all, it was a picnic. You didn’t have to pay. You bought your food, but everything was free. I mean, entrance was free, I should say. They’re all going around and shaking hands, and just like—well, this isn’t Senator Humphrey, this is Hubert. And I’m thinking, ’Wait a minute. This is Hubert Humphrey, okay.’ So we met them—and of course there were thousands of people—but I got very interested. I said, gee, these people are so accessible.

So it turns out that two doors down the street from us was a guy named Don Fraser, who later became a congressman and after that became mayor of Minneapolis. And they lived two doors down the street. We were in an apartment, but they had this big house, lots of children. So when she met me,
his wife Arvonne said, “Oh, you’re just married? You have kids?” I said, “No.” “Maybe you can babysit sometime.” I said, “Oh, I’d love it!” That’s how I got involved in politics. I started babysitting for Arvonne and Don Fraser, sometimes, not a lot, but they had five very active children. And she would sometimes be having meetings at her house.

She then invited me to join a group called the Democratic Women’s Forum in Minneapolis, which it turned out was a very good decision. It was a group of very high-powered women whose husbands were in politics or academic people who were very interested in politics, and I got to know some of the most interesting women I have ever met in my life, ever, really ever. Joan Mondale was a member of this club. Muriel Humphrey, Senator Humphrey’s wife, was a member of this club. And I could go on and on. They met once a month and I was a member. And I was the only black member—at first, I brought in some more later. I did bring in a couple of others, my friends. But again, speaking of the way that life goes—they didn’t know many black people, you see. But I lived in their neighborhood, they knew me, I got close to the Frasers because I was babysitting sometimes—at night, because I worked during the day—and I was just taken in. And they had, I will have to say, just about every prominent Democratic woman in Minneapolis, and a few from St. Paul, belonged to that club. I will have to say that.

We’re meeting every month, and then people would start inviting me for dinner or coffee or something, and I got to be quite friendly with several of them. And of course, that also means that when they have the campaigns, you’re invited to participate, to volunteer, to give money, [laughs] which, at our level, we didn’t have a lot of money to give. But I did a lot of volunteering. So anyway, in five years, I was quite—I actually got very involved, and was ready, that year we left, just before Jim got this offer here, they asked me would I run for the Board of Education. And my whole life might have been different if we had stayed in Minneapolis, because that was before, remember, before I went back to school. My whole life probably would have been different. I think I probably would have gone into politics. I had said yes, I would consider running for the Board of Education. And my whole life might have been different if we had stayed in Minneapolis, because that was before, remember, before I went back to school. My whole life probably would have been different. I think I probably would have gone into politics. I had said yes, I would consider running for the Board of Education. They had never had a black person or any minority on the Board of Education. And so would I run? I mean, all these people who were asking me to run would have supported me, and I think I would have probably been able to get elected, probably. I don’t want to be immodest, but because of those connections—I mean, because I had worked in the party then for five years. And then Jim came home and said, “Well, I’ve been invited to give a talk at Stanford, I think I’m going out,” and that was the end of my political career.

But in the meantime, I had a number of really interesting experiences. I mean, I worked on all the campaigns of the people I mentioned. The most active campaign I worked on was for Senator [Eugene] McCarthy, whom I hadn’t mentioned—they lived in St. Paul, actually. Senator McCarthy called me himself one day when he was—this was the election of ’68—and he called
me, and that was when he challenged—I don’t know if you remember this, when he challenged Johnson, because of the Vietnam War. He called me and he said, “Jewelle, I would like for you to help me with my campaign, organize some coffee parties.” And I thought he meant in Minneapolis. So I said, “Oh, you know, I’d be happy to.” So he said, “No, I mean around the whole state.” I said, “The whole state?” He said, “Yes. I want you to coordinate—,” you know, that’s what they do in the Midwest, I told you earlier. The women have coffee usually three times in a week, sometimes every day. That’s what they do. They were still at home and they had to get out. So he says, “I’d like you to coordinate my coffee parties for the whole state of Minnesota. Come to the office and we’ll give you lists and all.” So I did it. And unfortunately, of course, he didn’t get the nomination. But there’s a lot there which I will tell another time, but a lot of behind the scenes stuff that I found out about, [Lyndon B. ] Johnson and, of course, Senator McCarthy, too, that a lot of dirty politics that went on at that time, which, once you see the inside, you realize that it is a little bit unsavory, to say the least.

McGarrigle: This had to be ’64.

Gibbs: No, this was ’68.

McGarrigle: Weren’t you out here already?

Gibbs: No, it had to be ’64. That’s right. I said ’68. No, this was—no, I’m sorry, this was his Senate, I’m sorry, because I got the two things mixed up. This was his Senate bid in ’64. Then he ran in ’68. No, I was—that’s right. I’m glad you remembered that I was here. But what happened was, in ’68, we were here, and my father had gotten involved, not with his campaign but with Johnson’s campaign, and I got a call from my friends about what was going on, about all this back stuff, and my father told me a lot about what was going on.

But in ’64, I was there when he was running for Senate. That’s right. I was here in ’68. But I was not part of the campaign, because I was here, but I was involved through my father with the other side, and then my friends in Minneapolis were calling me, telling me, “You need to come back, we need your help.” And I said, “Sorry, I can’t come back.” You know, because that was when I actually had just started my master’s program.

Anyway, the gossip and the stuff that was going on I was privy to through my father, because he was a delegate to that national conference, and that’s what happened.

I need to go back to ’61, too, because—I need to go back to ’60. We were in Minneapolis, and I think Shirlee talks about this in her book. In 1960, let’s see, was it that spring? I think it was that spring. We had not been there long. I’m trying to remember. Yes, it had to be ’60, the spring. The West Virginia primary, with Kennedy and Humphrey. Okay, I was actually working for
Humphrey. By this time, we had, as I told you, we met him that summer before. I was working for Humphrey. And everybody in Minnesota wanted him to win, of course, because he had stood up for civil rights, Senator Humphrey. And here comes Kennedy, that, you know, nobody knows anything about, except he’s glamorous, he’s handsome, he has a pretty wife, and he’s from a millionaire family. I was not concerned about his Catholicism, but what I was concerned about is, was he going to buy the election?

Now, in the meantime, my father, being from Connecticut, had to be for Kennedy, because it was a neighboring New England state. So he’s for Kennedy. He came out to visit me—well, let me back up. Part of this is in Shirlee’s book. I don’t know how much is in her book. I’m trying to get these dates straight in my mind, because it’s so long ago now. Okay, Bailey, a man named Bailey, John Bailey, was the national chairman—he was the Connecticut state chair of the Democratic party, where my father lived. He was also the national chairman of the Democratic party, so he was both, Connecticut and national. Bailey was an Irish Catholic. And I say this only descriptively, okay. But he really did support Kennedy, they both had that background, and felt it was time to challenge this idea that Catholics can’t be president. He came to my father, and he said to my father, “Reverend Taylor, would you support a Catholic president?” Because here he is a Baptist minister. And my father was vice chair of the Democratic party in Connecticut, one of several, there were several. He said, “Would you support [Senator Kennedy]?”

My father said, “Well, it would depend. If he’s a good candidate and if I thought that he would not be beholden to the Pope, I would probably support him.”

I don’t want to go into too much detail, but just to show you how the political stuff, how I got really involved in it. So he had this meeting with Bailey, and he says, “Well, you know, I’ll talk to some of the members of my group,” there was a group of black ministers who had an association in Connecticut, Protestant black ministers, and he was the president of it. So he said, “I’ll talk to them and see how they feel about this.” Because they were trying to test Protestants and black people. Black people were always Democratic. But would they go for a Catholic president? Because most blacks are not Catholic.

Anyway, that was my father’s task, to do this. So he did, and he began to realize that a lot of people were loyal to Kennedy because he was from New England. They knew his family was a well-known family, and not so much that he was Catholic, but that he was from New England, and he was considered a moderate senator. He wasn’t even well known then in the Senate.

Okay, now, fast forward. My father comes to visit me—it was really like winter, so it was way before the West Virginia primaries. It was still cold, so it was somewhere in February, maybe March, in Minnesota. In fact, he tells me
to meet him in Chicago. He doesn’t come all the way to Minnesota, because he’s going to be preaching at a big church in Chicago. He says, “Can you meet me for the weekend? Because I’m so close.” I said, “Daddy, you’re not as close as you think you are, but I’ll come and meet you.” You know, everybody thinks it’s all one—after you leave New York, it’s all sort of squished together, you know. [laughter] So he said, “Oh, I’m so close.” I said, “No, you’re not that close to Minneapolis, but I’ll come.”

So I went in, and he was staying with a minister, another Baptist minister who had a big church there, and he said to my father, “I know a great place to get wholesale clothes,” and this was a Friday. I got there on a Thursday night. I took off the weekend, so on Friday. He said, “At the merchandise mart in Chicago, I’ll take you down and you can look”—my father was a small man and he had a lot of trouble getting suits off the rack. He was about 5’8” and very slim, so he had to have his clothes made, his suits. So he said, “We’ll go down and get you some nice suits, made to order. They may even have your size. It’s a big wholesale place.”

So my father said, “Would you like to come?” And since I was there to see him, I said “Fine.” We get down there, and this guy, who liked to be a big shot, this other minister, said, “Oh, well, I have to introduce you to Sargent Shriver, who’s the president of the merchandise mart.” And of course you know who Sargent Shriver is. So we go into Sargent’s huge office, huge office, and here’s this—well, you know, he’s not that imposing, Sargent Shriver. So then my father says something to him about Kennedy. Sargent says, “You know, my brother-in-law’s from New England, and he’s thinking about going to run for president.” So then my father, in just conversation, says to him—and I was there, so I heard the conversation—he says, “Yes, well, the chair, John Bailey, has already talked to me about it, and I’ve decided I’m going to support him.” And he said, “Oh really?”

Then he gives my father a card to go to a particular tailor in the building, and he said, “I’ll catch up to you later, but this is the tailor who I think will be the best one for you to see.” My father goes down there. So the tailor’s fitting my father for a suit. And so this is, you know, like an hour later or something. They get a call in this tailor’s little—they each have these shops—that said that Sargent Shriver wants to see Reverend Taylor again before he leaves the building. So we go back up, and Sargent Shriver says—now, one hour has gone past. I want to tell you how these people operate. Sargent Shriver says to my father, “Well, I just talked to John Bailey on the phone.” He’s checked my father out to see if he was telling the truth. And he says, “We would like you to go to West Virginia to help us with the West Virginia primary.”

My father is almost in shock. I mean, in one hour this man has done all this research and all, and is offering my father—my father says, “What do you exactly want me to do?” And Sargent Shriver said, “We want you to go and contact the black ministers, and we want you to try to help them to understand
that his religion is not an issue, and they should vote for him because of his record.” So my father said, “Well, you know, Hubert Humphrey has a record, too,” because my father had really been for Hubert Humphrey until now. So he said, “Yes, but we have some enticements for these ministers. We will help them in ways—if they need help for their churches,” and all.

My father says, “Well, I don’t think I exactly understand what you mean. I’ll talk to them, but whatever else you do, you’ll have to have other people do it.” Because he was really talking about probably giving them money or something. My father said, “I’ll talk to them.” But he didn’t want to be exchanging money for favors or anything. So Shriver said, “Okay, so we’re going to have a big team down there. All we want you to do is talk to the black ministers and try to get them to vote for my brother-in-law. That’s all we want you to do. And we’ll set up a schedule for you.”

My father is thinking once that he’s going to go down there. They sent him down to West Virginia three times in a matter of about a month or a month and a half. Paid all of his expenses. Stayed at the famous big hotels down there, which had never been integrated. They put him up in these hotels, and he talked to the black ministers in the big cities, you know, only three or four big cities in West Virginia. And told them why he thought they should support Kennedy. And Kennedy won that primary.

McGarrigle: He becomes a key person, your father does, in that.

Gibbs: My father was a key person in that. You might not read it in any biography, but I can tell you he was a key person, because if not for the black vote, they would not have won the primary. And after that, he did get an appointment, the State of Connecticut appointed him as a hearing examiner. That was his political payoff. It’s like a kind of justice of the peace, hearing examiner. He was invited to the White House on several occasions as an advisor, basically on black issues. But it was just interesting to see the way they operated.

In the meantime, I’m still operating for Humphrey. I was still trying to support Humphrey. And when Humphrey didn’t win the primary, I was very disappointed, truthfully. My father was very happy. But then I switched to Kennedy. But you can’t imagine how much I learned about politics through these experiences, and also I came to the conclusion that the people in Minnesota were a much more honest, probably, group of people. I mean, I don’t think they were trying to buy votes in West Virginia. I think Kennedy probably did, although my father said he refused to. He said, “I didn’t promise them anything, but I think there were other people who did.”

McGarrigle: Is that something that’s been written about that you’ve seen elsewhere?

Gibbs: Oh, people have written for years about the West Virginia primary, but I don’t know whether my father is in any of that writing. But they’ve written, and
there is strong evidence that some of those black ministers got some kind of, I don’t know, favors. I’m not sure exactly what kind, but there’s strong evidence that they were given some kind of favors by the Kennedy operatives. There were many, many people who went down there to work for him.

Now, my father does appear in one film, the film of the night that Kennedy won the nomination at the Democratic Convention. My father appears in that film when the number of votes—when they, what do you call it, go over the top? He was a delegate from Connecticut, my father. And when they went over the top, they showed all the delegates cheering, and they focused on my father, he was so happy. And of course, I have the video. He was not a man to express a lot of emotion, but he actually jumped up and down and put his hands in the air, and his mouth is open and his eyes are just, you know, just sparkling, and they sort of did a freeze frame on him, and so every once in a while I look at it, because he was so happy.

So he did enjoy that convention. And then he went to the 1968 convention, too, which is when I was aware of all this stuff that was going on between—that was when McCarthy tried to unseat Johnson.

[begin tape 14B]

McGarrigle: Do you think at that point that the Kennedys had an explicit commitment to civil rights?

Gibbs: No. Not really.

McGarrigle: It seems that it came later.

Gibbs: I have since become a little bit jaded about the Kennedys. I used to be an admirer of the Kennedys. The more I read about them, the more I realize that they did things for expediency. They were very pragmatic, very expedient people. That whole business about wooing Martin Luther King was a very smart thing to do, a very expedient thing to do. They figured it out. So I’ll give them credit for that. But the truth is that with all the hype about Kennedy and his liberalism, the truth is that Johnson did more. If you actually look at the record, it was under Johnson that you had the two big civil rights bills, in 1964 and 1965, after Kennedy was dead.

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: He did more. And also the anti-poverty program. So the Kennedys got a lot of hype. They were very glamorous. I think he opened some doors, and I think he maybe set the stage for Johnson, and I think that he did, when it came down to the civil rights issues, he did the right thing partly because I think his brother was interested in doing the right thing, as attorney general. But I don’t think either one of them were bleeding heart liberals, if that’s what you—no.
No, I don’t think so. I think of the three, the youngest one is probably the most liberal. Probably.

McGarrigle: It seems like, in things have been written recently about Robert Kennedy, that towards the end of his life—he was only forty-two when he was killed, which is unbelievable—but that toward the end of his life, people who observed him found a change.

Gibbs: Yes. I think he got really interested in poverty and really was moved by the poverty he saw in places like West Virginia. And I think that toward the end of his life, it was more of a real commitment than a political kind of decision. But I think Teddy, the youngest, is truly probably the most liberal. I think so. It’s hard to say, because all of that family have done a lot things that are expedient, to say the least. But, you know, I think he laid a kind of, you know, or maybe I should say prepared the ground for Johnson. But it is Johnson, in spite of his Southernness and all, who should get the credit for the two big bills. They never would have been passed if he had not really been persuasive. That’s what I think. But if you really want to know who the liberals in politics are, it is those people like Humphrey, McCarthy, people like that, who—Humphrey simply was magnificent on civil rights. And I don’t believe he had a prejudiced bone in his body. Personally, I don’t think so. So he’s still my hero, Humphrey, not Kennedy.

McGarrigle: Did you continue to work on issues that he was involved with, then, after he didn’t make the primary?

Gibbs: Oh, yes, because he still was—well, then of course he was vice president. But I continued, as long as we were in Minnesota—and then of course, we left Minnesota in ‘65 anyway, so it wasn’t very long. He became vice president in 1964, and we left Minnesota in 1965, to go to Africa for a second time. And then we stayed a year and then we came here. So only a year after he was vice president. But I was very active in the party, and then I was there when—the last campaign I worked on was Fritz Mondale’s, I think it must have been his first Senate campaign, because when Humphrey became vice president, Mondale took his seat, took Humphrey’s seat, or ran for Humphrey’s. And that is the last campaign I ran—I mean, I helped to—I didn’t run it, but I was very active in that campaign for Fritz Mondale. They were neighbors of ours, and our children went to nursery school together. My oldest son and his oldest son went to nursery school together, and so we knew them pretty well. They lived a few blocks away from us in Minneapolis.

I liked Fritz and his wife. They were nice people, very nice people. So I was glad to. Again, there, the politics in Minnesota when we were there were really clean. I won’t say never, but you rarely heard of corruption in politics, because it was very much influenced by the Scandinavian system, the Swedes and the Norwegians, and they really were kind of clean in terms in their politics, sort of square-shooting people. They were open, and it was as if what
you saw was what you got. And what they said, you knew that they meant it. It’s very different from the kind of politics we’ve seen in California or other places. We always felt really that we could trust these people. I haven’t felt that way since I left Minnesota. I always felt I could trust Humphrey, I could trust any of them—the governors, the mayors. I could just trust them. If they said something that they were going to do it, they were going to try to do it. And I haven’t felt that way since then. So it was very good, because it was very idealistic. It was a good time to be involved in politics. And of course, if you’re involved in politics, you learn a lot of other skills, too.

McGarrigle: Yes. Let’s pick up there when we meet next time, and you can expand on that idea.

[end of session]
Interview 9: July 31, 2003

Gibbs: [That’s when I decided to return to graduate school to get a]—PhD in psychology. [tape interruption] After my children—when the baby was two, my second son, he was two, I was kind of feeling like I needed even more stimulation. And I knew that eventually I was going to get a graduate degree. So I actually had thought about doing a PhD. So leading up to that, I was always trying to find ways to kind of keep active intellectually, you know, as well as the political stuff. So I don’t know how I ever, how I got to teach this course in black history, but I was talking to somebody at the university, and they said that because of my background, would I be interested? And I think it was a summer course, it was not a regular academic year course. It was more like an institute. I said, well, yes, I thought I would be interested. And that’s when the babies were still very young.

So one summer I did teach at the University of Minnesota, I guess they called it an institute, I can’t remember. And I was only one of the lecturers on black history. Then another summer the University had an institute on delinquency. And because I had done a good job teaching the black history, and people knew I was involved in the community and in youth activities, and very interested in delinquency prevention, and I was on various committees in Minneapolis, they said, “Do you think you could teach this course?” And you know, I sort of rise to a challenge. Of course, I had never taught a course on delinquency or any other thing like that. But I said, “If you give me enough time, I think I can pull it together.” So, what do you do? You go to the library, you figure out what you want to tell people, and what are the important issues in the field, and you read and you teach. I’ve always sort of risen to a challenge, okay? I mean, I didn’t have any degrees then, graduate degrees. But I had always been interested in delinquency and trying to help kids who were troubled. That was what I would do as a volunteer person in the community.

So I got involved with a project at the Minneapolis Urban League, and that’s how this teaching delinquency came about. It was a project to work with a bunch of girls in junior high school who were at real risk of pregnancy and delinquency and maybe drug use. I got a group of women together. I organized a group of my friends, all of whom were housewives. Some of them were academics, some of them were not, but none of them worked in those days. We got together. We all had young children, and we decided that we were going to mentor these girls, and we each picked one girl. There were about twelve of us in this club, we called ourselves. Sort of like an auxiliary to the Urban League of Minneapolis. You know what the Urban League is, the national Urban League?

And my husband was on the board of the Minneapolis Urban League. So we were very involved with that. So I got my friends, and we went to this
principal of this school in north Minneapolis and told him what we wanted to
do. He welcomed us. He said, “Oh, that’s great.” We said we thought that
mentoring these girls, and for these girls to have role models of successful
women—because all of us were college graduates—would be a good thing,
and he agreed. So we ran this program—I actually sort of ran it, I mean,
unpaid, it was an unpaid volunteer program—for a couple of years until we
moved. We unfortunately moved, because we were right in the middle of it.
We had promised them three years that we would work with the girls
through—I think it was sixth to ninth grade, and we would work with them for
three years and try to get them on the right track academically and all. I
worked with them two, and that next year we went to Liberia, so I had to give
it up.

But the club went on, though, the group went on. We each had a girl, and we
committed to meeting with them at least twice a month or more often, and that
included going to group activities—concerts and plays and museums with
them, and then sometimes individual things in between. Just for an example,
in the summer we’d just have picnics, and take them to lakes where they had
never been. And there was a Guthrie Theatre that had just started, a famous
Midwest regional theater. We would take them to productions, and then they
had a very famous modern art museum called the Walker Art Center. We
would take them to places so they could see art. They had never been to these
places, just never been to these places. And then we would do sort of run of
the mill things, too, that weren’t always fancy projects, but we would just take
them out to a nice place for lunch, you know. And, you know, talk to them,
telling them if they had any problems or concerns, to talk to us. Mostly their
mothers worked. Some of their mothers were on welfare. Some of the mothers
had had a lot of problems, big families and so forth.

So anyway, I guess the word spread somehow that we were doing a good job,
and that’s how I got to teach this course. Somebody came up, called me, and
said, “I hear you’re interested in delinquency prevention. Will you teach this
course?” So again, I did teach the course. Basically I was just trying to keep
my hand in. I didn’t want my mind to atrophy while I was raising these
children. Finally, the year just before we left, I actually entered the PhD
program at the University of Minnesota. Again, speaking of politics, of
course, we knew the chair of the department through my husband, and it was a
little bit unusual. I was admitted under the regular criteria, but he allowed me
to take just two courses in the fall instead of a full load, because I was a
faculty wife. I had young children.

I barely—I think I did finish the first semester, but I had terrific babysitting
problems. This is not a funny story. It seems funny now. It did not seem funny
at the time, but as I tell it, it seems to be amusing. One day I came home. I had
a hard time getting a babysitter. Finally, the woman who came in generally
once a week when I went out, maybe twice a week she would come. But I
now needed somebody three times a week, and she couldn’t do it, because I
needed to be gone three afternoons for my classes. One full day, actually. She said that she had an aunt who would be happy to do it for me, and would also do a little cleaning and so forth, and fix the children’s lunch. And I said fine.

Now, the aunt was an American Indian, and I had not had a lot of experience with American Indians. But I noticed right away that she didn’t seem very literate. She seemed very nice. She could not take down a phone message. I mean, she got all the numbers garbled. She got the messages garbled. She couldn’t spell the names. So I said, “Jim, maybe she’s dyslexic.” The numbers were almost always backwards. They’d be reversed. I couldn’t ever understand the names. So I’d come home and look right away and ask her, “Well, who was this?” and she’d tell me, but she couldn’t write the names. So I realized after a while that she really probably could barely read and write. And I said, ‘Well, as long as she’s nice to the kids, that’s okay. I mean, if I miss a couple of messages, they’ll call back. But as long as she’s nice.’ And the kids seemed to like her. But my older boy, now, he was—let’s see—because when we went to Liberia, they were two and four, so he was three, and the baby was one. He was very smart. This is a little bit convoluted, but just to tell you how hard it is when women want to go back to school with young children.

So my husband’s aunt had given as a baby gift to the first child a little portable potty. Have you ever seen those? For little boys, little girls can’t use them. But they are about that tall, and they look like a little jar. It was a nice little portable potty, just for a little boy to put his little thing in, you know, his little penis. So we would take that out when we were going out for the day as they got older and out of diapers. So if we had long car trips, we had our little portable potty with us. And when I wasn’t going out, I would keep it in the little bathroom downstairs next to the kitchen. We had a little bathroom that connected to the kitchen and a little den where the baby had his playpen. He was now a little older than one, he was fifteen months.

So one day I came home and Geoffrey said—this was just before Christmas, I remember, because I did finish the first semester. He said, “Mommy, Norma gave Lowell his milk in the wrong bottle.” [laughter] I said, “She did? What bottle?” He said, “She gave Lowell the milk in the bottle that we pee-pee in.” I said, “No, Geoffrey.” I couldn’t believe it. I said, “Show me.” So sure enough, he went in, and you could see the residue of some milk at the bottom of the bottle. She had just confused—because I had told her what that was for, and I said, “It’s here, but we don’t use it at home. Just leave it alone if you have to clean the bathroom. We don’t use that at home.” But it was sitting on top of the toilet.

I said to Jim, “You know, I just can’t bear this. I cannot leave the house not knowing that the children—what is happening with them. I just can’t do it.” So I dropped out at the end of the semester. I ended up finishing the two courses. So that was my adventure in trying to go back to school, and I
decided I would not go back to graduate school until they were in school pretty much all day, and then I would not have to worry about that, and they could talk for themselves, and if anything happened with the babysitter, that I would know if the babysitter was trying to abuse them or give them the wrong food or something. But that was—I mean, and now it seems funny, but it was not funny then. It was very upsetting.

McGarrigle: No, it just points to the conflicts, too.

Gibbs: Yes. I recognized early that I didn’t want to sacrifice my kids for my own needs. So I said, you know, two or three more years, they’re going to be in school. So I didn’t go back until we moved out here, and when we moved out here I waited a year for Lowell to be—let’s see, when we left here, he was two, came back he was three—when he was four and he was in nursery school, actually, he went to nursery school three days a week, and that’s when I went back to Berkeley. [laughs] Anyway, that’s my story of a babysitting nightmare.

McGarrigle: That’s still quite a schedule, if he’s only in nursery school three days a week and you’re going to Berkeley.

Gibbs: Oh, yes, but I only went to Berkeley two days a week for graduate school. I managed to get all my classes on two days, that was my plan. Two days a week, I got everything. Once in a while, I had to go a third day, and Jim was of course teaching, and he could usually spell me, so that was not a problem. But it wasn’t easy. But, you know, I did it. I had to commute. It wasn’t easy. But now, looking back, it didn’t seem all that hard, either. It was just something you did, you know. You want to get your graduate degree, you have to go to Berkeley. Because I started in social work.

So that was my brief teaching experience in Minnesota. But it was good, because what you realize is that when they hire an assistant professor, the people who are most qualified are the people who have already taught before, already published before. And they don’t tell you this. They say, you know, you’re getting your PhD. You’re just coming out. But what you don’t realize, when you get that PhD and you start out, you’re going to compete against people who maybe have taught courses on their own, not just been a TA. People who have managed to have several articles published because they worked with some professor who helped them get published. And so those are the people who have it all over the people who are just coming out like green behind the ears and don’t understand the process.

Luckily, I had that on my CV when I applied for my position at Berkeley. So even though they were only two summer courses—and then the third course was the social psychology, I think it was social psychology I taught at St. Mary’s College—that made, there were three courses or institutes that I had taught, which gave me a kind of leg up when I applied for teaching at
Berkeley. Because I wasn’t just fresh out of the PhD. I had actually taught at the University of Minnesota in the summer, and at St. Mary’s College. So it all kind of adds up.

McGarrigle: Did you find that you enjoyed teaching from the outset?

Gibbs: Well, I am going to tell you the truth. Basically, I am a ham, okay? [laughter] If you haven’t figured that out yet. I love to talk, and as my husband will tell you, I love to be on stage. But basically, I’m sort of a frustrated actress. If I had come along later in life and things had been different for black women, I probably would have been an entertainer. I mean, I just love to, you know—I love to lecture. I love to speak. I love to tell stories. I like to be kind of dramatic, you know—that’s just me. That’s my personality. So teaching gave me that possibility. Because a good teacher basically is also a good actor.

If you think about the best teachers you had, even in high school, they sort of make the subject come alive, don’t they? Like an English teacher will act out parts of Hamlet or other plays in Shakespeare. I mean, every teacher I ever had that inspired me had a way of sort of acting in class to get us excited about a book or a play or a science project. And they had nice personalities and they were outgoing, and you came alive when you came into their class. Those were the teachers that inspired me. So I wanted to be that kind of teacher. I wanted to be the kind of teacher who, when somebody comes into my class, they are excited to be there. They look forward to my lectures. They don’t rush out as soon as the class is over, but maybe they have a question and they want to come up and talk to me. That’s the kind of teacher that I wanted to be. And I think I pretty much succeeded in being that kind of teacher.

I have a lot of humor. I mean, I’m very humorous sometimes. I like to tell jokes, but the jokes are always appropriate to the content that I’m teaching. So I have students who will remember a joke I told about a concept in psychopathology. I think I told you one of them, about the red tie and the blue tie. Years later, they will come up and they will say, “Professor Gibbs, I still remember the joke about the red tie and the blue tie.” But it actually is about a very serious topic. Actually, it’s a question on the state exam for clinical social workers. I’ve had so many students tell me, “That joke, really, that example, helped me to pass my clinical exam, because I recognized”—it’s basically called a “double bind,” and the reason I used the tie joke, is the idea of the double bind, the double knot. And they said, “When I saw the double bind, I thought about you.” That was the joke I had told about the red tie and the blue tie. So they laughed about the joke, but it had a real pedagogical purpose. And I knew they would remember the joke. Because I’ve always remembered—the first time I heard it, I remembered it.

So it’s a way of teaching that, in a way you are also entertaining people when you are a good teacher. You’re entertaining them, but you’re giving them content, and you want to present your content in a way that they will enjoy. I
think teaching and learning should be enjoyable. I do not think it should be painful. I don’t think any subject should be painful, even math and science. You can make it interesting. And I think the first time I started teaching, I just said, I’m going to be myself, and whatever that is, that’s who I’m going to be. I’m not going to copy anyone else’s style of teaching. I’m going to be myself. And I’m also a teacher who—I like to know my students’ names. I like to know something about each student. Because I find that I relate better to people when I know a little bit about them. I want my students to feel that I’m really supportive, I’m really interested in them. And if they have problems, I want them to feel they can come talk to me, anytime. And I have had some come at any time, and call me at any time. [laughs] So you know, I think when I first started in Minnesota, and it was actually the course at St. Mary’s that was a full-term course—when I first started, you develop a style. That style has always been my style of teaching. I’ve always enjoyed—I like teaching.

McGarrigle: When you taught the black history class, what was the student body like at the time?

Gibbs: You know, that was so long ago, I cannot even remember the name of any of those students, I couldn’t remember it. It was not a big class, there were probably not more than twenty people in the class. And it was mixed. It wasn’t all black. Because in Minnesota you could never get—in those days you probably couldn’t get twenty black people in a class. There probably weren’t twenty students in the whole school. And I believe some of them were teachers themselves. It was one of those summer courses they took for credit. But I can’t remember much about the student body. It’s funny. It was one of my first times I taught, and I remember much more about the student body at St. Mary’s, and they were actually—most of them were going to be nurses. I remember a lot about them. So they were professional students. They had a goal to be nurses. They were in a nursing program at that time.

But I can’t remember much—now, the delinquency course I can remember, because some of those people were actually social workers and people who worked with students, so here I am teaching them. [laughs] Of course, I was like two or three pages ahead in the book, that kind of thing. But I was very interested in it. You know, I had my course outline, so to them, I was giving them content that many of them didn’t know or hadn’t read about, and yet to me, they were professionals in the field. Most of them were actually professionals in the field, and now here I am teaching them more theory, really, and background. They seemed to enjoy it.

McGarrigle: What kind of results did you have with the girls who you worked with for those two years, before you went to Liberia?

Gibbs: Oh, now, that’s an interesting question, and a very touching question, because you remember I told you I had to leave in two years. I had one girl that I was
very close to. She had been my special girl. We each had our special girl. And although we often went out in groups, we also had a special relationship with this one person, each of us. Well, I wrote her from Liberia when we were there, and I never heard from her. And then of course, by the time we moved out here, that was a year later. I never heard from her, and somehow I misplaced her address, because there had been two moves, one to Liberia and then one from Liberia not back to Minnesota, but from Liberia here, so we had to pack up a lot of stuff at two different stages. So I never heard from her again. I think if I had kept her address, I would have written. So I always wondered what happened to her. I knew that the girls had generally had a successful program, because of my friends who stayed with the third year, and that some of them had really kept in touch with their girls all the way through high school, so I knew that quite a few of them had done well, of the twelve. But I never knew what happened to mine.

Now fast forward about—ten or fifteen years ago, I think it’s about fifteen years ago now. And of course, that was a long time after the sixties. My children are all grown. I go to a national Urban League conference in Los Angeles. I was a speaker by now. By now, my life has changed. I’m a professor at Berkeley, and I’m no longer a volunteer with the Urban League. Still supporting the Urban League, but no longer a volunteer. And I’m there to speak. I wasn’t one of the main speakers, but I was one of the workshop speakers, and I was giving a workshop on the topic of young black males.

McGarrigle: I’m going to turn the tape over.

[begin tape 15B]

Gibbs: Because that was actually my first book. Anyway, it must have been since 1989 then. My first book came out in 1988. So it was shortly after that. That’s how I can date it, it was shortly after publication of my book *Young Black Males*. I would say it was around 1989, 1990. So it was about thirteen years ago. And I got in the elevator. This woman looked vaguely familiar to me, and I smiled at her. She smiled back, and she says, “Excuse me, but is your name Mrs. Gibbs?” And I said, “Yes.” She said, “You don’t remember me, but I’m Carlotta’s mother.” I said, “Oh, Carlotta’s mother from Minneapolis?” She said, “Yes. Oh, it’s so good to see you.” I said, “I’m so glad to see you, and I’ve often wondered whatever happened to Carlotta.” “Carlotta is a lawyer.” I said, “Well, what about the other girls?” She said, “Oh, all those girls did well. I can’t remember what all twelve of them did, but you ladies did such a good job. Of the girls that I can remember, we have two lawyers, we have one doctor, we have a couple of social workers, and we have a couple of teachers. They all went to college. They all went to graduate school. And we owe it to you and your group.”

Well, you know, I started to cry. [pause] It was so moving to me, you know, I just started to cry in the elevator. [voice emotional] So I told her, “I’m sorry,
but all these years I have wondered what happened to those girls. And I really was very fond of Carlotta. You know, she wasn’t a writer.” She said, “She still isn’t.” I said, “Well, you tell her,” and I gave her my address, “that I’m so happy to hear she’s a lawyer.” Because she liked to talk. And I had always told her that I wanted to be a lawyer, which is interesting. She liked to talk, and so I said, “You tell Carlotta that I’m so happy she’s a lawyer, and I’m sure she’s still talking.” And she said, “Yes.” And then I told her what I had been doing. She said, “Yes, I saw your name on the program, and I said I bet that’s the same Mrs. Gibbs that we used to know.”

So again, it was an experience that really shapes a lot of my career interest in girls. See, I had originally been interested in delinquent boys, but then I got interested in girls. So it just really—I mean, that experience proved to me one major thing, that if you give a kid from the—now, these girls are from what you would call a ghetto, an inner-city ghetto. Not as bad as some, though, because Minneapolis didn’t have really bad ghettoes, but it was a predominantly black, working-class neighborhood. If you give people the right opportunities, the right role models, and enough encouragement, you can turn their lives around. And that is what we did for these girls. Some of these girls were doing okay, and some were kind of headed for trouble. But what we did was to step in, and they were about twelve or thirteen when we started with them, at a very crucial time, you know, that transition from early adolescence to mid-adolescence. We stepped in and we said, “You know, we think you can do great things, and we want to help you do great things, and we have a lot of faith in you, and we want to show you the bigger world. There’s a bigger world outside that you need to know about.” We believed that if they knew about that bigger world, and if we encouraged them and believed in them and had faith in them, that they would do better. And they did.

And when she told me, you know, how well—at least she told me about eight of the girls, she didn’t know what happened to the other four—I’m telling you, it was something. It was really—it just had such a big—not only did it make my day, but it made my year, my month, my week, I mean, I came home and I was telling my husband, I said, “You know, Jim, I can’t tell you how thrilled I was,” and he thought too, he said, “Well, that really is good news.” And I said, “I ought to write it up.” I never did write it up, though, because I didn’t have the exact details. So I gave the mother my address, and she never did get in touch with me, Carlotta, but her mother said, “You know she’s not a good writer, but I will give her your address.” Some day I’m sure she’s going to show up in my doorway or call me. One day she’ll call me. I keep waiting.

So that was another experience that shaped my research interest in delinquency and in young girls who get in trouble and what we can do about them. My feeling is that everything in your life has a purpose and a goal, and at some point it all begins to kind of converge. It all begins to come together. And this is what has happened in my life. You know, as I talk to you, I’m
thinking more about it, too, which is helpful. Each isolated experience, whether it was educational or employment, or in this case volunteer, politics, they were volunteer activities—each activity, though, put me on a course or shaped my interest in such a way that by the time I get to my final sort of professional job, they sort of all blend together and shape my research interests, shape my teaching interests, shape my public policy interests. And in some ways they all contributed to making me a more interesting person. There’s no question that all those things I did have made me, have enriched me, and made me—I think it made me a more interesting person.

McGarrigle: At what point, or is there a point, at which you decided not to pursue law school? Since it’s come up several times.

Gibbs: [laughs] I don’t know. That has come up several times. That’s another story. That’s another, like a family secret. Well, let’s see. I’ll tell you the truth. I ought to call my husband in here and tell him to tell you. We came here in 1966, and I was trying to decide between law and—well, social work or psychology at the time. Now, remember I had worked in business in the Pillsbury company, and I had worked briefly in government as a trainee, and I decided I didn’t want either one of those. I didn’t want state government, which is always a possibility. It was pretty easy to get a job in those days in state government. I didn’t want state government and I didn’t want business, because I really felt business did not at that time have a lot of real opportunities for black women, or women. That was long before the days of Carly Fiorina. What do we have, maybe half a dozen CEOs of big companies now and that’s all, after all these years. So I didn’t feel that business was a place I wanted to go, professionally. Because I could have gotten my MBA, you know, I had never finished that. I had that year at Harvard. I could have gotten that.

So then we decided—I mean, I decided, and then we’ll get to “we”—that I wanted to look into law schools and I wanted to look into schools of social work and psychology programs. So I looked into law schools, because there was a part of me that also always was interested in this sort of racial justice and equal justice for poor people and all those things, and political issues, which would have been the law school route for me. So I got information from Santa Clara and several other schools—Santa Clara, Stanford, Hastings, USF [University of San Francisco], and Berkeley, which were all the closest law schools.

Then I got information about the School of Social Work at Berkeley and the Department of Psychology at Berkeley. Stanford, of course, has never had a school of social work, and their psychology department didn’t interest me at all because it was more experimental. It really wasn’t the kind of psychology—you know, as I always say, they’re interested in rats. I’m interested in people. So it wasn’t the kind of psychology that I was interested
in. I don’t want to look at rats running through a maze, or memory, and all
that stuff. I mean, it’s interesting, but it’s not what I wanted. It’s not clinical.

So I had all these catalogues. And I sort of narrowed it down. I thought, the
PhD program while the children were young sounded awfully hard, and it
sounded like it was going to be about six years. So I sort of narrowed it down.
I said, if I go to the School of Social Work, it’s two years, and I might be able
to do it part-time in three, which is what I did, actually. Because they have the
academic classes and they also have the fieldwork, and I figured if I could talk
them into letting me split up the fieldwork and the academic classes the first
year, it would be easier, because Lowell, my little one, was still—he was four
when I started. So I wanted to give him another year so he would be in
kindergarten. I thought, ‘If I can just give him another year so he can be in
kindergarten, that would be great.’

Then the other thing was the law school, which I probably could have done
part-time too, especially if I had gone to Santa Clara. They’re fairly flexible. I
probably could have done that. So when I presented these choices to my
husband, my husband said, in no uncertain terms, that he did not want me to
go to law school. I couldn’t believe it. I said, “Why not?” He said—I should
call him down here and let him tell you himself. He’d probably be
embarrassed. He says, “Because I think that it would harm our marriage.” I
said, “Why would it harm our marriage?” He said, “Because I think it would
make you even more aggressive and more litigious. And I don’t want to be the
husband of someone who learns how to argue even better.” [laughter] That’s
what he said. That’s true. I thought at first he was kidding, but he clearly
wasn’t.

So, well, what choice did I have? Here I have these two young children. I said,
“Well, you know, I could leave him and become a lawyer, but then I have to
break up my marriage.” So after he told me, I let him wait. A few days later, I
brought it up again. He said no, absolutely not, he did not want me to go to
law school. I said, “Well, you know, I thought you were more enlightened
than that.” He said, “I don’t care. I don’t want you to go to law school. I know
what will happen.” And he was sort of projecting into the future, that I would
probably get involved in politics and run for office, and he was probably right.
He was probably right. But he saw law school as a launching pad for me for a
political career, and he did not want a wife who was going to be involved in a
political career, not to mention, as he said, learning how to argue even better.
So I didn’t go. And to this day, of course, I still have this secret wish that I
had gone to law school. I suppose everybody has a secret wish that they had
done.

McGarrigle: Was that hard to let go of?

Gibbs: Well, I think what happened is, I transferred it to my son. I think I didn’t ever
let go of it. I think I used to talk about it and always showed an interest in
politics and law. And then all of a sudden, Geoffrey grew up. What did he want to be when he grew up? A lawyer. So I think in some ways, he got the message that law is exciting and interesting, and he ought to be a lawyer. I think that there’s a way that parents tell children things that really give the children the idea that this is something that my parents would like me to do, or this is something exciting to do. It’s like men who want their children, boys, to be athletes, because they were never great athletes. I think it’s just a process of, you give these kids messages both verbally and non-verbally. But I think I transferred it. I’m pretty sure I probably talked enough about law and how exciting it was and how I wished I had been a courtroom prosecutor, and I think by the time he was in high school, he was hooked, that law is where he was going to go. So he is a lawyer, the oldest boy is a lawyer.

But then I decided after I went to get the degree in social work, and we’re going maybe a little bit ahead, but I mean, that was a difficult period for me, three years. I did it in three years. But it was very difficult, because I had to commute. During that period, my husband learned to cook and became quite a good cook. He helped me with the cooking. But I gave up almost everything else. I gave up almost everything outside of my household and family, except for school, because that was the only way I could get through it. And then in the summers, I would have summers. I mean, I don’t regret it now, because the other thing is that I went back to school at the same time my husband became a dean at Stanford, so that made it more difficult for me, because there were many weekends when I had to do things with him that involved being a dean’s wife, so there was no time for anything else.

So with the kids and my commuting and my academic work, and his job, I was really sort of—you know, I just had to focus like a horse with blinders. You just focus straight ahead. Here’s your goal, here’s what you have to do to meet your goal, and you have three years to do it, and you can’t let up except in the summers and Christmas vacation, and that’s when you can let up, and other than that—. And we had spring vacation. But other than that, I would just sort of be tired all the time, and always trying to figure out how I could fit all these things in with the children and the husband and the school work. So it was not an easy time.

McGarrigle: Yes. [pause] I’m trying to think. We have so many directions we could go from here.

Gibbs: Well, have another cookie while we’re talking about these directions. [laughter]

McGarrigle: I was thinking about Bill Gould, partly because he’s a lawyer and partly because he came out with a new book. I know he’s been here since you’ve been here.

Gibbs: I know him. He’s a good friend.
Mc Garrigle: You know his new book? I saw it at Thelton Henderson’s—

Gibbs: The one about his grandfather?

Mc Garrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Yes. I haven’t read it, but I’ve heard him talk about it.

Mc Garrigle: Yes. I saw a copy.

Gibbs: In fact, he called me about it, because we have the business in common of being from mixed families. We have that in common. So he called and talked about it. But what made you think of him?

Mc Garrigle: Oh, I was thinking when you came here, too, I think he came shortly after you.

Gibbs: We came here before he came here. Several years, yes.

Mc Garrigle: Okay. And I was just thinking on my drive up through your neighborhood that this is such a California scene, and I just wondered what that was like for you to come here. You know, the whole—

Gibbs: Different.

Mc Garrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Yes, it’s very, very different. You know, at first we thought it was paradise. We used to live near you, when we first came. We lived off of Charleston, on Duncan Place. I don’t know if you know where that is. But you know where Charleston is. Between Alma and Middlefield, that part of Charleston. We lived on a street just a few blocks from Middlefield off Charleston, it was a cul-de-sac called Duncan Place. We lived there for a year and had an Eichler, we lived in an Eichler, and it was so different from anything we had ever lived in, and it was very different from the East where everything is two story or more, or people live in apartments. So in Minneapolis we had had this big two-story house, rather big, by California standards, anyway. With a big yard and no fence or patio, it was very strange, because I felt that people here were unfriendly when I first came. Everybody sort of lived in their yards and their patios, and I never saw people.

So the first year out here was quite an adjustment for both of us, but my husband was working and I was not. I did not like it at first. The only thing I liked about California, I liked the climate. But I really didn’t like it because my neighbors weren’t very friendly. I had two neighbors who were friendly. The other neighbors were not friendly. But you never saw them, I mean, people lived in their houses and their patios, and you hardly ever saw people.
on the street, in front of their houses like you do in the East. And so I didn’t think it was very friendly. It was hard—you know, we were academics, and the life of the campus is really sort of separate.

So the second year, we moved on campus, and it became a little bit easier, because you would meet people and you would see people on the campus. But then I didn’t like the fact that we were isolated from Palo Alto, so either way, I didn’t like the fact that the campus is really sort of like a fiefdom. Sometimes I call it the plantation, quite frankly. And you know, people here, they live a very, almost like a sheltered life. Their concerns have to do with what’s going on at Stanford, and they can be extremely parochial. I mean, you go to a dinner party here and all they want to do is talk campus politics. And of course, when I was teaching at Berkeley, they didn’t care what was happening at Berkeley. They weren’t interested in Berkeley, except to make fun of it and that they always beat Berkeley in the big game. That was the thing they would say to me all the time. There was no real interest in anything outside of the campus. And I found that, and still do find that, extremely parochial.

But after a while, I sort of got used to living here, and I guess you just get used to the California lifestyle. But it took me several years before I really got used to it. I mean, I finally took up tennis and did all those things that I thought a person should do if you live in California. [laughs] Never became a great tennis player, but I did learn to play. I like cities, even though I grew up in a very small town. After we married we lived in Minneapolis, and I spent my college years in Boston, and I spent my sabbatical in Washington, D.C. So I like cities, I love cities, and this is not really a city. When the children were young, we used to try to go up to San Francisco once or twice a month, and I always got sort of refreshed, because, you know, I’d see the city and we’d go out to a play, and I’d just feel—and it was more diverse. This town is more diverse now than it’s ever been, but when we came it was not very diverse. Not very diverse at all. I remember going to the shopping center just looking for a face that looked like mine, looking for other black people or people of color, and not seeing anybody. Now you go and you see a lot of mainly Indians and Asians. But when we came, you hardly ever saw people of color at the Stanford Shopping Center or downtown Palo Alto, hardly ever. I felt somehow this was really a very homogeneous community, and although as a community it’s a nice community, it was just too homogeneous. So I used to like to go to the city, because I’d see different kinds of people. So it was quite an adjustment for me.

McGarrigle: And Jim spent all those years following your arrival at Stanford, so his career progression must have worked out.

Gibbs: Well, yes, you know, he liked it. He was working all the time, and of course, the first year I didn’t work, and then I went to school for three years. Then after that, my first professional job as a social worker was actually at Stanford,
at the Stanford Mental Health Center. For four years I worked there. I loved
that work. I loved my colleagues—not all of them, but a lot of them—and it
was a wonderful job for me because I worked three days a week. My children
went to school right here at this school right on Stanford Avenue. They knew
where I was, and often they would stop by after school for money and stuff.
But they felt safe, because although they had a mother working, they had a
mother who they could ride their bike to her office, which was right around, a
few blocks away, and they would come home and call me if they needed
anything, or they’d ride their bike if they wanted money. And their father
worked on campus, too, so we were always here while the children were in
elementary school.

So I worked at Stanford. First I went to school for three years, and then I
worked at Stanford for four years, at the student mental health clinic in the
health center, and that was part-time. Then I went back to get my PhD, so that
during their elementary school years, I was very much around here, and they
knew where to find me and how to find me, even when I didn’t want to be
found. And I think they felt secure, and I felt secure that I was literally five
minutes away from home, and anytime anything happened, you know, I could
be at the school or at home within five to seven minutes, so it was a good job
for a working mother, in those days, anyway.

McGarrigle: And to back up to when you were getting your master’s, that volatile time on
college campuses. I know there was volatility at Stanford, but there was
maybe to a different degree in Berkeley.

Gibbs: Oh, much more in Berkeley, yes. Actually, you know, I got caught at the end
of the Free Speech Movement. That’s when I was at Berkeley. I was there
from ’67 to ’70 to get my master’s. I didn’t get involved in any of the—I
mean, I was a married woman and I was not—I wanted to get home at the end
of my class days. I wanted to get home. I did not get involved. Most of the
graduate students did not get involved in that. But there were a few. But I
didn’t get involved in any of the movements at that time.

However, one night in 1969, I think it was the spring of 1969, I was driving
home. It was either ’68 or ’69. You can look it up in some history book. And
that was the night the governor called out the National Guard, the California
National Guard, and they had tear gas bombs on the campus. So I’m driving
home and all of a sudden—and my windows are open, it was a nice evening—
I think it was in the spring—it was a nice, warm balmy night, and I had my
windows down. All of a sudden, this kind of stuff wafted in my car, because
I’m going down Hearst Avenue, because I had parked on Hearst. I’m going
down Hearst and all of a sudden this stuff wafts in my car, and my eyes start
to water and my nose starts to run, and my face felt hot and I said, “My God,
what is it?” I knew it was something. It’s interesting, because it doesn’t have
much of a smell. After it dissipates, it has hardly any smell. And so I turn on
the radio and they say the National Guard is throwing some tear gas bombs on
the campus in Berkeley. So I got caught in that on the way home. I was so glad to get out of Berkeley that day, to get across the bridge.

But that was my only direct experience with it. Otherwise the graduate schools in general were a little bit removed from that. Because most people in graduate school come and you have a particular goal. Most of the graduate students did not get involved in the Free Speech Movement. But there were a few. In fact, I think some of the leaders were graduate students.

McGarrigle: And the Vietnam protests is what I was thinking of when you were saying about the tear gas.

Gibbs: Yes, but the Vietnam protests—I guess that was about the same time, yes. I think that was for the protests, which followed after the Free Speech Movement, yes, which had been a little bit earlier. I think that was what the tear gas was about, because of the protests. I’m not sure. There were so many protests every year at Berkeley. But I think that was the big anti-war protest, yes. That’s right. So there was always a protest at Berkeley. Every day.

McGarrigle: I’m going to change our tapes.

Gibbs: So it was an exciting place to teach.

[begin tape 16A]

Gibbs: I did belong to the local chapter of the NAACP, which met once a month, and that was my contribution. We did various things. But I got very active in the chapter, and later became vice president of the chapter, after I finished my master’s. So while I was working at Stanford, then I was very active in two organizations which were related to civil rights. One was the local chapter of the NAACP. It was at that time called Stanford-Palo Alto, or Palo Alto-Stanford branch. I think it’s now called the Peninsula branch of the NAACP. But that was what it was called. And there were a lot of Stanford people, and believe it or not, at one time that branch, the Stanford-Palo Alto branch, was the largest chapter in the state of California.

McGarrigle: Really!

Gibbs: Before I came, they were telling me how big it is. But it began to dwindle as people got more interested in the war issues. But the Palo Alto-Stanford branch of the NAACP had at one time, I think in the fifties and sixties, had been the biggest, the largest—larger than San Francisco’s, San Jose or Los Angeles even, which is really amazing. But most of the people were white liberals, and most of the people were Stanford professors, who belonged. Not necessarily were they active, but they belonged. So I was very active and did a lot of things, you know. We raised money for scholarships, we protested employment practices of some of the major stores at Stanford, like Macy’s
and some of the others, who weren’t hiring many blacks, and so we protested. We would meet with their executives. We did housing surveys for Fair Housing. We did a lot of things with a very small group, by the time I was active, a very small group. So that was what I did, it was on the local level.

The other group I was very active with, and served on the board, was the Urban Coalition. They had an Urban Coalition here for a while, which was different than the Urban League. But again, it was a group of mainly white liberals with a few, mainly white and black—there were hardly any—well, even at that time, there were hardly any Hispanics or Asians who even lived in Palo Alto. You know, the Hispanic population is much more recent in Palo Alto, and also the Asian population. It’s a small, and until recently a very small population. So what we had mainly were black and white people who were in these two groups. And mainly white people, who were liberal.

And then, you know what? I don’t know, by the mid-seventies, I think what happened was the Vietnam War siphoned off a lot of those people and their energies, and they lost interest in the NAACP. They lost interest in the Urban Coalition. They weren’t able to keep the Urban Coalition going here. We had a paid executive director, a woman, a black woman. She finally left. She went to Atlanta, and then another one came in who was local. And we just weren’t able to sustain these organizations. You still have in Palo Alto an NAACP, but it’s not very active. So anyway, those were the two organizations that I was very active in. Then when I went back for the PhD in I think it was 1974, I again had to cut back on all my activities. I still pay a membership, but I haven’t been active in years.

[Insert, July, 2007]

McGarrigle: What motivated you to return to graduate school for a PhD?

Gibbs: I had been working as a psychiatric social worker at the Cowell Student Health Center at Stanford for four years and was just about the busiest person on the staff. I saw students of all races, was conducting a small research project on brief therapy, and realized that there were some significant differences in the help-seeking patterns of minority versus white students. I initially applied to the doctoral program in the School of Social Welfare because I decided I wanted to conduct some comparative research on mental health issues in white and minority youth and, perhaps later to combine teaching and clinical practice. I was also a little frustrated professionally because I had reached my maximum salary as a social worker after only four years.

McGarrigle: How was that transition back to school for you—with your family and a commute?
Gibbs: It was very difficult, but I worked out a program so I only had to go to Berkeley about two or three days a week for classes, then I could study at home. By the end of the first semester, I was disenchanted with the program because the teaching was really poor and it was too unstructured. I had taken a course in the Psychology Department with Professor Sheldon Korchin and found it very stimulating. So I applied for a transfer to the Psychology Department, but actually had to submit another complete set of application materials before I was admitted as a first year doctoral student in the clinical psychology program.

McGarrigle: How did the faculty members in the School react when you decided to transfer?

Gibbs: I think a few were disappointed and a few others felt rejected. I had only worked closely with two professors, so I didn’t have close alliances with faculty members or fellow students after just one semester. In the spring semester I did enjoy my work as a research assistant for Professor Henry Miller, who was interested in alternative therapies. I worked with him to construct an interview to investigate the clinical techniques of fortunetellers in the Berkeley-Oakland area. Then I contacted 12 fortunetellers and requested interviews with them. It was a fascinating project, particularly because I learned so much about fortunetellers, their backgrounds, their world views, and how they attract and manipulate their vulnerable clients. Berkeley is the kind of liberal community that attracts all sorts of independent, creative and non-conformist people. Most of these people want—

[end of insert, July, 2007]

Gibbs: —to live their own lives in their own way, so it’s a very unusual city in that way. It’s very unusual. And so you get a lot of people who are attracted there to do their own thing, so to speak. Fortunetellers become very important in these kinds of populations. There’s just a lot of people looking for alternative ways to express themselves and alternative means to sort of live their lives. And wherever you get that, you’re going to get fortunetellers. You’re going to get hustlers. You’re going to get conmen, free thinkers, the whole bit. Berkeley is an interesting city. So we had plenty. I certainly know that—I think I did about twelve. It was a very long interview, and I would do it maybe once a week or so, and I took one semester and did it, so I did about twelve of these fortunetellers. And we ended up with some really interesting material, interesting interviews. He [Professor Henry Miller] said he still had them. He’s still there. He retired before I did.

But the funny thing is, speaking about how your life goes around and around. I’m convinced your life sort of goes in—maybe not a complete circle, but at least in a circle. One of my professors was a young instructor. He happened to be Jewish, very highly nervous. He smoked all the time. He was very nervous. And we didn’t realize it then, but he had probably the beginning of what
developed into a palsy. He was very nervous. He seemed very unsure of himself. He was new. I mean, I didn’t particularly like him or dislike him; I just noted that he was very unsure of himself and that he was very nervous. So I wrote this paper for his class.

And I must tell you, one of my other activities—I forget, I had a lot of activities when I wasn’t working—I had been active in the League of Women Voters for a while in Minneapolis, because I thought that was a good way of—it was a nonpartisan organization, where you really get a nonpartisan view, and you study politics. You study policies. I think that’s a good way for people who aren’t sure what they think or what they want to do, to learn. So I had been active for a while. I wrote this paper about the League of Women Voters and public policy. I mean, I didn’t think anything of it. I had done it, I had been very involved in it, maybe for two years. And I picked some issue—I can’t even remember what issue it was, but I picked some issue and talked about how the League of Women Voters do their studies and how they arrive at a pro or con position.

So the paper comes back, and it has a note, “Please see me about this paper.” There’s no grade, nothing. And also, this is going to tell you a little bit about Berkeley at this time. This was 1967, when I was a first-year student, and also the background is that this is the time where they were pushing for affirmative action for more blacks and minorities, because it is in response to Martin Luther King and the whole business. So it’s a year before he was assassinated. But it’s the beginning of all the big schools realizing they should be doing more for minority students. But I get in, and my record is unassailable. I’m not getting in because of affirmative action.

So I go in to see him, and he’s even more nervous than usual. He looks like he’s going to jump out of his seat. And he’s a small man. He says to me, “Well, Mrs. Gibbs,” he said. “I don’t want to offend you, but—.” And I knew what was coming. I knew what was coming. Okay? You just get socialized. “I want to know, did you write this paper?” I looked at him and I said, “What do you mean?” Even though I knew what was coming. I said, “What do you mean, did I write this paper?” He said, “Well,”—these were his words—“you know, it’s such a good paper, I wondered, did you have any help?”

Well, you know what, I think I lost my composure to a certain extent, certainly. And I let him know in no uncertain terms that number one, I wrote the paper; number two, that I had graduated from one of the best schools in the country, in case he had never heard of Radcliffe College; and number three, that I was very offended that he would ask me did I write the paper, because I ended in saying, “If I were a Jewish student”—I knew he was Jewish, and so I was playing to that—“If I were a Jewish student, or any white student, would you ask me, did I write the paper?” Well, he just turned absolutely crimson. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” he says. I said, “Why don’t you, before you leave today, go down to the admissions office and look
at my file? Why don’t you look at my grades from Radcliffe? Why don’t you look at the fact that I also had one year in the Harvard Business School and see that I graduated with distinction, and had a course in report writing, before you ever do this to me or any other minority student again? Why don’t you do that?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Well, apparently he did. He wrote me a note. Anyway, he gave me an A on the paper—in fact, he gave me an A+, and wrote a note that said, “Well, let’s just keep this between us.” Because I actually did go to the dean. By the time I got the thing back in my mailbox, I had gone to the dean and I had complained about him. I had said, “You know, I’m not going to take this. This is racism of the worst kind.” And I said to the dean, “I want you to look at my record.” Well, they were all so embarrassed. I get a letter from the dean. I get a note from him. I had created a little bit of a scene. Maybe more than a little bit of a scene. And I said, “I should drop this class, but I’m not going to drop this class. I’m going to stay in this class.” So I came to class every week. He wouldn’t look at me, talk to me. Anyway, I ended up getting an A in the class. His name was Harry Specht, okay? He later became dean. Now, Harry was the dean who hired me.

What happened was—did I tell you how I was hired?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: But see, you have to keep this story in mind. For the whole three years I was in the school, he was so nice to me after that, whenever he saw me—he was not dean then—and how are you, and blah, blah, blah. So then when I finished and I heard he was dean, I said, ‘Oh, my God, I wonder do they know what they’ve got over there? I hope he behaves himself.’ But I didn’t leave with a good feeling about the school. That was one incident. As I said, I did have some friends. I did have some people I liked. But I didn’t leave thinking, ‘This is a wonderful institution, I can’t wait to come back.’ I just left thinking, ‘Well, I think I got a pretty good education, and now I can go be a social worker.’ But I didn’t leave with a lot of fond thoughts in my heart about the School of Social Welfare.

I never had that particular incident with any other professors, though, but I’m sure it got around. I did well in the school. I mean, I got practically all As. I think the only B I ever got was in statistics, because that’s always been difficult for me. I think I got a B+ in statistics. I think it was the only B I got in all three years. I did well on my fieldwork, you know, they have to write an evaluation. Your fieldwork is like an internship. They have to write evaluations and everything. In fact, my second-year internship was the internship at Stanford, which I arranged with the thought that if I did well, maybe they would offer me a job. Okay, the one at Cowell Health Center.
And I arranged it—you have to have a social worker on site to be yours—a licensed social worker who can be your supervisor. There were two, and I got along very well with both of them. They were faculty wives. I was the first black ever on the staff there, the whole staff—doctors, nurses, technicians, and social workers—I’m the first black ever. I got along with everybody. I loved my boss. He was a Jewish psychiatrist. I just really adored him, in the sense that he was nice and warm and friendly, and he and his wife, we were friendly with them as a couple. I just got along with him. I loved being there. I did some research there, I wrote a couple of papers, too. Some of my early papers are about the differences in mental health problems between the black students and the white students at Stanford. I wrote one paper with my boss. So I actually published three papers before I went back to get my PhD. They also helped when I came up for the teaching job. I had these three publications, all from my work at Stanford. And another one, actually I had four.

But anyway, what was the point I was trying to make about the job? I did get along with everybody, I did love my work. Students started asking for me. They’d call, because usually it’s a random assignment. A student calls and says, “I have a problem. I need to see somebody right away,” some psychiatrist or social worker or whoever, and we would be randomly assigned, so as the phone calls go, the next person on the list gets the next student. And students started asking for me. They would say, “I want to see Mrs. Gibbs.” So all of a sudden I get to be popular. But they were surprised, I think, but I wasn’t surprised, is that the white students liked me, because there weren’t that many black students coming in anyway. I think they were surprised that these white students would start asking for me.

So anyway, near the end of April—well, it was my second year at the program but my last year at Berkeley—my boss called me in and said, “Have you started looking for a job yet?” I said, “Well, no, but it’s time. I have to start. I’d like to take the summer off. I’d like to start in the fall.” He said, “Let me have the right of first refusal.” He had a great sense of humor. I said, “Well, let’s see, is that a job offer or what?” [laughter] He said, “Well, yes. I think that we would like for you to come. I have to get some money. I need to talk to you about salary. But why don’t you have a couple of interviews and see what the going rate is, and then come back and see me.”

So a month later, I had had a couple of interviews, and I went to see him, and we set up an appointment. This was May now, and I wanted to really have the job by June. And I told him, so he offered me a salary, and I said, “No, that’s not high enough.” So then I thought about it, and I said, “Well, if I only work three days a week, I’d work for that.” So in other words, he was offering me a salary as full-time, which I didn’t think was enough, but for three days a week, it was really—it would have been good. So you know, you have to bargain, and he agreed. He said, “Fine.” So by creating my own internship, I
ended up, which is what I really wanted to do, because I wouldn’t have to commute anymore, so I got the job.

Okay, now, fast forward. So I was there four years, and my fourth year I realized—well, this is another whole story, but it’s an interesting story. Let me tell you this briefly. I don’t want to say this to be immodest, but I was a very popular therapist, for the same reason, I think, that I was a good teacher, which is that the students always viewed me as somebody they could confide in, they could trust. But that I had an affinity for this work, for this kind of work. I really had an affinity. I love young people. And they could sense that, you know. They could sense that I wasn’t talking down to them or I wasn’t making fun of them or I wasn’t shooing them out of my office, they could sense that. So I was getting more and more requests, and I was getting a little bit overburdened.

The psychiatrists would take two-hour lunches and we, the social workers, were on one-hour lunch schedules. So while they’re on their two-hour schedules, we’d be taking twice as many students. This kind of work is exhausting, by the way, any kind of therapy. It’s exhausting. I’d come home every night and be so tired. I said to my husband, “You know, I think I need a raise. I’m seeing actually more students than almost anybody else at this place, including all of the social workers and all of the psychiatrists.” I mean, I don’t have empty hours. They all had these empty hours where they’d go to the coffee machine and sit and read a magazine. I said, “I am busy from nine to five, and barely get out of there at five o’clock. So I’m going to ask for a raise.”

So I went to see my boss [Dave Dorosin]. This is my third year. He says, “Well, you know, you are very valued and all that, but I don’t think we can afford a raise.” I said, “Well, I want you to think about it, because I’m working very hard. You know that I’m seeing”—because we would have to have contact sheets at the end of every week, how many people did you see and what were their diagnoses or level of severity—“you know that I am seeing more than my share of patients. Is that true?” He said, “Yes, you’re right. I know you are very heavily booked.” I said, “You also know that people ask for me.” He said, “Yes, I know that, too.” I said, “So I feel that I deserve a raise. Because I can’t come in any more days, and I’m just working so hard I’m exhausted.” I’d work three days and the other two days I’d have to recover, because I’d be so tired I would have to sleep late in the morning. I mean literally drained, okay? So then I had several cases, suicidal cases that were very difficult, and I’d have to go on the weekend to see about these kids. They’d be in the infirmary and, you know, it was just hard. So I said, “I think I deserve a raise.” He said, “Well, I’ll get back to you next week.”

The next week he called me and he said—and I still can remember it like it was yesterday. He was very embarrassed. He said, “You know, Jewelle, I would like to give you a raise. But I had to talk with the senior staff, and first
of all, the two social workers senior to you—you are already making as much money as they are. It would be extremely difficult for me to give you a raise if the two women who supervised you when you were a student don’t get a raise. You do understand that.” I said, “Yes, I understand that, but this is a market economy.” You know, I wasn’t going to give it up that easily.

He says, “And the other problem is, the university has pay scales, and the social work scales are pegged to the medical school social workers,” because we were part of the medical school, technically. So he says, “And in the medical school, you and our other two social workers, in three years, you’re at the top of your scale.” I said, “You mean I’m supposed to work for the rest of my life and not get a raise?” He said, “No, you can get cost of living increases.” I said, “Well, you know, that’s not going to be enough.” Like 2 percent or whatever it is. I said, “I’m sorry, Dave, that is not enough.” So you know what he said to me? He said, “You know, you’re a good clinician. We value you. We value you. You’re a researcher. But if you really want to earn more money, you need to go and become a psychiatrist or a psychologist.” That’s what he said to me. I said, “Well, you know, that’s a little bit unlikely at my age. First of all, I’m in my late thirties already, and secondly, I could never go to medical school because I can’t stand the sight of blood and cutting up animals.” So he said, “Well, you could always go to get a PhD, and I would write you a great letter if you want to go.”

I came home that night and that’s when I said to my husband—I thought about it for maybe twenty-four hours. By the next night I said to my husband, “I’ve made up my mind. If the only way I can increase my salary is to go get a PhD, that’s what I’m going to do.” And that’s how I decided to go get a PhD. Because I had been sort of toying with it, you know, but it was not really in the forefront of my mind, because my children were still young. I was really happy in that job. Imagine a job where you can drive no more than seven minutes on a rainy day, I can be in my office. Come home for lunch or see my children or go to visit their school if I have to, go to the shopping center at lunch, if I have an errand to run. Imagine a job where you like your colleagues, where you’re at one of the best universities in America, where you have the most pleasant of all kinds of facilities, where every Friday you have an intellectual seminar with some of the great psychiatrists visiting Stanford, come and give you a seminar on whatever it is their specialty is, and you sit and have coffee for two hours. Imagine a job like that. There are not many jobs like that that most people would give up, okay? But I felt that I was being undervalued and underpaid, and I felt, ‘You know, I can do the same thing the psychiatrists are doing, but I will never get one, the salary, and two, the recognition, and three, the research opportunities that I might want, to write about some of these things.’

So I came home and I said, “You know, Jim, maybe I do need to go get a PhD.” Because by then, law was out of it. I had already gotten into mental health, and I did love it once I got into it. I said, “You know, there are a lot of
issues that need more research,” one of the main issues being differences in mental health patterns between white and non-white students, and very little research. I would love to do some research on that. Why do some techniques work on some people and not on others? I would love to do that. Differences between males and females. I said, “You know, there is a lot of research out there, and I think I should go get a PhD.” And he encouraged me. He said, “Well, if you feel you’re undervalued and underpaid,” and very much unlike the law school business, he was very encouraging, and he said, “Well, you know, I think we can manage. Let’s have a goal and let’s—hopefully you can finish before Geoffrey goes to college, and that will be good.” That’s what we did.

McGarrigle: Wow, Jewelle.

Gibbs: This is probably a good time to stop, because I have to leave at 4:30. Yes, so that’s what the plan was. Let me just finish this, then. I went to my boss the next Monday, it was, and I said, “You know, Dave, you gave me a thought and I want to tell you that it encouraged me, and I’m going to go get a PhD.” He was very surprised and shocked, but I said, “Now, you promised me a good letter.” He said, “I will write you an excellent letter, but we will really miss you.” To tell you that he did write me a great letter, and four years later, when I was working on my PhD and I really had finished all my classes, I went back to him and I said, “Dave, can you use me one day a week?” He said, “We sure can.” I went back for one year, one day a week—it was like pin money, but it gave me an office, see, to work in while I was doing my PhD, and reconnected with my colleagues and friends, most of whom were still there, and they welcomed me back and it was wonderful. I actually worked a fifth year when I was getting my PhD. So that’s the story of how I decided to become a psychologist.

McGarrigle: That’s really interesting. Next time we can talk about your experience at Berkeley as a PhD student.

Gibbs: Oh, well, that’s another interesting one. [laughter] That’s another interesting topic. All these topics are interesting.

[end of session]
Interview 10: September 9, 2003

When we left last time, you had finished your master’s and worked at Stanford and decided to go back for your PhD at Berkeley, and that’s where we said we would start. When you started your PhD at Berkeley—first you get your master’s in clinical psychology and then—

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: I decided I would stop to get it because it was a natural point where I had done two years of classes, and I was leaving to go to Washington, D.C., to start a full-time, full-year internship. And I thought it would be good for me to have an MA behind my name in psychology, because I was going to a big medical center, George Washington University Medical Center. Two of us were the first two interns that they ever took. So we started the clinical internship program. There was a young man whose name was Drew and myself who were the first two interns. And I thought, you know, since I’m going to be the first intern, having an MA in psychology will probably be a good thing.

So I did what, they call it a second-year paper, which is—I turned it into a master’s thesis. So the degree was very easy, but it was really on the route. I didn’t do anything extra to get it. We just did these papers, major papers, and I took the paper and developed it into a master’s thesis, and then went to do my internship in Washington, D.C., and then came back here to do my dissertation, and that’s how it worked. I really did the degree in five years—it’s usually six or seven—because I did have the master’s in social work, and I convinced them that I shouldn’t do some of the same courses over again. So I had taken a research course. I had taken some other courses in social work which were really equivalent or very similar to the courses that the PhD students take in psychology. So I guess I was able to basically get out of two courses, a human development course and a statistics course, and that helped me to speed up my program. I finished all their course work in two years.

McGarrigle: How does the preparation begin for the dissertation topic? At what point in the studies do you start—?

Gibbs: Well, I guess it’s in the broad area of clinical psychology. So you start thinking about it almost from the beginning of your doctoral program. They want you to start thinking about it very early. Because you select your areas of
what they call concentration according to what you’re going to do your
dissertation, what is your area. I had got very interested in delinquent females.
One of my papers was on delinquency, and another paper was on cultural
variations in psychopathology and adolescent psychopathology. And I was, as
I think I said at another time when we met, very early interested in how people
have different symptoms in different cultures, and how they define mental
illness differently in different cultures, and what is mental illness in one
culture is not necessarily considered mental illness in another culture, and
symptoms really vary quite a bit. I had noticed that first in Liberia when I was
there with my husband, before I ever went back to school.

Then I came to Stanford, and one of the things we probably didn’t talk about,
I had a lot of foreign students, and a lot of black students who came to see me,
and I noticed almost immediately that the way they expressed their feelings
was different and the symptoms that they talked about were somewhat
different. There was overlapping, of course. And basically the way they
expressed depression, distress, whatever, there were some really striking
differences. So I collaborated with my boss on one paper at Stanford, and we
published a paper, and then I did another paper on the presenting symptoms of
black students at Stanford, and that kind of helped me to get into the program
at Berkeley, because I had published these two papers. But that was very
fascinating to me, and I thought, ‘You know, we need to know more about it.
We need to talk more about it, because what we need to know is that there is
not one diagnosis for everybody and there’s not one treatment for everybody,
and one size does not fit all.’

That had always been the prevailing theory in psychology and psychiatry, that
there’s kind of this universal pattern of development, universal pattern of
symptoms, universal this, universal that. But if you know anything about
anthropology, you know that that’s not true. But it had never been integrated
into American psychology, or very little, I should say. That was at the very
beginning of the time that they were developing—well, it was near the
beginning when I went to graduate school—they were really developing this
whole new area of cross-cultural psychology, which, of course, was very
much like anthropology, only the emphasis was on mental health and mental
illness in different cultures. So they started developing this whole area I guess
really in the mid to late sixties. But by the time I went to graduate school, it
was becoming a real field and people were recognizing it, and it was
beginning to seep into our courses. But then there were some people who
didn’t agree with it, didn’t really believe in it, and I had some people in my
department like that.

But I sort of decided that that’s what I wanted. I wanted to find out what was
going on in the field. So I wrote a big paper about that. Then I combined the
two. I decided that what I wanted to look at was different patterns of
delinquency in different ethnic groups, because I was quite sure that I would
find that. So I assumed that there were different patterns. But my dissertation
was set up to explore, are there different patterns? That was the question I asked. And of course, I did find different patterns of behavior and symptoms. So I had a small sample, and I did my dissertation up here in juvenile hall in San Mateo County. Forty-eight girls, and they were black, white, and Hispanic. I don’t think there were any Asian girls in the group. It was just fascinating. I interviewed them and gave them certain kinds of questionnaires and did find very—somewhat different, I won’t say very different, I would say somewhat different patterns, and that’s what I wrote about, and that’s when I started publishing in that area.

McGarrigle: Who were the faculty people who supported you?

Gibbs: Well, my dissertation advisor was a very famous psychologist at Berkeley, who was also famous nationally. His name was Professor Sheldon Korchin. He and a younger colleague of his named Enrico Jones had written one of the first textbooks, and it was called Minority Mental Health. So he was very happy when I came into the program, because he didn’t have a whole lot of disciples, you might say. When he read my application and saw that’s what I was interested in, he was very interested in working with me. So he worked with me, and he was the chair of my dissertation committee. He was always a very good person to work with, because his name meant a lot in the field. To say you worked with Shelly Korchin—we called him Shelly—was a very good thing. So that’s how I got started on my dissertation, and also that focus was one of the major foci of my entire work at Berkeley. Because that is the name of my book, Children of Color, and it has to do with that very theme—different kinds of values and attitudes and symptoms with different groups of people, and what we need to know if we’re going to work with these kids from different ethnic groups, and what we need to know about their families. So that’s how I got into it.

McGarrigle: I got a little bit ahead, but to go back to the coursework leading up to that, it sounds like if cross-cultural studies were just becoming valid and understood, then what was that program like for you to do, knowing what you wanted to do with the—?

Gibbs: Well, it was difficult for any of us all over the country. We were lucky that the American Psychological Association—when I said it was just becoming recognized—they have to approve of all the psychology training programs, and they had just passed a new standard, really I think the year or the year before I came in, saying that every approved program in clinical psychology at the doctoral level had to have one course in what they then called minority mental health. So it was just beginning to be acceptable. Before that, you didn’t have to have it. You could go through four or five years of a training program with no particular expertise or information about minorities and how they may differ in some ways. There was this assumption that we’re all really alike under the skin, and therefore we don’t need to know about these other things.
So there was some pressure on the generation before me, the generation of psychologists who were active, who said, no, this is not true, everybody is not just alike in terms of how they deal with anxiety and depression and how they express symptoms. And it’s really important to tell students, because of the growing number of minorities coming into the universities, coming into our private clinics, and the number of immigrants coming into our country. That was in the sixties and seventies. It was really connected, partly, to the Civil Rights Movement. There was really a revolution. We need first to have courses about black psychology. Are blacks any different in any way that we need to know about? Then that expanded to just ethnic groups, different ethnic groups—Chicanos, American Indians, Asians. So I was kind of benefiting from that earlier—because I didn’t start my program until 1975.

McGarrigle: I have the dates here, it’s ’74 to ’76 for the master’s.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s right. So I actually was in the program, I actually started the program in ’74, but not officially. I was actually enrolled in the School of Social Work and transferred that year, so that’s how that was. But I actually was officially enrolled in the master’s program, in the PhD program, in ’75. This was about ten years after they had started all this ferment. But it took ten years before the association said, “We now require one course.” Well, one course is never adequate. But it was a beginning.

So I took that course, and of course the person who taught it was Professor Korchin. What we had to do was to kind of create our own bibliographies and find other experiences where we could learn about minorities, and try to make sure there were people who came to—we had our own clinic at the university—encourage minorities to come to the clinic, and then we’d have supervisors of different races and ethnicities who would be able to work with us if we had a patient from one of their groups. That’s how we were just kind of almost experimenting, in a way. The truth is there wasn’t much literature in psychology when I started, and a lot of the literature that was there was either inaccurate, I have to say—and I think I knew that—it was either inaccurate or it was romanticized.

So you had, like people would write these diatribes about what needed to be done about minorities in psychology. There was a lot of romanticism about poverty and minority life, which wasn’t very helpful. So one of the things that I soon realized is, you know, we need information, but we need one, accurate information, and we need information that’s not politicized information. So that was one of the motivations for my writing the book *Children of Color*. Because my colleague is Chinese-American. We could stand behind everything—by the time we got to the book, there was more information—but we could stand behind everything that we said, because there was enough really valid research to demonstrate differences, and also similarities, for that matter. It wasn’t all differences.
So we thought that we would do a real service by writing this book, because both of us were in the field, we had both been interested in minority mental health. We were so distressed sometimes by things we read about our own group, which we knew had no basis in any kind of empirical evidence, but they were, you know, legends or rumors or myths or old wives’ tales. Some of the things that we would read were just so outrageous, or they were about a small group of poor blacks or poor Chinese immigrants or something, and didn’t apply to all the rest of the population.

So that’s when we decided, we have to write a book where we can really have facts, whatever facts are available, we are going to put in this book. And we are going to also reject all these political statements and just so much really, truly garbage that was in the literature at that time. We would read and we would say, “We don’t know these people. Who are these people?” I mean, some of the earliest language said black people don’t get depressed. I said, “Where have these people been that they don’t know that black people get depressed?” I mean, sort of the picture of the happy darky, like in slavery, the happy darky. Well, they weren’t happy in slavery, either, but that was the picture. So they didn’t get depressed because they didn’t have the mental capacity to know they were depressed. I mean, there were things like that in the literature that people were reading. And, you know, myths about black male sexuality and all sorts of things.

McGarrigle: Did you have assigned to you readings that included that kind of—?

Gibbs: Well, you know, some of the readings we’d come across when we did papers would have that stuff in it. Yes, I was a very active—I think you maybe started to use the word confront—yes, I confronted my professors about things that I thought were untrue and unfair and not based on evidence. And what could they say, you know? They would either apologize, or say well, you know, they hadn’t really seen that in the book, or statements that were just so outrageous. Some very racist statements. And then again, there were some racist professors, too. But I had one in development who started out—we started out together very badly. He was a very famous developmental psychologist who is now dead. He made the statement in class one day that most black children grew up in unstimulating environments, and they didn’t really have a lot of stimulation, and that’s why they didn’t do well on IQ tests.

Now, there was a bit, enough of truth in that, if you’re talking about standardized IQ tests, that I could accept the kernel of truth. But what I objected to was when he said they didn’t grow up in stimulating environments. So I said, “Well, I’d like to write a paper on that very topic, if you don’t mind. I think that’s an exaggeration, and I’d like to write a paper.” So I wrote a very good—I know it was a good paper because he gave me an A+ on it—and I said, “Let me describe some of the environments that black children grow up in,” and I think I took three different kinds of environments.
I said, “Now, take a community like Harlem. There’s a lot of stimulation. There’s music coming out of almost every storefront. There are churches on Sunday that have very, very active services, a lot of participation, singing, clapping, dancing.” Well, that was before hip hop music, but I said, “There is a lot of jazz music, blues music, that surrounds these communities. People in the summer and spring and fall live outside on their doorsteps, intermingle with each other, play stickball on the streets. These children are probably overstimulated, not understimulated. They are probably overstimulated. They’re in a big city where there are buses, subways, Times Square. Sometimes they are exposed to urban violence,” and so forth and so on. I said there are a lot of sports played daily on the playgrounds in a community like Harlem. Boys are almost all involved in sports. So that it isn’t that they don’t grow up in a stimulating environment. It’s that they are surrounded by different kinds of stimuli, and they have to be able to sort it out. And so that’s just an example of the paper.

Well, what he said to me—I saved that paper, by the way. He wrote on the bottom, “I stand corrected, and I think you’ve given a good description of urban black environments.” I also talked about rural environments, which are a little bit different. He said, “I think what we really do need is books and authors who are more familiar with these environments, like you, who can write about them.” He and I became lifelong friends after that. He gave me an A in the course, and when his daughter graduated from college and had wanted to come to our school, and didn’t have quite the grade point average, he called me personally and asked me would I speak up for her, and would I give her a chance, and would I watch out for her. So I did, and she became my advisee, and she did graduate, and to this day is a big fan of mine, the daughter. The father is now dead.

But this is the kind of thing that we had when I was going to school. Even—he was absolutely one of the most famous psychologists to ever teach at Berkeley. Ran the whole institute on development. And these are the statements he would make in class. And he was just wrong. I said that there are some children who are understimulated, but you can’t say all black children are not stimulated. Because a lot of them are overstimulated. They have too much stimulation, too much noise. So that may not be good, but it’s certainly not the same as no stimulation.

So anyway, I did have some professors whom I felt were—to put it the best way I can put it, were not supportive, were not eager to see minorities in their programs, and didn’t make it easy for you, you know, they were not supportive. Because, their assumption was always that, because this was, after all, after the mid-sixties that I went back, the assumption was always that you’re an affirmative action candidate. And sometimes I would get mad, and I would have to tell them. I’d say, “You know, I’m older, and I graduated from Radcliffe long before affirmative action. I graduated from Radcliffe with honors, and I am not a stupid person.”
Sometimes I felt they would be talking down to me, or not expecting much of me. I don’t like people to do that to me. I want people to expect as much of me as they would any student, even if it’s, you know, you have to work hard—that’s fine. But to talk down to you or condescend to you because you’re a black woman, or because you’re a woman, whatever, you know it. You know when it’s happening. So all I could say is that by the time I graduated from the program, I think everybody did respect me and did treat me with respect. Maybe one or two still had their feelings about me because I was outspoken. I mean, I will say that the clinical program, which was a small program of four professors, I always felt valued there, and they knew my work, and they always treated me with respect. I had no problem with those four, because we had a small program. It was the other professors. We had to take classes in the other parts of psychology, because psychology is a huge field. It’s like law. I mean, I know law has so many subdivisions, I can’t even keep up, and they keep getting new ones, like information technology. But with psychology, we have a lot of big, major divisions. So we have developmental psychology, we have social psychology, we have industrial psychology, we have—the whole area of statistics is a whole different branch.

We usually had to take courses in about three of the other big fields, and so you take the courses in what’s related to your major field, which was clinical, so of course I took courses in social psychology. I had to take a course, a couple of courses, or maybe one course, in statistics, and then I also took courses in developmental, because those three were more related to clinical. I wanted to work with teenagers, so developmental was most related to what I wanted to do. And then social has the area that I was going to work in, in terms of looking at people’s families and communities, and the impact of those things in the way you perceive the world, on people and on kids, so I took courses in those. And it was universal when you would start the course, if you were a minority student, they would seem not to expect much of you and to treat you in a condescending way. I’m sure they weren’t always aware of it, even. It was just the way they responded. But eventually, if you performed well, they would have to change their mind. And I think that’s what you have to do. But you know the professors who didn’t treat you well, and you sort of always had this sort of feeling about them.

Then the irony of it was when they had the 100th anniversary of the Psychology Department, and I was then a professor at Berkeley at another department, the School of Social Welfare, they called me and asked me would I be on the program to speak. I thought that was so ironic, you know, a student that they didn’t all welcome when I came in.

McGarrigle: Did you make reference to it in your speech?

Gibbs: No, I was nice. I was nice. I did have a chance to make a reference to some of what I thought was racism in the department when my advisor died, Professor Korchin. His widow asked me to be on the program. She said, “You were one
of Shelley’s favorite students. He always thought so highly of you.” When he was dying of cancer, I went to visit him several times in Berkeley. She said, “He always felt—he just was very fond.” I knew he was. She said, “He was very fond of you, and I would like you to say something at his memorial service,” which was, you know, when all these psychologists from all over the country came.

And on that day, what I said was, in praising him and the clinical program, I did say, and I really wanted to say it, because he had a hard time really convincing his colleagues that they ought to have more minority students, and they really shouldn’t look at us as “Well, we’re diluting standards,” you know. He said, “There are some good students; we need to recruit them.” That was one of his lifelong battles, and that’s why all of the minority students liked him, because we felt he was a great advocate for more minority students in the field of psychology. He had recruited a number of them, and they were mainly in clinical, and then there were some in social psych, and some in developmental. Those were the three fields. The other fields had very few minority students. And these were not just black students, but Asian, Hispanic and so forth.

So at his memorial service, I did say that we should honor his memory, because I thought that he had made this great contribution to the psychology department at Berkeley, and that I felt that there had been some resistance in the department to his efforts, and that I was glad to say that I had lived long enough, as a colleague, to see that the department now was much more integrated and multicultural. That was the way I sort of said to them, “You know, you’ve changed for the better.” I mean, I made it positive rather than negative. Anyway, it was just the way some of them behaved, that all of us felt that we were not always welcome.

McGarrigle: It sounds like clinical psychology was very small; there were four professors.

Gibbs: Yes, there were only four professors.

McGarrigle: How many of you students there, then in that one area?

Gibbs: Well, from the time I came, they often had two minority students a year, and that was out of four to six students, so it was a good ratio.

[intererview interruption, Jim enters, greetings, discussion deleted]

Gibbs: Anyway, they really tried to keep a minimum of two a year. I mean, I think there was a kind of commitment to two a year, and then there were minority fellowships, so it wasn’t just complete altruism, because again, the NIMH [National Institute of Mental Health] had set up a special program of minority fellowships. I did get one, by the way. I think I had it for two years. They had set up this special program to encourage departments to recruit minority
students. So that money, of course, goes to the department. I mean, some of it comes to you for living expenses, but some of it goes to the department. So they really did make a commitment to have two minority students a year, and my year there were only four students, and of the four, two—there was a black male and myself, and two white women. So that was good.

McGarrigle: Was that experience in class different than at Radcliffe?

Gibbs: Oh, a very different experience, just because graduate courses are much different, you know, much smaller. So it was a different experience. And you’re expected, because your seminars are so much smaller, you are expected to be much more active, and you really just can’t go to class unprepared, because you never know, if there are dozen people in the class or maybe fewer than a dozen. I don’t think we ever had more than a dozen in a class, and that was a lot. Classes were more like six to eight people. The only bigger classes were like the developmental classes, the statistics classes. Social psych might have had as many as twenty, but never more than that. So what we had were these very small classes, very intimate, where you were expected to participate very actively, to show that you had read the assignments, and to make critical comments, those kinds of things. So it’s a much more intensive experience, being in graduate classes.

McGarrigle: I wondered with the difference in the time period between when you were at Radcliffe and when you were at Berkeley, and then there’s this other factor about the small seminar size, but if the attitudes of the professors, it sounds like in some ways was even maybe harder to deal with than at Radcliffe, in terms of their treatment of minority students or their attitudes or their expectations.

Gibbs: Oh yes, because it was smaller and it was right out there.

McGarrigle: And it’s this many years later, but it’s not more evolved; it’s maybe less evolved.

Gibbs: No, I wouldn’t say it’s less evolved. I think people are more aware of it, but they’re more sensitive to it. So they might be a little more sensitive to what they say, and yet, you know, as they say, you can’t legislate how people feel about each other. I think what’s happened in the years since I was an undergraduate is people had become more politically aware of what you can say and what you can’t say, but that doesn’t mean they’ve changed. But I think that the attitudes that come out in small seminars are much more obvious, because you’re dealing one to one with people, whereas if you’re in a big class, you’re not really dealing one to one in a lecture class, you’re really dealing with a whole group, and sometimes they would, years ago, say some outrageous things, too. Especially more about women than about minorities, because the minority issue was not a big issue when I was in college. It was the women, how are we going to treat women students, that was the really big
issue. And some of the professors never got really comfortable with female students, and would say things that were absolutely insensitive.

Looking back, I don’t know how any of us stood it. But it was kind of what people did in those days. So I guess my feeling is that my experience, to kind of try to sum it up, in the clinical courses, with my four professors whom I got along with, by and large, and I worked closely with two of them. One was a woman who was Canadian, who was very liberal, and she gave me an opportunity to work on her research. We wrote a paper together, and she and I are still good friends.

McGarrigle: What’s her name, Jewelle?

Gibbs: Rhona Weinstein. She just wrote a book published by Harvard University Press. I don’t know if I had her on my list, I should have asked you to talk to her, because she would have a lot of funny things to say about me. Because she was much younger. She was a young assistant professor, and here I was coming back, and I was in my late thirties, and it was kind of a little bit awkward for her, I always thought. She was a young assistant professor, and I met her even before she had her children—she had twins—and I think it was awkward for her at times, because I was older, I had teenaged children and everything. We used to commute from here to Berkeley. I should have put her on my list.

McGarrigle: I can call her, though. I’d still like to call her.

Gibbs: Yes, Rhona Weinstein. We just came back from her, one of her twins got married last weekend in Malibu. We just went to the wedding. So we’re good friends still, we’re still good friends. Rhona and I used to talk about not only academic things but personal things, because we commuted together, so I got to know her very well. She was always supportive, and Shelly Korchin was always supportive, and the other two I didn’t have as much to do with, but one was a young black professor, he was an assistant professor, and I’m sure that he was somewhat intimidated by me, too. He was very young and he was just out of Harvard, and that was funny. But he seemed a little intimidated by me, because I was older. And then another professor who was, when I started, [Phil] Cowan was the chair of the department. Those two I didn’t get along with quite as well. On the surface, I got along with them.

But anyway, it was an experience where eventually I felt very comfortable, by the time I left. I felt they all recognized that I was a good student, and I had good clinical skills, meaning the people who came to the clinic that I saw, my supervisors all thought I did a good job. So when I left, I felt that I had acquitted myself well enough and that they were pleased with my performance. I mean, I didn’t get along with the other two as well, as I said, but on the surface we all, it was okay. [laughs] But I kind of butted heads with the chairman a couple of times. So I think I have a reputation in the
department as being very assertive, which I was. I can’t say it is an undeserved reputation, because a lot of times I felt like complaining.

And then you know what happened, is that the younger students made me their spokesman, and a couple of times I really got into trouble, because I shouldn’t have taken up their causes. They weren’t always my causes. But I’ll tell you one famous incident. Now, we’re in a program of clinical psychology. When I say I was assertive and outspoken, yes, it wasn’t always about minority issues, either, but it was basically about being treated like adults. We were students, but we were all adults, and sometimes they treat graduate students like children. Well, you know, they do that I think in law school, at least the first year. They treat you like children, as if you have no experience, as if you know nothing about the world, and it’s like you start all over again. Here I was, I think I must have been thirty-nine when I started, but anyway—maybe I was forty. I was an adult woman with two teenage children who had lived in other parts of the world, who had worked at Stanford for four years, and certainly I knew a little bit about the world. I had children whom I had raised to be teenagers, and I had had two jobs, the longer one was at Stanford. And I didn’t want to be treated like a child, like a fresh college graduate of twenty-one. So they would have these edicts and these bureaucratic rules, which sometimes were just purely silly. And then of course, we would try to get around them.

But the younger students would feel, well, somehow they felt I had less to lose, you know, and they wanted me to always be their spokesperson, and sometimes I was and sometimes I wasn’t. But there was this one incident where they were about to hire a fifth person. Our program was really small, and all the four people who worked in it were really overworked. There was really no question. If you ever talk to Rhona, I’m sure she will tell you that. I mean, we even felt sorry for them. They had to deal with all the classes that were there, in the program, not just our class.

So finally the university gave them money—they call it billets—to hire another professor, assistant professor. There was this guy—I won’t mention his name, because it isn’t important what his name is. But he was a real hotshot, considered a real star. He had published a lot. He was a clinical psychologist with a strong interest in social psychology. I always thought he was more of a social psychologist myself, but in any case. And they wanted to hire him. He came for a visit. Now, we’re the students and there are four professors. I was asked to be on the search committee, because he was being hired by the whole Department of Psychology, not just the Clinical Program, but I think he was going to work in both social and clinical, I think that was it. So I was asked to be on the committee representing the students.

By this time, it was the end of my second year, just before I was about to go off for my internship. I had finished almost all my classes. It was the spring of my second year. I had also—we all worked in the clinic, where you get
clinical experience, and I have always, from about the age of twelve, had I guess what you would just call instincts about people. That’s one of the reasons why I liked that field. I’ve always been good about kind of diagnosing people and having instincts about them, from the time I was about twelve years old. I always—I think I told you—in the dorm, everybody always used to come to me at Radcliffe and I was the confidante for everybody. I was giving out counseling long before I had a degree.

So this guy came for a two-day visit. And he was, to me, obviously almost crazy, in a way. He had a lot of symptoms of the kind of people that we often label, now we would label them, well, if not autistic—you know, he didn’t make good eye contact, he was rude, he had absolutely no social skills, I mean, none. He was like—well, there’s another category of people, too, but he was kind of a social isolate, and he didn’t seem able to relate to people at all, on any level, empathically, but he was very smart. He made this presentation. And then he said at the end of his presentation, which was to the whole department, that he believed in creative disruption. Now, you’re coming for a job as an assistant professor, right? And you stand up there and you say to people, “I believe in creative disruption.” Now, would you want to hire somebody like that?

So when they discussed it, I said, “You know, I think this guy is bad news.” I said none of the students liked him. We felt—he had a separate meeting with us. “He is very narcissistic, into himself. He didn’t ask any of us what we were interested in. Some of us wanted to know who he would want to work with, what kinds of students. He really seemed to be self-centered about his research, and he doesn’t seem to be particularly interested in teaching, and we do not think he would be a good addition.” So I’m representing the students, and we had a separate meeting. I said, “I’m representing the students, and the students do not think this guy would be a good fit for our department.” Because first of all, it’s a small department, and secondly, he just didn’t seem to have any social skills.

Well, they overrode us, and I’ll never forget, the chairman said, “Well, of course we’re glad to hear the students’ input, but he’s going to be our colleague and he’s very smart,” and he’d make, you know, this business about publishing and all that. So, fine. They hired this man, within—I was in Washington the next year—I heard within a month that everybody was unhappy with him. He did things like reading other professors’ mail, which is absolutely unethical. He had a continuing controversy with the very man who was my advisor, Shelly Korchin, Professor Korchin, and he was trying to find out what Shelly was saying about him in some letter or something, and he went into Shelly’s mailbox and opened his mail. He had temper tantrums in meetings, he lied to students about other students—I mean, he was totally unethical. It got so bad that they asked him to leave at the end of that year, which is almost unheard of, to hire an assistant professor, but they told him they wanted him to leave the clinical department. If social wanted him, they
could keep him. And I think he stayed on at social for another year or so, and then after three years—it was a three-year appointment—they let him go.

Of course, then he went, I think, to Michigan. He was a person who seemed to have no ethics, no conscience, no social skills. Now, we as students all recognized that this guy had problems, serious problems, and our colleagues, I mean our teachers, did not. Which was really interesting, because they were with him for two days. They entertained him. They were only concerned mainly about the publishing and how brilliant he was. But, you see, you have to live with these people.

Anyway, the next year when I came back, I saw the chairman, Phil Cowan his name was, in the hall. He said, “You know, Jewelle, I have to give you credit. You were right about this guy. I remember what you said, when you said you didn’t trust him, you didn’t like him, and the students didn’t like him. You were absolutely right. He almost wrecked our department, so I have to tell you that.” Because at the time they were annoyed with me, what I said about him. He said, “I have to tell you, you were right.”

McGarrigle: It sounds like this subset of autism called Asperger’s syndrome?

Gibbs: Yes, a little bit like Asperger’s, yes. That’s probably not a very good diagnosis for an adult, but he had some of those symptoms. There are other diagnoses I could give him, but he was really a social isolate and had trouble sitting still, he had sort of like ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]. He was always in motion and just didn’t have any social skills.

McGarrigle: So that kind of brings up the question about what it’s like for you to be in the field where not everybody has good intuition and not everybody is thinking about the students, or maybe even the rest of the population.

Gibbs: Yes, I think what you find is that in any field—and the problem is for clinical, we should, when you’re admitting students, you should really screen them out right away for mental health and mental illness issues, and they don’t. They’re interested in the smart students, they’re interested in the best students, the good students, the ones who write well. Years ago, you had to have psychotherapy to go through one of these programs. But that requirement long ago was dropped. That was a requirement to get a PhD in clinical psychology or an MD, to get a residency in psychiatry, to finish it, you had to have—even social work required, years and years ago, social work required for the master’s some psychotherapy, because they felt that they wanted people who would know themselves and know themselves well and be sort of well-balanced before they started working with other people. And it was expensive for people. Everybody couldn’t afford it, and some people objected to it. Some people said, “You know, I think I’m in pretty good mental health. I don’t need it.” So they dropped it. But I will say that for psychiatry and psychology especially, which require the PhD, I think there’s something to
having some therapy required, maybe even if it’s only a year, but some therapy required to see who’s really stable, and who sort of is unstable.

One of the major issues about doing therapy as opposed to research is the ability to have empathy with other people’s problems, and I will tell you, there are a lot of psychiatrists and psychologists who fail on that one measure. Because when you’re out seeing patients, it doesn’t matter how brilliant you are and how many articles you’ve written. What really matters is, can you connect to these people? Can you understand their problems? Can you imagine walking in their shoes? You don’t have to walk in their shoes. But can you imagine walking in their shoes? And can you reach out to them across racial barriers, sex and gender differences, social class differences, et cetera? Can you do that? And I will have to tell you, I think in this field, in general in mental health, there are a whole lot of people who shouldn’t be in it. A whole lot. When I see students that I don’t think have those capacities, sometimes I’ll talk to them and try to counsel them out of doing social work that includes counseling, or sometimes I’ll talk to their supervisors, and I’ll say, “I really think you need to evaluate this student, this student strikes me—.” Or someone who’s dishonest. I’ll say, “This student strikes me as not having either the ethical standards or the psychological flexibility to be able to be helping, counseling, other people.” I felt that was an obligation I had. There were several students I tried to counsel out of it. I wasn’t always successful. You know, if you’re not successful—. They’d graduate and then it’s up to other people to judge them, evaluate them.

McGarrigle: Did you become friends with other women who were returning students who were in your similar situation with children?

Gibbs: One or two, because at the first time with my master’s, I did commute with a friend, a woman who was actually married to my husband’s colleague, and we commuted together. We were already friends. She had four teenage boys. We became quite friendly through the commute. And then a couple of others. Mainly I became friends with the people like me, the older women who had children who commuted. Those were the people. Because we didn’t stay around the school much, we’d really be going home right after class. And we didn’t have a whole lot in common with the very young students, the ones who were twenty-one, just out of school, twenty-two, twenty-three, and twenty-four. So we tended to, we might have coffee together. There was a woman named Cecile from San Jose that I was friendly with. And there were about four or five of us who would get together for coffee sometime. But except for the ones I commuted with, I never became very close to any of them, because they all lived in different cities, and I wouldn’t see them after class.

McGarrigle: When did you study, Jewelle? When you came home and the boys were home from school? How did you set up the schedule?
Gibbs: I was so organized. Leah, I’ve never been as organized in my whole life, because you have to be, and since then I wish I could recover that organization. I had to have a very good schedule. Fortunately, at that time I was more of a night person. I’m not able to stay up as late as I used to. But I was a night person. So first of all, our boys were not allowed to look at television until their homework was done, and some nights they didn’t get it done until late. It was kind of interesting. After dinner, we all would do our work. I would say, “Now, Daddy’s going to his work, I’ve got to do my work, and you guys are going to do your work.” So it was a house where everybody studied after dinner, and it was kind of a unifying thing, that we all—well, three of us were students and my husband was a professor, and he had papers to grade, lectures to write. It worked out very well, because they saw us every night studying, writing papers or grading papers. We would allow them to look at television after they had finished all their work, and then I also had to check their homework. They would always come to me, no matter what. They never went to their father, they would always come to me. That’s the way it is. And I would check their homework. Usually when they finished their homework, it might be too late to look at television anyway, so they’d go to bed. I did my best work between ten o’clock at night and midnight. Two hours.

McGarrigle: That’s late, though.

Gibbs: And then I would get up in the morning, and I didn’t go to school every day. I went to school usually three days a week, three days a week, and the days I didn’t go to school were the days I’d study and read my papers. If I had something to read for class, I’d stay up late the night before, and that’s when I did all my work. And weekends, I would do some work on weekends. I usually gave the boys part of the weekend, and the house another part of the weekend, and then the third part of the weekend, I would study. So I divided it that way. But you have to be very creative. I would take my books to the hairdresser to read. I would take my books, if I had a long line to stand in at the post office, I always had a book. I always carry a book. Even now, I carry a book everywhere. So if I were going anywhere where I knew I had to wait for something, or if I was going out to lunch by myself, I’d take a book to read. I always had a book to read. I was sort of behind, so I was always catching up. But you know, I managed. Of course, the other thing is—I probably told you before—I gave up almost everything to finish this degree.

I gave up a club I was in, a woman’s club, which I enjoyed. We only met once a month, but people would call each other between, and sometimes people would play bridge. I gave that up. I gave up all except my closest friends, people I used to call and see occasionally. I just didn’t have time anymore, so I kept my very closest friends. We never went out during the week, ever. We would go out on Friday or Saturday. So we had a schedule where the family and our work was paramount, and everything else had to come after that. I did that, and I don’t really have any regrets. I probably lost a few friendships that
were not very close, but people that I did enjoy and couldn’t keep up with, so I
probably did lose a few friendships. I didn’t have a whole lot of recreational
activity for a long time.

But then in the summer I would kind of make up for it. In the summer we
would go away and I would see my friends more and do more fun things in
the summer. It was only eight months a year. You know, the school year gets
shorter and shorter. It’s now basically eight months instead of nine, so it was
about eight months a year that I was busy with school, and then the four
months in the summer, from about the middle of May to the middle of
September, we had summer, and then I would do other things, more time with
the kids. So it worked out. I don’t have any regrets about it.

McGarrigle: No, I wouldn’t think so. It’s just interesting to know how people—.

Gibbs: I don’t have any regrets. I mean, some of my friends who weren’t doing
anything—they look back and they say, “Oh, I wish I had done this, I wish I
had gone to school, I wish I had gotten a degree.” But they were playing cards
and going out to lunch, going to the hairdresser, whatever they did, I don’t
know. They didn’t enrich their lives in any way during a period where their
children were home and they had maybe more time, and then one day they
woke up and their kids were gone and they didn’t know what to do with
themselves. I think that’s what I was working toward. “When my kids are
gone, then I can have a full-time career.” I didn’t really plan to have a full-
time career until they were pretty big. So it worked out.

McGarrigle: Well, it’s something about life stages for women. And your friend Charlotte
Siegel spoke to that, and how her field has been good for her, and compatible
with her different stages of child-rearing—young children, older children.

Gibbs: It’s like Passages. I always felt—you know, now it sounds so old-fashioned,
but I always felt that I had the children and it was my obligation to be their
primary caretaker, not anyone else’s. I guess I’m not sure why people have
children and then turn them over to nannies. I thought it was my primary
obligation. And when they get older, and as they got older, I first did school,
then part-time work, then the PhD, and then the full-time career. I didn’t work
full-time any time in my life until my oldest boy was a senior in high school.
That was it. So I was always home part of the week. I was never gone more
than three days a week, either to class or to a job, never. I would have two full
days at home, and the other times where I worked was so flexible, because I
was on campus, the children were near me, they knew where I was, so that in
any emergency I was immediately available, because they went to Gunn High
School, and this school over here, the Nixon School. So I was immediately
available for all the times that they were growing up.

Then when I finally went back to get my PhD, and I was in Berkeley more, it
was still three days a week. I always managed—I was very lucky—always
managed three days a week for classes, and then two days a week, they always knew that on these two days—so if I had to do things with them, it would be those two days a week, I was available. I could be writing or reading or doing something, but I was here, and it was flexible. And that suited me fine. It suited me fine. I think if I had started my full-time career earlier, who knows what might have happened. I might have been probably a dean or something. But, I don’t know. But I feel I had a good career with doing it the way I did it, I think I had a good career. And I also don’t feel guilty about my kids. That’s the best thing. I don’t feel any guilt, because I was around and they knew I was around. So I feel as if I did what I needed to do.

McGarrigle: Yes. I’m going to change the tape.

Gibbs: The interesting story is how I got my job at the School of Social Welfare. Did I tell you that story? Maybe I told you that at the beginning, near the beginning, of how I got my job on the faculty.

McGarrigle: I’m trying to think—Ed Nathan told me a little bit about that. Why don’t you tell me?

Gibbs: Yes, I think I did tell you how I was sitting in a café, and that I didn’t get along as a student with Harry Specht, I think I did tell you that.

McGarrigle: Yes, you did tell me that.

Gibbs: And then when I left the program, one day, it was my last quarter, I was finishing up my dissertation, and I went into—you know north campus, on Hearst, where they have all those little cafés. I think I did tell you the story, but if I did you can stop me. And I was getting some coffee, and he was there with three of his cronies, it turned out—no, one of his cronies—I call them cronies because they used to have lunch almost every day—with a guy who’s named Neil Gilbert, who’s a senior colleague of mine. And so he stopped me. I was leaving. He said, “Aren’t you—” for some reason he remembered my maiden name. “Aren’t you Miss Taylor?” I said, “Yes, well, I’m Jewelle Taylor Gibbs.” He said, “Yes. You were my student. You graduated.” I said, “Yes,” and I was not terribly warm.

But he said, “I heard you were getting a PhD in psychology.” I said, “That’s right. I’m almost finished.” He said, “Well, you know, we have a job coming up. I would love to talk to you about the job.” So I said, right there and then, “You know, I’m not really interested in commuting to Berkeley anymore. I’ve been commuting to Berkeley for years to get two degrees. I really don’t want to do it.” He said, “Why don’t you let me call you about the job?” I said, “Fine.” So I left.
I came home that night and I said to Jim, “The last person in the whole world that I will ever work for is Harry Specht.” [laughter] Well, of course I ate my words. So I came out the year that Proposition 13 was passed. There were no jobs, no new jobs in the mental health fields, in fact, no new jobs in public services at all, and the people who were there were holding onto their jobs, but they didn’t have any new jobs because of the tax cuts. All the social services were cut, and the mental health services. So I had planned to go into a career of counseling, private, and have the little maybe part-time practice of my own on the side. I wanted to do therapy, I wanted to work with young people, young couples. That’s what I wanted to do. And I wanted to do that full-time. I didn’t want to be a professor. I never, ever planned to be a professor. That’s what’s funny. I never did. I said, we have one professor in the family, that’s enough.

Well, and also my son was getting ready to go to college. I had to have a job. The next year he was going to college. So I started looking that spring, and then the proposition was passed. I think it was actually passed in the June elections but whenever it was passed, there were no jobs. First the dean had a woman on the faculty call me who had been my teacher, and she lived down here, and she said, “Oh, I would love you to come, then we could commute together.” Her name was Gen [Genevieve] Oxley—did I ever give you her name? She also knows me very well. She knows me from being a student at Berkeley. I said, “Well, Gen, you know, I don’t want to commute.” She said, “Well, I can help you.” She was very eager. She said, “You know, they’re very interested in having you apply.” I said, “Oh, well, they just want numbers for affirmative action.” That was when affirmative action was beginning, and people were concerned about it. I said, “You know what, I don’t want to be a number for affirmative action. That’s not what I want to be. I know what I want to do. I don’t want to commute.”

Then Specht wrote me a letter and told me about the job, and said, “Please call me about the job.” So I didn’t call. I said, “Jim, I am not going to encourage these people. I don’t want to go there.” In the meantime, while I’m getting these letters and these calls, I’m not getting another job. Finally I got an offer from Wright to come up to the Wright Institute. And the Wright Institute interested me, but you have to get your own grants. It’s really kind of soft money that carries people along, and once you don’t have a grant, you don’t have much of a salary. Then I heard from Santa Clara, which had a position in psychology which interested me, and they were real teaching psychology jobs, which interested me more than going back. I said, well, I’ve done this degree. Why do I want to go back to the School of Social Work? Okay?

Anyway, all this was perking along. It was summer. In the fall, my son was going to be going to Harvard, and where was his tuition going to be coming from? [laughs] So my husband was starting to put a lot of pressure on me. Then the dean called me again. This is his second call after the call from my colleague, Gen Oxley. He said, “Jewelle, did you ever get my letter?” I said,
“Yes, I got your letter.” I was very cool. He said, “Well, why didn’t you answer it?” I said, “Well, I’m not really interested in the job.” He said, “Well, look. We’re interested in you. Why don’t you come up and talk to me about it? At least talk to us about it. We really are interested.” My husband overheard the conversation and he said, “You know one thing, if you don’t go up there and see about that job, we’re going to have problems!” I said, “All right, I’ll go up and see about the job.”

I went up to see about the job. I spent a half a day, and it turned out to be like a job interview, really. They seemed glad to see me and they talked to me and they told me what they wanted and what kind of job it was. So at the end of the interview, I said to him—I’ll never forget this, and I’m sure he won’t, either, although he’s now dead, too—I said, “Harry, tell me the truth.” And by that time we were getting along better. I realized he had grown up a little bit, and he had changed and matured. I said, “Harry, tell me the truth. Are you offering me this job? Is this a serious offer? Or do you just want me to be in the numbers to say you interviewed a black woman? I want you to tell me the truth, because I really need a job, and I need a job by September, so I want you to tell me the truth.”

He said, “Jewelle, you’re one of our best students. Everybody on the faculty knows you. We all know how smart you are.” I mean, he’s basically trying to stroke me and give me a few strokes. He says, “And we know you would not be an affirmative—you’d be the last candidate that we would ask for affirmative action. We think you’re competent. You now have a PhD. We think you’d be a great addition to the faculty, and it has nothing to do with the fact that you’re a black woman, nothing.” I said, “Yeah, I’m sure that’s true.” He said, “Well, go home and think about it and please let me know in a couple of weeks, because we’re doing a national recruitment and you’re at the top of our list.” I said, “I haven’t even said I’m interested.” He said, “That’s okay. You’re still at the top of our list.”

So you know, everybody, I’m getting all these pressures from all around. He had this woman call me again, a second time. She said, “Oh, Jewelle, I heard you went up to see about the job. I’m so excited! You know, we can commute together!” So I’m getting all this pressure. So finally we set a date. He said, “We want you to come back and we want you to meet with the search committee.” Because the first day I didn’t meet with the search committee. “We want you to meet with the search committee. We want you to meet with the graduate students. And then we want you to make up your mind.”

So I went back, spent basically another whole day, they took me to lunch at the Faculty Club—you know, all they do for a candidate. And I’m getting interested by now. I’m sort of saying, oh, this is nice to be wanted, they really seem to want me. But they didn’t put a lot of pressure on me. I didn’t really make a formal—like you’re supposed to make a formal presentation. I never made a formal presentation like all candidates are supposed to do. The search
committee asked me about my research and asked me to send them some copies of my papers and asked me about my dissertation. I met with the graduate students and they seemed to like me. Their vote isn’t very important anyway, truthfully, but at least they give some input. So when the day was over, Harry said, “Jewelle, this job is yours if you want this job. But you have to let me know soon.” I said, “Well, how do you know?” He said, “I’m telling you, the job is yours if you want the job. Just call me and let me know.”

So a week went by, and I decided I wanted to see about what Wright [Wright Institute] had to offer. I haven’t called him back. So I go to Wright for another day. You know, they always like to interview all day and take you to lunch and all. After lunch, the dean of Wright called me and said, “You have a call from your husband.” I called my husband, and Jim said, “Jewelle, please call Harry Specht. He wants to talk to you, and he wants to talk to you today, and I told him you were at Wright, and he said to please call him.” So there I am at Wright asking the woman can I make a call to the University of California, Berkeley. She was nice, she went out of the room. So I called Harry. Harry said, “Have they offered you a job yet?” I said, “I don’t know, but I think they’re going to.” He said, “Jewelle, we are giving you a firm offer. Now, are you going to take it or not take it? Don’t take an offer from Wright. We are giving you a firm offer and I want you to come and see me and sign the contract,” or whatever you do. I can’t remember. I think I did sign something.

Anyway, that was my offer. So I listened to Wright, and Wright gave me an offer. But actually, it was not as good. The salary wasn’t as good, and when they told me you have to get most of your own money, I thought, I don’t want to be having to depend on government grants every year for the next, say, twenty, twenty-five years. So in any case, that was what happened.

McGarrigle: And Santa Clara?

Gibbs: And Santa Clara gave me an offer. That one came after the one at Berkeley, and by that time, I had decided since they were so nice to me, and their offer—the actual salary was better than the other two schools, and the working conditions were somewhat better. I would have liked Santa Clara, maybe, because that was an offer in the psychology department. But there was more teaching. They were not so concerned about research as in teaching. There would be more teaching and less pay. So I decided to go to Berkeley with two courses a semester, some support for my research, and even with the commute. We agreed in advance that I only would come no more than three days a week. I told them that was a very important stipulation, that except for emergency meetings or something, that I would only come three days a week, and he agreed. He said, “We’ll try to get all your committees and all your students, everything, on those three days, and then you’ll have the other two days.”
So that’s how I got my job. If I hadn’t been in that café, I’m not sure I’d be ever teaching at Berkeley. If he hadn’t actually seen me and remembered me and then, I’m not sure, maybe they would have called me anyway, but that’s how I got the job.

McGarrigle: Well, he was very persistent.

Gibbs: He was very persistent, and it turned out that I always thought—I asked him about it a few years later. I asked him, “Harry, did you offer me the job because you were guilty about what you said the time you accused me of plagiarism, asked me if I had help?” He said, “Well, not really.” But he told everybody that story, too, which was funny, at the beginning. I said, “Harry, I don’t think you should tell that story, because it says a lot about you and not anything about me.” He said, “Well, I just think it’s a good story to say how I misjudged you and how brilliant you are,” and so forth and so on.

But he became a very good friend, a very strong supporter of mine, a very strong supporter, and really became a mentor to me in terms of mentoring me as a faculty member, making sure I got summer grants and putting me up for things, like editorial boards of major journals in social work. He became an excellent mentor to me and was always, after that—I do think there was this element of guilt, because of what he did when, what I told you, he was the one that accused me, had someone written my paper, which, oh, just really devastated me. It was just awful. I just felt so awful after that. And he apologized, of course. But I think that a lot that he did for me in my career was partly to make up for that early incident. I always thought that. He denied it, but I always thought it.

McGarrigle: When he offered you the firm job, was that the endowed chair at that point?

Gibbs: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. That came much later.

McGarrigle: Oh, okay, okay.

Gibbs: Because that’s an honorary thing. You don’t get that until you have proven that you are a scholar. No, that came at the end of my career, really, almost the end of it. No, I did not have an endowed chair until 1993. My endowed chair started I think January 1, 1993, and I had started at Berkeley on July 1 of 1979.

And I actually started before I had completed the PhD. That’s the other important thing to tell you. I didn’t complete the PhD until December of 1980. I actually turned in my dissertation December 17, a week before Christmas, so I could enjoy the holidays. I told my husband, “I have to finish this dissertation so I can enjoy the holidays.” I turned it in on December 17, 1980—no, I’m sorry, 1979. I was hired July 1. You know, they start the new year on July 1. I didn’t actually have to go to work until September, because
of the summer. You know, I got my office ready, planned my courses and everything, and I wasn’t expected to show up at work until September. So I had that summer. But in the meantime, I was also finishing my dissertation that summer, and actually finished the first draft by the end of the summer, because it was important for me not to have that hanging over my head. Then my advisor gave me some comments for revisions, and finally the final draft of the thesis, the final copy of it, was handed in December 17, 1979. I didn’t actually get my degree until June of 1980, because at that time they didn’t give December degrees, so I’m listed as June of 1980 for my degree, but I finished in December of ’79.

So anyway, I think the main point I wanted to make about that whole process was, you know, people can change. I had not gotten along with him as a student, partly because of that comment, but he made a complete turnaround. He was very, very, very supportive. We became good friends with him and his wife. His wife liked Jim. We would go out to dinner with them sometimes. We’d go to their house, they’d come to our house. And he later on—I can tell you more about this another time—but later on, as there was a lot of political turmoil in our department over the years, there was a group who didn’t like him as dean. They thought he was too heavy-handed, too authoritarian. I always liked him because he was always good to me, but I could see their point, though. But then he really began to enlist me as an ally and as a confidante, and I was sometimes in the middle of things. I appreciated the fact that he saw me as a confidante and as an ally, but when I disagreed with him, he wasn’t happy, because he felt that he was doing everything to make my life pleasant, and he wanted me to always side with him around some political issues in the department and hiring people, things like that. And I agreed with him maybe 60 percent of the time, and maybe 40 percent of the time I didn’t, and then he would get angry, and it was interesting. So I was in that position.

And then after his wife died—his wife died, oh, I don’t know, it must have been ten years before I retired—he became almost very needy for emotional support, and then there were about three of us in the department who he turned to for really a lot of emotional support. Not long after his wife died, he got cancer himself, and it was a very difficult time. He didn’t want to give up the deanship. He had no one at home to care for him. Finally he just couldn’t work anymore, and then three or four of us would go and visit him. Some of the colleagues would take him dinner. But I didn’t live up there. But once in a while I would go by and take him food and just sit with him, because he was living alone.

And it was very interesting how the relationship in later years turned into one of real friendship and almost—well, it was a strange relationship. I mean, he was still my boss. But I felt that I could say whatever I wanted to say to him and he could say whatever he wanted to say to me without feeling that there were going to be repercussions. I was one of the ones who finally urged him to step down because he was ill; he was not able to do his job. But that was all
he had. Three of us who were good friends finally urged him to step down, and I think it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. Then after that, we realized we had to kind of keep supporting him, so we gave him a lot of emotional support. When he died, at his memorial service, his sons asked me to speak—I was one of I think four speakers, because they said, “Our dad always thought highly of you.” So I said how that relationship came full circle. So I did speak at his memorial service.

McGarrigle: Really it did come full circle.

Gibbs: It did come full circle, yes. And in fact, I read a poem that I knew he would like. I read a poem. I also spoke, but I read a poem that had been read at Jackie Kennedy’s [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis] service. She liked to travel, and he liked to travel all the time, and it was a poem—I think the title is “To Ithaca,” but meaning the Greek Ithaca, in the Greek sense. I read the poem and it was about traveling, and it’s got a kind of theme, and at the end of life, it’s a journey. It’s a very, very moving poem. So I read that poem in his honor. I had thought a lot about what I wanted to say. I talked about our relationship, and how the student sometimes becomes the colleague, and then sometimes becomes the friend, and then sometimes even becomes the teacher, at the end. Because at the end of his illness, we were all supporting him and reading to him and trying to help him figure out what he wanted to do at the end of his life, so it was really one of the most interesting relationships I’ve had in my entire life, as you can imagine, from the time I entered the school. And I miss him. I’ll show you a picture I have of him that I keep right on my bedside table. [goes to get picture] Because he became like a member of the family.

McGarrigle: Let me see.

[end of session]
Interview 11: October 21, 2003

[begin minidisc 19]

McGarrigle: Today is Thursday, October 21st. I’m just checking the recording levels. Okay.

Gibbs: Well, I guess we’d have to go back a little bit to 1967 when I entered Berkeley for my master’s degree. So I was there for three very crucial years, ’67, ’68, ’69. I finished June of ’70, and that was the height of the strike, those years, especially the second year. I was living here, I had young children, and my object was to go to Berkeley and to get a degree. And you have to remember that I had been active all my life in college and in Minnesota, which I’m sure I mentioned, in political and civil rights causes. So I was actually a seasoned community activist by the time I came here and had my children and had gotten back to graduate school. So I was in sympathy, basically, with the goals of the strike, but there was no novelty to me to marching or trying to be a spokesman. I figured, you know, I’ve done that, I’ve enjoyed it, but now I have to focus on my graduate training.

So I didn’t get involved at all except very peripherally, because you couldn’t be on campus and not have—you had to take sides one way or the other. So I had a very peripheral involvement in my school, and the students would have meetings, the graduate students. I would go to the meetings and sometimes I would make comments. And I also felt—I was on the side of peaceful protest, because I had felt that that was the way to go, with Martin Luther King and all the other things that were going on, that it’s peaceful protest that we need, not vandalism and throwing bombs or anything. And I would speak up about the importance of having peaceful protest.

Other than that, attending meetings within my own graduate school. That was all I did. But however, you got caught up even if you didn’t want to get caught up. I thought I might have mentioned to you about coming home one night when Reagan called in the National Guard.

McGarrigle: About the tear gas, yes.

Gibbs: Yes, I was affected by the tear gas one night. And that is the closest I came to actually being affected by the riots on campus. Then they died down, I guess—well, first there was the Third World Strike. And then of course, right after that, you had the anti-Vietnam War movement, which went on and on. So when I started—by the time I came back here, when I finished my master’s and came back here to work, that movement was really in full swing at Berkeley and here too, but I was then a professional woman with kids and I was not at all involved directly in that movement, in the anti-war movement. Of course, I sent money and I supported it, but I wasn’t out marching. So I really didn’t get involved as a student, you know, in those days, because I was really an older student with a family, and my object was to get out of there
and get home and cook dinner. So that’s what I was thinking about, not whether I was going to protest with marches or anything. So I really don’t have too much to say about it, except I certainly agreed with the goals. But I also thought it was important not to get involved in violent protests, because that I didn’t see as helpful. So that’s pretty much where I was on that.

McGarrigle: Can you tell me about your first day teaching? We talked about how you spent the summer preparing, you were hired before summer to start teaching in the fall. Do you remember your first day?

Gibbs: Well, I remember feeling a little bit overwhelmed, because I had approximately three months to prepare. I was hired, and the problem is that the process was slow, and it wasn’t until after July first that I was sure I had the job. But they assumed—I had the approval of the university, but the [University of California] Regents have to pass on all the professors. That takes a little longer, and I think that by the time July 1st came, I had definitely been voted on. But anyway, I had an office and all that, I came in. So I spent the summer preparing. Fortunately, I felt that I could do a lot down here, because we have a good library, not in social work, but a lot of the books they use were down here.

So I spent the summer preparing, but I had three months. Luckily, the first term I had one course. But after that, it just mushroomed. We had at that time the quarter system, which by the way, I hate, because it’s too fast. The professor doesn’t have enough time to really go thoroughly into a course, and the students only get a superficial, really very superficial exposure, to whatever the course is. I don’t care what field it is. You cannot teach that much in a quarter. I like the semester system, because it’s slower, it gives the professor more time to teach the information and discuss the information, and it gives the students more time to digest the information and do good research projects. It’s just a slower pace, and I really like it much better.

McGarrigle: So there was a time, I think it was in the mid-eighties, when it was voted on to return to the semester system.

Gibbs: Yes, yes. I can’t even remember the year, but I was very happy when they returned, because they had gone from the semester to the quarter system, and I got there when they were in the quarter system. I never liked it, from the very beginning, because you’re trying to be teaching in this quarter while you’re ordering your books and planning your syllabus for the next quarter, so you’re always having to plan two or three months ahead of time, and you’re sort of never—it’s hard to really concentrate on what you’re doing now in the quarter system, because you’re always planning for what you’re going to do in three months. It’s just a very hectic system.

Anyway, I guess I was not as nervous as a new professor ordinarily would be, because I had had some teaching experience in Minnesota. I was lucky, you
know, I had taught one psychology course at a little junior college called St. Mary’s in Minnesota. I had done some teaching at the university, two different summer institutes, and I felt kind of—well, you know, I know what I have to do and I am not that nervous about it. I just have to control my end of it. I am the one, if I’m prepared, I have to get there on time, I have to get my materials ready, and the rest will take care of itself, and I did feel that way. I think it was because I had had this little experience before. There was some nervousness, but there really wasn’t a lot. And I like teaching, and I like, I think I’ve told you I have to admit—it’s a kind of a performance. And I will admit, and all my colleagues will tell you, I like that part of it.

You develop your own style as a teacher, and my style is very interactive, but I don’t like a style where the professor completely turns the course over to the students and lets them do all the talking, or she doesn’t give any guidance or throw out any questions or ask any. This so-called Socratic style may be okay for law students, but I never liked that style. I really like a more active style. So that my courses, all the way through, were always—unless if I had a very small seminar. There were a couple of times I had fewer than twelve in a class, so there might be, say, eight to ten, because you have to have about eight to have a class at Berkeley. So when they were small, two or three times I had very small classes, then it would be more like a seminar, which is always—most people run seminars little bit more in the Socratic method. But if the class is bigger and you have to impart so much information—and I always felt very pressured about that, I always felt very pressured—this is the information I want to cover in this course, and how can I best do that?

So my method and my approach was half of the class would be really a lecture. I would give them the information that I thought they had to have, that was important for them to have to learn the skills they needed to have and the knowledge they needed to have to work with their clients. And then the other half, so if I had two hours, the first hour was mainly—or the first fifty minutes would be a lecture. And it would be a loose lecture in the sense that I would be prepared with an outline, but if they wanted to ask questions, and sometimes we might diverge here, we might diverge there. But I always had in my mind where we needed to end up at the first hour. And if I hadn’t ended up there, then I would take maybe ten minutes in the second hour. Then after I’d given my, it was basically a fifty-minute lecture, then the next hour I would open it up to general discussions and questions. And sometimes I’d have the students give little presentations of their own, fifteen-minute presentations for a midterm or something.

So this is the way I always taught. I always had a combination of the lecture and discussion rather than all discussion, because, you know, those can get out of hand. Then what happens is you have a few students who do all the talking and the other kids feel like they’re not learning anything, and I didn’t want that. So that was the way I taught, and that was the way I thought it was effective. I guess it must have been, because I always got very high teacher’s
ratings. I should show you some of my teacher’s ratings, if I can find them. They’d write comments. The ratings—I guess there’s still a seven point scale—I always ended up with an average of 6.0 or higher, which is, you can’t do much better unless you end up with a perfect seven. There were some small courses where I would get a seven, and the dean always would tease me about that. He said, “What are you doing, Jewelle, in those classes so you get a seven?” [laughs] I said, “You should come and see.”

McGarrigle: That might have—did that create envy among some of your colleagues?

Gibbs: Well, I don’t want to say that, but you might imagine that it became a little bit of a problem with some of my colleagues who were lucky to get a 3.5, which is the mean. And there was, I don’t want to say that there was envy, but I would say there were two or three people who were not good teachers and had a lot of trouble teaching. And, more than that, sometimes they would come and ask me—one of my colleagues asked me to come to lunch with him once. He came in with me, and he was a very poor teacher. And everybody knew he was a poor teacher. But he was so brilliant. His problem was—it’s almost that he was too brilliant, and he wanted to put too much information into the class, and then he didn’t know when too much was too much, when too much was enough, I would say. And he would also use a vocabulary that was often too complicated or technical for them, and they would feel intimidated, so they would feel they couldn’t ask questions, because they felt he was so smart. You know, sometimes you get a professor like this, and they didn’t want to show him that they weren’t smart, so that they ended up feeling frustrated.

So he asked me the second year—we both came in together—he said, “I heard you got wonderful teaching ratings.” Actually, my first year was excellent. He said, “So I wish you’d give me some tips,” and I appreciated that. I had heard about his problems, and over the years he did improve. You have to be very careful when you give people tips, because you don’t want them to feel bad about—or to know what you’ve heard. But I had heard the students complain, and students went to the dean about him. So finally the dean suggested that he take—they do have these teaching courses for professors, teaching them teaching techniques. But anyway, I told him what some of my techniques were.

But you know, everybody’s different. And I don’t think he ever relaxed in the classroom, and that’s one of the keys to being a good professor, to relax in the classroom. Because if you’re anxious, the students know you’re anxious. And if you’re anxious, you have one or two students who will kind of get under your skin, if they feel either you’re anxious or you don’t know the material or something. So one of my principles was always be prepared. I had these principles about teaching. Always be prepared, because if you’re prepared, you don’t have to be anxious. The only times I ever felt anxiety was when I had a new lecture coming up and I hadn’t quite read all that I wanted to read about it, or I hadn’t checked the assignment, or I had forgotten maybe an
article I had given them and I hadn’t looked at it recently, and then I would feel anxious. If somebody asked me about that—[laughs] and that happened once in a while. It always happens. You go out late, you spend the weekend going out and cleaning your house or doing other things or going away, and then Monday you’re faced with the fact that you’re not really quite prepared for this lecture. So that happened once in a while.

Then the other principle I had is that you really have to encourage class participation and you have to treat every student with equal respect, because if you only reward the smart students and the talkative students, the other students feel left out. So I was really very conscious of bringing in the quiet students, of giving the quiet students a lot of feedback and a lot of reinforcement. Sometimes I’d encourage questions or comments, and sometimes there’s a student, and often the first-year students would say things that were so way out or so incorrect. Instead of saying—and some of my colleagues would—“Oh, that’s a stupid comment,” or, “Where did you get that idea?” or, “Don’t you ever think?” or, “Didn’t you read the article?” I would always say some variation of, “Well, that’s an interesting point. Now, let me ask you to elaborate on that point,” or, “Do you think there’s another point of view?” Especially if the student was really flat out wrong, I would say, “Well, do you think there’s another point of view?” or, “Can you think of another angle on the point?” or something. So I would always give them an out.

I would always feel it’s really important not to embarrass students. And if they do have the courage to raise their hand, even when they’re not sure, you really have to encourage that, instead of discouraging it. So I had this way of bringing in the quiet ones and reinforcing the ones who were maybe not as bright as some of the others, too, I mean just literally, they would read the same material and sometimes they didn’t get it, and you would know they hadn’t gotten it. But you didn’t want to embarrass them, so you’d have to say something like, “Well, let’s think about that some more. That’s an interesting point,” or, “That’s a good point,” or something. And they would hear that message, that this is an interesting point or this is a good point, and that message would encourage them to keep talking.

Then another thing I also realized very early on, which a lot of high school teachers I think need to understand, is you really have to control your class, because every year there can be one or two bad actors in a class. You know, people who are smart alecks, people who are clowns, people who want to be disruptive for some reason or another or want to show off to their girlfriend or something. There’s always at least one, and sometimes there may be a pair of them. So I found that was an important thing for a new professor, and I think because I was older that was easier for me. My colleague, the one who had trouble teaching, never controlled his class. You would walk by and you would see people talking and writing notes—he would keep his door open—you’d see people talking, writing notes, not paying him any attention. He
never learned how important that was, that you have to control your class. So I learned that you do have to control your class. They’re there to learn, and you have to let them know that that is the major reason they’re in the room, and if they want to read the paper or have a discussion, or you know, flirt with their friends, they can go out and take a break. And I would make that clear. I think people did respect me for that. They knew they weren’t going to fool around. I said, “You know, we’re here to learn, we’re not here to play.”

McGarrigle: So I’m wondering how many women there were in the department when you came.

Gibbs: I was only the second tenured woman. There were a lot of women teaching, and you know, they had this—I really think it’s a form of second-class citizenship, where the lecturers are hired every three years and they get contracts. And at the School of Social Welfare, we have a lot of lecturers, because basically they work with the students in their fieldwork, placements out in the community. That’s their role. So they may teach one course, usually one course a semester or one course a quarter, and the other part of their job, the other half of their job, is supervising students who are working at different agencies. They aren’t expected to publish. It’s not part of their job. If they want to publish and they have time, that’s fine. And they are treated differently. They are called clinical faculty, or field faculty, clinical meaning they are the people who are working with the students in the agencies, or field, meaning field work, faculty. So that was mainly women, that group.

And what’s interesting is, it was exactly the opposite of what they called the academic faculty. So the academic faculty—all men except for one woman, when I came. There were actually, I think when I came there were actually two women, and the other one was an assistant professor who clearly had already decided that this was not for her. It was her third year, and she had pretty much clearly decided that she wasn’t going to go up for tenure. It mean, it was pretty clear in her behavior that she had decided that. The other woman was a senior woman who’s still there, a senior woman named Eileen Gambrill. And when I came in, then, I was the third woman on the academic faculty.

So there were these little pressures, little tensions, and this second woman I mentioned left soon after I came. Her name was Charlane Brown. She may have stayed the whole six years, but she didn’t actually ever come up for tenure, because she knew that she wasn’t going to make it. And I don’t know where she went from there, except I think she got married, and I don’t think she went back into the academic world. But I think she married, if my memory serves me right. So then there were two of us, Eileen who had been there and had a fight over tenure, and that’s an interesting thing. I don’t know all the details, but she had to bring a suit, because that was what it was in those days, for women to get tenure at Berkeley. Many of the early women at Berkeley actually brought suit, because they said, you know, “I have met all the requirements. I have done all the things you said I needed to do, and why
aren’t you giving me tenure?” You had to be courageous to bring a suit in those days, because you weren’t sure you would win, and they would go out of their way to find reasons why you didn’t deserve tenure. So you put your life on the line and your reputation on the line.

Eileen was really willing to do that. She was going to take them to court, but anyway they did give her tenure. So then when I was coming up, the question was, was I—I didn’t want to have to do that, because there’s always fallout. Then she made enemies and they never like you after that. And I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do that.

But before we even get to the tenure, so the first few years of teaching went well, but I felt that I was on too many committees. The first fight I ever had with the dean was over the committees. And there were three of us hired at the same time. I mentioned this one man. The other one was a Chinese-American woman. We went together, because we realized if one of us went, that we would be targeted, but if all three of us went, the three new assistant professors, that there is strength in numbers. Well, I can’t even begin to describe to you the interview we had with him. We were on seven committees as assistant professors. This is unheard of.

McGarrigle: This is assigned by the dean? You don’t sign up for these.

Gibbs: Well, the dean and the chairman of the faculty. Because they had been understaffed for years, so when we came in, we were new blood. So instead of saying, well, let’s go slow and let’s only put each one on two or three committees—because in most departments, assistant professors are only required to serve on one committee, one, and I knew that. In smaller departments, maybe they might serve on a maximum of two, but that was it, and I knew that. He had us on seven committees. Now, the truth is, some of the seven were actually like subcommittees of a bigger committee, but they had a different day to meet. So in terms of your time available, you had seven different obligations to meet, which took you away from teaching and research. And when you are an assistant professor, that is absolutely essential, that you have time to do your research and your writing because you won’t go up for lecture.

So at the end, I think it was either the end of the first year or the beginning of the second year, we went to see him. I can’t remember exactly. But I think it was the beginning of the second year. Because I had complained to him privately the first year that I thought there were too many committees. And also because I was commuting, it was very hard for me. Sometimes the committees would meet at night for dinner. Then I’d have to stay over with friends in Berkeley. I complained to the dean. That fall, I realized that the other two felt the same way I did, so we went to see him.
Well, he grilled us like we were on the witness stand. “What do you do with all your free time?” We said, “What free time?” By the second year, we’re teaching two courses each semester, each quarter—that’s six courses. I said, “What free time?” He just kind of grilled us, and it was very embarrassing, as if we were children. He treated us like we were children.

And finally I think all of us said to him, “You know, Harry, we will never make tenure if you don’t take us off some of these committees.” He said, “Well, I’ll think about it. But we’re understaffed and we need people.” So he didn’t do anything the first semester, the first quarter—yes, it was that year, the second year. So in the spring he went away and he hadn’t done anything about the committees. He was gone. So I said to my two colleagues, “Well, you know, while he’s away, we should go see the acting dean, because otherwise next year it will be the same,” because they appoint the committees in the spring, in May, for the following year.

So we went to see the acting dean, and he was even worse. He was just really like, “Well, why are you whining? Why are you complaining? Aren’t you happy here?” It was just that kind of thing, that we’re whining and we’re complaining, and I said to him—it was Ralph Kramer, who was a senior professor. I said, “Ralph, we’re really working so hard, we are not getting our work done that we need to get for tenure.” If we’re meeting every day—and some days there are two committee meetings. We go home, we’re tired, you have night meetings, you have breakfast meetings, I said, “When are we supposed to do our writing?” “Well, you have plenty of time. You have the weekends.” Well, of course, I had children. And she was married. The other guy was single. So it’s always the men who are single who have the most time.

So anyway, to make a long story short, that was the first time I realized if you don’t take care of yourself, nobody else is going to take care of you. I said to them, “Okay, I’m going to go see the provost,” who happened to be a woman provost at the time—no, actually it was [George] Maslach, because he was later replaced by Doris [Calloway]—his daughter [Christina] is now a dean or something, but it was her father. So I went to see him and told him the situation. I don’t think the other two came, but I’m not sure. I have a vague memory that they didn’t come and I went by myself. I laid it all out to him. He was furious, not with me. He said, “What do you mean, seven committees?” I said, “Well, I mean what I said.” He said, “Name them,” and I told him. He said, “That’s ridiculous.” While I was in his office, he picked up the phone and he called Ralph Kramer, the assistant dean. He said, “Ralph, I want to talk to you. What are you doing to your assistant professors over there?” [laughs]

Well, anyway, to make a long story short, he said, “Well, I want to see you about these committees, because if you want these people to stay, and you want these people to get tenure, you have got to get them off some of these committees.” Of course, you realize that did not make me popular. And Ralph
Kramer I don’t think ever forgave me. He had an office right next door to mine for a long time. It took him a long time before he warmed up to me. But when I came back, later that day, he said, “Well, I heard you went over and complained about us to the provost.” I said, “Well, we came to you first, and it looks like you didn’t want to do anything. Yes, I did go.” He said, “Well, we’ll see about that.” Oh, he was furious.

Anyway, the upshot was the next fall, we were on three committees, which of course was still one more than anybody else had, but that’s okay. After that, until I became an associate professor, it was basically three committees. But what happened was, it was interesting, because it came up in—you asked me about the faculty meetings. I had gone to the chair of the faculty to complain, and he actually was kind of a friend of mine. I had worked for him as a TA when I was in school before. And he said, “You know, Jewelle, we’re all on too many committees. Maybe this will be good for all of us.”

So the following fall, when we came back, it turned out that—in fact, our committees were reduced by Christmas after I went to see the provost. But the following fall we came back, everybody had fewer committees. What happened is, they realized that the school, they were all spending too much time on committees. They then consolidated a number of committees and it was better for everybody. He said to me, Henry Miller, “I want to thank you, because if you had never had complained about those committees, we’d all be going around in circles. Now, we looked at those committees and some were repetitious. They overlapped, they were unnecessary. There are some you don’t even need. We had more committees than some three or four schools combined. And I looked at the other departments, and I found out they had maybe six committees, and we had dozens of committees,” little tiny committees, book committees, curriculum committees, Christmas party planning committees—I mean, it went on and on. [laughter] And everybody was expected to do their share, which was why we ended up with seven.

Well, it turned out to be a blessing, because they sort of reorganized the structure of the committees. Henry Miller, who was the chair of the faculty then, went to the faculty—and I was at the meeting then—he said, “I think it’s a good idea, that we need to streamline our committees. We’ll all have more time.” So in the end, everybody sort of benefited from our little revolt. But on the other hand, it sort of targeted me, in a way, as a little bit of a troublemaker, and that was my reputation for a long time. You know, watch out, she’s a little bit of a troublemaker. But, the thing about being a troublemaker or whistleblower, as they call them, is that people then are a little bit more careful about how they treat you. Because I was saying, “We’re not being treated fairly.” And the provost agreed with me. And when they saw that he agreed with me, they cut down the committees.

I think they also realized that the provost—in fact, before I left, he said, “I’m going to keep an eye on you, Professor Gibbs, and your career. I’m going to
keep an eye on you. First of all, we’re going to cut out these committees. We’re going to give you more time, and I have high hopes for you.” I remember very much that he was saying to me—it was kind of a double-edged message, that this time you’re right, and I’m going to help you out; now it’s up to you to do the work so you can get—I mean, I understood what he was saying—so you can get tenure. But it also meant that he had an eye out for me in a way. I mean, I think he was interested in having me get to tenure, is what I felt. I felt that he was invested in this woman who had come to say, I need your help, and if you help me—my part of the bargain I understood. So it didn’t hurt.

In the long run, it did not hurt that he knew me personally, in other words, that I wasn’t just a figure, that he knew who I was. And I think for my dean, that he realized that Maslach was interested in me. Apparently, he told me later, “Every time I see the provost, he says, ‘Well, how is Professor Gibbs doing?’” [laughter] So it was a little bit of a—I admit it was a little bit of a double-edged sword, but I thought in the end—you know, I told you a long time ago, ever since we’ve been talking, that people, women have to take up for themselves, because if we don’t, basically the society is ready to kind of steamroll us. So I’ve always felt that if nobody else will take up for me, I’ll take up for myself. So that’s what I did. That was one of my first big kind of, I guess you could say, little revolts at Berkeley.

McGarrigle: Well, was there some kind of a welcome for you? I know you were known in the department already, but was there a welcome for you in this new status as faculty?

Gibbs: Yes, there really was. Everybody was very nice at first, very accommodating, and except for the committee problem, everybody was very nice and they seemed happy to see me. I had known some of the secretaries who had then kind of climbed up. One had become an office manager in the department. And so I felt really quite at home. Because of the three of us hired at the same time, I was here and the other two lived somewhere else. They were back East and they were moving here, so I got my first choice of the office. So the department administrator, who was a woman named Kay Stewart, said—she called me Jewelle because she had known me as Jewelle as a student—and she said, “Listen, I’m going to show you the best office. I’m going to show you all three offices that we have, but I’ll let you pick the one that you want, but I’ll tell you which one I think is the best one.” So she gave me one with a view of the carillon, the [Sather campanile] tower, and she gave me that office. It overlooks—you can see the back of the big library from my office, Doe, and you can see the tower, so that was nice.

McGarrigle: Was that your office the whole time?

Gibbs: The whole time. I never left it. I liked it, and it also was right over our parking lot, so it was convenient, too. So I had the nicest office because she said, “I
knew you as a student, and you’re here, and I want you to have the best office.” So I felt that from the beginning, everybody was friendly and I also thought that they were all cheering me on. I was not the first black woman ever hired to teach there. But the previous black woman had failed badly a couple of years before that. She had been hired as an assistant professor and she had not done well at all. Usually, you have three years, and they asked her to leave I think after her first year, she was so bad. I think it was after the first year. I’m not 100 percent sure, but she didn’t make the three years. She didn’t come to class on time; she didn’t do her assignments on time; she missed faculty meetings. Well, you just can’t do all that. Apparently she was just a disaster. She had no concept of what a professor does and what a professor’s role is, and the responsibilities.

And because she was black, there was sort of a little bit of extra pressure, I think, on me to do well, and a couple of them mentioned to me, well, we don’t want you to be like so-and-so. I realized there’s always this, if you’re a minority, you have to represent all minorities, and of course, as far as they were concerned, she was a black woman, and therefore another black woman has to come along and be judged, you know, compared to her, and that’s the way it is. So anyway, I understood that. But I would have to say that people were cordial—and people entertained us, you know, the dean gave all the new people a dinner party, which, that’s kind of the custom for new people. He gave all three of us a dinner party, and different ones of my colleagues invited us to dinner, and Jim would go up with me. So I feel they were really quite welcoming, because I had known most of them as my teachers, you know. I was getting to know them just in a different way.

McGarrigle: Then you were embarking on a marriage of two faculty members.

Gibbs: That’s right.

McGarrigle: So that was a difference, too.

Gibbs: That’s right. So it was interesting. And there used to be a lot of teasing of my husband, whenever we were up there, oh, the teasing about Stanford. And if they came down here, vice versa. He sort of enjoyed it. There were two or three of my colleagues who really got to like him. He got to like them, too, so it was a good—since he was also an academic, you know, they were more comfortable with him than they might have been with somebody who was not an academic. So anyway, I think I got a good start.

McGarrigle: I have information on some of your first courses. I don’t have from the first year—oh, I guess there’s this committee, dean’s advisory committee on ethnic content. You know, there are several committees here. Committee service from ’81 to ’82.

Gibbs: Look at them.
McGarrigle: Ad hoc committee for merit increase, ad hoc committee for ethnic content for report of School of Social Welfare re-accreditation committee.

Gibbs: That was a big one.

McGarrigle: Planning task force, subcommittee on methods, curriculum subcommittee on human behavior and the social environment, admissions committee, ad hoc subcommittee to read folders for direct service applicants, ad hoc committee to plan fall colloquium, co-sponsored with School of Public Health.

Gibbs: So you see.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: You see the committees.

McGarrigle: So that was the first year.

Gibbs: And I don’t have to say any more. But let me add another point about committees. This is really important to say. This needs a whole chapter, that one of the issues that minority and women faculty, new minority faculty and women faculty face at every single university, is being sort of trotted out as a symbol for everything. So the problem is, they put you on all these committees, not just in their department, but then the university wants to showcase them, so the university wants to put them on the committees. And the problem is, the more committees they are on, the less likely they’re going to get tenure. So it’s a very vicious circle. It is a revolving door for so many young women and minorities who don’t catch on and don’t complain like I did. And even though I complained, for example, very early on in my first year, the beginning of my second year I was appointed to a university-wide committee. This is very unusual for a man in the university. The male professors, they can sit there for six years, nobody’s ever heard of them.

But if you’re a woman or you’re a minority, and if you’re a minority woman even better, because you know, the word “two-fer”—I was a two-fer. Which means everybody wants to say, “Oh, here we have this minority woman.” The federal government comes in, and “How many women do you have, how many minorities?” The accreditation committees come in, “How many women, how many minorities? What are they doing? Are they on the committees? Do they have responsibilities? What are they teaching?”

So, what did they do? They figure out very early, they have this little tiny pool. Okay, now, we’re going to put her on this university committee, put him on that university committee, put her on this ad hoc committee, put him on this—listen, I was on so many committees, they were coming out of my ears. I was on school committees. I was on Berkeley campus committees, which is that campus. I was on statewide committees, several. Now, I was the chair
several times of the committee on scholarships for minorities. It’s changed its name over the years, but that one. Several times I was on and chaired the committee on the status of women and ethnic minorities. That’s a separate one from the committee on scholarships that go to minorities. So you have the committee, SWEM, they call it, Committee on the Status of Women and Ethnic Minorities, committee on scholarships that help ethnic minorities, and gradually worked my way up to basically the steering committee of the Academic Senate, which is, you know, about as high as you can go unless you’re going to serve on the—well, that is as high as you can go on that campus, is the steering committee of the Academic Senate. I got there because—I served on that actually twice—because all the chairs of all the major committees serve on the steering committee. Okay? That’s a lot of work. A lot of work.

But thank God, by the time I got on that committee, I had tenure, because it’s a lot of work. And the only committee that works harder is the budget committee, which you know about the budget committee. They are the hardest working of all committees, because they have to decide all of these promotions and appointments. But the committee that I served on, which is the steering committee, or like an executive committee, decides the agenda for every meeting of the Academic Senate, and looks at the issues that we have to discuss, and reads all the reports that come through the university that we have to either approve or disapprove or just read for information. A lot of work.

So this is what happens. And then if you’re a good committee member, I mean, it’s even worse. Because if you’re not just sitting there and using up space, but if you talk and you take initiative and you take on responsibilities, oh, my God, they love you. [laughs] And in my case, my husband used to say, “Jewelle, you can’t have it both ways.” I would complain about the committees, but on the other hand I always wanted to have an active role in the committees, you know. I figured, well, if I’m going to go, I may as well not just sit there like a bump on a log, but be active. The minute you open your mouth—oh, well, here, you can be chair of this subcommittee. [laughter] So really, you’re in a bind. The bind you’re in is, first of all, will you ever have time to do your work that you’re supposed to do to get your next promotion while you’re doing these committees, and if you decide that you can, then when you’re on the committees, how active do you want to be. And do you want to be there, or do you want to be just a symbol?

And my feeling was, if you’re going to be on a committee, work on the committee, and do something and help whoever it is that you’re supposed to be helping. So then I got in trouble. I have a career studded with my—[laughs] I don’t know, if you ask anybody, Did you ever hear—a couple of years ago, now I’m gone—of Professor Gibbs, they would all say, “Oh, yes! We know her!” Especially the men. I had this reputation, and I’m aware of it, a little bit, as I say, of the gadfly.
So when I got on the Committee of the Status of Women and Ethnic Minorities, I mean, that committee wasn’t doing what it should do, okay? Which is to advocate really aggressively for hiring more women and minorities, for giving them more responsible positions, for bringing them into the administration.

McGarrigle: And who was on the committee when you joined, I mean, more or less?

Gibbs: Oh, gee, I don’t even remember all the names. It varies. There were some women and some men. But see, I was on it three different times, so it would be hard for me to recall.

McGarrigle: Okay. I just wondered if it was made up mostly of minority faculty?

Gibbs: No, no.

McGarrigle: It was the majority—

Gibbs: No. And they made a point of putting white men on it, which was good. We would have about seven or eight members, and there would be equal numbers of white and minority representatives, by and large, and one or two men, one white and one minority. That’s how it would be. Because remember, it’s a committee on women and ethnic minorities. So you had to have some men. But they didn’t want to have it be all minority, because that doesn’t look right either. The university should be interested in having this committee integrated. So they did a pretty good job. So when you asked me, I mean, Chris Maslach served on it as chair before I did. There were a lot of other women who have become really quite prominent at the university.

McGarrigle: I think Mary Ann Mason—

Gibbs: Mary Ann I’m sure was on it at some time. I think many of the women who later went into administration did serve on that committee. But Chris and I—I was co-chair with Chris—decided that we were going to take the university on about the kinds of committees that minorities got appointed to. We had decided it’s not enough to put us on the committees that deal with minorities, because those are not the most powerful committees, obviously. The powerful committees are committees like the budget committee, long-range planning committee, academic—well, I’m not sure right now of the exact title, but it’s an academic curricular committee, those who plan the curriculum and the criteria for majors and things. So we decided that we were going to take the university on and we were going to do—I think we did a ten-year study of who served on those committees. And boy, it really was something. Maybe it was longer than ten years. I’m trying to remember, no, I think it was longer than ten years. It might have been twenty to twenty-five. Because it was a long time. We got the records, because all you had to do was ask the academic secretary. Turns out that basically only about ten departments in the whole
university had been represented on the budget committee, and those are the
ten departments which are considered the departments with the most prestige.
So they’re deciding for everybody else about their departments. So you had
history, chemistry, physics, economics, departments like that.

There were some departments that had never had a member on the budget
committee, never, and they were mainly the social science departments. And
what we were shocked to find out was the Psychology Department, which was
one of the largest departments at Berkeley, had had only a couple of members
on the budget committee in all that time. It was twenty to twenty-five years.
And social welfare had never had one. Sociology had had maybe a couple.
But there was a definite bias for the hard sciences and what we called the
status departments. History was always a status department. English had had
some, but history, the science departments, and economics were those—and
the law school. Those departments dominated the budget committee for a very
long time. And our point was: you have a small group of people who are
serving on the budget committee year after year after year, making decisions
about all of the other departments, some of which they have no experience
with. So if you don’t have a social science department on, how can these
people from law and physics and chemistry decide what looks like a good
record for a sociologist or a psychologist?

The other thing we found out, that in the whole history there had been, I
believe—I’d have to find the report, it’s in my office—but I think no more
than two minorities, two blacks. There had been a couple of Asians, but no
more than two blacks, in this long period of time. It was disgraceful. And we
published it. You have to report annually to the Academic Senate, and we’d
said we were going to be quiet. When the report came out, the Daily
[Californian] picked it up. The campus was upset. The academic leaders were
upset, challenged our findings. Well, we had the statistics. We had a student
do the statistics, but we had them. We had our data, okay? Oh, they were
really upset. And of course, I was glad Chris was there with me, because we
had to take a lot of heat. The women, of course, were delighted. The
minorities were delighted, exposing the good old boy network, which was
what it was. Very few women—so first of all, they had very few departments
and certain kinds of departments, very few women, and almost no minorities
in that period of time, okay? So what does it show? It shows what we had
been saying all along, that it’s an old boy’s network running the university.

So after it came out, the people who appoint—in fact, the steering committee
of the Academic Senate is responsible for these things. The budget committee
is nominated, but the whole campus votes for them, but who is nominated
then, is the question, see? So you do get a vote, but you only get a vote—
unless you want to write in, and most people don’t—so who’s nominated?
And who’s nominated, the nominations come from the Academic Senate,
from the committee on committees, which is again another powerful
committee. So that it is the committee on committees, long-range planning,
budget committee, none of those committees had many, either none or one or two, minorities and women. And this is what was going on in the eighties, late eighties, this is what is going on at Berkeley, okay?

It was shocking, even to us, even to those of us who did the study, it was shocking. We knew it would be bad, but we had no idea it would be that bad. So then of course, they had to discuss—you have to discuss each report, which is usually pro forma, in the Academic Senate. So she and I went prepared to—we thought they might throw tomatoes at us or something. And there was a lot of hostility. But anyway, we made the recommendation that the committee on committees should take extra care and pay extra attention to whom they nominate for the budget committee and other important committees, to be sure that it represented the diversity of the campus. It was pretty mild. Actually, it was so mild, the recommendation, that they had to vote for it. But it just gives you some sense of—this is the late eighties—of what was going on in Berkeley.

And since then, there have been some changes. I won’t say the changes have been amazing, but I’ve been away for three years now, and I haven’t really looked at the committee list lately. But before I left, there were some changes. I could see some more women were being nominated for the budget committee, women were serving on the committee on committees. And that’s all we wanted. And minorities. So that was, again, a confrontation with these people who wanted to sort of exclude women and minorities from the whole process, the important decisions at a university.

McGarrigle: Well, no one had looked at it before. That’s amazing.

Gibbs: Well, I don’t think anybody thought about taking them on before. Our committee should have done that years ago. That’s what I’m saying: they didn’t do much. They didn’t do what they should have been doing.

McGarrigle: What they were charged with.

Gibbs: Well, they did little things, you know, like giving receptions for new women faculty and new minority faculty. But you see, they needed—they hadn’t done a lot about policy issues, and they had complained about salary structures before I was chair. There had been a report showing that the female faculty, even with years of experience and all, still made less money than the male faculty. They were hired at lower salaries, so therefore their salaries started lower, so their average salary remained lower than their peers’, and it took longer for them to get tenure, if they got it at all. So that was done, and that was an important committee report before I became chair. The committee was going more in the direction of really taking on the establishment and some of their practices that were definitely not supportive of women or minorities.
McGarrigle: And how did that decision to make that study come about? Was that a decision that you made jointly with—?

Gibbs: Yes. I think Chris and I—we were the co-chairs—we discussed it with the committee and said we thought it would be a good thing, because we had noticed that there weren’t many women and minorities serving on these committees, and we shouldn’t be the only committee that had women and minorities. We had more than most, of course, because of the title. So we decided that we needed to study it. Even when we decided to study it and we knew it was an issue, nobody realized what we were going to find. It was really shocking. That’s all I can tell you. And then of course, all the excuses—“Well, there weren’t many women in those days,” and all the excuses, and there weren’t many minorities. Yes, that’s true, but of those who were here, why weren’t any of them nominated for these committees? Yes, it is true. So as time has gone on and you’ve had more women, now we have more women administrators, you can see things changing. So that was another of my major battles with Berkeley. But I think the outcome has been pretty good.

McGarrigle: I’m going to stop the tape and get us a new tape.

[begin minidisc 20]

McGarrigle: I had read about that traumatic situation where the young woman was raped. Tell me how that happened, that you came to be involved.

Gibbs: Well, what happened was—

McGarrigle: We’re in the late eighties, now, too. I don’t have a date on that.

Gibbs: Well, look on my CV, it will tell you about my committees.

McGarrigle: Okay. I have that one at home, probably, if it’s later.

Gibbs: Yes, it will tell you the year, but it was in the late eighties. By this time, I was an associate professor, and again—well, I need to tell you something else first. Because when I was thinking about coming up for—I mean, my teaching went well and I was getting things published, but in the first three years of my teaching, the first three summers, I had a death in my family. So in May of 1981, my father died. In the summer of 1982, a foster sister who actually grew up with us, so she was like a sister, she died. And then in 1984, my brother died, in June. All summer, late spring or summer deaths. Now, that’s the time when they say, “You have the summer to write, right?” And they do tell all assistant professors, spend your summer not fooling around and vacationing all over the world, but writing, because that’s when you have the time, and you have no obligation to teach or anything, unless you want to teach summer school. Our school didn’t have a summer school at that time. And I didn’t
need the money to teach anywhere else. So those were the summers that I was supposed to be doing my work to come up eventually for tenure.

Well, I can only tell you, I basically lost all of those summers. I lost a good part of the year my father died, because it was very upsetting to me, and I would just sit around and mope and didn’t have any energy. I was grieving, and I didn’t feel like writing articles, okay? So I didn’t get much done. I did get one out, but that was with great effort. I had to just really—it was like fighting through water. I’d feel like I was just kind of drowning in sorrow, and I would be writing. It was horrible. But I did get one out. And I worked on maybe one or two others for my dissertation.

Well, then the next summer my sister died, and then two summers after that my brother died. And all of these—these are young people at the time. My brother was actually forty-eight or forty-nine when he died. I thought, ‘How will I ever, ever get tenure? I just can’t.’

In the meantime, I had gotten my first—you know, you have your three-year reappointment, where they’re going to give you another three years. Well, it’s not exactly a reappointment, but it’s that you put in your papers and you get a progress report and things are going okay, all right? Here they have these levels of salary, so I got my increase to show that things were going okay, and I got a pretty good increase, so I knew I was doing okay. But I knew also that I didn’t have enough really to get tenure.

So I applied for a semester off and went to Boston, you know, at Radcliffe they used to have an institute for women. They still have it, but it’s a whole new setup now. Anyway, it used to be called the Mary Bunting Institute for Research. I got a fellowship. My husband was there that year going to Harvard. He had taken a whole year off, and I couldn’t go with him that fall because I hadn’t earned enough credits yet. So he had taken a year off, a sabbatical to go to Harvard, and so I was glad because I had gone to Radcliffe and I figured they’d give me a fellowship, which they did, for just the spring semester. So we lived in Boston that semester, and actually I got a lot done. I really worked hard. This was actually the year after my brother died, but by that time I was feeling better and had more energy. So I really worked hard and got out a proposal for a book, and in fact I gave a presentation, and it was in the New York Times, they quoted something I said in the New York Times, on the front page. So that brought me a lot of credit and attention.

McGarrigle: And what was that about, Jewelle?

Gibbs: Well, actually, the presentation was not at Harvard. The presentation was in New York. I think it was the Legal Defense Fund had a conference in New York, and I spoke about the plight of young black males in our society and the problems they were having, and I had earlier worked up this talk for an Urban League meeting in Oakland the year before I left, or maybe just the fall before
I left, so I had worked on that and I was going to publish that as an article, kind of a summary of all the problems young black males have in American society, with statistics and what should be done about it.

So they invited me to this conference in New York, which turned out to be a very big conference, and I gave this talk, and somebody from the New York Times was there, and was apparently impressed with what I had to say, put it on the front page of the—I think it came out either on a Sunday or Monday. So that kind of really gave me a lot of credibility and I was back at Harvard, so the people at Radcliffe were very impressed and everything. A few days later I got a call from a publisher who said, “Professor Gibbs, I read about your speech in the New York Times, and I think it would make a great book.” And that’s how my first book came about. I said, “A book? Well, I’m working on it as an article.” He said, “Oh, no. Well, you work on it as an article and you send me the article when you’re through, but I’m ready to give you a contract right now for a book.” It was a small publishing house, by the way, that I had never heard of. I said, “Well, let me think about it.”

So I went home and talked to my husband. He said, “Well, you’ve never heard of these people. You don’t know what they’re like.” I said, “No, but he sounds like such a nice man. I liked him on the phone. I’ll just send him a proposal and see what happens. Because I hadn’t thought about working it up as a book, but I think I could work it out.” And that’s how my first book came about. I got a contract before I left Boston, and the book was my first book, Young, Black and Male in America: An Endangered Species [Auburn House, 1988].

McGarrigle: Did you go with that publisher?

Gibbs: Yes. Young, Black and Male in America: An Endangered Species. And it was really a successful book. Turns out he was a small publisher but he knew how to get publicity, so that’s what counts when you’re selling a book. So anyway, when I came back in the fall—but see, I hadn’t done the book yet, I was working on the book—I was still working on the article. When I came back in the fall, the dean said to me, “You’re supposed to come up this year for tenure. Do you think you’re ready?” Fall of 1985. I said, “You know what? Let me get back to you. I want to talk to my husband about it.”

Jim says, “You know, Jewelle, I think you ought to delay a year, because now you’re at Berkeley. If they’re anything like Stanford, you don’t have a book out yet. You’re still working on a couple of articles that you’re almost done with from being at the Institute. Why don’t you take another year, get a couple more articles in press, at least, even if they’re not actually”—once they’re in press, that’s like being published—“and try to get some chapters done on your book, and I think you’ll have a better chance.” That was my husband giving me good advice, and I figured I’d take it.
So I went back to the dean and said, “I want to delay a year.” They will let you delay if you have—and I said my reason for delay is all the deaths in my family, which they all knew about. So he said, “Well, I think you have a legitimate reason, but you have to go see the provost.” So I went to see the provost, and this time it was a woman provost named Doris Calloway. She had replaced the other one, who was Provost Maslach. But she was very, very sympathetic. And I don’t know today if it had been Maslach or a man, whether they would have understood even. She said, “Well, I understand. We have to take real life into consideration. You’ve had three deaths in your family, close family, in four years”—it was actually over a four-year period, and she said, “I can understand why you haven’t gotten much done.” I told her I had things in the works. I had a contract for a book. She said, “Take another year and then see how much you get done.”

So I did. Then I had no trouble. I really literally, according to the dean, since I wasn’t at the meeting, he said I sailed through. And he told me—again, this is hearsay, I was not at the meeting—he said, “Jewelle, you got an unanimous vote. That’s very rare. Everybody voted for you to have tenure.” So I was very pleased, that in spite of my little revolts, that my colleagues all apparently respected me and apparently liked me well enough. So he said I got a unanimous vote, and I was very pleased about that.

So then I felt really secure. Once you get tenure at a major university, it does give you a certain amount of security, because you know they are not really going to kick you out unless there is some kind of scandal or moral turpitude, or you kill somebody—you know, those things. So I felt much more secure, which gave me a feeling that I could launch into other things and get involved more in university politics, which I did, and that’s one of the ways I got involved with this report. I think if I had been an assistant professor, I probably wouldn’t have had the courage to get involved with that report. I don’t think I would have. I might have had, but I’m not sure. Anyway, by that time I had tenure, and I was just feeling better.

So, now, you had asked me about this other—now I’m coming to this, because that has to do with what happened about how I got appointed as chair of this task force. This is such a long story. We’ll start it, we’ll try to finish it in fifteen minutes—because I have to leave about four.

Well, the story is, and you did read it, a young girl, she was an underclassman, of course, and the interesting thing is that she was biracial. She was Asian and white. And I think that has something to do with it, which was never really publicized, but anyway. She had been going out with one of these boys on the football team, and there were actually twins, brothers. And she went to a party one night and got drunk, and then he invited her outside the party, on the landing, to have oral sex, which she did. I mean, I’m not excusing her behavior either. And then he invited her back to his room. Now, he has a roommate, and his roommate is his brother. I believe they were twins.
She goes back to his room, and she’s already had sex with him, and she is drunk. She goes back to his room, and then he, his brother, and two other people in the adjoining room come in and have sex with her. And she did wait a little bit, until the next day I think. I think she must have been very ashamed and everything. But she reported it the next day.

So part of the problem was the circumstances under which—it’s like this current Kobe Bryant case—under which it happened. They said it was consensual, and she admitted that the first part of it was consensual. But she said at no time, when she was sober, did she plan to have sex with the three other men, when he took her back to the apartment. So anyway, and you know how lawyers are, then even more than now, and how prosecutors are, and when there’s any complicity at all from the girl’s point of view, then it’s very hard to prove rape.

So what happened was, she reported it and it got into the papers, and it became a scandal almost right away. The coach kind of dismissed it and let the four players play the following Saturday after it was in the paper. He let them go on the field. They were football players. He let them play. Well, of course, that made the women on campus even more outraged, that they had no punishment. That all the punishment is going to this girl. And in the meantime, the district attorney of Alameda County was considering whether he was going to bring charges or not. But in the meantime, so there was the legal case going forward or not going forward, as the case may be, and then there was the campus uproar over what happened to this girl.

So Chancellor [Michael Ira] Heyman, who knew me, called me and asked me would I head up a task force. To this day, I do not know why I was called. I can’t say. He said, well, I was a well-known woman on campus. I’m sure the fact that I was black had something to do with it, because the players were black. And I’m 99 percent sure that one of the reasons he appointed me was to defuse the issue of race, because if he had appointed a white woman, then they would have said the white woman was trying to lynch the black players. But by appointing me, and we were supposed to do—well, let me say, we weren’t really investigating the case. That was not our role. We were supposed to do a kind of investigation of what was happening with athletes on the campus and sexual harassment and sexual assault and date rape, that’s what we were supposed to do, and we were supposed to interview the students about their attitudes, and then we were supposed to come up with a policy. He gave our committee a year. We appointed twenty people, and I had a hand in the appointments, but basically he had to approve them all. So we appointed people from different parts of the university. It was men and women, whites and non-whites. We had two student representatives, maybe one—who, we had one, who was the president of student government.

Now, the long and short of it—I’ll give you the short version of it today, and if you want to ask me any more questions next week we can go back to it—the
short version is that we had a good committee, and I set up working groups because we had all these areas we wanted to cover, and twenty people cannot cover things like this together. So I had different working groups looking at different things. Some groups were interviewing the fraternities, which also had a reputation for date rape and sexual harassment; other groups were interviewing the athletic directors and the athletes; and some other groups were interviewing student organizations in dorms and so forth. So anyway, we actually got a lot—we had open hearings where people came to testify in Pauley Ballroom, and we interviewed a lot of the campus leaders and people.

Now, the problem I had was getting access to the athletic director and the football coach, who didn’t want to be interviewed. I finally got to the athletic director, and he said well, he would call the coach, but the coach was busy. I said, “The coach may be busy, but I’m empowered by the campus to do this task force. It’s important, and I need to talk to the coach.” Well, the coach kept putting me off. I had an appointment with him and he sends, not even his assistant coach, but he sends somebody who, was kind of a low-level functionary in the Department of Athletics. I was insulted, so I called the chancellor, and I said, “Chancellor Heyman, I need your help. You have to tell those people that I want to see the coach, and I am not going to see anybody else but the coach.” He said, “Okay, I will.” So he called him and he said, “Professor Gibbs wants to see the coach, and she’s coming over.” And I think what the coach was really upset about, he thought we were just going to come and accuse him of not training his players. So he had another professor, so Heyman said, “Why don’t you take a male professor from the law school with you,” who was on my committee, and I said fine.

So somehow that was better. The coach then agreed to see us together. And we saw him. But it was that kind of—we had a lot of problems really trying to interview the coaches and the athletes, because they all, it’s this wall of silence, like police brutality. It’s the same thing, a wall of silence. And they protect these athletes. These athletes can get away with almost anything they want to do on a college campus, and they always blame the girl, and they always say, “Well, there was liquor involved.” They get away with a lot, and they really do get away with a lot.

And then when we started interviewing, we found that there was this pattern of years of sexual harassment and date rape in the fraternities, and that there were lots of cases that had been reported to the student conduct committee or reported to the police. Nobody had ever been really punished, and it was always the girl’s word against the boy’s word, and by and large the girls did not prevail, by and large. They did not prevail. And sometimes the girls would have to leave school because they would be embarrassed. They had been violated; they had been raped. Nobody had given them justice, so they would leave school. And in this case, in fact, this girl left the campus and those boys stayed.
Because what happened was, the district attorney never brought charges, never. It was a sad case, because he said there wasn’t enough evidence, and that since the girl had gone voluntarily the first time with the boy, and then she shouldn’t have gone back to his room and she was drunk, and that she couldn’t prove that she did say no. So the boys were never really punished, at least not by the police. They did have student conduct hearings, but they were closed. But by and large, you know, I would have to say I think they got a slap on the hand from the student conduct committee, but there was no legal punishment.

McGarrigle: No consequence, really. Was there a recommendation about what the consequence should be from the—?

Gibbs: Well, see, we did keep clear of the case itself, but what we talked about were general policies. We came up with a number of policies, I don’t know, there were more than a dozen policies where we talked about, first of all, educating the campus about what date rape is and what sexual harassment is. That was the first thing we said they needed—education, giving special attention and education to all of the athletic teams, all of the fraternities. And they said we were picking on the teams and the fraternities, but the evidence is, and a lot of studies show, those are the people who are more likely, and more frequently involved, in cases of date rape and sexual assault. It’s the fraternity boys and the athletes more than any other, because those are the two organized groups of men on campus, and they kind of encourage each other. There’s this kind of attitude, a frat-boy attitude.

So we made a lot of recommendations about starting with the first weekend that they came to the campus, in the residences, they were supposed to have a sexual harassment seminar, all the freshmen. And they did it for a few years. I don’t know if they still do it. They would talk about what is sexual harassment, what is date rape. And then we talked about—as I say, sort of special seminars for athletes, and the department was responsible for their players. Because there have been incidents when they went out of town that were not well publicized. And sometimes they would just rampage in another city and attack girls in the hotels and stuff. So we also said that we thought that the coach had to be responsible for his players, and they had to realize that they represented Berkeley, and wherever they were, they were representatives of the university, and they had to act like gentleman and act accordingly, and stuff like that. And we also said that we thought the student conduct penalties should be harsher. We have cases where they could prove that there had been date rape or sexual assault of a girl, and we thought that there should be harsher penalties. A fair hearing, but at the end, if they felt that the evidence was strong enough, that the person was guilty, that there should be rather stringent penalties.

So anyway, we did have all these recommendations—and there were other things about health counseling and other things that we included, and the
health center was one of the places that was represented on the committee, too. So we had a lot of different recommendations. But again, the thing is, when it was all over—also, we had to have a second year because we hadn’t finished our recommendations. Some of the committees hadn’t really done what they were supposed to do, so I had to remind them at the end of the first year that we really need a good report. And I am really happy to say that—finally we had another three months, I think it was before Christmas we put the report in, we had a unanimous vote. Because it was very contentious, especially for the men on the committee, very, very contentious about some of the recommendations for the athletes and the men in the fraternities. And we managed to get the wording—with the help of two lawyers on the committee—we managed to get the wording so that it didn’t look like we were just targeting the fraternities and the athletes and picking on the men.

Oh, we also had some recommendations about drinking, because drinking is almost always a precursor to these things. Now more and more, you are realizing, the universities realize they have to crack down on drinking, because they’re having fires in dormitories, they’re having of course sexual issues, they’re having vandalism issues. Kids are driving into trees and killing themselves. So universities are really more and more realizing they really have to have a strict alcohol education policy. So that was part of it. It was not just the sexual business, it was also the alcohol.

Anyway, we actually, by the time the second year was over, I think we had twenty-four people on the committee, plus the president of the student government. We had a unanimous report. The only one who voted, and he was against one of the recommendations, against it, was the student representative, which we felt said something about the fact that the faculty was all very much unified on this, and staff, very much unified on this report, and the vote said more about him and the fact that he was a student and about authority than it said about the content of the report. So I was very pleased with the report, because we had a unanimous vote—and it was published in the Daily [Californian], and I was on television talking about the report, and the [San Francisco] Chronicle picked it up, and the Oakland Tribune. So there was a lot of really good publicity, showing that the university was trying to create policies.

Oh, we also were responsible for those phones on campus, those phones you see? We said we need more points like it, if a girl is walking at night. We talked about having an escort service. Some of the girls had actually complained about being approached by men maybe who weren’t students, so we talked about getting more safety points on campus. The bus at night, the escort service—that all came out of my report. All of those things that are now taken for granted at Berkeley were not there when we wrote our report. So I think I really was responsible for making the campus a safer place, as far as the girls are concerned. We were concerned mainly at that point about sexual assault and the drinking. I think the drinking still goes on, and it seems to be
tolerated, and it’s hard to change. But I think that girls feel safer walking across campus—we also had more lights put in at very strategic places. The phones came last. It was a long time before they put the phones in. But the lights were in my report. The night escort, that was in my report. The buses going later hours was in our report, and then the lights, which I don’t know, maybe it was for budgetary reasons, they didn’t put up until a few years ago.

But anyway, so I feel we did a really good job. But now the upshot is, and this is what I am going to finish here, because I do have to get some x-rays over at Palo Alto Medical Clinic, is that somewhere in the middle of this, two things happened that were really quite disturbing to me. And you know, it’s hard to interpret it without seeming to be a little bit extra sensitive, but I will say they were disturbing. There were a bunch of women, a group of women on the campus, who had been very, very vocal feminists for a long time. They had alienated the administration long before I ever got there. They were people who had been there longer than I was. They were older than I was—older in service, if not in age. They weren’t all older in age, but they were older in service. There were two or three who were very outspoken feminists. He did not put any of them on the committee. Now, he chose the committee, and as I said, I made some recommendations.

McGarrigle: “He” is Heyman?

Gibbs: Yes, Heyman. Heyman completely ignored this group. He knew this group; this group was very visible. I cannot tell you. And what we were doing with the committee, we were getting people who represented different constituencies, okay? So we had someone from the health service; we had someone from the athletic department; we had someone from the dean of students office. So you had people who had power to carry out the recommendations. We didn’t just pick up people off the street to put on the committee. And we also had a couple of lawyers, for obvious reasons, because we wanted to craft the recommendations so they would stand up if the student conduct committee ever said these aren’t constitutional or something. So we had two lawyers. Everything we did, we would say, is this okay? Can we say this? Can we do this? And in the final report, they checked everything, so that we felt we were not violating anybody’s constitutional rights, because it really wasn’t aimed at individuals. It was really aimed at the institution and making institutional change, okay? It was never aimed at—as I say, we actually never discussed the trial, because of the idea of confidentiality and these boys were defended by lawyers, we never could even see the record. We never saw it. But we certainly knew in general what had happened. We could find that out. But we never saw the transcripts. There was never a real trial, because the district attorney did not proceed to indict these boys, or to pursue these boys.

McGarrigle: Now, was that at all because the young woman decided to drop the charges, or that she wouldn’t go forward, do you know?
No, she didn’t drop the charges. But I don’t know what went on, as they say, in camera, but they said there wasn’t enough clear evidence, that it was a weak case. See, the district attorney has a choice. If he doesn’t think the case is strong, he doesn’t have to put it forward to make a case of it. And they have that choice, like this one in Colorado just yesterday said that the evidence was weak, but it met the basic minimal standard that maybe Kobe Bryant did it, but he could have gone the other way, too. That was the judge. But the district attorney makes the decision whether it will even go to a preliminary hearing, and in this case, as far as I know, there wasn’t even a preliminary hearing. But basically it never went to trial, that I’m sure of. And so the girl was very upset and very embarrassed, and she left the university. Because her name soon became known, even though it wasn’t in the papers. Apparently the whole campus knew who she was. So we weren’t aiming it at her or the boys as individuals; we were aiming at the system.

So the two things that happened—these women were left out partly because they didn’t represent constituencies of the university institutions, but I think Heyman left them out deliberately, because they were associated with a lot of previous controversy over women in the university. They had all led probably many protests, many more than I ever led, in terms of hiring women, in terms of women’s salaries, and, as I told you, that report that came out before I joined the SWEM committee, about inequities in salaries, and there were two or three women who were pushing this. So he did not appoint any of them to the committee.

So after we had—we were about halfway through the committee’s work. We were doing, I thought, quite well, in terms of the committee working well together. We were doing our investigations. We had all these little subcommittees, and we were just moving along on schedule. They went to Heyman and demanded that they should have representation on the committee, and asked why was I appointed as the chair. I hadn’t even been there that long. I don’t even think it was really personal, but it was a kind of attack on the committee, and of course I was head of the committee. I didn’t have a co-chair. So they wanted to know why I was head of the committee, I was only an associate professor. They were all full professors, and basically it was, “Why didn’t you appoint one of us?” And basically it was sour grapes. But it created a lot of turmoil on the committee for a while, because they had, I guess you’d have to say almost like spies on the committee, who did try to undercut the work.

After this happened, I could see there were two or three people who were undercutting the role of the committee and what we were trying to do, and those were their friends, who were kind of basically saying we weren’t going fast enough, our recommendations were not radical enough, you know, that kind of thing. They even told Heyman they thought I was his tool. He told me later on. They thought I was his tool, that I was a tool of the administration. A friend of mine said, “Jewelle, if they knew you, they would know you’re not a
tool of anybody, that you could never be a tool of anybody.” That’s what they told him. They said, “You appointed her because she’s your tool and she’s not going to rock the boat,” and so forth and so on.

So this really upset me, I have to say it upset me. Because you know, it was another group of women, and I thought, ‘You talk about female solidarity? Where’s the solidarity here?’ And they were wrong, because nobody was more interested than I was in making big changes in how women were treated on this campus. Yet I also realized that it has to be a group process. If you’re a feminist and go in and try to do something by yourself, you’re not going to be accepted. I thought, ‘If I can get this committee to accept some of these major changes, we’ll make tremendous strides.’ And that’s the way I did it, the democratic process. And even some of the men who were reluctant at first, remember I said it was partly a matter of language and we would change the language until we got it right so they would approve it.

But still, we got the changes we wanted. So these people who said, “She’s a tool of the administration, why don’t you have us in there, we want to push for radical changes.” And he was angry with them, too, but he did tell me about it. He told me, “Your friends came in to see me today,” and then he told me what happened, and I was very, very disappointed. Very disappointed.

And then the second thing that happened was, near the end, when we had made a preliminary report and we wanted to see what the administration thought, how much change they were going to permit, in a way, and we were waiting for feedback about this. Then we understood that there were some of the men in the administration, in the higher reaches of the administration—and I don’t know whether that included Heyman or not, I’ve often thought that maybe, possibly, it did—who were unhappy with the report because they felt that it was too much, too soon, too many changes too soon, and it would cost a lot of money to the university, and they were unhappy with the report.

So what’s interesting is that we did hear this, and I did have one meeting with Heyman about it, about the preliminary report. He just said, “Well, I think the report is a little bit idealistic, but I don’t want to interfere with the committee. I think the committee should do what it wants to do. You should come in with your recommendations, but you have to realize that we are constrained. We have budget constraints and other kind of constraints, and it may be that we may not be able to institute all these changes right away.” So I felt that in the end, there was some feeling of that we were moving a little bit too fast. I felt the support of the higher administration eroding at the end. I think when there’s a scandal, everybody always reacts, but then after another year and half has passed by and we’ve studied it, somehow I did feel that the administration was not quite as supportive as it had been at first, and that was a kind of a disappointment. So it was a very interesting process, the whole thing. You learn a lot when you work on these big committees.
McGarrigle: Well, let’s end there, because I know you have to go.

Gibbs: Yes. But it’s very political, the whole thing, very political. So I felt it. Remember I told you that I had learned a lot.

McGarrigle: Well, you also, in a very short time, became familiar with the provost and the chancellor. That was probably very unusual, even though I know by that time you had tenure, it still wasn’t that many years.

Gibbs: No, it wasn’t. Well, I guess I became—I would go to the Academic Senate meetings and speak my piece. They did know who I was, absolutely. And then I always got a lot of publicity in the paper, because the kind of research I did was always, it had a lot of popular appeal, a lot of popular controversy, for that matter. So whenever I wrote anything, and the university press loved me—not the press, the public relations office. I do think they loved me. Now, maybe love is not the right word, but they want professors who are going to make news, because they like to see Berkeley in the news. So whatever I did, I wrote an article, whatever I did, they used to call and they’d say, “Professor Gibbs, can you talk to a reporter from the Chronicle or the L.A. Times or—,” and I always did, because I felt, you know, that—not just because they asked me, but because I thought I wanted to get some of these ideas out there about what we need to do for these kids in the inner city. It was to me like a mission. I felt very strongly about the poverty, the discrimination, the poor schools, the broken families, the dysfunctional communities, and I wanted people to understand the other side of it, that these kids aren’t just bad kids. They’ve had a lot of bad luck. And we need to realize they’ve had bad luck from birth. They have bad schools, they have dysfunctional families sometimes, and there’s nobody there to help them, and then they can’t get a job because they don’t have a good education, and then they turn maybe—you know, some do—to crime and drugs. And then we want to put them in prison.

So there’s this domino effect that I always used to talk about, and the press used to love to talk to me. Because they’d say, “Oh, Professor Gibbs, you have these wonderful images.” [laughs] Like the domino effect. So I’d say, “Well, that’s good. I want people to understand these images, and maybe they’ll be a little more sympathetic.” So I did do a lot of public relations for the university. I mean, I always, whenever they asked me to talk to a reporter, or sometimes it was TV, I always did it, not just to get my face out there and my voice out there, but hoping that I would reach somebody out there, hoping somebody would hear me. And then I would get letters on pros and cons. I got a lot of hate mail in my years, I have saved a lot of those letters. I have hate mail and then I have letters saying, “Now I understand better, and I’m glad I heard you on KQED, because you helped explain this better to me.” So I have had a lot of letters from the public about what I’ve said.

So the answer to your question is, this is why the provost and the—one day I was passing by—oh, yes, I told you when I went to Cambridge and I gave that
speech in New York, actually, it was on the front of the *New York Times*, and a year or so later, they mentioned—when the book was published, they did an editorial and mentioned the book. It’s rare to mention a person’s name in an editorial who’s written a book, and they did. It was the lead editorial about a year after my book came out, that one of the reporters called me and said, “Oh, we think your book is just so interesting and wonderful and this, that, and the other, and we’d like to interview you.” I didn’t realize it was for the editorial page. I thought it was just for a news article.

So the next Sunday, Jim is here in the room, I’m still in bed. He calls me, he says, “My god, Jewelle, you made the editorial page of the *New York Times*, the lead editorial mentions your research on young black males.” So that Monday, I’m going across campus, and Heyman calls out to me, “Well, Professor Gibbs! I knew you were famous at Berkeley, but I didn’t know you were famous all over the world!” [laughter] Oh, it was so cute. So it was about a year after that that he asked me to be head of this committee. “I didn’t know you were famous all over the world.”

So I think, yes, I think they knew me partly because of some of the things that I was doing on campus, and also partly because I had a lot of publicity in my years at Berkeley, a lot of publicity. So I guess they would read about it thinking, ‘Oh, my god, she’s at it again.’ [laughs] But you can see I enjoyed all this.

McGarrigle: There was a lot of excitement.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s one thing I can say. I was twenty years at Berkeley, I had a very exciting career. Yes, very exciting. Sometimes exhausting and controversial, but you certainly can say exciting.

Do you want to take some of the cookies home?

McGarrigle: No, you can—

[end of session]
Interview 12: November 10, 2003

[begin minidisc 21]


Gibbs: [My husband and I just saw a movie about a black professor who passed for white all his adult life. The story is from a book by Philip Roth that]—was just made into a film, The Human Stain. My husband and I both read the book, and what is interesting about the book that does not show up in this review in the New York Times today is that it is partially based on a real character whose family we knew. He was [Anatole Broyard] a well-known reporter, worked for The New Yorker and other magazines—submitted articles to the New York Times and other publications. He was very well known in New York. He was from a Southern family which had a lot of racial mixture, and he was very fair-skinned. Only his siblings were a little bit darker. But he decided at some point in his life—he married a white woman—that he was going to pass for white.

He moved to New York City, and he did manage to pass for white, even though his skin color was, in most people’s eyes, he would be kind of defined as a Mediterranean. But his skin color was not that fair, it was more like olive skin. But he passed for white. His own sister, whose name was Shirley, was married to a very prominent black man who was active in the civil rights movement and later became a diplomat, named Franklin Williams. We knew that part of the family. We never knew him, but we knew his sister and her husband, who once lived in Palo Alto when he was associated with the NAACP in Palo Alto, as a leader in, I think, the state branch of the NAACP. He later went on to become a very well known civil rights leader, as I said, and a diplomat. They lived in the same city, only in different boroughs. Franklin and Shirley lived in either Brooklyn or the Bronx. I can’t remember which of those two boroughs. And her brother was in New York City, Manhattan, and I understand they never saw each other socially or publicly, but every once in a while they talked on the phone.

And this book is basically, although he mentions knowing, hearing another story, the people in the publishing industry, and he knew the reporter who was a friend of Philip Roth, said that they believed that the book is based on his real life. He didn’t teach, but he was in the publishing field. It wasn’t until after his death that it became widely known that he was black, because the professor at Harvard who is head of Afro-American Studies wrote a long piece about it in The New Yorker. Skip Gates wrote a long piece about it in The New Yorker after his death, so this whole story emerged.
And the reason, of course, it’s interesting to me and my sisters is because of our own family history about those who passed. What’s so strange is that it still is inconceivable to so many white people, because they don’t understand the gradations, really, that race is only a social concept. They don’t really understand that you can have genes from black ancestors and look positively white.

So this is coming out in the criticism of this film—“Well, how could they pick Anthony Hopkins, because not only is he English, but he’s a fair-haired, blue-eyed person.” And it really shows to us the level of ignorance in the white community, that they don’t know that there are thousands, if not millions, of Americans running around with blond hair and blue eyes who probably have some black or Indian ancestry if they have been in this country long enough. If their families were here and they’re not recent immigrants, many families do have some black or Indian ancestry, particularly in the South and the Southwest. You find that almost all the families who have been here before the Civil War would have some black or Indian ancestry, or ties—not through marriage, but through [laughs] other means, as we say.

And so we were talking yesterday, and to us it’s almost laughable that people don’t understand that there’s the phenotype and the genotype, so what you see on the skin is the phenotype of the gene, and what you see inside, or what you see under a microscope, is the genotype. There are so many people who do not understand this, even educated people. If they did, they wouldn’t—I mean, I agree, I wish they had cast somebody else too, because I think it would be good to cast a light-skinned black, and as my sister said, they needed a star and there probably aren’t—most of the black actors are not that, you know, their skin is brown, so therefore they wouldn’t be able to play the part.

But in any case, to me it’s another kind of indication of one, the denial of race in America, the denial of the racial history, and two, the lack of education about what race really means. They confuse race and color constantly, and now the other word is ethnicity. But in any case, I think that—she said to me, my sister, Shirlee, who wrote the book about the family, said, “You know, maybe it’s good they cast Anthony Hopkins, because that would be non-traditional casting.” [laughs] That was her point, that it was good that they didn’t cast a black man, because she said, “The truth is, you and I both know people who look like Anthony Hopkins who are legally, or technically, black, who define themselves as black and don’t have any features or color or hair or anything that looks like a typical black person.”

So that would be my comment about it. My husband and I have been discussing it over the last few days, and all you’d have to do is look at the members of my family, in which there are many blue-eyed blondes, my mother’s family, many blue-eyed blondes, who nobody would ever see, would even think, that this person is black. But they chose, the ones who chose to be
black, and then of course there are the ones who chose not to be black, and it was a choice.

So it speaks—and I don’t know whether he deals with this issue in his book about race, but it speaks to the myth of race in this country. There is just this persistent myth that you can always tell a black person, either by their looks or by how they behave, and that there is no acknowledgement of the fact that there was so much racial mixing during slavery. There’s almost no acknowledgement of it, and that all these families have relatives who somehow would have a black cousin or uncle or aunt, and it’s just denied, just forthrightly denied over and over and over again.

So in a way, it does bother me, because I just can’t understand the persistence of it, even when the story came out about—and then I’m going to finish because I want to get into my own research—but when the story came out about Carol Channing. You know that story. And at first people didn’t want to believe it, until she got on the “Larry King Show” and she said—I mean, she wrote it in her biography. People didn’t want to believe it. And he said to her, “Well, is it true that your father had some black genes,” or whatever he said. She said, “Yes. My father was part black. I didn’t know it growing up, but I know it now.” But we’ve often said, my sister and I and friends who have talked about this, now, if they had known that Carol Channing, with her blonde hair and blue eyes, had one ounce of black blood in her, do you think she ever would have become a famous star? And the answer is no. That’s the answer.

McGarrigle: And how did she deal with it? I don’t know how she dealt with it when it became public knowledge.

Gibbs: She brought it up. Nobody knew. She brought it up in her book. Now, it might have been rumored before, but she brought it up in her book that her father had been a man who was part black. And she says she didn’t know, but her mother told her later. But here is a woman now, she’s in her eighties, what difference does it make? They can’t take her career away from her. So what have they done? They’ve whitewashed it. They’ve done exactly what the title—they’ve whitewashed it. You saw that mention of it only at the time when her book came out. Some papers mentioned it, and Larry King had her on his show, because I did see the show. After that, you have seen no further mention of it. In her autobiography, or obituary, I bet you, you will not see a mention of it.

So this is how race is treated in America, even when people step up and say, “Yes, I do have black ancestry.” If the person is an icon, you can’t imagine that. You can’t put the two together. How can we have this wonderful icon, *Hello Dolly* and all of this, for fifty years and not know this person was black? Because if we’d known this person was black, she never would have had those
opportunities on Broadway. And that is what is so troubling to me about
American society, about the way race is treated and the denial of it.

McGarrigle: Let me just ask you one more thing—we’re talking about The Human Stain. Did you know when you knew the sister, Shirley and her husband, did you know about the sibling relationship?

Gibbs: No. My sister did. She knew about the rumor. I didn’t know until later that—and I guess I had heard the rumor from my sister. But you know, it was the kind of unsubstantiated rumor, that this man was black and he was passing. He was a very big person in the New York literary scene, and a critic, and a very sharp-tongued critic, at that. He was accepted. And yet I think there were a lot of people who knew it. There were a lot of people who knew it. But again, it was denied because of his position. And this is the way it’s treated. Anyway, I do want to read that book, because he may bring up some of those issues, I don’t know.

McGarrigle: And just for the record, we’re talking about Troy Duster’s book with Michael Brown and others, Whitewashing Race. It just came out. The Myth of a Color-Blind Society.

Gibbs: Right, yes. But this is one of the issues in my research, biracial children, teenagers, and their identity conflicts. So I have actually studied it from the point of view of being a psychologist and being interested in it as a psychological phenomenon. How do these kids develop their identity? How do they feel about themselves? How do they define themselves? That was actually the second strand of my research after I finished my first book, which was the book Young, Black and Male in America: An Endangered Species. But I also found in doing that research, I found that when I would go to talk to people in San Francisco about some of these issues, they would say to me, “You know, there are a lot of foster children in the system who are racially mixed, and they are having problems.” That was not the focus of my research at the time, but I kept that comment in mind. Why are so many of these racially mixed children, they would say, they’re coming to our attention disproportionately in the system, because we always knew that there were a lot of black kids in the foster care system and the juvenile justice system. And the two systems, you know, often the foster care children get involved in problems and end up in the juvenile justice system. So they would say to me, “You know, we’re just seeing all these kids.” And I would say, “What all?”

Well, it turned out that San Francisco and places like Berkeley and San Francisco, being what they are, were really the vanguard of this generation’s multicultural families. It started in the sixties, and it started, really, in Berkeley and San Francisco. They came out of the closet, so that these relationships became public and legal, as opposed to what they were when my mother was a child. So what you saw was this beginning of the movement of multiculturalism, not as a philosophy or anything, but a reality in terms of
people dating across racial and cultural lines, people marrying, and people having children. It really did start in this area, the Bay Area. So as I began to look at it, began to think more about it, began to notice newspaper articles—that was how I first got interested—it turned out that there were three or four other cities where people had noticed this sort of beginning group of people who were mixed families. They used to use the word mixed families. Seattle was one; Minneapolis was another.

We had lived in Minneapolis, so I was aware that Minneapolis was very liberal, and had what I thought were a few mixed families, but as the years went by and we left, that group kept growing. So you had Minneapolis, Seattle, Denver—there were certain cities that seemed to be extremely tolerant in terms of lifestyles and in terms of accepting people who were different. That’s where these people either moved or met growing up, you know, so these cities were magnets for people who were interested in establishing multicultural families, biracial and interracial, interethnic—there are various terms that were being used. But anyway, that’s how I got interested.

Then I said, well, you know, let me take a survey. Let me be like a social scientist. So I sent out to about a hundred agencies in the Bay Area, I sent out a very brief questionnaire, maybe it was two pages. It was very brief, asking them how many—basically I was interested in adolescents—how many adolescents had they served who were from interracial families. I was really interested in interracial as opposed to, say, interethnic or interreligious. I was really interested in interracial.

Then I got a very good response from these agencies, and wrote my first article from the kinds of problems that they said these kids were having. That included basically identity conflicts, conflicts around impulse control, conflicts around sexuality, conflicts around social identity—I mean, where do I belong, who should be my friends? How do I define myself? So I wrote this first article, and actually the first article was based on that survey, and then I wrote several subsequent articles. I set up a private practice and I began to have kids sent to me, referred to me by these agencies. A very high proportion of them were mixed children.

McGarrigle: And this is the early eighties?

Gibbs: This is the early eighties, yes. I set up a private practice in San Francisco because I wanted to have my own clients. I wasn’t sure I was going to get tenure, you’re never sure until you get it. I wanted to have a fall back position. So I set up a part-time practice. I got my license as a clinical psychologist, and that’s another whole big story, but anyway, I got my license as a clinical psychologist and opened a really part-time practice. I was there two afternoons a week, so that’s about as part-time as possible the two afternoons I didn’t go to Berkeley.
It turned out I really enjoyed this. I had an office in San Francisco at the base of Pacific Heights, a lovely office over an antique shop. I loved going to the city. I really enjoyed the whole experience. But it turned out it was just too much. I sort of had three lives—one in San Francisco, one at Berkeley, and one here. I mean, you talk about trying to juggle things. It was just too much. Now, fortunately, I opened the practice, I think it was the year my son graduated from high school, the second boy, and went to Cornell. I think that’s the year I opened the practice. We did move to San Francisco for four years to help me get tenure. As I say, that’s another interesting side story. We rented this house, leased it to different people for four years, coming in to be visiting professors, or coming in with a new job and they didn’t know where to live yet. Then we rented an apartment up in San Francisco, near San Francisco State, right off 19th Avenue. So that helped me with the commute. It was during that time that I did have the practice, most of those years I had a practice. It was very interesting, and I loved doing it, but it got to be just too much. I just couldn’t handle all of the various commitments. I’d wake up one day and say, “This is Tuesday, I must be in San Francisco.” [laughs] I mean, it was that kind of schedule that I had. So I ended up doing it for I think four years, and then when we moved back down here, I realized I just couldn’t handle it anymore.

McGarrigle: And you were seeing primarily young people?

Gibbs: Primarily young people and young couples. I had very few people over thirty-five. Because I told people I was specializing in adolescents and young adults. That’s who I want to see and that’s what I like to do. And remember, I guess I had mentioned that I had done some work at Stanford in mental health. Did we ever go through that?

McGarrigle: Yes, we did.

Gibbs: Because that was interesting, too. And I had gotten used to that age group. That was basically from eighteen to thirty. It was graduate students. I loved working with that age group. But now I was interested because of my research in working with younger people in their early and middle adolescence. So I got these referrals. And again, I kept seeing in this population, and talking to other people about what they were seeing, the same issues emerging from kids who were from two different races. These were mainly black and white. And it always started late—well, between about twelve and fourteen, these issues started to emerge.

The issues had to do with dating, with defining who’s your social group, who will accept you, or who do you want to be part of, and how do you label yourself in a society where white is good and white is privileged and white is power, how do you label yourself if you’re half white and not all white? And issues about trying to prove yourself, which often led to doing things that were self-destructive, because you had to prove that you either were or were not a
part of a particular group. That often led to very self-destructive behaviors, like drugs, early sex, sexual behavior, poor school achievement. I mean, if you want to prove “I’m really black,” then of course you cannot be a good student, in their minds. Their minds were obviously confused, but still. If you were a boy and you wanted to prove that you were going to be a good athlete because you wanted to be with the black kids, then you had to do certain things to be accepted. And if you were a girl, often it meant you had to be sexually available, if that meant that’s being a minority, if that’s what you think it means, then you’re sexually available—but who are you sexually available to? You’re sexually available to white boys, because then you can date them. So it just got to be lots of confusion around these issues.

So I thought, ‘Well, you know, this is a good area, but I have got to find a way of getting a bigger sample, not just kids who are referred to me and not just kids who are in the system, but normal kids whose families are mixed.’ So then I set out to do a larger research project, which was kind of the third stage of what I was doing, and recruited families in Berkeley and Oakland. And when I say “normal families,” I mean they’re not recruited from agencies where kids are seeking help. It wasn’t that hard to get them. We interviewed about twenty families, and then did some case studies of the kids in those families. We found they were still dealing with some of those issues, but they had learned how to figure them out. They had learned how to resolve them better, in cases where they had a lot of support from their families. We also found differences if a kid was raised by a black mother or a white mother.

McGarrigle: What kinds of differences?

Gibbs: Well, the difference is that the mother is really the main person who socializes the child. So the differences were that a girl, particularly a girl who’s raised by a black mother, if you hold the sex constant, and a girl who’s raised by a white mother, the girl tends to identify with the mother’s side of the family, whichever race that is, because she’s spending most of the time with her mother, so she tends to identify, only to the point where if she becomes rebellious against the mother or if the mother leaves the father and the father is separate, then often the sympathy would be with the missing, absent father. So it was very interesting. Very interesting. Anyway, so we then wrote, a student of mine who helped me with the interviews, she and I wrote a chapter in a book about that and got a lot of response.

And then after that, I said, well, I’m not going to do anything more on this. I sort of got to a point in that research where I figured I either had to do kind of a national survey, to really have a big, big survey, or I had to do something else. I decided that at that point, I was getting more interested in policy issues, and I decided that I would not do that big national survey. Since that time, fortunately, two researchers—in fact, several—have done larger surveys. Most of them, it’s interesting, because they always refer to my work as a
pioneer in the field, and most of them have confirmed the majority of what I said, but not everything. So that’s the way it is when you have a large sample.

I’m pleased at two things. Because I was a very early writer in the field, very early, there had been some psychiatrists who had done very small samples and had written about it. And their work was more on the order of, “This is really pathological.” I said, “No, it’s not pathological. But I think it’s a normal process they have to go through. But there is light at the end of the tunnel.” So my work was much more optimistic, that, okay, some of these kids are going to get involved in this identity conflict and do stupid things or self-destructive things, but it’s a process, and I think they’re going to come out of it late teens, early twenties, and they’re going to be okay in most cases. The psychiatrist who’d written about it had a much dimmer and more negative view.

Now, what has happened since, as I said, other people took up where I left off. I was one of several people who were in that kind of middle stage. And basically have come out with what I said in my final chapter, that if a kid is biracial, and I also would say bicultural, grows up in a home where the parents support both identities, that’s really important, that kid is going to come out okay. Because as long as he is supported to know, you’re half black or you’re half Japanese or you’re half white, we are proud of both sides, you should be in touch with both families, you should honor both, to some extent, both of these heritages. You should not deny them. They are part of you, and be exposed to both histories and heritage, that kid is going to come out and that kid is going to be all right. And maybe he will choose one group over the other as he grows up. But the thing is, he is making that choice with the full knowledge of everything. He’s saying, “Okay, I’m half black and I’m half white, and I understand that, but I’ve been around these white kids I grew up with, I like them, and that’s the group I want to socialize with, but if anyone asks me, I’m going to say, yes, I’m part black.”

It’s that kind of progress that I said that I thought would occur in a case where not only the parents support the kids—I think that’s the most important thing, it should be supported in the home—but the school supports it, there are school supports, so these kids are not marginalized because they’re half this and half that. They’re not marginalized. The third thing is the community has to have an understanding of what this means to be biracial, biethnic and multicultural families. And by that I mean in a lot of big cities now they have groups, support groups for multicultural families, where they meet on weekends and they do picnics together and outings together and they discuss the issues and everything.

McGarrigle: And are they organized depending on the races involved?

Gibbs: No, there’s what they call a multiracial American society now.

McGarrigle: So it’s all—
Gibbs: Well, it usually involves different groups of multiracial families. It’s not all the same mixture, is that what you mean? So you have a woman named Maria Root who’s one of the big founders of—I can’t remember the exact name of it, but it’s an association of multiracial Americans, and she’s written two books about this. She encourages the idea of a multiracial, multicultural identity, where you incorporate all these things. There’s a lot more research going on now about it, what it means and where’s it going in terms of our society, and basically, I think those support groups are especially good for the teenagers, because then they don’t feel, “I’m the only one. There are people who are like me. They may not look exactly like me, but they have two parents of different races or different ethnic groups,” and they feel more comfortable sharing their feelings about identity.

So anyway, I guess to wrap this up is that I feel that—out of my own curiosity, my own family background, and what I saw as this emerging issue in the Bay Area, that by actually studying it at a very early phase, I feel that I was a pioneer in that area, and I feel I made some real contributions to the area. As it turned out, as I said, most people who have done work have supported some of my conclusions, but not all, and that’s good too. You start something and you throw the question out there, you throw your ideas out there, and it may be that with further research, all of your ideas will not be supported. But at least you give people some kind of directions where they should be looking. So that in that sense, I’m satisfied with what I did in that phase of my career.

McGarrigle: And how was that area of inquiry supported at Berkeley in your department?

Gibbs: Not much. Not much. I mean, one of the things about my academic career which I would have to say is very different from almost anybody else’s is I would get an idea [laughs], and I would just pursue it. Sometimes I would get a little grant for it, and sometimes I wouldn’t. In fact, that brings me to the issue of grants, which I wanted to talk to you about. I was lucky in a sense that I came along—I was lucky in two senses. I told you my dean liked me. He was Harry Specht, was very supportive, and sometimes I would have an idea, and my colleagues would say, “Oh, that’s crazy. You’ll never get tenure with that.” I would go to Harry and he would say, “Well, that’s interesting, Jewelle. See what you can do with it,” which is a difference. He was like a mentor. He’d say, “Well, that’s interesting. I don’t know that I’d call it a social welfare problem, but see what you can do with it.” So I’d say, “It’s a mental health problem, Harry, it’s a mental health issue.” So he’d say, “Well, I guess you could define it that way.” He would often be very funny because he would not always know exactly what I meant, but he would encourage me.

The other lucky part was that when I came to Berkeley, they were just starting to give more support to women and minority faculty, so they had these special summer grants and one-semester-off grants. They were especially designed for minorities and women to help them to get tenure. So they had only started
that maybe a couple of years before I came on the faculty, because there was
this attrition rate. They would hire a woman or they would hire a minority and
they wouldn’t make it, because they would be involved in all these—I
mentioned the committees last time—all these committees, a lot of student
support work, and they would never have time to write or do research.

So I was lucky that I was able to get one of those summer research grants. I
think it was the second year after I got to Berkeley. And then I was able to get
a full Fall Quarter off, and I think that might have been the fourth year, third
or fourth year, where I had full support. So it was a grant replacing salary, in a
sense. It wasn’t really a grant giving you a lot of money to do research, but it
replaced your salary so that it allowed you to—and I think there was some
money for research—and it allowed you to have time to do research and
writing, and you could do whatever you really wanted to do.

So in that sense I was fortunate, because I decided that I wanted to do these
things. Then I started getting nervous about tenure after about three years; I
think I started getting nervous about tenure. And a couple of things happened.
The first thing that happened—and this is a very important part of my story,
but it’s not just my story, it’s all minorities—is I submitted a grant to NIMH,
you know, the big National Institute of Mental Health. At that time, there was
a Republican administration. I did not realize at the time how much politics
plays in terms of the grants you get. But I submitted a grant, and the grant
was—well, it had to do with what would now be called the whole area of
multicultural studies. It had to do with the psychosocial adjustment of
minority teenage females in Oakland, and that was my sample. Some of my
colleagues looked at the grant, thought it was a good idea. Doing those grants
takes a long time and it’s a tremendous amount of work, a tremendous amount
of work. The university department has to sign off on them, so they’re saying,
we think this grant is okay. And they’ll sign off on it.

So I sent the grant in and it goes through, without boring you, a whole
laborious process. There’s a board of national reviewers in the field that
you’re in, and it may go through two or three different groups of reviewers
before it gets to the end and then before it’s funded. Now, you have to get a
rating that is above the cutoff point in order to be considered for funding.
That’s the crucial point I want to make here. If it’s below the cutoff point, it
doesn’t matter what they say, you’re not going to get funding. Say the cutoff
point is 75, meaning you have to get above 75 points out of 100 to be
considered for funding.

McGarrigle: And the review is done by, is conducted by people at other institutes?

Gibbs: By other scholars at other universities, not your own. And they have national
panels. In fact, I was on one of them once. You have national panels who
come together, and maybe it’s a group of, I don’t know, half a dozen, twelve
people, and they review quite a few grants. Then they compare the grants, and
you’re looking at how well is it written, does it make sense, can it be carried out effectively. There are a lot of criteria. And I understand. All of the criteria are fine. But you never realize, when you’re a young scholar, unless somebody tells you, that there may be a political criterion. Certainly nobody told me, and I didn’t think of that. So I submit this grant and the university signed off on it. A lot of documentation. And it takes months. Three, four months later I find out that I have made the cut, meaning I’d gotten something like an 80 out of 100. Well, nobody gets 100, so 80 is not bad. Something like that. I can’t remember the exact score. But it was somewhere in the low 80s. So everybody was saying, “Oh, you know, you’re sure to get funded. This is a time when government has a lot of money. You’re sure to get funded.”

So then I find out—I get a call from a guy who I later got to know better—they wanted some more information about my grant. And I sent in the information they asked. Well, how was I really going to recruit these kids, was I going to make sure that their confidentiality—because they’re called vulnerable subjects when they’re teenagers, under eighteen is a vulnerable subject—how could I assure that their confidentiality would be protected? Was I going to go through the schools? Those questions seemed perfectly okay to me, and I got letters from the school board in Oakland—the school administration, not the board—that they were going to cooperate with me and I was going to work in several schools, and they signed off on the grant. So I didn’t think too much about it.

Well, anyway, a few months later when I’m waiting to hear, I get this form letter that they were sorry that they could not at this time fund my grant. So of course I was nearly in tears, and I went to talk to the dean. He made some comments, he talked to some of the other colleagues. He said, “Well, let me see again exactly what they said again, Jewelle.” So it turns out that the administration—now who was in, was it Nixon? Who was in in the early eighties?

McGarrigle: Reagan.

Gibbs: Reagan. Right. Any grant that came through that used terms like “multicultural” or “multiracial,” or had comparisons between blacks and whites, was almost doomed to defeat. They didn’t want anything, unless it was crime and drugs. It was okay to do crime and drugs. But anything which was—mine would have been a much more positive, these kids are—looking at their adjustment and trying to find out how they were doing, and it would have been a much more positive kind of study. And it did at some points, I’m sure, use the word “multiracial sample,” of instruments which have been used on different races. But that was the death knell. They made it very clear that they don’t want to support any studies of urban minorities unless they are studies that basically show that they are all sick, all drug addicts, all criminals, things like that. Then they’ll be supportive.
McGarrigle: And this information came to you, your dean—

Gibbs: Well, the dean talked to some other colleagues. They couldn’t figure out why mine wasn’t funded. But then they came back to me and said that they knew because they had served on panels. See, they were senior to me. I wasn’t serving on panels at that point. They served on panels, and they said, “That’s the death knell.” Even if the panel will fund it, and then you have to send it to the administrators of NIMH, who are appointed by a Republican—it was Reagan, I couldn’t remember it was Reagan—and there were these guidelines. You never knew what they were, but basically we don’t—so it’s like now they don’t support any kind of real things that would encourage family planning. It’s the same thing.

McGarrigle: Yes. It’s the agenda.

Gibbs: It’s the agenda. It’s the political agenda.

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: So now, if you’re doing AIDS research, and you talk about using condoms, you may not get funding. I mean, it’s awful. It’s awful. If you’re doing research on pregnancy prevention, I mean, the only thing that gets funded is abstinence programs. This is what I’m talking about. So I learned—this is my third year probably at Berkeley—that depending on who’s running the government and who’s running these big agencies, you may or may not get funded. That was a big disappointment to me. So then I had another route, because that was really my next big project. I had another route that I took. Fortunately, the university had these grants, which in fact came from NIMH, but they were locally administered. So I simply sent the same proposal to the university committee, which was locally administered. They got the money like a block grant, and they then funded my project for three years.

McGarrigle: And is there a way in which, at the university, there’s an informal mentor?

Gibbs: Well, we had—they were just beginning it when I came along.

McGarrigle: Because I’m just wondering how could it have been different, so that you could have gotten the guidance upfront.

Gibbs: Yes, well, they were just beginning, and I had one, a person who was assigned to me, who was not that attentive and not that interested in me, so he didn’t really give me a lot of good advice. He read the grant the night before; it was too late then. But I did get it funded at much less, in terms of the money that I received, but I did get it funded sufficiently so I could do the work and I could do the research, and that led to—I was supposed to do a book. I never did the book, actually. I never did the book, unfortunately. I had a great title for the book. It was going to be called City Girls. I never did the book, but I did
several articles, which, again, helped me with the tenure process, several articles showing the different kind of adjustment patterns of black girls, Hispanic girls, and white girls, and one of the things—well, I found several interesting things.

But one of the major things I found was that the black girls had levels of self-esteem which are as high or higher than all the other girls. And see, this whole issue of self-esteem is that minorities must have low self-esteem because they’re minorities. That’s not true. Nearly every single study done since mine has shown the same thing, that the minority girls have very high self-esteem, surprisingly, in view of their circumstances, often. They also have lower rates of drug use, and again, mine was one of the first studies that showed this, that they have high self-esteem, lower rates of drug use, and their sexual behavior in my study—it was by class—the lower income black girls did tend to start sexual activity earlier than any of the other girls. That is true. Probably, I’m sure, that may still be true. But in any case, it was a class-related phenomenon.

So now the recent work—I mean, if you look at Carol Gilligan’s work, the famous woman at Harvard—there are a number of other people who have done research on girls and boys. But the thing that they’re finding is that this issue of drug use, the fact is that, in every single national survey, black kids are using fewer drugs. Now, the one criticism of that is that we’re talking about kids who are in school, because that’s where you’re getting the studies. So that the idea of who’s using all these drugs, they have to be kids who are not in school, and those are the ones who drop out, which you would expect maybe would be using more drugs. And the older youth, say between eighteen and twenty-five, who are often more likely to use the hard drugs. But if you look at kids who are up to eighteen in school, every single survey shows that black kids use lower rates of drugs, in fact, sometimes much lower, except for marijuana, where it’s all about equal, but much lower rates of alcohol and drugs than any of the other ethnic groups—the whites, Hispanics, or American Indians.

McGarrigle: Is this like the myth around welfare, that it’s not front-page news?

Gibbs: It’s the myth that reporters go into a ghetto and see some kids who are stoned on maybe heroin and maybe involved in the criminal justice system, and assume everyone in that ghetto is using those drugs, and the fact is that the kids who stay in school are using fewer drugs. But my study was done in the early eighties, and I found that out in Oakland, and now we’re seeing all these other studies that are coming forth. For example, Carol Gilligan had to admit, after her first book, when she said teenage girls have low self-esteem. She did a follow-up study and looked at the black girls separately, the black girls had higher self-esteem. And it’s the same result, and that became one of her findings in, I think it was her second book, that black girls don’t go through this in early adolescence, this self-doubt that white girls go through. They
don’t have this sort of decline in self-esteem. She found that out too, and that was the same age group I was looking at in Oakland, junior high school.

McGarrigle: And to what do you and do she attribute that to, that difference?

Gibbs: Well, I think that there are a couple of things that I have said, and she and her colleagues have said something similar. I think black girls are raised from a very early age to be kind of goal-directed. They are told by their mothers that, you’ll probably have to work. If you marry, your husband may not be able to get a good job, especially earlier in this—in the last century. And you’re told that you have to be self-sufficient. Very early on, from very early we get that message. Then the self-esteem that is generated for black girls is not a self-esteem where you’re comparing yourself to white girls, because most blacks are segregated still in our society. So you’re not comparing yourself to the white girls who live in Atherton if you live in East Palo Alto. You’re comparing yourself to other black girls. And there’s a kind of competition around the hairstyles and the clothes and who has the prettiest hairstyles, like these braids, who is the best looking, who is the best dancer. So the sources of self-esteem in the black community are somewhat different than they are in the white community.

For boys, it’s athletics. If you’re a good athlete, you have a lot of self-esteem. I mean, you walk around, you’re the king of the walk, the cock of the walk too, in high school every girl wants to date you if you’re the quarterback or you’re the star of the basketball team. So the sources of self-esteem come from what opportunities the black kids have in their own community, and if you’re cute and have the best braids and you’re the best dancer, then that gives you self-esteem. And there’s a lot of positive reinforcement for that in the black community.

So you’re not sitting around feeling, oh, I’m not white. I don’t have what they have. You’re sitting around feeling that, oh, I have something special; I’m a good dancer; I have pretty braids; or whatever it is. You’d be amazed—I’ve been working with these kids a long time, and also there’s a sense of energy and vitality that black girls have. They’re very sassy, and everybody knows that. They’re very sassy. There’s a sense that they’re very alive when you’re around them. The emphasis that their mothers give to them is not, “Be a lady.” That’s not what they grow up learning, which I think they do probably grow up learning in Atherton; learning how to sit; learning what to say; learning not to raise your voice. Black girls don’t learn that. That’s not what’s taught to them. I mean, the middle-class black girls learn that. But the majority of black girls are taught, “Be assertive. Don’t let anybody take advantage of you.” Those kinds of things.

Now, when you’re taught that from a little girl, you know, stand up for your rights—and that makes them sassy. They’re pretty sassy. I’m not saying that totally positively—they tell off their teachers. They tell off clerks in the store.
They’re pretty sassy. And when you work with them, you have to be sassy, too, and I learned that. Otherwise they’ll roll over you in a minute. So I think it’s all those things that give them a sense of, “In our world, we’re important people. We’re assertive people. We know what we want and we know where we’re going to go to get it.” I think that the problem is the white world just looks for the pathology, like, oh, teenage pregnancy, this, that, and the other. But they don’t really see that other part of it. They see those indicators out there. They don’t see the other part of it. So this is what I would say, is that they really are getting different messages about themselves than I think the average white girl gets.

McGarrigle: I’m going to ask you the same question as about the earlier research. How was this research received?

Gibbs: This research was received—well, actually my first book was received very well. But that wasn’t based on my own research as much as collecting—I think I told you that—collecting a lot of statistics and having other contributors. So I wasn’t actually out there observing these young men, but what I was doing was collecting the data to state the case that they are not treated very well and they don’t have opportunities, and that we need to change the policies. So it was not the same kind of research.

Now, that second business was about the interracial teens and multiracial families. That was received very well nationally by clinicians. I got a lot of—the first article was published in a major journal, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, and subsequently I had two articles on that published in that particular journal, which is a major interdisciplinary journal. I got lots of feedback, lots of positive comments about that. But from my colleagues, that didn’t come. For them, the problem was not so much that they didn’t like the research as that they didn’t think it was social welfare research. They didn’t see it as a social welfare issue. So I said, “Well, when you hired me, you knew I had a degree in psychology and I was interested in mental health, and it’s a mental health issue, which has social policy implications.” Well, what are they? [laughs] So it was hard for them to see. Now they can see it.

I was told recently by one of my colleagues, “You know, Jewelle, you predicted years ago that our society was going to be much more multicultural, multiracial, now we see it.” But it took them a while to be able to see that what my little problem was, that I defined as the identity issues of these kids, is now a whole social reality, not only in the state of California, but in much of society, this whole question of the census changing its labels. That’s when they came to me. They called me, the U.S. Census called me and asked me about those labels, because they knew about my research. I told one of my colleagues—in fact, I told the dean—he said, “Well, it’s finally paying off.” That was his comment, it’s finally paying off.
But this is the kind of thing that you have to recognize early as a trend, which is what I did, I recognized it. If it starts in the Bay Area, anything that starts in California, in the Bay Area, is probably going to sweep the country eventually, like rock music and the hippie movement. All of that started in the Bay Area. And California is, in fact, I say in a lot of my work, a bellwether state. So if we see something in California, we know that it’s going to probably spread to the rest of the country. So the fact is that this issue has now become a social issue. How do we label these people? What do they call themselves? You know it affects funding for bilingual education? If we’re talking about Spanish-speaking people, it affects block grants for minority communities. Are we talking about black people here, or not black people? So all of this whole business about identity and how you define yourself has become a major social issue.

McGarrigle: There was piece in the *New York Times* in the last few days. It was on the front page, and it was about the census, and it was about the Latina community.

Gibbs: Yes. My sister called me about it.

McGarrigle: How they defined themselves.

Gibbs: That’s right. As “other.” And I read it. But again, that’s some of the things that I was saying were going to happen in our society, this issue of shifting identities for political reasons. One day you may say, “I’m a Latino,” and another day you may want to be black, depending on which one is salient to you at the moment. One day you may be Indian, because you want to apply for reservation benefits if they have a casino, another day you may not want to be Indian. You want to apply for a job in town, you maybe want to be white and forget the Indian. So it just really is an issue that we’re going to see more and more.

But let me come back to the—you asked me how people accepted this research. Because this research I’m talking about on sort of the psychosocial adjustment—

McGarrigle: Before you start, I’m going to change our tape.

Gibbs: Okay.

[begin minidisc 22]

McGarrigle: So now we’re back taping. We’re talking about how this next piece of research was received.

Gibbs: Okay. Well, the next piece of research, which I did over a three-year period, I think it was received well. And again, it augured what—because for years, oh,
before the seventies, people had said black people had low self-esteem, black young people had low self-esteem, and this business about drugs and all. And that was not what I found at all. It was absolutely opposite to what I found. I had a fairly large sample, I think it was 187 girls, four different schools in Oakland. I just didn’t find that at all. It didn’t make sense. Well, this is inner city. Why were they not showing these patterns? Then as time went on, we began to see a whole new literature emerging in the eighties, showing the strength of these kids, the fact that they did have high self-esteem, the fact that most of them were not involved in drugs or crime, also low depression rates, that they are not as depressed. The black girls had a much lower rate of depression in my study than the whites or the Hispanics. And since then, this has been replicated over and over and over again.

I won’t say mine was the first study. That would not be accurate. But mine was one of the first studies to use a large, fairly representative sample of school children who were not already in any kind of system, like juvenile justice or foster care. There had been some before, but many of the samples were smaller than mine. So this was one of the first rather large samples. No, I said 187, it was 387.

McGarrigle: 187 was Los Angeles.

Gibbs: That’s right. Because I remember, I think that’s not—you’ve got a good memory. 387. So that’s a fairly large group of kids, of girls. And they were all girls. So since then, and in fact I just finally finished a chapter for this conference that I went to, remember, in Germany last year, where I had to review all the literature on youth suicide and all of the related things like depression, antisocial behavior, and substance abuse. I just finished reviewing it, and every single indicator shows that—and this is a review of dozens of national studies—on every single indicator, black kids, and especially black girls, have the lowest rates of depression. Hispanics generally have the highest rates of depression among, if you compare just the three groups, because there isn’t as much information on Asians. Black girls have the lowest rates of depression. Black girls have the lowest rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and black girls have the lowest rates of suicide. That is in all these national studies. Now, this is what I found. I wasn’t really looking at suicide before, but I was looking at suicidal ideations and depression and substance abuse. This is what I found in 1983. Okay? So I feel really vindicated, because now it’s 2003, and most of these studies were conducted after my study. Mine was one of the earliest ones. I feel really good, I really have to say that, because there was some skepticism about my instruments. There were people even, a couple of people, who even said, “Well, maybe it was the way you interpreted it,” meaning that I was putting this spin on it, like a spin.

I was very upset when a Chronicle reporter—see, the university always puts out, you have an article in a magazine or something, they always do their little squib in their weekly paper. So they send it out to the Bay Area press if it’s
something they think is interesting. So they had sent out this little notice about my research, and that it had been published, and what it showed, that black girls in this sample were very well adjusted compared to all the others. So the reporter for the *Chronicle*—I believe from the voice, I didn’t see her, but I believe that she was a young white woman, and the name—she called me and said, “Oh, Professor Gibbs, I’d like to come and interview you. It sounds like such an interesting study.” So we were talking and she said, “Well, can you send me a CV and give me some background?” That was even before faxing, I’m sure, because I remember I mailed to her this short thing of mine.

If you read it carefully, you would know I was a black person, if you read it carefully. I mean, I don’t say I’m black, but there are things that I’ve done. So she called back, I think a couple of days later. I didn’t hear from her for a couple of days. She called back and said, “Well, Professor Gibbs, we decided not to do the interview at this time.” I said, “Well, is there any reason you’re not doing it?” She said, “No, but my editor just felt that it’s so hard to—that people would find it hard to believe that black girls in Oakland would be so well adjusted compared to others.” There was this definite kind of implication that I had kind of doctored the data, the way she talked to me, and it really upset me. But there’s nothing you can do about that.

So I just said, “Okay, fine,” and went on about my business. But this is the kind of thing that I was getting from some people, and especially conservatives, that, “How could you find this out? Where did you make this up?” And it turns out, as I said, that when you review this literature for the last twenty years, over and over again it comes out with the same conclusion. It is, I will admit, somehow surprising. So then you have to assume that there is something in either the culture or the family system or the community. There’s a new book called *Urban Girls*, that they’re saying these girls are very resilient, that they rise above their environment, that they learn how to cope well, because that’s the only way they’re going to make it. So that there’s a very early resilience that they develop. They know that if they get involved in drugs or have a teenage pregnancy, that they’re going right down the drain. So they try to find ways to succeed without getting involved in those kind of things. So that’s my hypothesis.

**McGarrigle:** I know the dean was supportive. Who were some of your other colleagues who were supportive of your work, in or out of the department?

**Gibbs:** Well, that’s another subject that I’m kind of reluctant to talk about, but I do want to say that I did feel, yes, I had some supporters. But the big difference between me and some of the young men who came in after me, with me or after me—there was one hired with me, then after me—as soon as a young white man enters the department, and it’s not just in my department, somebody brings him in, mentors him, and usually attaches him to their research project. I never got that. Never.
McGarrigle: That’s why I asked you about the guidance for the NIMH study.

Gibbs: Yes. I never—and that was very superficial. Finally after about four years I realized—and remember, I’m still trying to get tenure—that I needed to try to get into one of these big research projects, because you’ve got a big research project. They’ve got ongoing grants, and they’ve got a staff. They’ve got people who do all the scut work for them—the typing up of the grants, the typing up of the papers, all of these things.

McGarrigle: It’s all built into the grant, the administrative costs.

Gibbs: That’s right. The administrative costs.

McGarrigle: Clerical and—

Gibbs: Are you cold? Let me turn up the heater or give you a sweater or something. I’m just watching you here and I’m not too cold, but sometimes this house gets drafty. [leaves the room] You know what, it’s seventy.

McGarrigle: Well, it’s maybe just me today.

Gibbs: No, you know what I think it is? It’s seventy, but we’re sitting in the coldest room in the house because of the glass. The glass in this room, usually if it’s sunny, the sun will come out, but it isn’t sunny.

McGarrigle: I’m okay, Jewelle.

Gibbs: This is one of the coldest rooms in the house because there’s so much glass.

So anyway, if you hadn’t asked I might not have mentioned it, but since you asked, it’s an important part of an academic career. The main—and I will say, so I won’t make it too personal—the main complaint that women and minorities have at a place like Berkeley or any major university, and I want to say it’s not just Berkeley—Stanford, Harvard, Yale, University of Michigan, it doesn’t matter—is that when you come in, you are treated as an outsider, so to speak. You’re not the typical all-American male professor that they’ve always had. So you represent somebody who’s different. And I understand that.

But not only do you represent somebody who’s different, there’s also a kind of threat to them, I think, that, ‘This person, they’re from a minority group. Are they really smart? Are they capable? Do we really want them to come into our team and maybe drag us down? Or do we have to give them too much support or we have to build up their skills?’ is one part of that. And the other part of that, I think, is, ‘Will this person know how to play the game? Will this person be skilled politically in helping us to get more funds, in reaching out to the community and whatever we need?’ So in a way, you are an unknown
professor, the female professor and the minority professor is an unknown quantity.

And so in some ways I can, as I’ve gotten older, understand that they’re playing it safe to protect their own little empire. But on the other side of it is that it makes it very difficult to get tenure if you don’t have that. You really are out there by yourself. You’re like a cowboy on the range. You’re out there by yourself because you don’t have any support, and the only support you may have is one secretary that you share with many others. I was very lucky to have a good, very efficient secretary who became my friend and my support system and was very helpful to me. I was very, very lucky, and often she made my work a priority because we were friends, and I appreciated that. But everybody wasn’t so lucky.

So part of what happens with the women and minorities, you come in, and people don’t automatically invite you to be part of their research team, so you have to scramble around for the first couple of years looking for a way to get your stuff published, you have to figure out what you want to do, then how to get it published. And maybe by the time you’re there three or four years, you’ve proven that you can play the game, that you are competent, and maybe somebody will then invite you to be part of their research team. I was never invited, ever, to be a part of the research team. Now, I suppose they could say I did different kinds of research. That is true. But part of the reason I did different kinds of research is nobody ever asked me to do the traditional social welfare research. Mine was nontraditional, I will admit that. Mine was more sort of psychological, more mental health, but there was one guy who was supposed to be my mentor who was doing a big project on psychiatric emergency, and if he had asked me, I would have been happy to be part of his team.

As it turned out later—and he was a good researcher—as it turned out later, he had a lot of difficulty getting along with people, alienated most of his graduate students, and worked his secretaries to death. So in the end, I think it probably was better for me not to have been associated with him. But he certainly was very successful at getting big grants from NIMH. He was very successful at publishing, and he’s a very well-known, one of the best known, colleagues in my department. But he knew I was a psychologist, so obviously I was interested. He knew I had worked in a psychiatric emergency situation in San Francisco at Mount Zion Hospital one summer, and he never asked me to be part of his research team. And other people, other minorities and women who came into our department, had the same experience. So everybody, you sort of have to be on your own, and it’s not easy.

McGarrigle: Well, I want to ask you, following on that, about the qualified women and minorities who did not get tenure.
Gibbs: Well, you know, I don’t know all of the cases to speak of. I knew of a few cases where people did either go to court or went through the procedures at Berkeley. There were a couple in the law school who certainly, I felt from my knowledge of the cases, were highly qualified, and they had to go through the tenure committee, the Promotion and Tenure Committee, called P and T, and they had to fight, sometimes for several years. I think one eventually got it, who is still there, and I think one didn’t.

In my own department, a couple of women left before they came up for tenure, and I have to say, in those two cases I didn’t feel that they had a lot of support to begin with, and so they left before they ever came up for tenure. And again, it’s difficult. I can only speak to the cases that I really knew well. The difficulty was—and I can speak to some cases in other departments which I was involved in, peripherally. But the difficulty is, without support from the beginning, sometimes people can just flounder for two or three years, and when they wake up and finally figure it all out, it’s too late. Because you have to have almost a running start. You have to come in, you have to get your first project running right away, and you have to figure out how to get a grant, and you have to do that in the first two years. And if, by the end of the second year, you haven’t figured that you, you come up for a major review in your third year, and it’s probably too late.

So I think what has happened to many of the minorities and the women who haven’t gotten tenure is that they didn’t have that very early support and guidance, like about where you should apply for funds and grants, about people helping you to craft a good grant proposal, people not putting you on too many committees, people asking you, “Would you like to co-author an article with me, would you like to help me with my research until you get started with yours?” These are the things that minorities and women do not get, these are the kinds of things. And some of them are very subtle. Some of them are very subtle. For example, subtle—in my department—I may have told you this story. I can’t remember, we’ve been meeting for a while now. The dean and three of the senior professors went to lunch almost every day together. Did I tell you this story?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: Well, they went to lunch at a pizza place up on north campus.

McGarrigle: LaVal’s.

Gibbs: Yes, on Euclid. Well, no, not that one. The coffee shop around the corner from it, which is now been turned into a xerox place. It used to be a coffee shop.

McGarrigle: Okay, on Hearst.
Gibbs: Yes, on Hearst. Right. Right at that corner of Euclid. It was an Italian sort of coffee shop right there. They used to go almost every day, and we used to see them. And we realized that they weren’t just talking about nothing, they were sort of planning what was going to happen in the department. These are the four top people. We used to call them the Good Old Boys.

McGarrigle: And when you say “we,” that’s you and—

Gibbs: Well, the women. I was hired with two other people, one woman and one young white man, and we were never invited to lunch by these senior people. The year after I was hired, they hired a black guy, who had been at another university, I think at University of Oregon. He was never invited. So here were these people having lunch every day, making decisions about the department, about everything in the department, which we later learned, and we were not included in that. The part about being at a university or any major institution is access to information. If you don’t have access to information, it’s hard to succeed. Because there’s a lot of informal information that gets passed around to those who are “in the in group” that the “out group,” by the time they learn about it, it’s too late.

So one day, when I was feeling particularly sassy, as I said earlier—[laughs] and I do have my sassy moments, I’ll tell you that—I walked in, I was by myself. One of the men was missing, so there was an empty chair. So I went over, and I said—first of all, they barely spoke, you’d go in and they’d just sort of nod to you. I went over and I said, “Well, hi! How is everybody today?” “Oh, we’re fine, how are you?” So I got my sandwich and I looked around, and I came back and I said, “Do you mind if I join you?”

Well, there was dead silence. I cannot tell you. I wish I had had a video of this day. There was absolute dead silence. Everybody’s looking at the dean to see what he’s going to say, and he said, finally, “Oh, fine. There’s an empty chair.” [laughing] So I sat down. More silence. They didn’t know what to say. Here I was, one of their colleagues. This was not my first year; this was, I think, my second year. It took me that much time to get up the nerve. They didn’t know what to say. I finally said, “Well, gentlemen, don’t let me interrupt your conversation.” They said, “Oh, we were telling dirty jokes.” I said, “Well, that’s okay. As long as they’re not too dirty.” Well, then they laughed, and then they resumed just kind of a normal conversation—but it was clear they had been talking about the department, and they asked me what I thought about a particular vote coming up. So it was clear they had been talking, and I told them what I thought.

Well, after that, things shifted and changed for me. After that, these particular people, the three senior people, became friendlier. If I would go in and there were maybe two of them there, they would invite me to sit with them. Then what happened—it was very strange, actually, to me. To this day, I can’t explain exactly what happened. But they sort of adopted me, in a way. They
began sharing all this stuff with me, and telling me, and if they were going to
hire somebody, they would ask me what I thought, and they would kind of try
to get me to vote on certain things certain ways, which is how they ran the
department anyway. Sometimes I went along, if I agreed, but on principle I
would tell them when I didn’t agree. But they sort of adopted me.

So then that created friction with the other women and junior members of the
department, who then told me I was one of the Good Old Boys now, that I had
become one of the Good Old Boys. So they began—this is about my third or
fourth year—they began to see me as one of the Good Old Boys, which I
never felt I was one of the Good Old Boys, or Girls, but I did feel that they
had kind of adopted me. I knew their secrets, so they sort of brought me in.
After that, although they still never invited me to be a part of anybody’s
research project, after that I found that, for example, one of those senior
people who’s still there, and has served as acting dean after the other dean
left—and I will say his name, it was Neil Gilbert—he put my name in for the
the National Association of Social Workers Board of Publications, and I did
get on and serve, and in fact that was very early in the process. He submitted
my name.

There were things that they did to kind of help me advance my career, besides
the dean. There were other things that they did. They put me up for chair of
the Academic Senate in the department. They would suggest me for
committee assignments in the university that were important committee
assignments. So I felt that they had kind of adopted me and they were helping
me in my career, those particular three senior people.

McGarrigle: What do you attribute that to, other than there is the fact that you did join
them for lunch that day, but that shift?

Gibbs: Well, I think that—you know, it is hard for me to be completely objective, but
I will say—I discussed it with my husband—I will say that I think what
happened is that in a way, it’s they saw that I didn’t really fear them, or feel
that they were alien, or somebody I couldn’t approach, that their power didn’t
intimidate me. I’ll put it that way. And it didn’t. I mean, I knew they had it.
But their power didn’t intimidate me. That’s why I said, “Do you mind if I
join you?” I think that they developed a certain level of respect for me. And I
would speak my mind in the meetings, in the faculty. I always spoke my
mind, and everybody would laugh. They’d say, “Jewelle is going to say what
she really thinks.” I mean, I didn’t just talk to be talking, but if I had
something serious to say. And I think they felt that I was serious about my
work and that I was not intimidated by them. I respected them and I wanted
them to respect me, and I think that that’s what happened. That once they saw
that I didn’t fear them or feel that they were like the Mafia or something, and I
actually began to take part in some of these conversations.
For example, there were several fights about newly hired people and people that we were going to recruit. I would listen to them, and they would sort of want a certain outcome. Since these were the dean and the three senior members of the department, or three of the senior full professors, they usually got the outcome that they wanted. Then I would argue with them sometimes, and I would say—this was after I had started sort of joining them for lunch, not exactly regularly, but once in a while. I would argue with them, and I would say, “I don’t think this is the right person for our department. I don’t think this is the right person for this job at this time, and I think we need more minorities, or I think we need somebody else for this job.” They would listen to me, and sometimes they would know there was a job where I and the women in the department were determined that we were going to get the person we wanted, and we were absolutely determined. And they knew. In a way, I came to represent the women in the department, in a way, the way often the women were thinking.

Now, I didn’t always agree with all the women, either. Let me make that clear. Because there were a few women—most of the women were lecturers—there were very few on the Academic Senate, of which I was one. The most we ever had was five when I was there, five women on the Academic Senate at the same time in our department. So I don’t mean the big Academic Senate, but our department. That was the most we ever had.

But I became sort of the spokesman for those women, because the woman senior to me was very strange and very odd and alienated from most members of the department. She had very strange, kind of marginal views about almost everything, and she was not popular. So I became kind of this person who spoke for the women on the tenure track. Once we decided we wanted something, you know, they would try to get me to see their view. I would say, “You know, I’m sorry.” And they knew—I sort of had a voting bloc then, and then the minority members, because by this time I was becoming more senior. By the time I got tenure—I’m talking about now—I was becoming more senior. And the younger members, the women and the minorities, I tried to be helpful to them. I tried to mentor them. I was very, very welcoming to them. I would take them to lunch. I would tell them all about the process. I would tell them what they had to do and when they had to do it. So I think that I had developed some loyalty among the younger women and the minorities on the faculty.

And basically I think the older people finally figured out that I did have some votes that I could deliver one way or the other. I think that I tried to do that fairly and judiciously, but there were one or two times when we dug our heels in, the women and the minorities who wanted a particular person that they didn’t want, and we won a few battles. [laughs] And I will say, that was interesting. I will say that. We did win a few battles. Once you win the battle, then you may not win the war. Because the war is what follows the
appointment, and they can always find ways of derailing an assistant professor if they want to, which in some cases they did, and that’s just another sad tale.

But I think on the whole, what happened over my career as my research became more in the way mainstream, because I would start something that would interest me, and all of a sudden other people would see, “You know, this is interesting. We need to do more research on that.” So whether it was young black males, because when I wrote that first book on young black males, the way I put it together, it was the first time anybody had put it together like that. It spawned all kinds of research. Several states set up commissions for young black males from my book. It had a very big—they had Congressional hearings, and I went to Congress to testify about it. So it spawned a lot of action, and it spawned a lot of action in the political and policy arena.

Then the other research on multicultural teens, it took a little bit longer, but people began to see that as a trend, multicultural families and biracial children and bicultural children, and that spawned another area. And then this third area of the issue of the adjustment of black teenagers, especially black girls, and why are they so well adjusted compared to what you might expect, and compared to white and Latino girls. So as these things began to be mainstream issues of research, I think my colleagues did learn to appreciate me more.

Now, by this time, I don’t really need them anymore. When I needed them was the first six years of my career, when I was going up for tenure, when I was looking around for things to do. So after I got tenure, I felt that I had my own—I had carved out my areas. What I wanted to do then—I mean, I still would have accepted if somebody had said, “Would you like to work with me, Jewelle?” I still probably would have. But by then I was getting more interested in policy at that point, when I got tenure. I said, now, all these issues and problems, we need to look at what needs to be done about them. So then I was getting more interested in policy, and then I came to my next big book, which was probably the most controversial book I have ever written and will ever write, the Race And Justice book [*Race and Justice: Rodney King and O.J. Simpson in a House Divided* 1996, Jossey-Bass Publishers]. Because it was very controversial. What time is it? I’ll just tell you a little about it.

McGarrigle: Well, let me ask you two quick questions, and then we’ll see if we start there next time or today. In the twenty years you were in the department, did this situation, this lack of support in these early critical even first two years, you were there to be a support for the new women and minorities coming in. But did you see a change as more of a department culture?

Gibbs: Not appreciably. I won’t say it didn’t change at all, but not appreciably. First of all, there was a hiring freeze for a while. You remember the university went through some bad times. So after we hired a young Chicano instructor, we went a few years without hiring anybody. Then we hired a young Asian-
American, Chinese, instructor. I think that’s all we had for a long time. We didn’t have any new instructors. Now, when the young Chicano instructor came, I was the chair of that search committee, and I took it upon myself, and another Asian-American woman, a colleague of mine, we took him out to lunch and we sort of briefed him on what he needed to do. And we made ourselves available to him for his first two or three years, to go to lunch, to talk about his research, to do anything. Eventually he did get tenure.

McGarrigle: Now this is Kurt Organista. He’s very fond of you. I met with him early on.

Gibbs: I was the chair of his—and I was also the chair—I don’t think he knows it, he may have figured it out—of the committee when he came up to get tenure. So we made sure that he got the tenure. But then this young Asian-American came in, just about the time I was thinking about retiring, so I wasn’t as active with him, although I did take him to lunch. I made a point of taking every new person to lunch. I did take him to lunch, and again, told him the score. Sometimes the score is who to avoid, and I told him the people that I thought were not very helpful, and who would be helpful. And whenever I would see him, I would always ask him how he was doing. So I tried to create for him the feeling that you can come to me whenever you want to. Because some of his interests were like mine. He was interested in minority issues in big cities more around—I think he was more interested in help-seeking, more around how they seek help on some other issues, in which I was also interested. So I talked to him about his research. I wasn’t as active with him as I was with Kurt Organista. Because, you know, you get to a point where you begin to disengage a little, and I was beginning to disengage. The last two years of my career, I knew I was going to retire, and I was trying to finish things up, so I wasn’t as active. But I certainly made an effort to be available to anyone who wanted to talk to me and try to tell them about the culture of the department, and not to let the dean put them on too many committees, that was also what I told them, and generally tried to be supportive, because I think it’s really important.

McGarrigle: My other question—oh, it’s ten to four.

Gibbs: Okay. Well, you can ask your last question.

McGarrigle: I’m fine on time. I know you want to make a phone call.

Gibbs: I will make it as soon as you go.

McGarrigle: Okay. As you garner more national attention and go to Washington and participate in Congressional hearings and so on, are there repercussions in terms of professional jealousies in the department?

Gibbs: Interesting you would ask that question. Well, I think there were maybe some. But, you know, they don’t tell you. You have the feeling that you gain stature
in the eyes of your colleagues, but there is the other side. There was a lot of teasing, which, you know, indicated to me that number one, they were aware of what I was doing, because I was away a lot. I mean, I would always try to meet my classes. We could have three classes a semester where we would invite a speaker that the university would pay for. Only three. That was our limit. I used those three up every time. If we had a fourth, we’d have to pay the person ourselves or they’d have to do it free.

McGarrigle: Oh, I see, if you were away.

Gibbs: Oh, yes. But I would work that out, see. Because you have to cover your classes. I would never have a class that wasn’t covered. But I actually was lucky, because I taught the kind of courses where you’d want experts to come anyway, like my minority mental health class, I’d have a Spanish expert and an Indian expert and an Asian expert to talk about those three ethnic groups. The dean had no problem with that. But then I would schedule them when I was going to be out of town. So that would fit right in with my syllabus, which I prepared in September. So it wasn’t like, “Oh, here she goes again.” So I worked it out. There were a couple of semesters where I was away a little bit more than I was comfortable with or that the dean was comfortable with, and he would tell me, say something to me. As long as I covered my classes—but they didn’t want you to really be away for more than three. There were times when I may have been away for a fourth, yes, and then I would invite a colleague, or someone in my department, and then I would owe that person a talk.

But I think there was a lot of teasing, and every once in a while a kind of catty comment. I’ll tell you two comments that I thought were perfect, and then you can decide for yourself. The one comment was an older colleague who really was a brilliant man, a historian in the department, but he was not a great lecturer, but he was brilliant as a historian. He didn’t have any kind of national profile. I mean, no one in the federal government is interested in the history of social welfare, I will tell you that. So he didn’t have a national profile.

So I went to Japan. We haven’t talked about my Japan stint. But I went to Japan, I think it was 1986, to do a workshop. I was actually a substitute for a colleague of mine who couldn’t go, and she was wonderful. She had done all of the lectures in Japanese that could be handed out, and just prepared me beautifully, gave me all these materials. So all I had to do was go over and give the lectures in English and then have a translator, and it was a wonderful opportunity, I’d never been to Japan. So I went to Japan. I was there one week for this workshop in Kyoto, which is the ancient capital of Japan, a beautiful place.

So when I came back, this particular colleague never really seemed to like me, and there is some evidence that he had problems with race. I don’t want to say his name, but he had made some unfortunate comments in class about race
and about black people. He had told one graduate student, who was Hispanic, a very fair-skinned blond Hispanic, a doctoral student, he said, “You know, I don’t know why you don’t change your name. You don’t look Spanish. Why don’t you just change your name so nobody will ever know?” Which is bad news to say those kinds of things. So it was clear that the students, the black students always felt that he had a problem, that he was a little bit of a racist. He would make comments about blacks on welfare, things like that. So he never really seemed supportive of me, he never seemed to like me. I did everything I could, because he was a senior colleague, to be nice to this man, and sometimes he would make comments to me that I thought were fairly suggestive, that I didn’t like. If I had been more of an aggressive young feminist, I might have complained to the dean. I mean, really he did make comments to me about my clothes and how I looked and things that were, I thought, inappropriate.

Anyway, one day a colleague came out of his class. He taught a doctoral seminar on the history of social welfare, and one of my students who was in it came laughing to my office. She said, “Jewelle, I have to tell you what your friend just said.” I said, “What did he say?” She said, “Well, he seems to be upset that you were invited to Japan. He told the class, ‘Well, I always knew she thought she was Miss Black America, but I never thought she was Miss Japan, too.’” [laughing] It’s very funny. Now, isn’t that a funny comment? “I always knew she thought she was Miss Black America, but I didn’t know she was Miss Japan, too.” So those are the kinds of comments I did get. Now, that is a very nasty comment, although very funny.

McGarrigle: He didn’t have a problem making a public remark like that.

Gibbs: He said that to a class of graduate students. “I always knew she thought she was Miss Black America.” I had to laugh. I wanted to say, Yes, I should tell you some of the comments he’s made to me about how I look. I mean, they were compliments, but they were very suggestive things that he had said to me. I said, ‘Now he’s running around saying I thought I was Miss Black America? Maybe I should run around and tell people what he said to me.’ But that was that.

Then there was another comment. There was a book published by [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan, I’m trying to remember, maybe it’s called One Nation or something. Moynihan did a series of lectures at Harvard, and he published the book. I have the book. I’m trying to remember the name. “Nation” is in the title. And he quotes me, cites one of my first articles, probably the article before I wrote the book on black males. It was the article called “Young Black Males in America.” I think that was the article he cited. It’s cited in the Godkin lectures. The Godkin lectures are every year, very famous lectures, and the book was published. So one of my colleagues stopped me in the hall and said, “Well,” he says, “I knew you were important, but how does Moynihan know about you?” Those kind of things. I had comments like that
maybe monthly, somebody would make a comment. Or if I was quoted—I told you about the time I was cited in the *New York Times*.

McGarrigle: The editorial.

Gibbs: Yes. Even the chancellor, but I took it that he was proud. I felt that he was proud about me, being in the *Times*, you know.

McGarrigle: What kind of a response did you develop to that? Did you develop a response?

Gibbs: Oh, yes. First of all, I have a great sense of humor. I really do. I have a great sense of humor, and I consider myself—I don’t think I’m very thin-skinned. Because if you’re a black woman in this society, you have to grow up developing armor. You know? I hate to say that. But I don’t know if Thelton Henderson ever said anything like this. But you grow up as a black person, and especially if you’re middle-class, and you’re dealing with both worlds, you always have a foot in both worlds, the white world, the black world. You just have to develop a certain protective armor. You can’t let every comment get to you, because you’d be crazy. You’d be paranoid. So you have to develop a kind of way of laughing at these other people. First of all, you have to laugh at yourself, and then you have to laugh at other people. And I think I do that very well. I mean, I can laugh at myself when I feel that I’ve gotten too self-satisfied. But I can also laugh at other people, because I realize that some of it may be a little envy, yes, some of it may be a little envy, and they want to put you down, and I figure, if that makes them feel good to put me down, that’s fine. It kind of rolls off my back. I mean, I have a different response for each situation.

So when this colleague said that to me about Moynihan’s book, I said, “Oh, well, you didn’t know how famous I was,” and laughed. It’s kind of a double entendre. You are asking me how he knew about me, and I said, “You didn’t know how famous I was,” and I’d just laugh and walk away. And that leaves him standing there, having exposed their ignorance or their jealousy or whatever it is they’re exposing, and I’m laughing all the way. I’m just laughing. And that is the way I deal with it. You have to. You have to deal with it that way. If you get upset and angry at every comment that’s made to you, either about your race or your sex or your academic success or your public attention, you would be reacting all the time. So I just can’t let these people—you just can’t let them get that close to you. You have to keep a little bit of a protective armor around you. Just laugh. Smile. Shake your head and go on, you know? That is true.

McGarrigle: It’s a strategy.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s the strategy. Did I ever tell you about the comment I made to—this is odd, I’m going to have to tell you. I thought about that when you say it’s
strategy. When I first went to the men’s Faculty Club, did I ever tell you about that?

McGarrigle: They weren’t allowing women at that time. But I don’t think you told me the story.

Gibbs: They didn’t allow women for a very long time, and then finally they allowed women, but there was one room traditionally where women weren’t supposed to sit. Of course, I didn’t know that. I didn’t want to sit there. You know the Great Hall, where they have these wooden big tables? Women traditionally, they really don’t want women to sit in there. That’s for like the older faculty, the emeriti faculty and so forth. So anyway, why would I want to sit in that dim, dark, ugly hall anyway? I mean, this is the truth. You know?

So one day I went in with the dean, and it was my first year, and I had not been there very long. He had said to me, “I’m going to take you to the Faculty Club to discuss something.” It was, I don’t know, some project or something. It wasn’t about me, it was about something in the school. So I said to my husband, “I think I’ll get just a little dressed up. I’m going to the men’s Faculty Club”—it was my first time—“going to the men’s Faculty Club.” So I got dressed up in one of my nicer suits and high heels. In those days, I was still wearing high heels to class. And I looked nice, like a professor, a young professor.

So as we walked into the dining room, all these heads turned. So Harry—I said, “Harry, why are they staring?” So Harry laughed. He said, “Well, Jewelle, you look around. How many women do you see here?” And there were very few. Now, keep in mind, this was 1980 that I’m talking about. I was hired on July 1, 1979. So sometime that year—I think it was that spring, I’m sure it was my first year, so it would have been the spring of ’80. There were maybe one or two other women in the dining room. We didn’t eat in the place where you get your sandwiches, that big room. We ate in the special dining room, you know, there’s one with the nice little tables.

McGarrigle: With tablecloths.

Gibbs: Yes, with tablecloths.

McGarrigle: The service.

Gibbs: Yes. I think there were one or two women. Not more than two. And he laughed and he said, “Just look around you. There are not that many women.” Then he said, “But you know, they’re probably looking at you because you’re so cute.” I said, “Oh, shut up, Harry,” something like that. That was the end of it.
So then a few years later, a reporter was asking, called me, and she said, “We’re calling some of the women on the faculty, and your name was given us to comment on this issue of the history of the men’s Faculty Club, and the two faculty clubs, and what do you think?” Now, this was a Chronicle reporter, okay? Well, I guess I must have been feeling very sassy that day, because my answer was, and I never thought she would print it. I thought I was just giving her a cute comment. I said, “Well, you know, whenever I go into the men’s Faculty Club, people do still stare. They still stare. I don’t know whether they’re staring at me because I’m a woman, or because I’m black, or because I look particularly good that day.”

And she put it in the Chronicle!! [laughing] She actually put it in the Chronicle! Oh God, did I get teased about that comment! I had friends from Berkeley calling me. One friend from Stanford wrote me a note, Bill Gould, and said, “Jewelle, I bet you were looking particularly good that day.” Oh, God! Even now, I blush to think about it. But you know, it was an offhand comment I said to the reporter. I never thought she would put it in, but she did, exactly like I said it, exactly like I said it. So anyway, those are some of the days, some of the funny comments I remember about sexism and racism at the Faculty Club. But it did exist, yes. I just think it—these are things that take so long to change.

Next time remind me to tell you two things that I was thinking about when you were away. I should have written them down, but I was getting ready for my trip after you were here before. Two things I do want to comment on. And that is sort of the general sexism and racism at Berkeley during my twenty years. You know, I mentioned committees, but the general sense of things that happened on the campus that really were sometimes almost unbelievable, the nature of some of the discussions on campus and the Academic Senate, which are actually on record.

And then the other thing I wanted to talk to you about, one of the things that I’m really very proud of, I mentioned on committees, I mentioned the committee where we looked at the structure of the committee on committees. I think I talked about that last time, and the budget committee. Talked about that last time. But the other thing that I was proud of, that we did, the Committee on the Status of Women and Ethnic Minorities, that we really did, we were the first to develop this kind of code about sexual harassment, forbidding sexual contact between the professors and the students. Then I read just a few weeks ago that there had been no code, which just was not true. But the difficulties of trying to get it through is what, of really trying to get it through the Senate, and the kinds of, to me, shocking things that people would say, indicating that the men did not feel—I mean, really just felt entitled to do what they wanted to do with their female students. I guess I was really quite shocked that it wouldn’t be clear cut that you’d have a rule at a university that there would be no sexual contact, or no intimate contact between a student and
his professor who—or her professor—who has power over her. Those two things were—I just found that shocking.

And then one other thing about committees that really I will remember from my career as a contribution, when they developed the, well, it’s not new now, I guess it was about ten years ago, the new requirement that everybody had to take a kind of course in multiculturalism.

McGarrigle: The American Cultures requirement? I’d like to talk about that.

Gibbs: Yes. I was involved with that. The American Cultures requirement. I was involved with that, and I really felt that was quite an accomplishment, because there was in fact a great deal of resistance to it, which I think represents the broader—there is a really deep conservatism in the faculty at Berkeley that is shocking to me to this day. Because Berkeley is a public university, and it’s known for the student radicalism. But it’s the students who are radical and liberal. It’s not the faculty. The faculty in Berkeley is really fairly conservative. And there is one group that’s really deeply conservative, which comes out a little. So I do want to comment on that.

McGarrigle: Good. That’s excellent. I’ll turn this off for today.

[end of session]
Interview 13: November 24, 2003

[begin minidisc 23]

McGarrigle: Okay. And now we’re taping. Today is November 24th, and I’m Leah McGarrigle with Jewelle Gibbs.

Gibbs: Okay. So today I guess we were going to start with how I got interested in the whole field of cross-cultural psychology. It’s a field that’s also got other names—minority mental health, it also is called ethnic psychology. There are a lot of names for this field, but basically what this field is, is looking at other cultures and how cultures contribute to behavior, and in my case, not just—I mean both normal behavior and what is considered aberrant behavior. So that when you’re teaching students of psychology or social work or psychiatry or any of the mental health fields, how to help them to understand that the meaning of mental health varies across culture, of what is a healthy person and what is a mentally ill person, varies. The symptoms of mental illness vary across cultures, and they’re not the same in every culture.

So as our culture has become more and more diverse, this is an important point to get across in teaching, because the teaching, even when I was in school, was you were taught about a Western model of mental health and mental illness, and that comes from Europe and it comes from earlier on, from Freud and his disciples, and what is mental illness and what is mental health is all couched in a culture that really is Anglo-American and Euro-American culture. And that’s what we understand, and that’s what we were taught. By the time I came along, and there were a lot of other influences in my life which made it clear to me that we needed to broaden this definition, period, in this culture. I had mentioned we lived in Africa. I had seen things which are very hard to describe to someone who is not familiar with tribal cultures. Some of it was surprising, some of it was shocking, some of it was illuminating, but I certainly saw that what they considered mental illness and mental health was different from what we considered mental illness and mental health. So you start with the fact that belief systems vary.

And when these people move from their native cultures to America, they don’t give up all these ideas. So if they believe in what we would call superstitious ideas, if they believe in witch doctors where they come from, and that’s how they grow up, they’re going to believe in witch doctors when they move to America, even if they are graduate students in a prestigious school. They believe in a lot of—their ideas of causation of symptoms are very different, and their ideas of causation are much more in line with things like spiritual beliefs and supernatural forces. They believe that’s what causes mental illness. Whereas, of course, we don’t believe in any of that.

So therefore, I was very interested in trying to pursue that in a more rigorous academic setting. My dean asked me would I devise a course on—at that time
they were calling it something like “Ethnic Content”—in a comparative sense, for the masters’ students in social work. And of course, I was delighted, because I already had the interest. I had started to read a lot in that field. But I also realized there wasn’t a great deal of, you might say scientific information, so you’re relying mainly on anthropology, some sociology, but mainly you’re relying on what anthropologists are saying about other cultures and mental health and mental illness.

So I combed the literature, and you have to remember this was in the very early eighties. I actually developed the first course, I believe it was my second year at Berkeley. There wasn’t much out there. There was a field beginning to be called black psychology. A few years later, they had Chicano psychology. A few years after that, it was Asian psychology. So each group began to say the same thing, that we need to study our own group, and we need to explain these cultural differences and what they mean, and how people in the mental health field have to recognize these different things, these symptoms, these belief systems, and behaviors. In other words, you don’t always want to attach a label of mentally ill to somebody who is doing something in their culture that’s perfectly normal. And that is one of our problems, that somebody would come and talk about their visions, and their visions might be religious visions that they would have only on Sunday when they were in church, and they wouldn’t be abnormal, and yet we would medicalize that, and we would say they were a schizophrenic, and they were having schizophrenic delusions, where if you really knew about the culture, it wouldn’t be schizophrenic delusions at all. It would be a religious experience, which is really only in that context, and that’s how you have to evaluate it.

So anyway, these were the kinds of issues that were coming up, and psychiatrists were getting confused, social workers, psychologists. They would see things and not know how to evaluate these behaviors or these symptoms. They would talk to people and they would just slap a diagnosis on them, very often a serious diagnosis, and give them medicine, and think, ‘Oh, they’re going to get better,’ without understanding that a lot of these things weren’t really symptoms in the sense of psychiatric symptoms that needed medication.

McGarrigle: There must have been a history to this as well, for example with Native American culture.

Gibbs: Oh, sure. A long history. And of course, Native Americans often used peyote in rituals. It was very normal for them to do that, and in a society where we outlaw marijuana, then that becomes a problem, and other kinds of psychoactive drugs, that becomes a problem. So how do you treat that issue?

In any case, I developed this course at first by myself, and it was just a semester—no, we had the quarter system at that time. I was not totally happy with it, because I just couldn’t find all of the resources I needed. So then my
colleague [Larke Nahme Huang], who was an Asian American woman, who had had the same ideas that I had, we got together and we decided—she was teaching a separate course—and we compared our notes and compared our literature, and compared the fact that we both knew, from our own experience in different ethnic groups, that these things just were not understood and were not covered.

So she and I decided that we would contact some of our other colleagues of different ethnicities, who were all PhD psychologists, who had done both research and had a clinical practice and could document these differences, and that they would be believable because they had all this education. So we contacted six of our colleagues and friends, from different groups—and we were very careful to pick out the best, in other words, people at the top universities who were teaching, and we ended up with twelve chapters in a book, and we called it *Children of Color [Children of Color: Psychological Interventions with Culturally Diverse Youth. 1989, 1998, 2003, Jossey-Bass].* It was the first textbook ever written at that level to help children. And we were aiming it—because we were psychologists, but two of us were teaching in the School of Social Welfare—but we were aiming it at all of the mental health professionals. Our biggest market, we thought, would be psychologists, and secondly social workers, both in terms of graduate training, people who were working in internships, people who bought books for their agencies, all those things, and that’s who we aimed this book at.

Fortunately, we got a publisher who thought it was a good idea, in San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, which is a big textbook publisher. I had an editor. They liked the idea, thought it was a great idea. So we published this book, and there was an immediate demand for it. It became a very popular book, used as we had hoped it would be, used in training programs, in clinic programs, in research programs, and so forth. Each of the chapters dealt with a specific group. So we had chapters on two Asian American groups, two Latino groups, an American Indian group, black Americans, and so forth. Then we had some explanatory chapters, which compared these groups. And then we had a chapter where we gave each of our contributors a case study, and asked them to describe it from their point of view.

McGarrigle: That’s really interesting.

Gibbs: Did you see that?

McGarrigle: I have. It's really interesting.

Gibbs: And you see the differences, you know. They would really approach it differently. If this were somebody, a Filipino or whatever—we didn’t have Filipinos in the first book, but we have them in this book, our last book. And that was one of the most popular chapters, because it really showed how the
world view of each of these people is really quite different, you know, the way they would approach a case and how they would interpret the behaviors.

So the book did quite well in terms of sales, it was very popular. So then about five years later, they asked us, would we do—or maybe it was a little bit more than five years later. It was 1989, so it was 1995, I guess, or ‘96. Anyway, we did another book, which was a second edition. They didn’t actually call it a second edition, they just called it revised edition. But then we finally put out what was officially called a second edition, which we call our third edition anyway, in 2002, last year, or was it 2003? I’ll look at the date on it, but it came out sometime last year.

And that one is a little bit different. We have new groups and we have a slightly different approach, and we do more of what is called policy issues around big policies that affect youth like Medicare and the juvenile justice system, and we discuss all the policies where these kids—the foster care system. They tend to be more involved than white kids in these systems, because they’re poor and minority. So you have more of these kids in what we call the six systems of care. So we look at special education, foster care, juvenile justice, the health system—that’s four, what are the other two?—child welfare, and I guess the sixth is just regular education. So we have a lot of good statistics and we show how these kids are over-represented on every single negative indicator. Everything. Anything you want to ask about, there are more minority kids, more minority low-income kids, in all of those systems: the juvenile justice system, the child welfare system, so on. So we document them, and then we talk about why we think that is, and then in the final chapter we talk about what this government needs to do—federal, state, county, local—what this government needs to do to change that picture, because they’re unwilling to do what they need to do. We do talk about that.

And this third book, which as I said just came out last year, has been doing quite well. People like it even better because it has the two policy chapters, so people like it really well. I think the thing that we were happy about—as I said, my co-author is a Chinese American—is that, one, we created the first course like that at Berkeley in the School of Social Welfare. It meant that we felt that in teaching the course, our students were really getting a comparative view. We weren’t just talking about one group here and one group there, but we were comparing groups. And we felt good about really, that we were preparing them to work with a multicultural population, where we live in the Bay Area. They were all saying, “You know, this doesn’t work with black kids, what works with white kids or Asian kids” or whatever, and so we felt that we were making a real contribution. And then it turns out that it’s used in most major schools of social work all over this country, and in Canada. For the same reason, people are saying, “This is one of the first books.” Right after ours, another one came out, but we got the head start. Another one came out by a colleague of mine. He’s a very dear colleague at the University of New Mexico. He wrote me and said, “Would you contribute a chapter to my
book?” I wrote him back and said, “Sorry. Mine is just coming out.” [laughs] His name is Louis Vargas, and he wrote, they wrote a nice book, too. A little different than ours, but they wrote a nice book.

So those were the first two, and now there are probably dozens. Now you look in a catalogue, there are probably dozens of books like that.

McGarrigle: The first group of students at the course that the dean asked you to teach, was that a multicultural group of students?

Gibbs: Oh, all the students in the School of Social Welfare—in fact, we had more minorities in the early eighties than we have now.

McGarrigle: I saw the numbers of master’s students and doctoral dissertations that you supervised or guided, and it’s tremendous, from social welfare, psychology, and education.

Gibbs: Yes. Mainly doctoral students, but I did do some master’s theses, because the master’s kids don’t have to do theses, so therefore they don’t. Only the very ambitious ones do theses. But you’re right. I have worked with a lot of doctoral students. But the classes that I taught were mainly—oh, I should add, though, that’s a good question. They were master’s level students, but when the kids heard about it—I shouldn’t call them kids—but students heard about it from education, public policy, psychology, sociology and education, they would come and ask, “Can we take it?” Psychology was sending me so many students that I had to write the chairman a letter. I wrote to the chairman and said, “You know, we have a limit of twenty per seminar.” If it gets more than twenty, you really can’t—in fact, sometimes it would be twenty-five, okay, and the dean said, “Okay, twenty-five is your absolute limit.” But when you have more than twenty-five people in a room, a graduate seminar which lasts two hours a week, you cannot do justice to your topic and let them participate. So we’d have all these young people in the room and they’d want to ask a lot of questions, but there wasn’t—either you had a lot of questions that you answered or you covered your material, but you couldn’t do both.

So I said no more. So I wrote to the chairman. I started out by saying, “I’m really happy that you’re sending all these students from psychology—clinical, mainly—over here to our school, but I would suggest that you develop a course of your own, because we cannot handle all your students. We cannot. We simply cannot.” Sometimes four or five would show up in one semester. And it was only taught once a year, anyway. I said, “We can’t handle all your students.” They were sort of almost, I hate to say this, but sort of dumping them on us. They weren’t taking responsibility. I reminded him that the licensure requirement for psychologists, since I have one, requires at least one course in this area taught at the graduate level in their program.
Well, he wasn’t too happy about my letter, I’m sure. But they did then really—they would have a course like every other year, but then they started having a course every year. Because when the person who taught the course went on sabbatical or something, they just wouldn’t offer it, and then they would send the people to me.

McGarrigle: Now, when you were a student in that program, the man who became your thesis advisor, was he the one who taught that course?

Gibbs: Well, it was just beginning then, yes. It was even before they required it for the degree—and then soon after that, they required it. He did teach a course and he had a book. He had one of the first books, called *Minority Mental Health*. Shelley had one of the very first books. His co-author was a black guy named Rico Jones, who recently died, unfortunately, very young. They taught a course, and again, that helped me to formulate my course, but my course was quite different. They were basically dealing with the black and white issues. They weren’t really dealing with the whole spectrum. By the time I got my PhD and started teaching, we just saw the population of the school changing and the society was changing so rapidly, and it was no longer black and white, it was everybody. It was all these groups, and so let’s deal with all these groups.

But their course was mainly about black and white issues and similarities and differences. It was very helpful on that issue, and certainly I learned a lot, and certainly it was useful. But when we wrote our book, we wanted to cover other groups, all the groups in the society, all the major—you know what, you can’t cover every group of people. But you cover the major groups, and then some of the issues that are true, people can extrapolate. If it’s different for the Asians and the Latinos and the American Indians, then maybe it’s different for the Turks and the Asian Indians. Because obviously everybody has a different belief system.

One of the examples from India is the issues they have around multiple gods and goddesses, you have different gods for different things, and how that impacts both in terms of their marriage customs, their burial customs, their—we would call—I mean, I don’t like to use the word superstitions, but their belief systems. Something like if the girl doesn’t give a big dowry, why do they have so many brides die in India? Because their mothers-in-law kill them, that’s why. When a young couple comes over here and starts having problems, an Indian couple, and comes for counseling, you have to understand those tensions, and you have to ask about them, you have to understand there may be a lot of tensions. Did this girl give an appropriate dowry? Is that the cause of this problem that they’re having, this in-law problem? I mean, one of the questions is, is her life even in danger if they go back to India? So there are things that you have to understand about these cultures to really do good work with people. And if you don’t understand them, you just miss so much, you just miss so much.
So anyway, I guess I’m really proud of the book. I don’t think the book is perfect, nothing is perfect. But I think the book was a—well, I know the book was a pioneer in its field, and I think it’s contributed a lot to helping people study things. I get letters and emails about it almost every week. I got one the other day from a student. I should show it to you if I can find it, where is it? A student back East who is doing a research project on biracial children. It’s funny because I recognize her name, she may be the daughter of a couple we used to know. She said that she wanted to write to me about my research on biracial children and how it’s changing, and this, that, and the other. I haven’t answered her yet.

But I get these letters really fairly frequently from graduate students and undergraduates writing papers, “Can you tell me the new references?” and, “Your work has really helped me,” or, “I’ve been inspired,” or something like that. But it makes me feel good, and I think my co-author feels the same way, that we have kind of opened up that discussion and now other people have followed, and I think it’s made a great deal of difference in the training of people who are going to work with these children. I think from that point of view, I’m probably most proud of that book of all my books. I mean, I like all my books, for different reasons, but I’m most proud of that in terms of its impact on graduate education in mental health, because they use it in psychiatry, psychology, they use it with psychiatric nursing, they use it for high school counselors, the training of counselors, they use it for training parole officers. I mean, they use it in almost every field where people are dealing with troubled kids and teenagers. So I feel as if we’ve done something that is very positive and that it will live on after I’m gone. That’s the way I feel.

McGarrigle: That’s wonderful, Jewelle.

I want to ask you about the process you’re—well, when you’re writing a book, how that changes your life, if it does change your life.

Gibbs: Oh, it does.

McGarrigle: —and what your process, your creative process, is like. And then this book is a collaboration, and so that’s different—.

Gibbs: It’s difficult. You know, I’ve decided I’ll never do another one, although I love Lark, my co-author. She and I are like—I call her my little Chinese sister. She’s tiny, she’s short, she’s about ten or fifteen years younger than I am, she has a very different personality, she’s very [whispers] quiet, she’s quiet, and calm, unlike me. [laughs] We get along like two peas in a pod. I love her. But she now lives in Washington, D.C. She has a different kind of job. She works in the government. She has a wonderful job. Actually, it’s an academic job. I shouldn’t say she works in the government. But she works in a policy, sort of think tank that is related to—does work with the government. She works at
Georgetown University, but she works a nine-to-five job. She’s rearing two kids, and she doesn’t have as much time and flexibility as she used to have when she was here and we worked on the same faculty, and we could run into each other’s offices. So it’s been a little bit difficult, the long-distance collaboration.

It turns out that we were trying to finish this job at the same time her daughter was applying to college, so you can imagine. So they were spending weekends—when we had a deadline, she’d be on some weekend going to Yale or Princeton, or another deadline, they’re writing applications, or another deadline is senior high school prom. You know. [laughs] So it was delayed. The book was delayed, because every time there was a major deadline, Lark had some child, one of her two children, had some kind of important weekend crisis, so anyway.

But the creative process, everybody works differently. My husband and I are very different, the way we work. I can work almost under any situation, partly because I’m the kind of person who is used to a lot of stimulation, so noise doesn’t bother me very much. What other people are doing around me just doesn’t bother me too much, as long as I can have a room and a yellow pad and relative quiet in the room where I’m in. So I can come in here if people are looking at TV, and my kids when they’d be looking at TV in that room, which is our family room. Jim can be doing his computer thing in his room, and I’ll just come in here or go in the bedroom, sit up in my bed—I love to work on my bed—and I work with a yellow pad.

I do not type anything. I do not use a PC. I do everything in longhand. I’ve done four books and dozens of articles. Everything starts in longhand, and I will write basically the first two drafts in longhand. I really do have to set aside time. I can work anywhere, but I have to set aside a block of time. So the difficult thing with children and a husband in a house is sometimes you have to go out to the library. So there would be days, when I get really going on a book, then I spend a lot of time in the library. I’ll just find a quiet place, and I can use the library here, at Stanford University, because we live here. I would find a quiet place in Green Library, or I love to work at the Stanford medical school library because I used a lot of their books. I’d go downstairs in the medical school library. I don’t know if you’ve ever been there, but it’s very quiet, because those medical students are serious students. I’d go downstairs and I’d take my books and my yellow pad, and maybe spend three, four hours in the library and outline a chapter or whatever I was doing. So I would work both at home and in the library.

The other thing is that when I’m doing a book, I screen out almost everything else. I don’t call my friends, I don’t go out as much, I don’t worry about my house. I mean, I have a goal and I have a deadline, because when you’re working with editors, they have deadlines. So if a friend calls me and says, “Let’s have lunch,” I’ll say, “Let’s do it next month. I’m sorry, I’m doing a
chapter, I’ve got to get this done,” or whatever. I feel that it’s hard for a woman with children, and you have to set yourself limits. The kids and my husband, I’m not going to deny them what they need. So I will do what I have to do as a mother and a wife, anything beyond that, I would just kind of screen out of my life. So there would be months when I wouldn’t see friends. There would be months when I would hardly see a movie. There would be months when we wouldn’t take a weekend trip, and the only people I would call would be my mother and my sisters, basically. Friends would call me and I would talk briefly, but I’d say, “I’m really busy, I can’t talk to you. Call me next month.” Which means that sometimes your friends, unless they’re very sympathetic, may not call you next month. But I had a small core of very loyal friends. They understood, so that was lucky.

But then when that deadline is met, then I treat myself. And then maybe for a couple of weeks or a month, one of the ways I treat myself is I go shopping. I call my friends and say, “Let’s have lunch.” Jim and I will go up to the city and spend the evening and have dinner. So it works like that, that I sort of deprive myself for a period to meet a deadline. On a book there are always deadlines, but usually I would promise the publisher and say, “Okay, I’ll give you half the book at such-and-such a date,” and then we’ll make another date for the second half. Then I would have this period of where I could sort of enjoy myself. So that’s the way I did it.

And with an article, I’d work very hard on the article, and when the article was over, I’m going to enjoy myself. I’m going to kind of treat myself, I would call it—it’s time for a “mental health day,” I would say. And I would sometimes stay in bed all morning and read the *New York Times*, and that’s a real treat, when I didn’t have to get up for a deadline. So this is my creative process. I think everybody has a slightly different one. But for me, I would really have to screen out all kinds of things that were not going to advance me toward my goal, because I knew that I wanted to make this deadline. I want to make this deadline, and then I’ll have a little fun, and then I’ll do the next deadline. My life was like that for twenty years.

McGarrigle: And between the first draft in longhand and the second draft, are you editing the first draft then by hand?

Gibbs: Oh yes, I did everything by hand.

McGarrigle: So you’re making annotations in the first one.

Gibbs: You see, it’s interesting you ask me that, because more specifically, my process is, I sit down without any books. I mean, I’ll do my reading. That’s what I do first, and I take notes on whatever resources I’m going to use. I take extensive notes, again by hand. I do my reading, I take my notes. So then I have my notes all in a big folder. I then sit down without the notes, sit down in a quiet room. For the first draft, it slows me down if I check on the notes. It
just slows me down. And then I just write from memory. I will write a whole chapter that way, from memory. Then I’ll put the parens where I want to put the references. Sometimes I’ll remember the reference and I’ll just say here it is and this is the year, or I won’t remember the reference, but I know this is where I want it to go. Sometimes if I don’t know the exact statistic or I can’t remember it, I’ll just put a question mark, but I know that’s where I would put the statistics that I’m using. That way I end up with a longhand manuscript, let’s say for an article or a chapter. Because I do it one at a time. I don’t try to do the whole book at a time. I do a chapter at a time.

Then I’ll go back and the first thing I’ll do is put in the numbers. I don’t even put in the references always on the second draft, but I’ll try to clean up the statistics and sharpen up my points on the second draft. By this time, I’ve sent it off to my secretary. She does the typing for me. I was very lucky, I always had a good secretary. Then she’ll send back—it’s usually the second draft I send her to type. She’ll send it back, she faxes it or emails—now she emails it to me. Then that’s the draft, that second draft, that I will perfect it. I almost never do more than a third draft. I do three drafts and then I’m through. The third draft is the draft that I’m going to send in, with a few, maybe, missing references or something.

But I figure that the first draft is what I do from memory. The second draft, I’m using the resources, and the third draft is, I’m really cleaning it up, and I’m trying to make the language more academic. I’m trying to vary my sentence structure. I think about all that on the third draft. Sometimes you think, ‘Oh, too many sentences beginning with “the,” or too many sentences beginning with a pronoun,’ so you’ve got to change it. And it’s on the third draft where I also—I just want to make it sound more elegant. I want my writing to be more elegant. Even academic writing, some of it’s very boring, very, very pedestrian, including some of mine. But I really like to make my writing kind of intimate with the student or the person who’s reading it. I want to make the person feel like we’re having a conversation, almost. I don’t know if you’ve noticed I do try to do that, now especially in Race and Justice. I did more of that in Race and Justice. I try to bring the reader in and say, “Here we have this mystery, or here we have this issue, and here’s the way I want you to think about it,” and then I write that way. So I try to create a relationship with the reader. I just don’t want a dry manuscript that just gives facts and statistics.

McGarrigle: And in a collaboration, then, are you each doing different chapters?

Gibbs: Yes, we each do different chapters, and then we edit each other’s.

McGarrigle: Oh, you do. And what’s that like?

Gibbs: Well, that’s interesting, because you have to be very—we edit each other’s, and she’s a good writer, too. Lark is a very good writer. So I don’t have to do
much with hers. She’s actually a little more concise than I am. She does help me, because sometimes I go on and on too long about a point. So she’ll help me be more concise. We accept each other’s criticisms, you know. We want this to be a good book. She’s a very good editor, I will say that for her. In each of the other books, we have other contributors, and we each take half. I edit some chapters and she edits the others.

McGarrigle: Okay. It’s really a collaboration all the way through.

Gibbs: Oh, it’s a wonderful collaboration. Then when we’re all done, we each read the whole manuscript with final questions, and of course the editor comes back with final questions. We try to make it equal. This last time, I did more than she did, because she had the daughter going to college. You know, your child’s senior year is so busy, and I understood that. So I said, “Next time, Lark, this book, if we ever do another one, you’ll be the senior editor, because this is my last time.” She laughed, she said, “Well, if we do another one, I’ll be the senior editor.”

But since I’m senior editor, I feel more responsibility for how the book turns out. It’s my name comes first, and that makes you—kind of also for the critics and all, you’re the one that they refer to. So a lot of me is invested in these books.

McGarrigle: And you’ve seen each other through all these life stages, then.

Gibbs: Oh, yes. And actually, I’m older, so I’ve helped her with—I went to the hospital when her baby was born, and started right away. She was having trouble nursing. I’ve given her a lot of good advice. Her children call me “Auntie.” I don’t see them that much. When her daughter entered teenage years and started getting really rebellious, she called me one day and said, “Jewelle, I don’t know what to do.” I said, “You know one thing? You’re on your own, because I didn’t have girls. I think they’re much more difficult!” [laughs] I said, “I can’t give you a lot, except I remember with my mother and my sisters,” and so we talked about how girls really are—you probably will face that.

McGarrigle: I expect.

Gibbs: Girls are more rebellious than boys—to the mother. They’re very rebellious. The boy tends to be more rebellious toward the father. But the girls tend to be very rebellious. And so she was having a lot of trouble with that and sibling rivalry. She said, “You’ve gone through it. Give me some advice.” So we’ve had a wonderful collaboration, a wonderful friendship. We’re really good friends. I miss her. She really is a good friend. So anyway, we’re still in touch. We did a chapter for a book together that she was the senior author for, and we’ve collaborated in a lot of ways.
McGarrigle: There was a year when you and Jim were on sabbatical in Washington. You were out at an urban policy institute. Is that where she is, or is that a different—?

Gibbs: No, she’s at Georgetown University, but she’s at a children’s mental health center. It has a long name, but that’s where she is.

McGarrigle: So there’s more things that we could talk about about the book, but we could talk about it with the other books, also.

Gibbs: Well, I think we can talk about it in relationship to how that affected the American cultures requirement. That’s what I was going to get to finally, because I realize, because I’m going on and on about my process, which you asked me about, but anyway.

So this course became—we kept refining it and we finally came out with a book, and then we taught with the book. She and I didn’t teach together. We taught different sections. At one point, I got a call from this man who said he was, for the same reason, they thought Berkeley needed to expand their curriculum so undergraduates would take a course introducing them to other cultures. Because I have to tell you, Stanford had done it. And you know, there’s a lot of competition between Stanford and Berkeley, and to be truthful, I think that was one of the reasons—but it was also going on at Harvard. In other words, all the big schools were changing their curriculum to expose their undergraduates to other cultures except Western Civ, which had been Western Civ, which we all took, and that was the be-all and end-all. If you understand about Rome and Greece, the empires, and a little bit about—the British empire, and you know, American civilization, you don’t need to understand anything else. That’s it.

That was what we all learned. Those were the books we thought were important. And if it didn’t come out of ancient Greece or ancient Rome or the British empire, it wasn’t important. Let’s forget it. That was a model that to this day is considered, you know, people like [Harold] Bloom who criticize the Great Books model. That is the model that we were all educated on, if you went to that kind of school.

So they finally began to say, students began to say, “Now, wait a minute. What about authors like Toni Morrison? Why isn’t she in the canon?” You know, they talk about the canon. Richard Wright, Amy Tan. They’re beginning to get all these authors who were not of that “dead white men”—I’m sorry, but I have to say it—the “dead white men” variety. And why aren’t we learning about these authors? James Baldwin. I could think about a lot of the black authors right now. They have something to offer, they have something to say. So they began to attack the university curriculum, and some of the professors began to realize that maybe these kids had something to say, too, that was relevant. With a culture and a country that was changing so
rapidly, could they just continue to ignore minority authors, authors of different ethnicities?

And I think they decided they couldn’t, that they had to include, particularly in literature they had to include it. But then it became broader than the literature. It became, “Well, we really need the Peace Corps”—I think the Peace Corps was a big influence, by the way, on these curricula. I really do. People were going to these countries. They knew nothing about the history of these countries. They couldn’t speak the language. They had to have special courses. And then they were coming back here and saying, “There’s a whole new world out there. There’s a whole world that we don’t learn about in college, in Africa and Asia and the Caribbean,” and all these other places.

So I think that there were several strands that came together. One was the Peace Corps and the interest in going to other nations to help them. Another one was the changing demography in our own society, so we have more and more immigrants and more and more high birth rates among Latinos, particularly. So that, I think, was a big influence. And then thirdly, there was just this liberalization and liberal attitudes after World War II. So I think if you put those—and there again, soldiers who had gone abroad had seen, some had brought home Italian wives, Korean wives, people from other countries. So there was this more liberal attitude about other cultures that we needed to find out about. I’m sure there are other—well, I think a fourth thing would be people just traveled more, began to travel more, after World War II, particularly in the fifties and sixties as the economy got better and people had more money. So people began to travel all over the world. So you get all of these influences coming together, basically in the 1960s and 1970s—and then the Civil Rights Movement, I would have to add.

McGarrigle: That was the one I was thinking about.

Gibbs: I have to add the Civil Rights Movement. That was in the sixties. And it was after that that you began to see the push for a sort of more multicultural curriculum. It started with black studies, okay, it did. It started with black studies, which really didn’t start until the late sixties, early seventies. By the time I was hired at Berkeley, it had gone beyond black studies, because every group said, “Wait a minute. We have a history. We have a culture. We have literature.” So we had seen the expansion of ethnic studies at Berkeley, but mainly on the graduate level. So you had black studies; you had Asian studies; you had American Indian studies; you had Latino studies. But some of this was like one course that students took as undergraduates, and also graduate students were interested.

I shouldn’t say mainly on the graduate level. Let me take that back. It was mainly undergraduate levels, but they were beginning to think, ‘We ought to also train graduate students,’ so it was really the reverse. So by the time they got to be concerned about more of a broader perspective, like, ‘Maybe we
shouldn’t be just teaching one course about this group and that group,’ they wanted to do a comparative study, which is what had happened at Stanford. Stanford had started this course, a comparative ethnicity course for undergraduates, which was required. And that’s where we come into American cultures. So I got this call and—

McGarrigle: Who was it who called?

Gibbs: I’m trying to remember.

McGarrigle: From administration?

Gibbs: No, it wasn’t administration. It was somebody from the Academic Senate, and I think it was Professor [Robert] Brentano, but I’m not sure. He died recently. I think it was Brentano who called me. He was a historian. Did you know Brentano?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: Very outstanding historian. I think it was Professor Brentano. I can check that out at some point, but I think it was Professor Brentano. He called me. They had set up this committee. Now, I was not on the committee. They were holding open hearings about the need to establish such a course, and one of the issues was should it be required or not required. That was the big issue. So I went for the hearing. They asked me. They said, “We understand that you teach a course like this in the School of Social Welfare, a comparative course.” And I said to them, “Yes, but it really is very specific about mental health. It’s not just about knowledge about different cultures. It has a very specific—it’s more of a professional course, so it’s not just a kind of literature course or a survey course or a history course. It combines a little bit of each of those, but it’s mainly about how to work with people who come to you if they have psychological problems.”

So they said, well, that was okay, that they were interested in the comparative nature of the course and how did I approach it. So they asked me to send in my syllabus. I did. And that’s how they invited me to come to this open hearing. Now, what was amazing to me, because I thought—and this certainly was in the early eighties, I think, or mid-eighties. No, it was the mid-eighties. I guess what was shocking to me was how many people stood up and said that this was not important, that our students could take a course, an optional course, and they could take it as an elective, but why would we have to teach them something like this? There were people who got up and said, “You’re trying to be politically correct, and there isn’t really that much content,” they would say. “Well, what’s the content in this course? Is there enough to fill a semester?” I mean, that kind of nonsense. And, “Who would teach it?” You know, “Who are the experts in this course? How do we know that the students
will be getting high quality teaching and reading things that are really legitimate?” I mean, all this nonsense.

I mean, some of the comments, I would have to say, were fair, yes, but something like, “How do we evaluate these books that they will be reading,” and, “How do we evaluate these authors,” and, “Are they equal to the European authors?” I mean, it was so much inherent, basic racism, I can’t even tell you. And I don’t even think the speakers realized it. I mean, they didn’t realize how they sounded to the rest of us, to the minorities in the audience, the minority professors who were there that day. They didn’t realize how arrogant and how elitist, I would even say elitist, they all sounded. Like, “How would we evaluate these books, and how would we evaluate these courses? Is there enough material?” I mean, it’s just so elitist.

So those of who knew some of the works said, “Yes.” I also got up and I made a statement, which, well, I think it was Brentano who told me, “You know, you were very effective.” I said, “You know, it’s more than just the content of what we’re talking about. It’s the role models. Here we are—,” and I’m sure it was somewhere in the mid-eighties. I said, “How many minority scholars and professors do our kids see? They’re going out into the world where the percentage of minorities is soon going to be up to 30 percent. How many minorities do they see? They’re going to have to work with minorities, they’re going to have to deal with minorities, and they have so many misconceptions and so many attitudes that are we would say prejudicial attitudes, stereotypes about these minorities and about their history and their culture. I never had, in all my undergraduate teaching, I never had one black professor. I had one black—” we used to call them section men, like a TA—I said, “I never had one black professor. So my being in the academic world is almost an accident, because when I was coming along, I didn’t think black people did that. Blacks didn’t become professors.”

I said, “Now, you’re asking who’s going to teach these courses. There are people who specialize in these things. There are people who know about black literature, and Asian literature, and so forth. You will be able to find some young—maybe they will be younger scholars, and you will be able to find that they meet these criteria. But it’s not just the teaching that’s important. It’s having an Asian face and a black face and a Latino face in a role as a teacher for these students, so they can see these people are intelligent. These people can teach. These people have something to offer us, as well as the field they’re teaching.”

McGarrigle: So they were talking about making hiring decisions as well as curriculum decisions? They weren’t going to turn to the people who were on—

Gibbs: No, but that day they were talking mainly about curriculum. But I brought that in as a point, that we need role models here. We need role models. In fact, one
of the questions was, who was going to teach it, and I said, “You know, you will find people.” Anyway, I got some applause. It was a big audience. I got some applause. I was very passionate, because whenever I say anything that I really believe, I’m passionate anyway. And so I was very passionate, but I got some applause. I think Brentano felt that my contribution had kind of in some ways put the others on notice, that what you’re saying really does sound very racist, very elitist, and you need to think beyond that. You need to think outside the box.

McGarrigle: If you could—or maybe it’s not relevant—but characterize who the people were who were making the comments that you described? Was there a particular—

Gibbs: Well, they were older white professors.

McGarrigle: From all disciplines?

Gibbs: And mainly they came from places like history. Political science was amazingly, in my day, a very conservative department, amazingly so, when you think of the topic of political science. Their graduate students had asked them to teach a course, to offer a course in urban politics, in a country where most people live in cities, and urban politics would include minorities. They told the graduate students one year that they couldn’t find anybody in the whole United States who could qualify to teach urban politics, and that’s just not true. They weren’t willing to teach it, okay? Those are the kinds of things. So the Department of Political Science had a number of very, very conservative professors, known for their conservative views. The Department of History was fairly conservative. The Department of English was really conservative, and nearly all of the science departments were conservative. And it was those departments that were heavily represented in the Academic Senate, heavily represented on the important committees. They had a great deal to say, and much of what they had to say was negative, about the American cultures course. If you want to go back and look at the debate in the senate, you will see what I’m saying. They, of course, whether they’re named or not—some of them I think are named in the debate, their names are in the minutes, because you have to usually identify yourself. But if you do see the names, you would be able to link them up with these departments that I mentioned.

Most of the liberal people came from departments such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and of course the ethnic studies people supported it. But you see, at that time, ethnic studies was not considered a very—did not have a lot of status in the university. And there was, to be fair, there had been a lot of political foment in ethnic studies, and there was a question of, were the students so involved in political activity that they weren’t doing their scholarly work? There was some question. I can’t say whether that was true or not. But there were certainly some very outstanding professors in that
department, some outstanding professors, and maybe some of the students were heavily involved, maybe over-involved in political activity on campus. Every time there’d be a big protest about civil rights or a protest about minority hiring or a protest about more minority graduate students, that department was heavily represented. So I think there was some feeling among the conservative departments that this department was spawning a lot of the political activity, and they weren’t really separating out the professors who were really quite well qualified, and many of them got national awards, from the students’ activity. So I think that’s a fair thing to say, too.

McGarrigle: And there was the anti-apartheid movement around that time.

Gibbs: Anti-apartheid movement. The ethnic studies students were involved in many of those issues, many of those, because they were issues that were of particularly close concern to them.

McGarrigle: So when you went that day, was there any kind of discussion in advance with Brentano about what to expect? Did you know what to expect?

Gibbs: Not really. I went, and I wasn’t even sure exactly what I was going to say when I got there. I knew that I was going to support the proposal. Oh, the preparation is that the proposal was circulated. But the proposal was in a very infant stage, I should say. So it wasn’t the proposal that was finally adopted, but kind of an outline of what they were going to discuss, I should say, what the goal was and what they would discuss. That was circulated to those of us who were going to be there. It had also been discussed—this was not the Academic Senate discussion I’m talking about. This was a separate, sort of like a big open hearing, almost, and it was also discussed, of course, in the Academic Senate after it got further along, debated very hotly and very heavily. People made their stands, and they are on record, and you can see, if you look at the debates, that there were a number of faculty members who were very much opposed to the American cultures requirement. They kept putting in extra things to kind of bog it down.

So it started out, I think, with each course would have at least two groups that are compared, so that there would be comparative focus. I don’t think that originally it was two groups plus whites, but then it was two groups plus whites, which meant that whoever taught the course had to be looking at—well, the whites become the norm, then, see. They become sort of the norm, and then the other two groups are compared to the whites. So they kept adding more and more criteria for this course, trying to, I think, defeat it. Then I think that is what is now—I would have to check, but I think that’s the way now, that students who take a course in American cultures will look at three groups, one of which has to be whites, and the other two can be any other major ethnic groups.
Now, it may have been changed. As you know, I retired three years ago, so I’m not sure if it’s still that way, but that’s the way it was when I left. So there were efforts to torpedo the proposal. There was a lot of debate, contentious debate, and I think that people’s feelings got bruised, egos got bruised sometimes, and I think that there was a line in the sand, and I think the ethnic minority family, a number of women sided with the ethnic faculty—because they, of course, wanted women in the canon, too. And then the liberal, the really liberal faculty, I think they decided that they were going to fight for this. They had to fight, because there were people who in every way did not want this requirement to go through.

McGarrigle: Was this going to be—is it to be university-wide or is it campus-wide only? Is it for the whole system or it’s only at Berkeley?

Gibbs: I think that each campus has a different solution. I’d have to check that out. In fact, after we finish, there are a couple of things I’ll check out myself in my notes. Some of my notes are in boxes, so I’d have to go look. I think it’s just for Berkeley. But each campus, I think, has adopted its own version of it. And in that connection, I served on a Berkeley affirmative action, the SWEM committee, but I also served on the statewide affirmative action committee. I was one of Berkeley’s representatives to the statewide committee. So you know, the situation and the issues are the same at all campuses. Some campuses had, when I was there, I think chancellors who were willing to go out on a limb and to be more outspoken about affirmative action and diversity, and others did not. It varies across campuses.

McGarrigle: That’s what I was going to ask, because I think it was Heyman then in the—was Heyman chancellor?

Gibbs: Heyman started—he was the second chancellor.

McGarrigle: It was [Albert H.] Bowker and then Heyman.

Gibbs: I think Heyman was on this issue of diversity pretty good. I think he was pretty good. I think [Chang-Lin] Tien was even more devoted and more passionate about it because of his own experiences, and he had been discriminated against when he came to this country. He couldn’t find a decent place to live at Berkeley, at first, you know that story. So Tien had personally experienced discrimination. So I think that he carried on—I think that Heyman was committed to affirmative action and diversity intellectually. I think that he certainly was a good role model for the administration. I think by the time Tien came, Tien was involved at a more emotional level, and I think was more passionately committed to it.

McGarrigle: I’m going to change our tape right there.

[begin minidisc 24]
Gibbs: It’s amazing when you think of these great minds, how some of them can be so narrow-minded. It’s amazing.

McGarrigle: Well, the part about the lack of consciousness about the content of their views is really stark.

Gibbs: Well, I’m not even sure they were not that conscious. I mean, I don’t think they realized how it sounded because they thought it was okay to say it. It’s like people in South Africa—when it’s permissible, you can say anything you want to say, and then when it’s no longer permissible, you have to watch your words. But they were at a point in their lives and at a point in our society where I think they felt they could say those things with impunity, and that they wouldn’t offend anybody, and that nobody would challenge them. I mean, that was what amazed me. That was what amazed me.

McGarrigle: So over time, as the requirement went through, after all this contentious debate, then I’m just wondering how it shifted over time, if it became—

Gibbs: Well, you see, I can’t speak to that too much because I didn’t teach—I never taught undergraduates, the whole time I was at Berkeley. All I did was I did go to that hearing and I did go to the Academic Senate debate, because I wanted to have my vote recorded. But it seemed to me that it soon became accepted because the students wanted it. The students also had been advocating it. It wasn’t just the Third World students—we used to call them Third World minority students—but a lot of the students realized that this was what they needed in their education. I think they tinkered with it. I think it expanded. I think that they were concerned about quality control. And I’m not saying that was wrong. I certainly think they needed to be concerned about quality control, because you didn’t want a lot of courses which were full of, like one person said, “We don’t want rhetoric; we want reason.” I remember that was one of the comments made. And it is easy to get into rhetoric on some of these issues.

But for example, like the issue of just slavery, there are enough good books written, several written by members of the faculty at Berkeley, several very well-known books written by the faculty. You could just have one course on the history of slavery and its impact on race relations in this country, period. You could have just that one course. There’s lots of material about it. And even though you may argue about some of the books and some of the facts, there is a long history of scholarly work on slavery in this country. Not enough, by the way. They’re beginning to change a lot of their views on some of the earlier books, too. But that’s good too.

So the idea that there wasn’t material on all of these things is just ridiculous. The problem is most of those people didn’t know what material was available. The problem is, as I told you I think a week ago, there are a number of people who either know nothing about the racial history of this country, or deny it.
They don’t want to know. So if you can go through a very good college up until maybe ten, fifteen years ago, without knowing anything about slavery and race relations in this country, except what you learn in a basic American history course, which is very little, you can do that. So if you’re a well educated person, you can know all about Shakespeare, you can know all about Einstein’s theory, you can know all about European wars, and you can know nothing about American race relations, which is a tragedy to me, because this is the country we live in, and it has been largely shaped by the history of slavery.

One of my favorite comments by a sort of popular historian is one by a man named White, and he said, the story of America, there are three themes in the story of American history. Rich and poor, black and white, and—let’s see, what’s the third? I’m going to say this famous quote—but rich and poor, black and white, and democracy versus tyranny. Something like that. I think that was the last one. But those are the three themes; certainly I’m sure of the first two; the third one was something like democracy and tyranny. Those are the three things that have shaped this country.

And if you can call yourself an educated person and know nothing about the black and white issue, you are not an educated person, to my mind. You’re just not. So I think this was the issue with the American Cultures course, that we’re trying to say to students, “You need to understand the various groups who have contributed to your society and your country.” Who built the railroads? It was the Chinese. It was not Mr. Stanford, okay? It was not Mr. Stanford. It was those Chinese coolie laborers. Who mined the gold? It was, again, the Chinese. Who built the South? It was the blacks. Who built the Southwest? It was the Latinos, okay? But we don’t want to talk about those things. We don’t want to admit any of those things. And those things are part of our history. They are true and we need to understand them, and we need to understand the extent of the fact that we stole all that land from Mexico, and now we don’t want—we call them immigrants. You know?

So these are just things that I as a person know, and I think everybody ought to know them. Unless you know them, you can’t really understand why there are all these tensions in all these parts of the country. Why are there all these tensions between blacks and whites, between Latinos and whites in the Southwest, between Chinese and non-Chinese in San Francisco? Why are they? That’s why. Because we have denied to these people their real contribution to building this country, and that’s why we have all these tensions today. So anyway, I said some of those things that day, that we needed to open the eyes of our students and we needed to find people who could teach these courses.

McGarrigle: Well, and from what you’re saying and from what I imagined also, there were those people already there.
Well, there were some. People like Troy Duster could have taught the black/white part, and I’m sure—you add one other group, and you’ve got your two groups. I was teaching in the School of Social Welfare, but I did not offer to teach an undergraduate course, because that was not what I could do. But there were people in ethnic studies, there were people in history, there were people certainly in anthropology, which is what they do anyway, some in sociology—sure, there were people who could have very easily. Now, a lot of these courses had to be developed. But for most of it, to develop it, you’d be adding one other group, because a lot of people were already doing blacks versus white, Asians versus white, Latinos versus white, et cetera. So it was a matter of, okay, over the summer, we want you to develop a course and add one other group to compare, which isn’t that much work if you have a summer to do it. Or maybe you need a year in some cases. So you have that framework, and then you say, okay, how do we add another group to fill this requirement?

So anyway, it opened my eyes. Because the women had gone through the same thing and are still going through it, adding women to the curriculum. It wasn’t just minorities. It’s adding women to the curriculum. Look what women have done in American history, and look how we have ignored them. So it’s the same issue. For those men, who I am talking about, nothing was credible if it had not been done by a white European male. I’m sorry to say that, but that’s true. Nothing. And everything else is unimportant. I mean, for some of them, that is their view. If it was done by a woman, it has to be inferior, and if it’s was done by minorities, it has to be inferior. What else can I say? And that’s a very widespread view, unfortunately, in the elite universities in this country. Very widespread. It was not just Berkeley.

That’s why you have so few women on the faculties at these big schools. It’s not that women aren’t probably twice as smart as men, and I have to say that. But that women have not been given the opportunity, and then when they come up for tenure, they do use separate standards, in a sense. They’re really more critical of their work, and more critical of the fact, “Well, why did they stop out to have a baby?” Well, as I always say, who’s going to have the babies? The men? You want one? Good, have it. [laughter] So you know, all that nonsense. So she stopped out. So you give her an extra year. And you don’t count that year, which they finally—which we had something to do with when I was on SWEM working out a reasonable pregnancy policy for young women who were in their primary reproductive years, trying to get tenure, and you’re in your mid to late twenties and early thirties. These women have got to have time off to have babies. That’s all. So that was another issue that I worked on. I worked on a lot of important issues at Berkeley. That issue, the sexual harassment issue. And I to this day am shocked at the response that so many of my male colleagues had to things which now, in 2003, do seem—don’t they seem reasonable to you?
McGarrigle: They always did seem reasonable. In the context of the age we’re living in, yes.

Gibbs: But also, they seem reasonable now to most people.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: But at the time they came up at Berkeley, and we’re talking about the eighties and the early nineties, it was like a revolution, about women having children, and sexual harassment, “Oh, well, you know, don’t mess with it, it will work itself out.” It’s really difficult to look back and believe that was only a decade or so ago.

McGarrigle: I imagine, Jewelle. Let me see our time. Well, we could stop there and leave the next big piece for the next time.

Gibbs: Okay. Okay. Well, anyway—

[end of session]
Interview 14: January 20, 2004

[begin minidisc 25]

McGarrigle: Okay, and we are recording. Today is January 20th, 2004. And this is interview fourteen.

Gibbs: Mmm, my! [chuckles]

McGarrigle: So, thanks for sticking with it, Jewelle. And we’re going to start by talking about Race and Justice [:Rodney King and O.J. Simpson in a House Divided].

Gibbs: Okay. Let’s see, I think I want to tell you about how that book came about and how in the process of doing the book, it sort of changed, literally, in the middle, and the controversy around the book when it was published, and how I think it impacted my career in some, probably negative and positive ways.

The first thing is that, without going into all the details because this case is so famous, we were in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1992 when we saw on TV the beating of Rodney King by the L.A. police department. It was so shocking to us that, you know, in this day and age in California, which was considered at that time and still is, a fairly liberal, progressive state, that the police would just, even have the nerve to beat a person like that, who obviously from the film looked as if he were not resisting arrest. We didn’t know all the circumstances but just looking at it was very upsetting.

I was that year on a Fellowship at a place called the Joint Center For Political And Economic Studies in Washington, D.C. which is basically the most well-known and respected think tank that deals with African American issues. They also deal with other minority issues but basically, their major focus is on studying African American issues and writing public policy statements and dealing with those issues with the press.

McGarrigle: And it’s an independent institution?

Gibbs: Independent institution, and they bring in a senior scholar every year and give them a stipend and let them work on whatever they’re working on. And I was brought in that year. The head of it is a guy named Eddie Williams who is always called on by the press during elections to comment on the issues from kind of an African American perspective.

So, the day after the beating—I went in pretty much every day and I had an office and I was doing some work on another project. The day after the beating, he got calls from all over the world about could-somebody-comment-on-this and he knew I was interested in, first of all, young black men because I had the book on young black males. And secondly, he knew I was interested in juvenile justice issues, and generally the problems with the criminal justice
system. And he called me, I happened to be in my office, he said, “Jewelle, can you handle some of these calls from reporters?” which I did. Well, by handling the calls from the reporters, I ended up on several television shows in this country and in Canada. And I was on the—it was then called the McNeil Lehrer Show—with a panel of people. And, of course, that show is very widely seen and known around the world, and got a good deal of press. And I was very frank in my comments. I felt that—you always have to say you weren’t there, you don’t know the complete circumstances, but from what you can see on television, it looks like excessive force, excessive brutality, and that it was a pattern. It was not just happening in L.A., that it was a pattern around the country and somehow police felt that they had the right to beat up on the most vulnerable people in our society, which included minorities, the poor, gays and lesbians, and disabled people. And teenagers, I did add. I said, “And this is just another case where we have it on tape.”

And I also predicted, I said, “Of course, they always get off,” because the public always believes the story that they have, that the person was resisting arrest, or the person was doing this or the person was doing that. So, anyway, this is what happened, that I got a lot of attention from the press. And as a result, I started following the story very closely.

Now, this was the spring of 1992, and this is long before the famous—the riots. When we got back to California, in fact, by the end of that summer, I had decided that I was going to do some research on this. So, all of a sudden, whatever I was doing lost interest to me, and I said, “You know, this is so close to my heart and so close to the issues of why young black males in this country have such bad relationships with the police, and why so many are in prison, and this is a good example and there’s a lot of press about it. I think I’m going to go and get a little grant to go down to Los Angeles.” Which at the time—even Jim said, “You know, that’s going to be hard to do.” I said, “Well, that’s okay, we’ll see.”

I went back to Berkeley, applied for a small grant, through the university, I think I got the grant. They have a pool of money available and they call them small grants. But I can do a lot with a small grant and I had been used to using small grants before. Because I think I told you, I got tired of applying under the Reagan administration—was it the Reagan administration? Whichever administration it was, the Republicans, my first one was Nixon, I think. Anything I was interested in, they didn’t want to fund anyway, because it had to do with disadvantaged people and minorities. I said, ‘I’m tired of spending months doing these fancy applications. If I can get a small grant, I can do a lot with a small grant.’ So I got a small grant form the university. I submitted a proposal and I was funded right away. I had a research assistant to work with me who was from Los Angeles. We started going down to Los Angeles.

The proposal was that I would interview leaders of the black community and other leaders—of the Hispanic community, the white community, too—but
mainly the black communities, and the police. To talk to them about their view of the relationship of the police with the black community. Then, we also—I also said I wanted to interview young people from that community, the South Central community, on their impressions of the police, their experiences with the police and how that shaped their lives. And related it to educational opportunities, economic opportunities, political opportunities, et cetera. So, I had this grand plan in mind.

So, I had one assistant, and what we did was—I think you know it, because you do it—it’s qualitative research. Where instead of using a lot of things like closed in questionnaires where people check off something or multiple-choice questions, you interview people and you observe people and you go into their communities and you study the communities. This is what we did for a year and half. I would go down every month for about a week. I had the kind of schedule that I could do that, my teaching schedule. I would go down, every month, sometimes a four-day weekend, we would schedule in advance, we would write to people, we’d line up the leaders first. And we managed to get eighty-seven of the top black leaders and Chicano leaders, a few white leaders, and police—the top people in Los Angeles. Including the assistant police chief—I think I told you this—who later became chief of police, Bernard Parks. People say, “Well, how do you do it?” I said, “Well, you know, you do it by reputation.” That is, there is a technique that you use. And you start with who you know are some of the top leaders, like the head of the Urban League, you know is the top leader. The head of the biggest church in Los Angeles, he’s always on TV, Reverend Murray, head of the church called FAME, First African Methodist Episcopal. And he’s the celebrity minister, so you know he’s a leader. So, you start with them and then you go and talk to them, you say, “Tell me who are some of the other leaders I should talk to.” So, what we got was a 90 percent agreement from about twelve people on who were all the leaders we should talk to, about a 90 percent agreement. That was our list. I mean, if 90 percent of you agree that these are the people we should talk to, these are the people that are nominated as leaders in this community. So that’s what we did.

Also, I knew I couldn’t get to, probably, the police chief himself. I tried. But I did get to the assistant police chief. Of course, the police chief was [Daryl F.] Gates, and I knew he would probably not participate. But, I did write him a letter and he referred me to his assistant, who was a black man, who is now a friend of mine.

So, anyway, what we did was we went down—I mean I did the whole thing. Everything was on tape. We had releases. And so, over a period of months, we interviewed—I would set up the appointments two or three weeks in advance, I would write them, “I’m coming down on such and such a day.” And we had appointments, like, running every other hour, we would have an appointment. And she would do some and I would do some and we did some together.
It’s funny about the leaders, they all wanted me to do it, you know. Because some of them knew my work. Like Reverend Murray, as soon as I called him, he said, “Oh, I have your book on young black males,” which helped me out. The assistant chief said, “I know about you and I know your son,” who was then a lawyer in Los Angeles. He said, “So, I’ll be happy to talk to you.” It helped me out that I had these sort of already—people knew about me in the community, they knew my work, I had been on TV and radio in that community. And I had spoken in that community. So a lot of people knew who I was. That was helpful.

Anyway, we managed to talk to, as I said, the head of the black hospital, or the hospital that serves the black community, who was a previous friend of mine from Washington, D.C. We talked to about four of the top ministers, one in each denomination. So we didn’t just say, “This is this denomination,” but we had to get Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian, I can’t remember the fourth one. I think it was what they call God in Christ, which is you know, really a kind of Pentecostal Church. And he had a huge church. And he was delighted to talk to me, because his kids were right in the heart of the ghetto and he had a lot of experience with the police.

So, we rode around with the police twice in cars. They did not know, of course, what I was really looking for, I mean, what I was really looking for. If they had known that I was really looking for proof of police brutality, they probably wouldn’t have cooperated.

McGarrigle: What did they believe you were looking for?

Gibbs: Well, I wrote the same letter to everybody, that I was collecting information about attitudes. I said, “attitudes and experiences with the police.”

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: You know, that’s what the letter said, which was certainly honest. And I wanted, of course I wanted evidence of police brutality, but if people had told me opposite, I was honest, they were all on tape. This is what I got.

But anyway, they were anxious to show me that they were good cops. So, they took us on these, what they call ride-a-rounds, twice, in the ghetto, at night. Once, in the Spanish, Hispanic—East Los Angeles and another one in South Central. And we did see a lot of things. I mean, you could see why their—you know, there’s a lot going on. We also saw what we considered were a lot of innocent kids just hanging out, but the police want to say they’re all gang members. So, you know, it depends on how you view them. They’re standing out on the corner, they have no job, they have no place to go, they have no recreation, and there they sit! And the police will roust them. They’ll say, well, “Why are you here? You’re about to cause trouble, you’re gang members.” So a lot of that is your perception of why these kids are out at
night. We talked to the police, the two who drove us around and then we talked to two—all together, we had about six police people in our sample: the assistant chief, several commanders. And they were all more than polite, invited us to a community speak out where the police go and talk to different parts of the community. We went to, I think, two of those. So, we had this really good view.

Then we had the youth groups. We talked to all these young people in groups and as individuals. We first started with groups in community centers, gang prevention centers, churches, we went to two juvenile detention centers. And all of this, you know, I want to tell you, it’s very hard to set these things up. You have to set these things up, you have to get permission from every single level. But once they give you permission, then you go in. They all allowed us to take our tape recorders in. And the kids would fill out an information sheet about themselves, demographics, you know—how old they were, parents, where they lived, what schooling they had and so forth, whether they were employed or not employed. So, we had each kid do this individual demographic sheet. Then we had them in the group—now we had the group and the group met as a group and we’d tape the groups. And then out of the group, we asked for volunteers who would talk to us and give us individual interviews. And then we had this long interview with individual kids, who tended to be, of course, self-selected, and they tended to be the more verbal—more highly motivated kids. And we knew that. But they were the ones who volunteered. So this is how we got our sample.

We had a really large group of kids and we had—mainly black, we did have a few Hispanic kids who were in the sample because they lived in the neighborhood or because they participated in some of the programs. Some of them were half-and-half. In other words, they were half black and half Hispanic. We did not have any kids who identified themselves as all white. So, it was mainly black and Hispanic.

McGarrigle: And did you ask all the kids the same questions once you had your interviews with them?

Gibbs: Oh, yes. Well, we had an interview guide for the groups. And whenever you have an interview guide, you don’t have to use it as a—it’s not the same as a questionnaire. So you deviate according to the discussion but there are topics we had to cover. So we covered the same topics with every group. Sometimes they wanted to talk more about one topic than others. We talked about sex, we talked about drugs, we talked about gangs, and we talked about their experiences with the police, with school, with jobs, et cetera. And the overall thing we were trying to get was: How do these kids see themselves in this environment? Do they feel they’re oppressed? And is police brutality a part of that oppression? Or, are there some parts of this life that are good and some parts that are bad and where do their experiences with the police fit in to an
overall picture of their lives and how they are experiencing being black and poor—mainly poor or low-income—in the city of Los Angeles?

There was this overall framework so that we not only asked about the police but we wanted to know about the schools and how they fared in the schools, what they thought of the schools, what happens when you go to look for a job, what is the job situation, et cetera, et cetera. Also, recreational opportunities. For adolescents, there is sort of what you call four major areas of their lives, when you’re an adolescent. And we covered all of them—relations with parents, with schools, with jobs, and then with the community. Those are their four areas, when you are talking about adolescents. And some don’t have jobs, but they all have relationships with parents, with school, some have jobs, and then, with the community, which would include the police. And we covered all those areas.

Anyway, what happened was, while I was doing the book, I guess—I’m trying to remember when the riots occurred, just at the beginning or at the end of when I was doing the book. I think the riots occurred just before I started, as a matter of fact. Because maybe I’m a year ahead of myself. I think we, yes—I started the project the spring I came back, not the fall I came back, that’s right. Because the riots occurred a year later when the verdict came out. The beating was in the spring of ’92 and riots were in ’93, so I actually started the project right after the riots. So that a lot of the questions had to do with the riots, too. You know, were you part of it, what did you think of it, how did it impact on your life, and so forth. And looking for their sort of story about the riots, how do they explain the riots. So I had all that.

Just as I’m finishing up this project—and it took a year and a half—and had really almost finished the book, I had my last interview. I mean, I thought it was my last interview. I was in Los Angeles and I had this man that I had to see who was the minister of this celebrity church named Reverend Murray. He was so hard to pin down. He finally gave me an appointment at eight o’clock in the morning and I thought to myself, Now, you think I’m not going to be there. But I’m going to be there! [laughs] I think I got up at six! I don’t like to get up early. I got up at six and I was at his office at five minutes to eight. I think he was kind of surprised that, you know—I was determined that I was going to see Reverend Murray.

And so I got to his study and on the way—now I’m nearly through, that’s my last interview. I do my books by—I start the book process—as I’m doing the interviews I start the introduction and all. So I’ve already written the introduction to the book. I mean, I haven’t analyzed everything yet, but we’ve written the introduction. And by this time, we had analyzed all the leaders’ interviews. I’m into my second chapter, so I’m saying, ‘Oh boy, this book is going to be done. I’m not going to worry ‘bout this book.’ But we did have all the individual interviews to do with the kids, too. I’m on my way, I go back to
the motel, pick up my things. I’m on my way to the airport and there’s all this commotion. Did I tell you this about—?

McGarrigle: We talked about O.J. [Orenthal James] Simpson is happening.

Gibbs: Yes, O.J. Simpson. What the commotion is is that they’re on the road chasing the white van. And I didn’t know what was happening! But I hear all this commotion, and it’s not really where I am but there’s sirens and there’s noise and people are kind of stopping, so finally I turn on the radio and there it is, you know. To me, it was just a coincidence, that’s what it was, it was just a coincidence. I thought, ‘You know, isn’t this interesting.’ As I’m finishing up my last interview on the Rodney King case and all that happened, now we have O.J. Simpson and he’s about to be arrested. Of course, you knew then that they were looking for him for the murder of his wife. That was all I thought. I thought, ‘That’s interesting. And he’s another black man.’ And so forth and so on.

So, I get home on a Sunday night, I think. Monday, my editor calls me. He says, “Jewelle, how are you doing with the book?” Maybe I told you this before!

McGarrigle: I’m thinking that we talked about some of Race and Justice but we didn’t talk as much in depth as you just did about it.

Gibbs: Yes. Well, anyway, anyway, he said, “How are you doing with the book?” I thought it was funny that he was calling me. I said, “Oh, you know, it’s coming along.” I said, “I finished my last interview with the leaders and I have done all the other interviews.” I said, “It’s coming along and I’m going to work very hard this summer on it. I know I’m a little behind but we’re going to work hard on it and we’re going to get you this book by the end of the year.” He said, “I want you to change it.” I said, “What do you mean, you want me to change it?” “I want you to add O.J. Simpson.” So at the time, I said to him, “No dice. It has nothing to do with what I’m doing.” He said, “Yes, it does.” I said, “No, it doesn’t” He said, “You know what? I want you to think about it. And I think it does.” He said, “Looking at it through the prism of the criminal justice system, I think you’re going to see that there is some relationship.” I said, “I really don’t see it right now.” Without going into the details, we had a real argument.

And I said to him, “Allen,” his first name is Allen, “I don’t want to write about the Simpson trial. Everybody’s going to write about the Simpson trial.” I said, “This is the book I want to write and it’s an interesting book. It’s going to be a great book. Just let me write it.” He said, “I want you to think about it. I’m going to give you two days. In two days, call me back.” So I started thinking about it. By this time, you know by the end of the day, they had caught him and basically arrested him. And then all the press started talking about this case. And what I began to see was that there might be some
parallels, but I wasn’t sure what those were yet. I wasn’t sure what those were. [laughs] “There might be some parallels.” And I didn’t know whether he was innocent or guilty at that time. I have since made up my mind, but I didn’t at that time. I was thinking, “There might be some parallels here.” I called my editor and to make a long story short, I said, “Okay, give me six months and let me see what happens and we’ll see what we can do.” I said, “But I don’t know, you know. This means I have to follow—it’s contemporary.” “Well, you did the same thing with King.” I said, “Yes, but I had more background, I had more time. This way, I’m going to have to follow it every day.” He said, “That’s okay, we’ll give you another year.” Well, of course you know, the thing lasted a year. The trial lasted a year. So, I’m coming home every day, looking at the trial, following the trial. And all this time, I’ve sort of really stopped with the other book because I didn’t know what to do with it.

To make a long story short, when the final jury decision was made, that’s when I knew what I had to write, and it wasn’t what I guess my editor thought. But then what I did was to look at the two jury decisions. And that was what that book was really about. Why is it that the predominantly white jury basically gave those officers a pass when I thought the evidence was really quite strong that they should have been convicted. Now, a couple of years later, you have this predominantly black jury who gives O.J. Simpson a pass, when I thought the evidence was quite overwhelming that he was guilty. So, I based my analysis on the comparison.

And that’s why the book originally was called *The Color of Justice* and I wish it kept its original title because what I was trying to say was that the color of the jury, the racial composition of the jury really makes a big difference in how they view the evidence of the case. And all white juries are predisposed to really accept the evidence, that the police are good guys because they uphold the laws of our society. And they are predisposed. And so it has to be overwhelming evidence for them to say this is really brutality or this is excessive. Whereas all black juries, after I had spent my year and a half in Los Angeles and heard about all the incidents of police brutality that occurred there every day, are predisposed to believe that the police plant evidence, that they, in fact, will create conditions to make an innocent person look guilty. Which is what that jury I think believed.

So, that was the basis of the book. I had this background from Los Angeles, I had all the evidence from the trial, and that was the book I wrote. Now, unfortunately, two things happened. Just before the book was supposed to be published, they had to change the title because another book came out called *The Color of Justice*. [*The Color of Justice: Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in America* by Samuel Walker, et al.] They had already advertised it, stores had ordered it under *The Color of Justice*, which I think is a much more neutral title than *Race and Justice*. So, then we had to rename the book and we renamed it *Race and Justice*. The publisher sends out advance copies. In the meantime, every person and his uncle tried to get out a quick book about the
O.J. trial. As you may remember, there were all these books coming out by journalists, gossip columnists, I don’t know who else. Not many scholarly books. And my book was actually a very scholarly book about the trials and the evidence analyzing it from this point of view of the prism of people who have this predisposition and included a lot of psychological principles and all. My book was very different from these other books. And it was a comparison book. Unfortunately, what happened to the book is it got lost in all of the stream of these books about the O.J. Simpson trial, the gossip books and these horrible books. I mean, some of them were really not worth putting between two covers, but they were published. And that’s what sort of sucked up the market. Anything with a picture of Nicole [Simpson] on the front and sob stories about her life and about her children and about all this. So, it got sucked up.

And the second thing that happened is reviewers were more interested in the gossip books than trying to look even at my book. So it didn’t get many reviews. The few reviews it got were good, but it didn’t get many reviews. It got a wonderful review—I probably gave it to you—up here in The Chronicle. They gave it a wonderful review. I’m a hometown author, and they gave it a wonderful review. The New York Times never reviewed it. The Washington Post gave it a review by a person who didn’t read it because—I know he didn’t—I think he might have read the first three chapters—because what he said I didn’t cover, I had covered in the last three chapters. So, [laughs] they did review but it was kind of—. I had to write a letter because I said, “This man didn’t read my book.” The Los Angeles Times never reviewed it. And my publisher was very incensed and called and they said, “Well, we have so many books to review. Hers got lost.” Being in Los Angeles, they were much more interested in the gossipy-type, movie-type books. Said, “Hers got lost.” My publisher finally figured out that some of these papers probably didn’t review the book without reading the book because they thought I was saying he was innocent, which I certainly did not say, and so rather than have someone actually read the book to see that I don’t say that, they just kind of ignored it in a sense. They didn’t review it.

The ones they all reviewed were those that were very much sort of preaching that he was guilty and he should go to the chair and all that. And that wasn’t the purpose of my book. I wasn’t even—that was not the purpose, whether he was innocent or guilty, although I always thought he was guilty. But, why do these juries come to these decisions and two juries which are, one predominantly white, and one predominantly black. I thought it was very interesting, and my editors thought it was a very interesting comparison. But the reviewers didn’t take it seriously, or they didn’t read it, and I think they all assumed that it was a book that was sort of taking up for O.J., which it wasn’t. So, it really got kind of lost.

The ones that did review it, like I said, the paper here, gave it a good review. It sold not as many copies as I would like. In fact it didn’t sell—they thought
it was going to sell a lot of copies—it didn’t sell that well. It turns out that feedback that came to me from several sources, including someone on the staff of *The Los Angeles Times* who was a friend of my sister’s, later confirmed what I said that my book wasn’t reviewed because they thought it was too critical. That the person who sort of leafs through it, who decides who to give it to, the book editor, though it was too critical of the Los Angeles Police Department and that the *L. A. Times* thought that they had had enough criticism and my book was too critical. So, that’s why it was not reviewed. And I think at *The New York Times* there might have been a similar sort of feeling. What I learned is that the whole field is so political, you know, what books get reviewed and what books don't get reviewed and what I learned about that is the power of these editors to make a choice as to who gets reviewed.

Now, *The New York Times* kept telling my publisher they were going to review my book. Six months went by and finally they said, “Well, you know, we had a change of editors and now the book is kind of old and so we don’t think we need to review it.” So it was this kind of process of—I was saying some very, very strong things about the institutionalization of police brutality in this country. And here are two major papers, one in Los Angeles and one in New York, who I think just made the decision that they didn’t want to approve of this book to be reviewed, that it might have been you know, almost too radical for them. It’s okay to complain about the police, but don’t complain about the police in a book where it looks like you’re trying to excuse the verdict for O.J. Simpson. And I often think if that had not been part of the book, if it had just been Rodney King, most people agreed that that was police brutality and the country was outraged! But by combining it with the O.J. Simpson jury and why he was freed and trying to be dispassionate, I think my book was considered in some ways just a blanket indictment of the cops. And therefore it was not reviewed favorably—it wasn’t reviewed at all by the two major papers, which had reviewed my previous books.


Gibbs: Well, actually, I thought the reporting was quite biased in the *LA Times*, I did not think so much in *The New York Times*. And the reason I’ll tell you is this—I had to look at it every day for my book and they would leave out a lot of things. So that, my husband and I—and I want to tell you that I believe he was guilty. I looked at the trial every day. I think the evidence was overwhelming. Two of the major pieces of evidence couldn’t get in because of the poor work of the district attorney, that Marcia whatever [Clark]. They had rug fibers that were not allowed in so the jury never heard that. And the business about the shoe.

McGarrigle: Yes.
Those things were not ever given to the jury because Marcia Clark didn’t want to share them with the defense team, when she should have. So now, when you look at the evidence, I would say to a 95 percent certainty, he did that, okay. But if you looked at the trial you could see that the prosecution did not present the strongest case that they could have, because there was too much fooling around. There was too much trying to hide evidence from the defense when you are supposed to share it. There are laws about that. So Marcia Clark shot herself in the foot by not sharing two of the major pieces of evidence on time.

Now, most people who are honest and fair—several of the people who were on these talk shows said, “If you had looked at the trial, you would understand the verdict. There was reasonable doubt.” But if you didn’t look at the trial and you just read the newspaper, the newspapers didn’t ever give you the sense of the ineptness of the prosecution. They just were inept in several ways. And so people thought, ‘Oh well, I looked at some of it, I saw some of it.’ But what you saw was usually the summary on the news. I had to look at the whole thing. I would spend days when I wasn’t in class and then my husband would tape it for me. I had to look at the whole thing. So I didn’t miss anything really crucial. I will tell you that the reason—and it wasn’t just that it was an all-black jury either—it wasn’t all black anyway, but primarily people of color—but the evidence presented to them did leave reasonable doubt.

And as I say, a few analysts, including a few of the top white lawyers in this country, said, “The prosecution’s case was not presented effectively, and that is why that jury couldn’t be sure that he did it.” Because if you don’t know about the sugar fibers and you don’t know that that shoe fit him, there is reasonable doubt.

So anyway, I felt that I learned a great deal, mostly negative, about the politics of book reviewers and the politics of the press when they want to present one side or the other. And there still is bias about how they present these cases. And I just felt that I was treated very badly by the book reviewers, who had previously been very nice to me. So, you know, I shouldn’t complain probably, but I was treated badly because the subject was so incendiary. And I always feel that they didn’t look at the book, they didn’t read the book. Because, if they had read the book—friends of mine who read the book said, “Jewelle, you thought he was guilty, didn’t you?” I said, “How do you know?” They said, “It comes through very strongly, especially in the end.” But I didn’t want to say because that wasn’t the point that I was trying to make. I said, “Yes, I thought he was guilty, but I didn’t want to say that because that wasn’t the point of my book.”

And you said at the outset about the controversy, did that extend into the academic setting?
Well, it extended—my colleagues were angry with me. Some of them barely spoke to me for a while, and they didn’t read the book. One of them finally said to me, “So why did you waste your time taking up for O.J. Simpson?” I said, “Did you read my book?” “No.” I said, “Why don’t you read it and you’ll see that I didn’t take up for O.J. Simpson.” So there were colleagues of mine at my school who I think were quite upset with me.

And the other thing that happened which you’ll be interested in—and I will tell you now, it should be part of the history—the public affairs department almost always does an article about a book for a faculty member. I mean, if you want it in, it’s very easy to get it in, because usually the deans or the chairs send something to public affairs saying somebody in our department has just written a book or won a prize, or something, and so almost always you can get even a little paragraph about a new book in the faculty news that comes out. So, my dean—I don’t know if you know, each school and I guess each department has a person assigned to them. So our school had a woman. I won’t give her name now because she had been there for some years, I don’t know if she’s still there. I knew she was a feminist, she’d even written a feminist book about women, and she lived in the Berkeley area, anyway, and she had always been such a big fan of mine. I mean, whenever I did anything, she would write it up. I mean I got a lot of press at Berkeley. She would write it up, she would put my picture in. And whenever anybody called about race relations, civil rights, adolescents, any of the topics, she would always send them to me television reporters, radio reporters. So I had a good relationship with the press in the Bay Area because I was always responsive. You know, I wanted to talk about these things and I wanted to try to get people to see these things in a different light. In other words, I wanted them to see these kids not as problems, but as victims more than anything else. Whenever they called me, I would almost always take time for a brief interview on the radio and if I had to go into a TV studio, I would go.

So the dean said to me, “Well, you know, I sent the notice of your book to this woman, but has she called you?” I said no. Finally a couple of weeks went by and she called me. And usually they liked to get it out when the book first comes out. So she called me and she says, “Well, can I have a copy of the book, Jewelle?” And I said, “Sure, I’ll send you one.” In fact, I had the publisher send her one. So another couple weeks go by. I don’t hear. I called her. I said, “Pat, did you ever get a copy of the book?” She said, “Yes, but I haven’t had the chance to read it and I’m busy now.” I could see there was something going on. She says, “I’ll call you when I get time.” Well, she didn’t call back again. Then I realized—in fact, she made one comment that made me realize. I remembered that she had written a book that was considered a feminist book about women. And I realized that Pat would have been one of those people—you know, the feminists were outraged about the murder of Nicole [Simpson]. I certainly understand that. And I realized that because Pat was a feminist and that all the feminists had been absolutely outraged by what had happened to Nicole, and that she was probably not going to do an article. I
think that her personal feelings were getting involved in her professional work which was to do a little article.

So, you know what I did? Sometimes you have to do these things. I called Jesus [Mena], do you remember him? He was head of the public affairs office. I said, “Jesus, I have a problem I want to discuss with you.” And he said, “What is it, Jewelle?” He and I have been friendly for a long time. I said, “Jesus, let me tell you about the book. I know the book is controversial. It shouldn’t be but I know it is, because most people aren’t reading the book. They’re just assuming from the title that I’m taking up for O.J. Frankly, I’m not taking up for O.J. and I’m trying to analyze—.” I told him what it was about. He said, “It sounds interesting.” I said, “Yes, but I think Pat may have a problem with it. I don’t know, but I wanted to let you know that our dean asked her to write a little thing. She may have a problem with it and I can’t confront her but maybe you can ask her.” He called me back a few days later, he said, “You know, you were right. I won’t go into it,” because that was her boss, he said, “You were right, she had a problem with your book, I’ve just assigned it to somebody else.” And no, she never spoke to me after that. [laughs]

McGarrigle: And the review did get done?

Gibbs: Well, yes. I mean they gave a nice little squib and it wasn’t a full review, it’s not usually a full review, but a nice little squib, and in fact, they called me and quoted me. So I had a chance to say what I thought my own book is about, not what somebody else says it’s about, but what I think it’s about. And I said that I was comparing the two trials, the two juries, really the jury decisions, not so much the trials, and that I was trying to look at the impact of race and color on the composition of the jury and how that affects their decision-making. That was the point of my book, they did write that in. They gave me a nice little squib, but I don’t think Pat ever called me again after that. She never called me, I never heard from her. But I did think, again, she’s letting her personal agenda affect her work. This is what she was supposed to be doing and she didn’t want to do it because I guess without reading the book, she thought, ‘Oh well, Jewelle is on the side of O.J.’ which of course I wasn’t, but anyway.

McGarrigle: Well, it’s interesting too about how there becomes a conflict between a feminist and people who are looking at race relations—

Gibbs: Well, and there doesn’t have to be in this case.

McGarrigle: Right.

Gibbs: But for her, she thought that somehow I was glorifying him instead of sympathizing with Nicole. But all you have to do is read that book. There’s one part the editor made me take out because I essentially implied that he did
it in his last visit with her, I essentially implied that. He made me take it out. He said, “No, this is your statement, I don’t think we should put that in there.”

McGarrigle: Did you agree that that needed to come out?

Gibbs: Well, I liked it! I thought it was very dramatic, you know. I said something like—it was very dramatic, I loved it, it was one of my favorite things. I said something like, “His alibi was that he saw her last at the restaurant and that he turned away and that he never saw her again alive.” The way I put it, it was clear that I was saying that was his alibi but I don’t believe it, that I do believe that he did see her again when he killed her. My editor said, “No, you can’t do this. You can’t say that. You’re sort of saying that you’re sure he did it.” I said, “Well, I’m not really saying that.”

I think the main thing I wanted to stress was how people in the outside world do not realize what power reviewers have. And I certainly learned then, because it certainly affected the sales of my book, there’s no question. I did get on some TV shows. I was on Geraldo for that. It’s very interesting, he understood the book. People make fun of Geraldo, but I will tell you that was the best interview I had. He gave me a full hour and I think there were maybe only two other guests talking about this case. Geraldo had my book, he underlined it, he read it on TV and he said, “Here’s what she says,” and then asked me questions. But it was the most intelligent, most objective interview I had. And see, I had heard all these bad things about Geraldo and when my publicist said, “We want you to go to sell the book,” I said, “I don’t want to go on that show. That man, I don’t even respect him.” He said, “Jewelle, the man is intelligent, and he will ask you good questions.” And sure—I can’t tell you, I was so surprised. They made me do it! I did not want to do it. In fact, the first time I canceled. I used my leg as an excuse because I had just had surgery on my knee. I said, “No, I don’t want to do it, I don’t want to fly.” A month later, they said, “Is your leg better? You have to do this.” [laughs]

But it turned out to be an excellent interview. One, because he was objective. And he thought that O.J. killed them, you know, he had a lot of programs about O.J. and how he had done this, but he said, “I think your voice needs to be heard, what you’re saying about why the jury did not find him guilty.” And he read passages of the book and then there were two or three other people on the show that made comments. But I have to say that with all of the stereotypes that most people have of him, it was the best interview I had for that book. I had some other local interviews and I think I was on a couple of other national channels. I had a big fight about police brutality with the guy who writes these mysteries, called Joseph Wambaugh. Do you know him?

McGarrigle: I just have to change our tape.

[begin minidisc 26]
Gibbs: [In Los Angeles, there were many examples of police brutality against blacks, there were many]—cases of people, you know, an old lady killed, standing in her yard, and the police got off every time. Every single time they got off. So I had repeated those cases, I have the details on those cases. And then I had the experiences of the kids. Because every single group I had, every single individual, the kids had had negative experiences with the police, or someone in their family had negative experiences, or a neighbor, but someone they knew personally. **Every single person.**

McGarrigle: I think we touched on this because a long time ago we started to have some of this conversation but not as in depth as we are now. But in terms of giving a voice to these kids, what kind of reception did the book have in the community where your interviews took place?

Gibbs: Well, now, that’s interesting because what I did was the publisher sent copies to all the eighty-seven adults. Of course, I couldn’t send copies to all the kids because I’m paying for these copies, I couldn’t send to all the kids. And I sent one copy to each agency that had recruited the kids. The adults, many of them wrote me. I never really heard except for one community center, I never really heard what the kids felt. It was just too bad. But many of the adults wrote me and told me they thought the book was a terrific contribution and thanked me for doing it. Even the assistant of chief of police, he was not angry with me, he wrote me a nice note. He was not angry. I thought he would be, but he wasn’t, because I quoted what he said.

McGarrigle: And those interviews are what UCLA is hoping that you—

Gibbs: Well, yes, and I have to answer that lady again. She asked me to send her—and Christmas intervened. She called me just before Christmas. And I have to send her the interviews—she wanted to see the permission slips. Because she told me that they couldn’t use them unless I had permission to share them but I don’t have permission to share them. I only have permission for them to talk to me. And she was concerned about that. I said, “Well, you know, I do have that, I do have permission for them to talk to me. But I don’t have permission to give it to anybody else,” which seems a shame.

McGarrigle: That’s a real shame.

Gibbs: So she said she might be able to work something out. I can get in touch with most of them, but not the kids, but I can get in touch with most—most of the leaders are still around. I will say, that the voice—that they appreciated so much that we talked to them, there was just no question. I may have told you this, there were just evenings when my assistant left, went in the car and started to cry, both of us. There were evenings when we were just so moved by what we had heard, and so upset by what we had heard. And these kids, they were not lying. You know I’ve done therapy, I know people. I can tell
you when you’re lying and there are lots and lots of ways to tell when people are lying.

I probably told you about the boy who was half Spanish?

McGarrigle: Well—

Gibbs: Well, there was this one group and these kids had all been in gangs. And there were about fourteen kids, teenagers, all between the ages of about twelve and eighteen, they had all been in gangs, they were all school dropouts. These were some bad kids, some tough kids, most of them had tattoos. And we were talking about violence and why did they get involved. We wanted to know what attracted them to gangs, why did they get involved in gangs. This is an aside, but I later wrote a paper which was published about gangs from all that information I had, what motivates these kids to get into gangs. I ought to give you a copy of it because it was an interesting paper.

And you know, the gangs are their families. They’re substitutes for families that don’t function very well. And this little boy, his story was one that just touched us. His mother was a prostitute, his father was a drug dealer in prison. He had been in a gang and stealing, and doing, as he said, “many bad things” since he was twelve. He had a son out of wedlock at the age of sixteen. And his older brother had been killed in a gang shootout, his uncle had been killed in a gang shootout. And he said to me, “I’m going to get the people who killed them.” So, I said to myself, “It has to stop somewhere.” So I made kind of an intervention and I said, “Well, tell me how do you think that will affect your son?” And he started to cry. And we worked with him, my assistant and I, Teiahsha [Bankhead-Greene] and I. We talked to that boy, and other people supported us, for at least an hour, and tried to get him to see that at some point the cycle of violence has got to stop. And did he want to live to rear his son? He said, “Yes.” And we said, “If you want to live to rear your son, what do you think will happen if you go out and kill the person who killed your brother and your uncle? What do you think will happen to you?” He said, “They’ll kill me.” And we said, “Well, wouldn’t you rather live to rear your son?” And at the end of that evening, he came up, sobbing like a baby, and hugged me and said to me, “Maybe you saved my life.” And that was what those interviews did for me.

I just felt, you know these kids, they don’t have anyone to talk to. They don’t have any place to go. And just that little intervention—now maybe, I didn’t save his life, maybe he went out and did it anyway—but my feeling was we got to that kid. And we had a lot of support. All of the other kids were saying, “Listen to her, she’s trying to help you. Don’t do it! Stay with us! Don’t go back to that life.” So, when we left, we asked the director to please keep an eye on that guy, “Please really work with him and let me know what happens.” And about six months later, I was back in Los Angeles, and I called the guy and I said, “Is Pedro still in your group?” He said, “You know, Pedro
is hanging in there. But Jewelle, Pedro is really—he’s got so much drawing
him back to that life, but he’s hanging in there right now. I don’t know if
we’re going to be able to keep him from going back.” He said, “We’re
working with him in job training and if he can just stay in the job training—.”

So, every time we would go to a group, we would have an experience, an
emotional experience like that. So what I can tell you is that I don’t know how
they reacted to the book but they were so glad and so happy and so relieved
to come somewhere where they could talk about their community. How there
were no jobs, no recreation facilities, there was no place safe where they could
go, even to a park. Their parents were unemployed, or some were on drugs, or
some were abusive. They had teenage pregnancies, some of them were
involved in drugs, some of them had criminal records, they weren’t doing well
in school. And this was their daily life! And then, on top of that, the police
brutality, the police harassing them.

Just one of the stories and then we’ll go on because I could actually talk
forever about this. One of the stories was that they would—a lot of these kids
lived in the projects and they said the police would come by on a Friday
evening, Saturday evening, when they were hanging out because there was no
place to go, and they’ll take their guns and just kind of do it like that
[demonstrates] and say, “Rat-a-tat-tat!” Just to tease them. Now, what is that?
That’s what they do. So when I was on this ride-a-round with one of the cops,
I said, “Do you think that’s true, do you know any cops like that?” So, he
looks at the other guy—we were in the back—and says, “Well, we wouldn’t
do it, but I wouldn’t say that some of our comrades might not do things like
that just to have fun.” Having fun, scaring them with the guns.

So, this is why I wrote that book and wrote the next book, too. Is that these
kids are—see themselves as powerless, they see themselves as victims, they
see themselves as having no opportunities. They see themselves as almost like
trash. Like, “Nobody cares about us,” like, throwaway children—there’s a
book called Throwaway Children. They see themselves as just—the parents
don’t care, the teachers don’t care, the community doesn’t care, nobody cares.
And this is why so many of these kids end up in prison, in jail. That’s why.
When you do not see that your life is valuable, then you don’t think anyone
else’s life is valuable either. So, for the gang members, life is not a valued
asset. They would say to me, “I don’t expect to live ‘til I’m twenty-one. And
while I’m here, I’m going to have some fun.” So that it’s living for the day,
living for today, not even for tomorrow, but “What can I get to make myself
feel better?” It might be stealing clothes, it might be having sex, it might be
hotrod-ing a car, but, “What can I get today to give me a high, to give me a
thrill and to really elevate me out of what this horrible environment that I live
in every day, to make me kind of forget this environment?” So, a lot of things
these kids do are really fueled by a deep sense of a lack of self-esteem, a deep
sense of feeling violated by society, a deep sense of being abandoned by their
families, a deep sense of having no opportunities. And this explains so much about why they get involved in drugs, early sex, and crime.

McGarrigle: So, Jewelle, when you come back from that year and a half of doing this intensive work into that—in the meantime you’re going back and forth to the academic environment. Does that take an extra toll on you, having to—?

Gibbs: Well, in a way, it sort of—I have to say that after these intense encounters—because each of the groups we did was very intense. Altogether I think we did twenty-four groups, which ranged from about usually six kids to sixteen, not just from one area, but all over South Central, different organizations and churches. And after each group, except maybe the one in one of the churches which was kind of not that intense—those were the good kids. I think it’s like going back really to sort of a haven, sort of going back to the academic world is like escaping, because it’s your real world but it’s not like the real world that you’ve just left. So, in a way, doing this on the weekend, I would come back absolutely exhausted on Sunday evening and then have to go to work on Monday. But, going back, there’s a routine and there’s a sense of—you know the academic world is a little bit like an ivory tower to some extent. And so, there was a sense of relief that I’m back in my schedule, that there is an expectable kind of environment, I don’t expect gang members to start shooting at any minute. And I don’t have to worry about where I park or what I’m doing or what I’m saying or what color I’m wearing—because you do have to worry about that sometimes. So, I guess it was good that I had that, because to be in that environment all the time, I don’t know how people really do work with these groups day after day without getting burned out. It would be just very easy to get burned out. Because they are very needy, the kids are very needy. Both the boys and the girls, they’re very needy.

McGarrigle: So, when we were talking about topics for today, we touched on how these two books *Race and Justice* and *Preserving Privilege* really differed from your previous work and took you in a different direction. I’m not sure if we should start talking—maybe we should touch on some other things and save *Preserving Privilege*, that’s a big topic. How is your time?

Gibbs: Yes, what time is it? It’s almost four, yes. Well, maybe we can finish this off, how it got me into the different direction and then next time, we can talk about the other book. I guess it did a couple things, maybe two or three things. First of all, I got much more interested in what I would call community research, which is really much different than doing library research, or doing research with college students, which most of my colleagues do, or doing research with databases, you know. When you do community research, it’s probably the most difficult kind of research to do. I’m sure it is. It’s the kind of research that uses all of your facilities, all of your talents, not just your brain. Your social skills are involved, your political skills are involved because you’ve got to figure out how to make the contacts in these communities. Working in minority communities in big cities is not easy because they are very
suspicious of people. So, you’ve got to figure out how do you get in, how do you gain entry to this community? Who are the gatekeepers to this community? Fortunately, as I told you, I knew who some of them were and I knew some of them personally, which was very good for me. But once you get in, you still have to prove yourself almost every day that you’re not some sort of outsider or interloper or sort of like a double agent, and that you’re not there to exploit the community or to insult the community or to put the community down. Because most researchers in the sixties and seventies did just that. They went into black communities and exploited the communities, called them all sorts of names that implied that the people were stupid and deviant and all this. That was not what I was trying to do.

So you have to have your papers, the kids call it. “What are your papers?” And you have to establish a lot of trust at the very beginning so that you can move through and really move into the community. So you use all of your social skills, your political skills—and you have to be very empathic, because they’re looking for people who make fun of them and don’t understand them, so you have to really sort of be empathic. And point out that even though you’re—they used to call me “the professor”—that even though you’re a professor, that you understand what’s going on here and that you share certain things with them, starting with your race, which probably was good.

And, I guess, the methods that you use are different. As I say, you’re using interviews, and we did a lot observations, just watching, looking at the community—who goes where, where do the kids hang out, what are the schools like? We did all that. I must tell you we also went into schools and talked to several principals, too. So we did all that. I went into one school that you had to actually go through these metal detectors. It was awful, we thought, ‘How can these kids learn if they have to go to school like this?’ People are afraid after school, they have to go right home because of the gangs, and the teachers are nervous. And the teachers, most of them, I felt, weren’t maybe that committed like they should have been. Or maybe they were just burned out. To be fair, I think that some of the teachers were burned out. So, you see all that, and you’ve got to be able to put it into some kind of context. You’ve got to understand the sociology of the community. It’s not just understanding the people you talk to, it’s understanding where people fit in, what this community is all about, what are the levels of the community, who runs the community, so all that. So, I went in a different direction, I really was interested in, as some people would say, getting down and dirty, doing real community research. And that is what I did for that book.

Also, it took me more in the direction of concern about the criminal justice system, which I had always been interested in but it had not been one of my major interests. I got very interested in the problems of racial profiling, the criminal justice system, the uneven levels of justice for white kids and black kids, and also adults. So, I got very interested in that and that became much more the focus of my work. And also led me to be interested in Three Strikes
You’re Out, [Proposition 184, passed by California voters 11/1/94] which is part of the fourth book [Preserving Priviledge: California Politics, Propositions, and People of Color, Jewelle Gibbs and Teiahsha Bankhead, 2001, Praeger] that I wrote. So, that was the background of how I got very interested in that terrible, terrible law.

And then from there, realizing that before my career was over I wanted to make an impact on public policy. That was the big decision I made. Before, it was really more clinical and more dealing with individuals and families, but I decided when I started that book on Rodney King that I wanted this book and whatever I did in the future to have an impact on how blacks are treated in this country, especially in the criminal justice system. And political issues, social issues that are related to that, which is everything, I mean, really.

McGarrigle: And how does that decision at the time and during your time at Berkeley—this may be too complicated a question—but impact your career at that point, your academic career.

Gibbs: I’ll tell you, fortunately when you have tenure, you can change your direction, but it makes it—it’s not easy because you are known for one thing already. I was pretty much known in my profession as a clinical person, meaning, with my book Children of Color, which was pretty popular. That was what I was known for. So when I was invited to speak places, they wanted me to speak about doing clinical work, counseling, with minority children and their families. That was what I was known for. That was what I taught. I did not teach any policy courses ever at Berkeley, not ever.

And my earlier book, which was the first book on young black males, actually was in the policy direction but then I sort of wrote that and then went back to my clinical interests, so that for the rest of sort of the middle of my career, it was all clinical. Well, and a lot of other things that I wrote were clinical, working with families, I wrote a lot of chapters, I wrote a lot of articles. You see on my CV a lot of stuff which was mainly clinical.

This, then, was a departure. And then your colleagues sometimes have trouble thinking about you in that way as you switch and the public is not used to you being in that arena. And you don’t have what we call the bonafides to prove that this is your area. How can you just go into policy? What it meant was that I had to do a lot of research on the criminal justice system and start writing articles and speaking out. I wrote a couple of op-ed pieces and basically began seeking opportunities where I could comment in a professional sense. So, I started writing papers. Like, I wrote one paper called “The Criminalization of Minority Youth in the Juvenile Justice System.” And I would then speak at conferences, write articles, and so began to say this is a new area of mine and it is related to my earlier work, it is related. It’s not clinical but it’s related. It was a transition.
So, basically, ever since the early nineties, sort of for the last ten years of my career, I have been transitioning more and more into public policy. That’s what I wanted to have an impact on. And so this last book was pure public policy. That was what it was, but that was my transition. So, in a way, the third book on race and justice was kind of the transition point in my career, that book.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And see, it wasn’t really truly public policy but it was looking at the criminal justice system, at the jury system. And I even had a psychological analysis actually of it. But then I moved further into just talking about public policy. And my last book was about those four propositions that I wrote about that impact primarily on blacks and Latinos and why I felt that they are very bad for this state, which was supposed to be a multicultural, multi-ethnic state. And every single one of those propositions really impacts negatively.

McGarrigle: And the basis of the race and justice book or part of the research, which was community research, was that understood in the academic environment?

Gibbs: Well, you know, it’s getting more popular, it’s getting more popular. But actually, as they say, “Are you a sociologist now?” Some of my colleagues tease me. Sociologists have done that. That’s what they do, they study communities. And anthropologists study communities, often out in other cultures. But there is something called urban anthropology, and what I did is more like that actually, more like urban anthropology or urban sociology where you go into a community and you study a particular issue. So, it was much more than say, social welfare or psychology. There is a field called community psychology, though, but they usually take a small problem and look at it, a much more narrowly defined problem than community psychology. I was really looking at the whole community. I was looking at the community as a unit, almost like a public health model.

So my approach really combined all these things: sociology, public health, psychology, and anthropology and urban anthropology, it combined all these things. Not so much psychology, it’s a community psychology. And it was not really social welfare except in the very broadest sense, because the broadest sense was the implications of what I found can be translated into social welfare policy like, low income housing, better schools, better health care, et cetera. This would be either social welfare or public health policy, so everything that I found, if you read that book, had implications for changing the community to improve the lives of these children and their families. Everything! As I say, starting with low-income housing. They don’t have good housing, they don’t have good schools, they don’t have good health care, they don’t have any recreation. I mean, think about it.
Another of the famous comments that was made to me by one of the girls in one of the groups, this was one of the groups of teenage mothers. I had a group of teenage mothers from a teenage parenting program. So I had all kinds of groups, it was very interesting. There were only about six in that group but they were all young ladies who had babies and they came to this parenting program and they were learning how to be better parents and they were also trying to stay in school, things like that. So, I said to one of the girls, “Well, you know, people always wonder, did you plan to get—did you want to get pregnant or was it an accident?” And she said, “No, I didn’t plan to get pregnant,” and they all laughed. They said, “No, we didn’t plan it, it just happened.” I said, “Well, how does it just happen?” And so one girl looked at me dead in the face and she said, “Well, Professor Gibbs, if you lived in South Central, sex is our recreation, that’s all we have to do on Saturday night. There’s nothing else here. It’s our recreation.” What do you say to a girl who says that to you, sixteen-year-old girl? “That’s our recreation.” There’s nothing to say.

So these are the kinds of things that I heard over and over and over and over again. So you can just take my book, that book, and you can just outline public policy for the inner city. Everything that we know needs to be done, these kids are crying out in there, telling us. And the leaders are telling us. But it’s the kids who say it in a way that is so poignant and so powerful. And they are very frank, very frank, you ask them and they will tell you. So when I finished that book, I said to myself, You know, if I do anything in my life again, ever, if I write another book, if I do anything, I have got to try to get the voices of these children into the public arena. I have got to try. So part of it is in that book but also, my interest in these propositions, although I don’t quote those kids, the layer beneath what I’m saying is really, They are crying for help, these people. They are crying for help, and nobody much is wanting to help them.

McGarrigle: Let’s stop there for today. Pretty full day.

Gibbs: Yes.

[end of session]
Interview 15: February 10, 2004

[begin minidisc 27]

McGarrigle: Today is February 10th. [sounds of tea being served]

Gibbs: So here we are and sugar’s on the table. Tell me when you’re ready.

Wilmot: Ready.

Gibbs: Isn’t there a light somewhere?

Wilmot: Well, there should be a light. And it’s recording now.

Gibbs: It is? Okay. [laughs] Then I’ll sit up. [laughter] Well, before you start filming, I was going to ask you, had you ever thought about making a documentary of the project, putting all these people together?

Wilmot: I haven’t, but there may be a time when that happens. There will be enough beautiful footage for that to happen.

Gibbs: No, I think it would be interesting, after you’ve finished, to think about making a documentary.

Wilmot: It’s not a story that people always think about. There are different stories that people tell about black culture and black communities, but very rarely is it focused on the academic community and what happens there.

Gibbs: Yes, that’s just why it would be good, because the other night there was one about the color line that Professor Gates at Harvard did. He interviewed a number of celebrities, but I’m not sure that that was a representative group either. So, the thing is that there are lots of different black communities in America and black people in America, and a lot of them get ignored by the media.

Wilmot: Because the media has a very specific story it wants to tell about black people.

Gibbs: That’s right. It’s almost all negative. Or sports or entertainers. And that’s who you see in the media, but you rarely see black scholars in the media unless they’re on public television.

Wilmot: Being experts.

Gibbs: And being experts and being consultants. Their work is rarely discussed, unless they’re writers, famous writers. So it might make an interesting documentary. Anyway, now that we’re starting—.
McGarrigle: Yes, we were asking you before we went on tape about some of the faculty who you knew. I think you knew all of them, who Nadine either has interviewed or some of whom passed away before the project actually got underway.

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: And June Jordan was one of the women and Barbara Christian was one of the women. Can you describe when you came to Berkeley how you met them?

Gibbs: Well, when I came to Berkeley—my memory is that Barbara came either just before or shortly after I came, and we didn’t meet for several years. She was in the Afro-American Studies program. She was a writer. And I began to hear more about her teaching and her classes and it sounded like she was attracting a number of students who were interested in African American and also Caribbean literature. And so, after a couple of years, I met her. It took me at least two or three years to meet her after she came. At that time, Margaret Wilkerson was still there. She was head of the Women’s Center. She had been head of the Afro-American Studies Department and then she became head of the Women’s Center sometime during I think the early eighties. And so, we all began to talk about getting together for lunch and we tried several times and another woman came on the faculty when I came on, and she was an artist, and her name was Mary [Lovelace O’Neal]. I’m trying to remember Mary’s last name, but she was an artist in Art Practice. And we would see each other on the Plaza, you know, Sproul Plaza, and say hello and “Let’s get together for lunch.” And finally, I tried to do this. I finally picked up the phone and I called all of them and this was the days before e-mail. And I said, “Let’s set up a lunch at the Women’s Faculty Club.” And one person showed up. I called about six women and one person showed up. And all the rest had excuses, they were busy, they were on committees. And it turned out that it was so difficult for us to meet, partly because we were so really—you might say, we were all strung out in the sense of being over-committed to classes, to committees, to students who wanted to meet with us during the lunch hour.

Every single one of us felt that there were very few lunch hours that we could afford to meet and they never seemed to be on the same day. So I think that was sort of sad. I always felt it was sad because I never got to know any of them really well. We were all in different departments and we were all so busy and we were spread very thin around the university. And in some ways we were what you call a “two-fer.” We were women and we were black women. And therefore, if you’re counting diversity, you could be counted—and unfortunately I think sometimes they did count us twice. You’d be counted as a woman on the committee and then they’d say, “Also, we have one black on this committee.” And so we found ourselves just getting overworked all the time and overextended all the time.
So, I began to know them more from their students and from their work than I did individually. And in a sense, it was very sad. June Jordan would be the same thing. She was a world-renowned poet, she wrote *beautifully*. But I never, ever met June Jordan in person. I went to hear her speak once and there was a large group there and I had to leave right afterwards so I never met her in person. And then one day, I picked up the paper and found out June Jordan had died.

So, it was the kind of large university where we all had our sort of niche, everybody had a different niche. And we didn’t cross each other’s paths very frequently. Sometimes we would, as I say, see each other walking across the plaza and say hi and stop. I would have to say that Berkeley was not a place where there was a lot of warm and fuzzy feeling among faculty, because you were always feeling frazzled, you were always feeling busy. And there just weren’t an awful lot of opportunities to socialize outside of your department, unless you lived in Berkeley. I didn’t live in Berkeley. I often think if I had lived in Berkeley or Oakland, I would have been able to see some of these people on the weekends, to be able to socialize with them, but since I lived down here and they all lived up in Berkeley/Oakland, I really didn’t see them on the weekends. I just feel in a way that there were a lot of lost opportunities to get together.

And I think that it was symbolic of the university campus. There’s a feeling that I had for twenty years, it was very atomistic. In other words, you had your office, your cubicle at your building, and your classrooms. And you went from the office to the classrooms to other meetings in the building, and maybe once in a while, you walked across campus to another building if you had a class. In my case, I went mainly for lunch to the Women’s Faculty Club or up the hill to North Campus. And that was the route. You didn’t really find much time to kind of walk around campus, go to other people’s lectures and do things which would bring you in contact with many other faculty outside of your department. And the only time, really, I came in contact with other faculty, whether they were white or black or Asian of Chicano, was when I went to a committee meeting. I met more people through the committee system than I did in any other way. I think that probably happens on many large campuses.

**McGarrigle:** When you were a visiting scholar over the years, did you find that environment different in the different university settings?

**Gibbs:** Well, you know, I find that every university has a different personality, and that certainly was true. When I went to University of Toronto, I did find that it was a smaller school. The School of—they really call it the Faculty of Social Work—was a smaller school, and I felt that people were very friendly to me as a visitor. I’m not so sure how friendly they were with each other but they certainly were friendly to me. And I felt there was more of a community at the Toronto school and it maybe partly because of reflecting a Canadian kind of
culture, too, where people I think do have much more of a feeling of community than in some ways we have here.

McGarrigle: Did that change in your time at Berkeley do you think, in terms of more interaction or a sense of the possibility of having more socializing?

Gibbs: Well, you know, I have an interesting story to tell, which really doesn’t have that much to do with race but it has to do with community. The women in our department always tried to make things more cohesive, more of a community. So, when someone got sick, we would make sure they got cards, flowers. When somebody died, we always made sure that something was sent to the home. And you know, we reached out to students who had major illnesses, deaths in their families, I think, much more than the men did. I think partly that is, you know, in our society that’s sort of the role of the women. So as faculty members, I think we played the same role within our department. And over the years—when I came, I was the third woman on the tenure track in my school. And actually, the second woman to get tenure. One of the women who was there did not go up for tenure, because she was sure she wouldn’t get it. So she didn’t go up.

So, after I got tenure, I really made a pledge because I didn’t feel that my welcome had been very warm by the two women who were there before me. And certainly, the men never invited you to lunch. So, I made this pledge that for any new faculty member, male or female, I would take them to lunch, I would just try to be friendly and supportive, because I felt I didn’t have that.

So, the next faculty woman that came in, we started a little luncheon club. We called ourselves The Ladies Who Lunch. I began that luncheon club. It still goes on today, it’s a nice tradition. Basically, we were all so busy but we would have lunch twice a year, usually around Halloween in the Fall and Valentine’s Day in the spring. So, we’d make a real effort to meet once a year. Because by that time, over the years, we also included the lecturers, the female lecturers. By this time, we’re getting up into ten and twelve women over the years. We kept it going and it’s still going. And it was the one time we’d leave our kind of research interests and teaching problems behind and we’d talk about our children, our families, our vacations, and really try to make connections that were personal, and it really made a difference I think in the community of the department. The women felt that we had kind of a community. Once you know about somebody’s children and in-laws and summer plans, then when you see them in the hall, you say, “Well, how is little Jessica?” or, “Where’d you go for the weekend?” things like that. So, it made a difference, it really, I think, in a way made the department a happier place for all of us.

And we also started having more kinds of celebrations in the department. There was one when we came which was a Christmas celebration. And then somehow, that fell by the wayside over I think religious differences, over what
to call it and when to have it. And during the eighties, these issues became very prominent. So, rather than try to find a way to celebrate a multicultural holiday, they just dropped it for a while. Then there was no annual party. Finally, to get to my point, we started doing little things like giving showers. We had a few women who were having babies so we would give them showers. Or celebrate when secretaries got married or something, we would give them showers. So we were able, as the women, to bring people together. But the men were not included in this.

Okay, so now the story I want to tell, which says something I think about—we were the School of Social Work. And when the 1989 earthquake came, I was teaching, and I was in the basement of Haviland Hall. Do you both know Haviland Hall? Huge, big hall. I had promised my students that I was going to let them out early because there was a big game—I think it was the World Series in Oakland. Of course, this was at the very beginning of the school year, because the World Series was—I guess it was September, or maybe it was October, but in any case, the 1989 earthquake.

Just before five o’clock, we felt the building shake. I mean, the building actually moved on its foundations. And it was very frightening. And I had been in earthquakes before so I knew it was an earthquake but I was teaching a first year graduate school class. Some of them were from the East and they had never experienced an earthquake and so they got frightened.

So I said, “The first thing we need to do is get under our desks.” And it was kind of funny because there were about twenty students in the room and some rather stout ones trying to get under these little triangular desks. So, then it passed! Now you have to remember, at five o’clock, the school gets quiet anyway, everybody has left because this is a class from four to six. So it’s quiet anyway. It’s already getting dark at that time of year and so I thought well, it passed, I had no idea what was happening outside the school, our lights were on, and so I kept them for fifteen or twenty minutes. [laughs] And I kept talking.

So then the next shock comes and by this time, it’s even more frightening because you have another big shock and one girl started crying. She said, “Professor Gibbs, I’m scared! I want to go home.” I said, “Okay. I’m finished now and I promised you I’d let you out by 5:30 so we’ll just stop the class now.”

At which point two people come over. At that time, we used to have some kind of division of the state, the people who actually measure earthquakes were in the basement of Haviland Hall. So two people came running and said, “Do you realize there’s just been this huge earthquake?” [laughs] I said, “No, I didn’t!” They said, “Well, I think you’d better get out, because the lights are out in Oakland and you’d better leave the building.” So here I was, still
teaching with this huge earthquake all around us and then we heard the sirens
and all and so everybody rushed out of the building.

I turned on the radio—fortunately I had a little radio in my office—and they
said, “The bridges are going to be closed down because we know there’s been
huge damage to one bridge. We have to check. So please do not take any
bridges right now for the next twenty-four hours because we’re closing the
bridges down.” And so I had to stay overnight with my son. Fortunately he
had a condo in Oakland. So I’m trying to find my way to the condo. All the
lights are out, all the lights on the highway to go to Oakland, and it looked like
a ghost town. Anyway, I get there and didn’t have my key, couldn’t get in the
door, but finally I got in. Somebody gave me a candle, I got in. So I called Jim
and I said, “I can’t get back tonight.”

But the point of the story is not the earthquake itself but the point of the story
is the next day, we were supposed to have a faculty meeting. So I called my
dean and I said to him, his name is Harry Specht, I said, “Harry, I’m just
calling in. I presume the faculty meeting is canceled.” He said, “But no, why
should we?” I said, “Why should you? It seems to me that a lot of people have
had problems with their houses and cars and other things and people are upset.
Why can’t you just postpone the faculty meeting?” So, he said, “Well, we’re
going to have it, Jewelle, and I expect you to come.” I said, “Fine.” So, I went
to the faculty meeting. This was the next morning about eleven o’clock. A lot
of people didn’t show up because they had had damage to their house and all.
So, I said to the dean, “You know, I think we ought to call a meeting of the
school to talk to the students because there are probably a lot of people upset
about the earthquake, people from the East Coast and the Midwest who’ve
never experienced an earthquake. I think we ought to have a school-wide
meeting tomorrow. That will give us forty-eight hours. And I think we’re a
School of Social Work and we need to let the students tell us how they feel.
Some of them are probably very frightened, they may not have their papers
due or they may not want to take an exam this week. So, we ought to have a
school-wide meeting, sort of like a big group counseling session.” He said to
me, “Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary. If they need counseling, let them pay
for it.” I said, “Harry, that’s the wrong attitude. This is what we are training
our students to do and we should be models for what we want them to do.
This is like—this is crisis intervention we’re talking about. This is like people
experiencing a flood, an earthquake, a hurricane, and losing their homes.” I
said, “We should give our students what we would want our students to do if
they worked in the community.”

So, he said, “Well, you can do it if you want to with your class, but I’m not
calling a school-wide meeting.” And he didn’t. And that, to me, sort of
symbolized the whole Berkeley campus. It just symbolized the fact that here
we have one of the biggest earthquakes in the twentieth century, and yet there
was not a recognition that we were a community; we were a community of
professors, students, and staff. And we should have met as a community and
we should have helped the people who needed help or given them resources where they could find help. And if there were students who hadn’t met their obligations, we should have given them extra time. And it shouldn’t have been done on an individual basis. But he said to me, “The professors, you can all do that with your classes, we don’t need a community meeting.”

And that, to me, represents the problem—maybe not just at Berkeley—but it represents the problem in these huge institutions where people don’t see themselves as part of a community. They see themselves as, I’m an individual scholar; I’m an individual student; I’m an individual staff member. And that’s the way it is.

So, I think that after that I realized [laughs] that this was an uphill battle and I’ll do what I can to create a community around the women in the school, but I said, you know, I think these men, they don’t see it the same way. They have a very different view of it, so—

McGarrigle: I spoke to Kurt Organista before we started interviewing. When people like Kurt came—well, Kurt himself said how welcomed he felt by you. Was there a point at which you decided that you would reach out to new faculty? This went beyond the women who came to the school.

Gibbs: Oh, yes! I decided I would reach out to all of them. As I said, male, female, black, white, Asian, and Chicano. All the faculty members that were hired after me, I took them—each one—out to lunch. I talked to them about the school, I gave them advice about getting tenure. Maybe it was only one time, but I said to them, “If you have any questions, if you have any concerns, if you want to know about a particular procedure or policy, if you’re concerned about a particular colleague, or if students harass you, or whatever, come to me, and I will help you with it.” And I did that with each person that came after me. I think if you asked any of them, they would tell you that I did that. And I don’t mean that I became a good friend to all of them. I became friendlier with some than others, because we had more in common, but I certainly became friendly with—I had one Asian woman who came after me who became a very good friend of mine; Kurt became a very good friend of mine; and a couple of others who came after me whom I thought, I just wanted to help them to adjust to this environment, which I said I think was very atomistic.

McGarrigle: Why don’t we take a break just for a minute here.

[interview interruption]

McGarrigle: Okay. We’re moving from talking about, in terms of your publications, the books, Race and Justice which we talked about extensively last time and how the research on that book led to the next book which was Preserving Privilege. In particular, you had mentioned that your time in L.A. doing the
kinds of community research you did for *Race and Justice* and the timing with the Three Strikes You’re Out initiative, when Pete Wilson was governor, led to your decision to write *Preserving Privilege*. Can you tell me how that came about specifically?

**Gibbs:** Yes. Well, when I was in Los Angeles doing this book on race and justice—I told you I interviewed so many young people and so many community leaders—and it was clear to me that the level of police brutality was simply unimaginable to most people and not just the real brutality, you know, hitting people and all, but you know, the more subtle kinds of harassment and the more subtle kinds of going into the community and creating fear of the police rather than trust in the police. So, it was clear to me that the kids were not exaggerating. The leaders backed them up. And every single black leader and every single young person I talked to and every single community leader, particularly with the kids, heads of programs, every single one had had their own experience or someone in their family with the—I love to call them the LAPD. The Los Angeles Police Department. So that it was clear.

What they made clear to me was that Rodney King was not an exception. Rodney King happened every weekend but you didn’t see it because it wasn’t taped. And they could all tell you about brothers, fathers, cousins, uncles, nephews who had been beaten up or harassed by policemen. And usually for no reason. We’re not talking about people who have gone in and robbed a bank or stolen a car; we’re talking about a kid standing on the corner or just in front of their school waiting for a school bus, or driving within the legal limit and how these police will find *any* kind of way to make life really uncomfortable for them.

So then, in connection with the three strikes, I realized the implication of the three strikes, which I discuss in my book. If you are arrested for a minor felony when you are a teenager—and of course, many of these kids are arrested because they *resist* the police and then they are arrested for resisting the police. Not for what they were originally suspected of doing, which probably was not an arrestable offense, but for resisting arrest. And you can be arrested for resisting arrest and still you have a record.

Then there is the issue of those who are engaged in some kind of petty stealing which many teenagers engage in. Some are never caught. And that becomes another offense. So you can have stealing a bicycle as an offense. You can have two offenses before you are eighteen. And then if you get that third offense by the time you’re twenty-one, that is an offense under Three Strikes that you can go to prison for twenty-five years. So I realized almost immediately how this was going to impact on the black community in this state, the black kids. And also, to a certain extent, on the Latino community. And when you combine it with the problem of unemployment, which was very high at that time in Los Angeles and all the big cities, and the second problem of not having good educational opportunities, so that often they
would drop out of school. When you combine it with that, then sometimes they are more likely to engage in petty crime as a way of making income. And that would include selling drugs, which also of course is an offense.

So, I thought, somebody really needs to look at this and somebody really needs to try to bring to the attention of the public to what this means and what consequences we’re going to have. So then I started looking at that. In the meantime, while I was looking at Three Strikes and talking about it to my class and beginning to write about it, then, of course, we had this other series shortly afterwards. Every election, we have another proposition and they all impact minority groups very heavily.

So we had [Proposition] 187 which we call the Anti-Immigrant Proposition, although to be fair, it’s anti-illegal immigrant. But the problem is whenever you pass anything like that, again, there are many unintended consequences, which I talk about in my book. For example, many people who are legal are stopped and harassed because they look Spanish. And many people who aren’t even Spanish are stopped and harassed because people think they’re Spanish or Mexican or Spanish-speaking. And then you have the unintended consequences that are health consequences. So that mothers don’t want to take their children to get vaccinations but the children go to school and then if they’re not vaccinated, that can cause other kinds of tremendous health problems for other children in the school. And on and on. And then having all these young Chicanos, maybe immigrants who are not in school because they’re afraid to register so they’re out on the streets, the teenagers, and then they’re more likely to be involved in gang activity. So there are all these consequences that nobody seemed to think about.

And then we had after 187, we had [Proposition] 209. And of course 209 was the big one that everybody started paying attention to and that was the anti-affirmative action proposition. And then finally, while I’m doing all the research on these two, we have—I think it was 226—the one that was the anti-bilingual proposition.

McGarrigle: 227.

Gibbs: Yes, 227, anti-bilingual proposition, which again had a number of unintended consequences like increasing the drop-out rate of Chicano kids in high school. They already had the highest dropout rate in the country, Spanish-speaking kids. So, I decided with my student [Teiahsha Bankhead], I said, You know, I think we need to look at all of these together because singly they’re all important and they all have negative consequences but if you take them collectively, they really are terrible for minority teenagers and families. And I said, you know what we really need to do, we really need to nail down who supports these things. That’s what we really need to do and that’s going to be a service. And that’s the way we went about it.
I must say it was not easy to find out these things. But we—she went up to Sacramento, to the Office of the Secretary of State and we dug out the records, people who had given large contributions. And it turns out—and I document in my book—these propositions were basically financed by out-of-state money. There was some in-state money, too, but the big money, much of it came from states like Texas, New York, Florida, and states outside of New York that are very conservative. When we looked at who was really giving, like, contributions of ten thousand and more, they were people who—we also looked up the individuals who were on these boards of very conservative institutions. Institutions like the institutions against bilingualism, you know. The institution called English Only, which really doesn’t want immigrants in this country and doesn’t want bilingualism. We began to see this pattern that there were a few individuals who were actually supporting all of these amendments.

So, when you talk about a conspiracy, what is a conspiracy? You know, they say if you talk about a conspiracy as a black person, you’re paranoid. Well, I say this is a conspiracy. I don’t care what you call it. What it is is a few people who have a lot of money who have decided that they are going to undercut the growth of minorities in California. And why would they do that? Why would they do that? It’s clear! As minorities get to be a bigger and bigger percentage of the state of California, they begin to demand more power, more equity, more access. And this is what these people are afraid of. So what do we do? We strip them of all their rights. We get rid of all the Chicanos who are not legal by Proposition 187. We put all the black and Latino young men in jail where they can’t do any harm—first of all, they’ll be in jail and secondly, they can’t vote when they get out. If they’re convicted of a felony, you can’t vote. So they won’t be very dangerous. And then you take away bilingual programs, so you’re going to increase the dropout rate of the Chicano kids from the schools, you won’t get them educated very fast. And since this is the fastest growing group, we really want to keep them down. We really want to prevent them from getting equal access. And don’t tell me that’s not a conspiracy.

So when you look at where that money was coming from, from these conservative think tanks, from these conservative millionaires, who were well-known as board members of these things like English Only, or FAIR which is against immigration, against immigrants’ rights, and organizations of that type. You begin to see a pattern. As I concluded in my book, this wasn’t a grassroots development from citizens in California who said, “We want Three Strikes. We want the illegal immigrants to all go back to Mexico. We want to just eviscerate these programs for bilingual education.” This was not where it goes. We figured out—and the Secretary of State’s office helped us with that, that it cost approximately one million dollars to get a ballot initiative on the ballot, one million dollars. And that one million dollars is upfront, it is not coming out of the pocket of people who give twenty dollars, or twenty-five dollars, or a hundred dollars to a politician or a campaign. It is big money that puts that initiative on the ballot. And so, when I wrote that book, I was—this
book was really for me a labor of love almost, because each of those initiatives had disturbed me very much, because individually I could see where they were going. And then when my graduate student, Teiasha Bankhead, who was co-author of the book, when she and I began to put all this together, we could see this clear pattern.

Plus we interviewed a number of leaders in the Bay Area and in Los Angeles because those are the two kind of major foci of most political activity of the state, San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles County. And again, we had many people who could tell us the same thing that we had already figured out. You know, people from the ACLU and people from the NAACP and people from the Urban League, who spoke very, very strongly about these initiatives and on their own said, “We think this is a conspiracy to keep down or to prevent minorities from gaining access to education, money, and power in California.” And they have all been passed.

Now fortunately, for some of them, like 187, most of the provisions were overturned by the courts. But with Three Strikes, it’s still the law. The bilingual programs have now been mainly eviscerated and we’ll have to see, it will take some years to see what the results are, which I don’t think will be good. And 209 is basically, since the [United States] Supreme Court decision—I would have to say the Supreme Court decision weakened 209 greatly. But I still think that although it weakened 209, 209 is still legally the law of California. I mean, they didn’t overturn 209. They were looking at specific cases in Michigan and a couple of other places. They didn’t actually overturn 209.

McGarrigle: Did the people who were the wealthy sponsors of some of these propositions, did they ever go on record explaining some of their motivations?

Gibbs: Well, I never could—I tried, I called a couple of them that I knew as individuals to talk to them. They never even returned my calls. And I never saw any of them interviewed, I never saw an interview in the paper. I mean, basically, these are stealth issues. You know, you give the money and the only place it’s recorded is up in the Secretary of State’s Office which has to record and the campaigns do have to report, so there may be a list in the paper. But the average reader would not know who these people were. So there probably was a list in the paper. In fact, some of these names, I did get out of the paper. But, well, who is this person? I don’t know who this person is. Who is this organization if you don’t know what FAIR stands for or English Only? You don’t necessarily connect that this is a very conservative organization.

So the public is constantly misled about these issues because the public believes that a group of little old ladies somewhere [laughs] in San Diego sat down and said, Oh! We need to put all the criminals in jail! and then that spread around to all the other old ladies, but that’s not how it works. It’s not the little old ladies. It’s the people who sit in the smoke-filled rooms, but now
they’re probably not smoke-filled. But in the boardrooms. That’s who is doing this, the people who sit on these boards, the people with a lot of money, and the people who represent the basically conservative right-wing organizations. Only they often give the money as individuals. So, if you just see their name, unless you know that they are on the board of X, Y, Z and several X, Y, Z’s which are conservative, you don’t have a sense that these people are sort of directing.

Somebody said to me after they—“Do you think, Jewelle, these people sit around one room and say to each other, ‘Well, we’re just going to do all this damage to keep these people—?’” I said, “Not exactly. No, they don’t sit in one room. They meet at board meetings and resort areas and weddings and other places and they sit together and they say, “You know, we ought to send some money out there to California so that we can support this movement.” So, it’s not a formal sort of decision-making process. It’s an informal decision-making process. But it’s the kind of process that goes on within the establishment and between those people who are connected by serving on all these boards; they’re connected by school ties; sometimes they’re connected by family ties, marriage, and political affiliations. And it is these people who really decide the course of this country and we are just fooling ourselves to think that we make these decisions because we don’t.

McGarrigle: And during this time, this was ’94 through ’98 that these four propositions that you examined in the book all passed, Pete Wilson was governor—

Gibbs: And they helped him.

McGarrigle: —so there is this connection then between these conservatives—

Gibbs: Well, yes! And I point out in the book that one of the strategies was to help get Pete Wilson re-elected. So for both 184 and 187, those were used as wedge issues. I point that out. And they were to help Pete Wilson get elected. And it was also true with 209 that if we can really divide the electorate by race and class, then, the Republicans will always win. And of course, Democrats and Independents sometimes fall for that, unfortunately. So what they do is, to take an issue like race or religion or culture, where conservatives have very strong feelings that, these people should be adapting to America, these people should speak English, these people should look like us, eat like us, talk like us. And that issue divides the country, divides the electorate. Similarly, the issue of race and crime is always used as—the first President Bush used it in his election, the Willie Horton issue. It is always used to divide the electorate. And I will predict that in the next election, it’s going to be the gay marriage issue, which they are going to use against the Democrats, particularly if Senator [John] Kerry is the candidate, because it was a high court in the state of Massachusetts that said they should have the same rights as everybody else. And that will be the issue that the Republicans will use against the Democrats, because that also is another controversial issue.
McGarrigle: The race and justice book, you started the research on a small grant.

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: And you said you can do a lot with a small grant.

Gibbs: I can do a lot with a small grant.

McGarrigle: So I wanted to ask you a little bit about your ability to maximize small amounts of money. You talked about why you went for a small grant after having applied for larger grants. But also, in the case of *Preserving Privilege*, did you have a similar situation?

Gibbs: Well, I was fortunate because by this time, 1992, I was a full professor and my dean and a committee in the department recommended me for an endowed chair that had come up from a foundation called the Zellerbach Family Fund Foundation, a small foundation in San Francisco. And they wanted to fund an endowed chair in the School of Social Welfare, which would be given to somebody who was interested in community issues and social change. And the dean told this—I wasn’t there—apparently, the story I heard is the dean had lunch with the president of the foundation, who is a member of the family. His name is William Zellerbach. And apparently, the dean told him about my research. He said, “Oh! That’s the woman I saw on TV the other night.” He had just seen me on TV talking about *Children of Color*. But there was some issue I was on TV about, I was interviewed locally about something. And he said, “Oh! I like her! She’s doing just the kind of thing I think we should support.” Then they, of course, did have to have a vote. There was a committee of the school that voted on me. But he sort of gave prior approval, you might say, to the kind of work that he thought I was doing and then the dean sent him a couple of my books and articles. And he told the dean, “She’s doing the kind of work that we want to support in the community.”

Now, having a chair is a wonderful thing, a lot of people don’t even know what it means. But an endowed chair is given to the university and usually to a department, and the department decides who will get it. It’s given to a person. It has to be one person who will get it. And then the university manages the funds, which at Berkeley, I think, at the time I got my chair, they have to pledge something like $750,000 to fund the chair fully for a lifetime. But, it’s the interest that is given to the chair-holder at Berkeley. At Stanford, they do it differently. Different universities do it differently. So what happened to me is that at Berkeley, they want you to keep your salary so that if anything happens to the stock market or all these funds somehow disappear, you still have your salary. So the state pays your salary, and the chair gives you essentially research money. So, then I got the annual interest off of that chair, since 1992. I didn’t ever have to apply for another grant.

McGarrigle: I see.
Gibbs: And generally it was about $20,000 a year for the rest of my time at Berkeley. They first gave it to me for five years and then they evaluate you. It’s not a lifetime chair. If they like what you’re doing, then they recommend that you should get it again. So, I had it twice. I got it for five years and then it was renewed. And it was still good when I retired, I had two more years to go. That gave me, without any application to anybody, $20,000 which I then had to every year write what I was going to do with it. And then it would pay for my research or research assistant, any expenses that had to do with my research, and conferences I wanted to go to. It is a wonderful thing to have a chair.

You do have to provide receipts and all. I mean, they want to be sure you’re using the money not to build a new house or anything. That was easy enough. So it was that chair that permitted me to go to England, because it paid my way to England. It paid for my research in England and it paid for my research in Canada. And it was wonderful. So I really must say on camera [laughs] how appreciative I am and how grateful I am to the Zellerbach Foundation.

They really liked what I was doing and I had a close relationship with them the whole time. I would go every year to their annual dinner and they would introduce me and I would stand up. And even now that I’m retired, every year, they call me Their Chair. So every year I go to their dinner with Jim. They always have it in a nice place in San Francisco, and they always ask me to stand up and introduce me and it’s just really very nice. I have a warm relationship with them.

McGarrigle: Did they in turn help promote or use your research for other areas—?

Gibbs: Yes! I should show you. Yes, they published three manuscripts in little booklets. I have them.

McGarrigle: Oh, I have those.

Gibbs: Yes, they were published by the—they support something called the San Francisco Studies Center. So, you know, they’re little booklets and every other year I do a big speech and every year we had a different color on the cover, and I would pick the color. [laughs] So I had a red one, a yellow one, and an orange one, because I like bright colors. That’s right.

And then they asked me for a mailing list, and they mailed them out, they mailed them to state legislators and public policy institutes and they sell them. The San Francisco Studies Center, they sold these little pamphlets. I don’t know how much, maybe ten, fifteen dollars. And it’s amazing how many libraries they’re in. Libraries would order them. So they had a list of libraries and then a list of people they wanted to send these little pamphlets. And then they also would ask me for a list and I would send to my colleagues. So they
actually had a pretty wide distribution, because they’re really like a publisher, the Studies Center.

And by the way, I didn’t have to take that out of my grant so they were so generous to me. They published these things at their expense, not at mine. And they also gave me stationary with my chair title on it. It was very nice.

McGarrigle: Early on, I spoke to Ed Nathan who has spent his career as a child advocate.

Gibbs: Yes, yes.

McGarrigle: And he spoke about this time when you were appointed Chair. Did you know about any of the behind the scenes decision-making that went into this—?

Gibbs: No, but he probably did. [laughs] Yes, I knew a little bit about it, but I wasn’t supposed to know about it, but he probably told you. The dean was an advocate of mine. And I think he was too. Ed knew that family very well. He was the Executive Director of that fund and I think he was also—he probably told you—he wanted me to get it. So I think he was a big supporter of mine.

McGarrigle: Coincidentally, his wife [Harriet Nathan] is a colleague of ours.

Gibbs: Yes, I knew that, yes. So, I think he wanted me to get it. I had that sense. I didn’t know all the behind the scenes. There weren’t that many people in my department doing community work but there were a couple of others who might have gotten it but I think they wanted me to have it. So, that’s why I was the first black woman to get a chair, because I had people who were supporting me and people who were advocating for me in my department, but it was not a university-wide decision. The chancellor had to approve though, I will say that, but the basic decision was made in the department and my understanding is that Mr. Zellerbach was very enthusiastic. So, by the time you get to the level of the chancellor and his approval, it would have been very unusual for him not to approve. So he approved it. And then when I came up for renewal in five years, the university again approved it.

I can’t tell you how happy I was not to have to be every year running around looking for money from somebody. And I used it very well. I used it very well. I just used it for my own research and each year I used it, I got a book or an article or something out of it. I produced a lot of stuff since 1992. Actually, the chair went into effect on January 1, 1993. I did get a lot out of it, to be productive, I didn’t fool around with the money.

McGarrigle: I know in the materials that I have, there is an article, it might be from The Chronicle. It’s a picture of you and Jim and you are sitting right here.

Gibbs: Yes, on my pink couch.
McGarrigle: Right, and you were talking about the chair.

Gibbs: Right, and he had one, too, so we both had one. He had one here at Stanford. He had the Martin Luther King, Jr. Chair, which was quite a coincidence. [laughs] I always teased him. Because, you know, I told you I used to go out with him, so I said, “You have a chair named after my former friend.”

McGarrigle: Did your appointment to the endowed chair change things in other ways? It gave you this freedom of flexibility with research funds.

Gibbs: Well, it gives you a lot of freedom. It does not, for example—some people use it to buy out of teaching. I never did. I know I have my colleagues who use their chair money to buy out for a whole course and then it uses up most of the money. I was not interested in that. I actually liked teaching, I loved teaching. So, the teaching was really one of the most enjoyable parts of my career. So, why would I buy out of teaching? And then, I wanted the money to use for my research. And actually I used it also for Race and Justice. It paid for my expenses going down to Los Angeles in 1993. So I used it to do research, and I didn’t want to use it to buy out of teaching.

But, the point is, it just gives you—first of all, it gives you a certain status to say you have a chair. We had actually four chair holders when I started. When I got mine there were three other people in my department who had a chair. So I was the fourth and then after me there was a fifth. But it gives you a lot of respect in the university and it gives you a lot of respect in the academic world. Any academic knows that’s a big honor. So whenever you tell people that you have a chair or it’s on your stationary that you have a chair, there’s always a sense, “Well, this person must be special,” or “This person must have produced a lot of work.” Because you don’t get a chair unless you’ve published a lot really, you would rarely get a chair, or unless you’ve discovered a new star, or—I mean, getting a chair is a big, big honor. So, you don’t get a chair unless they feel that your body of work, whether you are an artist or a scientist, is significant. Otherwise you wouldn’t even get it. So that it sort of speaks volumes. You don’t need to tell anybody, “Well, I’ve written four books,” because they look at you and they say, “Oh, you’ve got a chair! What did you do to get a chair?”

And of course I must say then, there are also the unbelievers or the people who are the critics, but you know, you’re going to have to deal with that. “Why did you get a chair and I didn’t get a chair?” You’re going to have to deal with that in any honor you get. I didn’t let that worry me, there were a few people who were, I will say, at the least, ambivalent about my chair. And that was because they didn’t have one. And I understood that, so you know. But by and large, people seemed very pleased. And I feel that you want to do your best to prove that you really earned the chair, too. So, I think I worked harder after I got the chair than I did before. [laughs] You know, I felt, oh my God, now I’ve got this chair, now I’ve got to prove that I can do all this work.
And I actually published two books after I got the chair. And then a lot of articles after I got the chair. But, certainly getting it helped me.

It also gives you a feeling, you relax because you know for the rest of your—because I knew I was going to retire about 2000, I had already told my husband and my family I was going to retire—so, I knew that for the next eight years I was set, I didn’t ever have to apply for money again. I didn’t have to worry about those things and then I could go to conferences if I wanted to go to conferences and I could always have a research assistant. I could pay the research assistant. That I would never have the problem of not having enough money to do my research and what I needed to do. And that was a wonderful thing. And also I could by books with it, supplies. It’s very broad, anything that is related to your research or professional development. That includes books, conferences, everything. So it’s a very nice thing to have, I will say that.

McGarrigle: And that was an instance where you were again another first, I think you were the first black woman system-wide to have an endowed chair?

Gibbs: You know, there is a debate about that and I can’t document that debate. My dean said I was the first black professor in the entire system to get a chair. Some other people said, “Well, there might have been a black man who had one,” but they never said who it was. I certainly was the first black like Berkeley, male or female. Even somebody like David Blackwell, I don’t think he had a chair, and he was so prominent and he was a prizewinning statistician. I do not believe he had a chair. So I was the first black at Berkeley and the question was, was there somebody at UCLA who had had a chair? And I never heard anymore about that. One of my black male colleagues told me that, that he thought there was somebody at UCLA. But the Office of Public Affairs said I was the first black professor, male or female, in the system to get a chair. And that’s all I know. I can’t document whether a man ever had one but that’s what they told me. Maybe you can find out.

McGarrigle: Well, I just wonder if it seems surprising in a way that by the 1990’s this was a first.

Gibbs: It was surprising. Well, not only was it surprising, but in defense of all my male colleagues and even some of my female colleagues, some of them had done wonderful work. Except for Blackwell, I won’t name names but some of them are really very well known in their fields, have made terrific scientific contributions, other kinds of contributions. I don’t know why they don’t have chairs. I cannot say why they don’t have chairs. Certainly, there are two or three that I thought certainly deserved chairs—Blackwell would have been number one. I mean, he has a mathematical formula named after him or a statistical law, I should say, named after him, which I will never have. So, the question comes, why didn’t he get a chair? So, I think other people need to answer that. I can’t answer that. Is it because they were not white males? I
don’t know. But I will say that we have in music Olly Wilson who has composed a lot of good music; we have Troy Duster in sociology who is one of the best known sociologists in the country. And I could go on and on. And none of them got chairs. Which makes me feel—I do feel badly about that. I don’t feel guilty, I will say, I don’t feel guilty. If someone wants to give me a chair, I’m not going to say, “Go give it to Troy!” But I still feel that the university has in some ways not rewarded these other people, the black males who came before me and made terrific contributions, I still feel they have not been—let me say, adequately recognized is probably the best way to put it. Then again, I don’t make those decisions and I don’t know the history and I don’t know whether anyone gave money to those departments for a particular kind of chair, I can’t say.

McGarrigle: Let’s stop our tape, Nadine.

[begin minidisc 28]

McGarrigle: I was just saying that *Preserving Privilege* puts you even more in the political arena.

Gibbs: Yes.

McGarrigle: And was there a, for lack of a better word, backlash?

Gibbs: Well, it was interesting. By and large, my colleagues sort of ignored the book altogether. They didn’t ask me about it, they didn’t talk about it, except for the very liberal ones. And it’s interesting some of my colleagues actually, although they were in social welfare, were rather conservative. I had three or four colleagues who are really rather conservative, which has always surprised me. But, by and large, there wasn’t much conversation about it. And I realize that some of my colleagues probably agreed with some of those things, which really bothered me but that’s their privilege. It bothered me because they were in a field that should have been very sympathetic to my point of view. And yet, I think there were colleagues who were tough on crime and probably for 187. So, there was no point in discussing it because then we would have had an argument.

And the press, I was again surprised, the university sent out a really wonderful public affairs announcement to the papers and I got a few interviews in the Bay Area but by and large, I had better response elsewhere. I mean, *The Chronicle* asked me to do an op-ed piece, which I did, which they printed, which I think you probably have a copy of. And a few people wrote letters about that. And then I was on a couple of talk shows, but by and large the local press didn’t really seem as interested in that book as the earlier book, the *Race and Justice* book, because I got much more attention from the press for that one. And then, I had sort of a small book tour, New York and Washington, D.C. And I did get on some talk shows and radio and TV. The
thing that I realized while I was on a TV show with a very conservative black host, whose name is Armstrong Williams, who is a conservative host out of Virginia. And he speaks the really conservative Republican line. He interviewed me and my co-author, we were there together in Washington, and it was very interesting. I realized that those people who are conservative did see this book as a threat.

He gave us a whole hour on his show. And kept challenging us on our assumptions and realized that we were saying that, in effect, this was a kind of conspiracy that all these people were supporting these things. And I realized that one of the issues for the conservatives is that they don’t want this kind of information out there in the public. They don’t want anybody to be analyzing what they’re doing and how they’re going about their little mission, or their big mission, really. And I think he did sense that. And he had read at least some of the book. Usually, the talk show hosts don’t read most of the books, but he seemed to have read it, he quoted from the books. And he kept saying, “Do you really believe these people had the wrong intentions?” and, “Do you really believe that this is a plot?” And so forth and so on. It was kind of interesting because that one show I think indicated to both of us that our book was seen almost as a dangerous book by the conservatives.

And after that little book tour, there wasn’t a lot of discussion about the book. I didn’t feel as if—well, I don’t know because we had a public relations person working with us. Either she didn’t do a good job or people didn’t find it very persuasive. I don’t know what to say, but it didn’t get the level of attention that I thought that it would and that the issues deserved—not because I was writing it but that the issues deserved it. And it could be because the book came out so long after all of those things were passed that people thought, ‘Oh, well that’s ancient history.’

McGarrigle: Did you do any work with the Institute of Governmental Studies at Berkeley? Where people go and they study propositions—

Gibbs: No. I used their work though. I mean I quoted them, I quoted two or three of them very extensively. A guy named Bruce Cain. We had two of his books about the propositions and I quoted them extensively, but I didn’t do any collaborative work with them. Even, you know, we had a lot of scholarship in the book. And people didn’t seem that interested, the press did not seem that interested. And I think that’s sad, too, because when they were passing all these things, there was a lot of talk about them. And after they were passed, it’s almost as if, well, these things are now law and we just have to accept them. That was the feeling I had. So, the excitement of the book soon died down [laughs] and I moved on to other things.

McGarrigle: I wonder if it influenced any of your students in terms of their areas of research.
Well, you know, probably not because it’s not really considered classic social welfare. But what was interesting is, you never know who you impact on. So, you think, ‘Oh well, nobody read the book. Nobody cares about the book.’ You just did all that work. And why did you do it? This is interesting. I’m glad you asked because I had almost forgotten this. About three months ago, I went to a meeting. I’m on a small foundation board, called the Van Loben Sels Foundation and we do good works. We give lots of money to legal services for the poor and legal services for immigrants and programs for disadvantaged youth and things like that. We do a lot of very good things in the community. We aim all of our grants to people who are powerless and poor and people who need basic social services or legal services or educational services. That’s what we do.

So, we had three people from the American Civil Liberties Union come in and speak. They have a big office in San Francisco, the Northern California Civil Liberties Union. The woman who runs it is a woman named Dorothy Erhlich. And she had two assistants with her, all lawyers. I have been a lifelong supporter of the American Civil Liberties Union. In fact, you might even talk to Dorothy Erhlich. What she said to me—I was a little bit late because I come from down here and they all live up in the city. So when I got there, they were eating lunch, they were going to make a lunchtime presentation. So I said, “I’m sorry I’m late.” And then she said, “Oh, Professor Gibbs, I’m so glad to meet you in person. You know, your book had such an impact on me.” I said, “Which book?” “Preserving Privilege.” I said, “It did?” She said, “Yes. Your book really helped us to kind of think about how we were going to counter-attack these things. It was just so wonderful, your work, and you did such good scholarship,” et cetera, et cetera. So then the next woman—there were two other female attorneys—said, “Yes, and I read your book Race and Justice and it changed my life!” [laughs] I said, “Did it?” She said, “Yes, it really did.” She said, “I made a commitment to really work in this area of race and justice and to help young minorities who are in the criminal justice system. And the third woman said, “Well, Professor Gibbs, I didn’t read that book but I read another book which I was really influenced by.” So here are three people from a very important organization, the American Civil Liberties Union, who were sitting there. Each one had read a different book of mine and they said how much it had affected their work, the important work they did. And then I thought, ‘You know, it is worth it, what I do.’ Even if there is only one person or one organization that can use my work to further the cause of helping these people that I’m concerned about, it’s worth it. And I left that meeting, I really felt so good, you know.

And there was one other good thing that I heard, come to think of it. Do you know the Southern Poverty Law Center?

McGarrigle: Yes.
Gibbs: Well, the guy who runs that is one of my big heroes. I just think that that organization is a wonderful organization. And we do support that organization. So about a year ago, or two years ago—before I retired so it was more than that—I was at a conference in Washington and I met a staff member from the Southern Poverty Law Organization, so I started saying, “Oh! I just think your organization is just so wonderful and I just admire the people who work there,” and so forth, and I’d never met this young woman before—she is a young woman—she said, “Well, Professor Gibbs, we’ll have to let you know that we are some of your biggest fans.” I said, “Oh, you know my work?” She said, “Oh, yes, we have all your books and your books are very important to us and I’m so glad to meet you. I know about Race and Justice; I know about Preserving Privilege. We just think you do wonderful work.” [laughing] So it’s people like that who represent these huge advocacy organizations who make a difference in people’s lives and I think if they’re reading my work and my work is helpful to them, then that’s what it’s all about for me. That I can have some impact on public policy through these advocacy groups.

McGarrigle: Now, I have to ask you since we’re in this kind of line of questions, have people asked you to run for office?

Gibbs: Oh, many times.

McGarrigle: I thought so. So how have you—?

Gibbs: Many times. It’s funny that you would ask me that because I had thought about it some years ago. The first time I was asked to run for office was before I ever got my PhD in Minnesota. And I was very active in the community. Minneapolis is about the size of San Francisco, maybe smaller, but it’s really much more of a community. And my husband and I were very active. I didn’t work at that time, I had two young children. I was all over the place. I was active in politics, civil rights, you know, you name it and I was active in it. It was partly a way of expressing myself and partly getting out of the house when it was cold all the time. [laughing] So I was really active.

In 1964, they asked me to run for school board. I was very interested in running for school board. I had young children who were not in school yet but I was—and I was thinking then, I might like a political career. Now, you have to think about this as 1964, when Geoffrey was born in 1961, my oldest. Lowell was born 1963. So, my husband came home one day, he says, “Guess what? I’ve decided we need to go back to Africa next year. I’m applying for a big grant and I want to go back to Africa.” I said, “Well, you know they just asked me to run.” [laughing] “Well, I’m sorry,” he said. So that was the end of my school board career. So the next year, 1965, that summer, we went to Africa and we never moved back to Minneapolis and the spring of ’65 he got an offer from Stanford, so then we came to Stanford. We went to Africa, to Liberia for a year—and I told you about that—then we moved directly here.
We never went back to Minneapolis except to sell our house and say goodbye to our friends.

So then when I moved here, I started—you know, I was thinking about going back to school, but for years I have had this other feeling that I ought to run for office and I had been approached here a couple times, “Jewelle, why don’t you run for some kind of local office.” And it had just conflicted with my academic career. So then when I retired, I had really given it some thought and I thought, oh, I’m probably too old now to run. But I was seriously thinking about it a couple of years ago. And then I had my knee operation and I think that just finished it, because you know, if you run for office you have to be walking precincts and things like that. But just two days ago, somebody asked me, “Jewelle, why don’t you run for office?” So they keep—because I speak up and I say what I think and I’m interested in these issues. And two days ago, I went to a caucus for Kerry—we’re still active you know with the Democrats—and the only office I ever ran for I won, because there was no contest, I did run for delegate to the Santa Clara County Democratic Central Committee. I think I mentioned that to you.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: That year, there was no contest so five of us ran, there were five slots, and we were all elected. So that was the only office and that’s the lowest elected office actually that you can have in California, the County Committee, which sort of runs elections and educates voters in this county. So I was a member. I had two terms on that and that was my only elected office. But it was uncontested so it wasn’t very exciting. [laughs] So I’ve always been part of the Democratic Party and interested in its activities. And I think if I were a little younger, and didn’t have this bad knee, I probably might have thrown my hat in the ring for a local election. People have asked me several times to run for a Santa Clara County Commissioner, the Board. Several times. But, I don’t know, I think now, I probably won’t. Who knows? We’ll see if my leg gets any better. [laughs]

But I am interested in politics, very interested and we have always, Jim and I, always support candidates and give money to candidates.

McGarrigle: We just have a few minutes and then we’ll close but I wanted to ask you about these latest books about Martin Luther King. In this last week’s Sunday [New York] Times Literary Supplement, the feature article was about Martin Luther King. I wanted to ask you if you—

Gibbs: Yes, I do have it and I’m going to look at the books. I’m going to go over to Borders and look at them and see if I may buy one or two. I don’t remember each one, but I thought the reviews were mainly positive. I thought that also these people were saying mainly positive things about him. And in that connection, you might be interested to know, I’m writing an essay about him,
for a book, really kind of a personal essay about my relationship with him and what it has meant to me over the years. I’m almost finished, I wrote a first draft. When I finish, I’ll let you look at it.

McGarrigle:  I would love to see it when you’re ready to show.

Gibbs:  I’m just about finished with it. And brought about because this was an anniversary of his—was it birth or death?—I think it was the anniversary of his birth. So, yes, I think it was the 75th anniversary of his birth. Someone called me—lots of people know that I know him—and asked me would I write this essay, so I did. So we’ll see.

McGarrigle:  Good, I’d like to see it.

Gibbs:  And I am going to look at those books. I have a lot of books about Martin Luther King, some of them are right over there. But I don’t buy every book that’s written about him, I try to be selective because most of them are not saying anything new. But if there is something that is a new perspective or is new information, I might buy it.

McGarrigle:  Well, why don’t we close for today and then we can talk about what we want to do next.

Gibbs:  Okay!

[end of session]
Okay, we were talking about a new foundation appointment.

Yes. Well, I think I was saying that people sometimes think that retirement is equivalent to a kind of death almost in terms of your career, and that people are no longer interested in you for your expertise and you have to sit home and sort of knit and bake cookies [laughing] as Hilary Clinton used to say. But the truth is that I think if you are an academic or if you have been an active person in almost any profession, whether it’s law or medicine, generally speaking, your expertise and your skills are still welcome on things like foundations.

And nonprofit organizations when they are looking for board members often look for retired people who have an expertise that would somehow be related to their mission or their goals. And in my case, one board I am currently serving on is the Van Loben Sels Board in San Francisco. It’s a small foundation but they do—I think I did tell you a little bit about them. And I have enjoyed that. It’s more work than most foundations because we don’t have program officers. We read all the grants. That’s a lot of work. It’s often two or three evenings a week before the meeting, I’m sitting down going through grants and really looking at them and trying to determine whether they fit our goals and our mission and the criteria that we have for grants. We basically give small grants. Most of our grants are under $25,000. So people turn to us for start-up and small grants that will increase their capacity to deliver their services and maybe hire one more attorney part-time or something like that. So we are really not in with the major players like Ford and Rockefeller and Carnegie, those are the big foundations, but we are one of the Bay Area foundations that really has a good track record of helping non-profits start up. Particularly non-profits that work with the immigrants, legal services, disadvantaged youth, et cetera. Those are the kinds of projects that we support.

I’ve always been especially interested in the plight of teenage girls in our society because I feel that they are kind of a neglected group and that they have more and more pressures on them. Although I did a book on boys, on black males, the funny thing is that a lot of my volunteer work and interest and in my counseling, my private practice, I sort of had a specialty in girls, and have done some writing about girls. And some of my early research projects were actually on girls, on teenage girls, but I’m known more professionally for my work on boys, which is really kind of ironic. Most people know my book about black males but they don’t know all the articles I wrote about girls.
So, now, my formal career is over and I get this call about a new foundation. Well, the foundation’s not exactly new, but it’s a joining of a Los Angeles women’s foundation and a San Francisco Bay Area women’s foundation. They have joined together and they call themselves the Women’s Foundation of California. So, they have reconstituted with a new board as a new entity, although they have these people coming from Los Angeles and there are few people from the Central Valley who have been involved. We had our first meeting last Saturday and it’s very interesting. So I did agree to serve a term on the board. It represents women, basically from all over California, but the three major groups are from the Bay Area, Los Angeles area, and the Central Valley. And it’s a very diverse board. We have whites, blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. And it’s rare to see Hispanic women on boards unless it’s a board that deals especially with Hispanic issues, so that is a good thing. And they are granting grants only to projects for women and girls, not only in the West Coast, mainly in California, but also they have some international projects—one in Asia, one in Africa, and one in Europe—helping girls, very disadvantaged girls in countries which either don’t have any resources for girls or there is some history of oppression of women and so forth and so on. So it is really a very good foundation. I’m looking forward to working with them.

Again, I see this as a way of taking my expertise and translating it into real practical ways of helping girls, because I’ve always been on the research end or in counseling one to one or maybe with a family. But these kinds of projects that I am going to be working with and making decisions about are projects that will help large numbers of girls and women. So I’m very happy about it.

McGarrigle: Was it through a particular individual that your—?

Gibbs: Well, you know, I get a lot calls. I get a lot of calls to serve on boards and committees because I know a lot of people in the Bay Area and a lot of people know my work. And then I have—it’s this business about connections and who you know and who thinks highly of you. Actually, it’s the former President of Stanford, his wife who recommended me, Jing Lyman who’s been very active in these issues all over the country, women’s issues and foundations. Of course, her husband used to be president of the Rockefeller Foundation. And, they’ve come back. He was president of Stanford while my husband was dean, so we got to know them very well. My husband was dean of undergraduate studies in the early seventies for six years. We got to know them very well and then they moved to New York where he was president of the Rockefeller Foundation.

But she’s always been almost a professional volunteer, a very high level person who has been working with groups and community activists, she has wonderful contacts. And so often, she’ll call me and ask me will I do this or that and sometimes I say yes and sometimes I don’t. But she’s been very
active in training young leaders, there’s this Silicon Valley leadership council that she’s been involved in. And so she called me and asked me could she put my name up for it and would I be interested. So I said yes. [laughs]

McGarrigle: How does the funding come in the case of this organization?

Gibbs: Well, this foundation actually raises funds. Some comes from corporations. A very little comes from the government, but they have some funds from the government. But mostly, it’s from foundations and individuals. And they do big fundraisers, they’re having a big fundraiser around March 23rd in San Francisco. And then they invite lots of corporations to buy tables and things. So they have a big annual fundraiser but most of their funds are raised through the usual channels of appealing to wealthy individuals, groups, organizations, other foundations.

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: So anyway, that’s one of the things that I enjoy doing, is volunteer work that helps the very people that I did research on and that I taught about, young people, disadvantaged groups. And that sort of helps me to focus all that I know about these groups into what kinds of program would probably be more effective, because I have that experience. I’m sure that’s part of the reason people ask me, too.

McGarrigle: Yes. I had a bunch of things down for today let me just turn off for a minute while we talk.

[interview interruption]

McGarrigle: Okay.

Gibbs: Okay?

McGarrigle: Yes. So we are talking about the search for a dean. You were one of three final candidates is my understanding.

Gibbs: Yes. I just have to give you a little background on the search for dean. First of all, our dean, Harry Specht died suddenly. I was at the time in Canada. In the fall of 1994, I was in Canada, and the school was actually celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the school. And they had asked me to be the mistress of ceremonies, I guess that’s what you call it. And I had kind of demurred because I said, “You know I’m going to be in Canada at the University of Toronto as a visiting professor. I’ll be teaching a couple of courses there and it means I would have to come home for the weekend.” And they said, “Oh, we’ll pay your way home.” And of course Jim was here. So I said, “That doesn’t sound so bad,” because it was near the time of my birthday. “If they’re going to pay my way home, then I’ll come home and spend the weekend at
home and we’ll celebrate my birthday along with the school’s fiftieth anniversary and that will be fine.”

So I decided I’d come home. And when I came home, I noticed that the dean really didn’t look well. And he and I had over the years become really good friends. We didn’t start that way but we did end that way. I think I told you about our rocky relationship near the beginning, but we had become really good friends. His wife had died a few years earlier so sometimes we would invite him for brunch or dinner and he and Jim got along very well. He had a really great sense of humor, he was very funny. And he didn’t have the usual energy and he didn’t have his usual, I would use the word joie de vivre. He just seemed tired. It turned out that he had been—he told me just before I left that he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. He didn’t tell me until I think it was the next day. So I was worried about him the whole time.

Anyway, by the time I got back here from Canada, he was in the hospital. I got back here at Christmas time and they put him in the hospital.

But let me say what happened. The other thing that happened that weekend I was here, people kept saying to me—he had planned to retire the following year anyway—and several of my colleagues said that they thought I should put my hat in the ring for dean and I said, no, I don’t think so. All weekend, the weekend of the anniversary, people were coming up and saying, “Jewelle, we think you’d be a good dean, you should put your hat in.” And I said, “No, I really don’t think I want to do that. I’m really about five years from retirement, I don’t really want to think about being a dean now. I can retire any time and I want it to be after twenty years because at twenty years, you get a better retirement pension.” So, I was thinking about twenty years. And I said, you know, I really don’t want to stay any longer than that. So I sort of didn’t take it too seriously except just before I left, because I was here for the whole weekend. A couple of people said to me that they really were serious and they wanted me to put my name in because they thought I’d be a good dean and at least I should think about it. I said, “Okay, I’ll think about it.” So I go back—this is in October—and I go back to Toronto.

And actually, the irony here is that in Toronto, I found out that the real reason they invited me to be a visiting professor is they were looking me over as dean. I had no idea. There had been no hint of it. They had an acting dean, who was a woman that I got along with immediately. Until just before Thanksgiving they said to me, “Well, you know, we’re interviewing for dean and we want you to put in an application.” I said, “That’s not why I’m here.” And they said, “Well, we’ve been looking you over and we all like you and if you apply for dean, you would get it.” I had been there two months. They said, “Everybody gets along with you, we all like you, we think you have good leadership skills.” [laughs] This is what they said, okay? “We think you’d be wonderful and we think to have a dean who has been at the University of California—,” because they are very tied into the American
process of accreditation. They really are accredited by the Council of Social Work Education that’s in America.

McGarrigle: I see.

Gibbs: And they meet with American schools of social work and so they’re really quite tied in. They said, “Oh, we think it would help our accreditation and we’re interested in you—,” the issue of diversity always comes up you know. And the vice president who was the former dean of the Faculty of the School of Social Work at Toronto was apparently a big fan of mine. Her name was Heather [Munroe-Blum]. I had no idea she was a big fan of mine. She is now president of McGill University, by the way, the first woman president in the history of McGill. So, I had no idea that she was a big fan of mine. But she was the one that invited me and after she invited me, she became vice president at Toronto. She was no longer in the department and I worked with the acting dean.

So, anyway, the story is that I called Jim and I said, “What do you think?” So he came up for Thanksgiving—they have a slightly different Thanksgiving, their Thanksgiving is earlier than ours—and we talked about it. He said, “Jewelle, it would be hard because I’m not willing to move to Toronto. But if you really want this we’d have to have a commuting marriage for a few years,” he said. “Maybe you could take one term if you really want it but why don’t you wait and see what happens at Berkeley. If you’re going to be interested in a deanship, you may as well apply for Berkeley.” Actually, I loved Toronto. I loved the people there, I loved the city, I loved the very cosmopolitan mix of people. The only thing I didn’t like was it was beginning to get cold and I knew they have cold, long winters. But then again, I had lived in Minnesota so I knew that I could survive if I had to for four or five years. They were talking about a term which would probably be a five-year term.

So, I never put my name in at Toronto, I never did. They kept urging me. And the night before the application was due, two calls came to me and two of the professors there said, “Please put your name in. We want you to be our next dean.” It was very good for my ego. But you know I didn’t do it. In fact, I called Jim one more time and he said, “Well, unless you really want to have a commuting marriage, I’m not going to move to Toronto.”

That was the Toronto piece. So I begin then thinking about well, maybe this would be exciting. I had been doing all this talking. I said, ‘They want me, maybe Berkeley—.’ After all I had been at Berkeley all these years. So, when I came back, Harry was in the hospital, I went up to see him. I’m a big realist about death. I’m not afraid of it, at least for other people. I knew he was dying and I told some of my colleagues. They said, “Oh, he’s tough, he’ll get over it.” I said, “No, he’s not going to get over it. He’s really quite ill.” He had lost a lot of weight. He had no energy. I remember one night I brought him dinner
when he got out of the hospital, the last time I saw him, he said, “Jewelle, I want you to be the next dean. You know I’m very much for you.” I said, “Yes, I know, Harry, but now that I’m back, a lot of people feel that you have kind of pushed me onto them, and that’s part of what’s going on is that people feel you’ve brought a lot of pressure for me to be dean.” And we laughed. If I had known how sick he was then, I probably wouldn’t have told him that. But we were just talking and I did tell him that I thought in some ways he was kind of strong-arming people, saying, you know, “Jewelle should be the next dean.” But you know, you don’t have much power when you’re sick and not around every day.

So, anyway, it was not too long after Christmas when he died. I think it was late January, early February. I could check that date. But he died not long after Christmas. And I was very honored his family asked me to speak at the memorial. They only had three professors—his best friend, who had then become acting dean, and another faculty member, and myself were the only three asked. I thought it was a great honor to be asked to speak at his memorial service. So I did.

Anyway, at the memorial service a lot of the graduate students and alumni came up to me and said, “We hope you’ll be the next dean.” And so there was a lot of encouragement, a lot of encouragement. I still wasn’t really going to do it. And finally—and this is an interesting story. I don’t know if—I am going to tell it, maybe I won’t want to see it in the book later, but I will tell it. Three Hispanic colleagues—it’s important that I’m saying they’re Hispanic, for a reason—there’s only one who was on the regular faculty, the other two were lecturers—asked me to go to lunch with them. So I did. And they said, “Jewelle, we need you to put your name in as the dean and we will support you.” I said, “Why do you feel that you want me to put my name in? You know, it’s a hard job, I’m almost ready to retire.” They said, “Because you understand about things like diversity, we think you’d be fair to the minority faculty members.” A couple of them had had trouble with Harry. “We think that you would take the school in a different direction and we really want you to apply and if you apply, we will all support you.”

Well, that kind of tipped the balance for me. They were all men, and I thought, well, if they feel so strongly, and a number of other people had been—I had been getting e-mails, I had been getting notes—had been urging me, I said, maybe there is enough support. Because I knew there would also be some non-support. And here is a school who had never had a woman dean and never had a minority dean.

I don’t consider Jewish professors minorities in certain settings. Not now. They may have been at one time, but not at our school, they were not considered minorities. So, therefore excluding them as a minority. There just had been no women and no minorities. And I will say, we were one of the major schools of social work in the United States who had never had a woman
dean or a minority dean. And in fact, because social work is what it is and attracts a lot of minority graduate students, there are a disproportionate number of women and minority deans in that field alone. And in nursing, if you add in nursing and I suppose if you add in schools of education. In those three schools, social work, education and nursing, there is a disproportionate number of deans who are females and minorities. And for reasons, obviously, that these are the people who are going into the PhD programs. Our school, of course, had never had one, [a minority or female dean].

So several women on the faculty came up to me and said, “Jewelle, we want to encourage you because it’s time we had a woman dean.” And I had had what I thought were very good relationships with the females on the faculty. I had mentioned to you that I always had welcomed all of the younger ones to come on to the faculty. I had arranged this kind of “ladies who lunch” tradition that we would have lunch twice a year—I had mentioned that to you I think last time. So I felt that I had good relationships with the women on the faculty. So they were coming saying—not all, but some—“We think you ought to try and put your hat in the ring because we have never had a woman and we think it’s time.” Okay. So that was the second thing.

The graduate students, the doctoral students—most, not all but most, and certainly most of the women—were very supportive. They urged me to throw my hat in the ring. The students in my class urged me. So I had all these pressures. I had black alumni, especially, calling me saying, “Jewelle, please put your hat in the ring.” We had a committee of black alumni who got together to put pressure—not so much put pressure as devise strategies for how they could get me a lot of grassroots support. And that committee was headed by the woman who was head of admissions. Her name is Doris Britt, she’s still alive. She’s also retired.

Doris and I were good friends. We weren’t really very close friends but we were good friends and good colleagues. But we didn’t see each other socially outside the school—rarely. So we were just good colleagues. So she and some of the black alumni had formed a committee including state legislators and a lot of prominent blacks who had gone to Berkeley were on that committee, because they really wanted me to be the next dean. So, all of these forces, you can see were converging, is the best way for me to say it. So not only was I getting pressure from all of these forces, some of them formalized in this committee, but also I was beginning to think, you know, I’ve worked hard, this would be a good way to cap my career off. So my feeling was, gee, if they wanted me in Toronto, maybe they’ll want me at Berkeley. So I decided that I would throw my hat in the ring.

Okay. The minute—it’s like, I always compare it to what happened to—not that I feel like I’m Senator Kennedy—but Teddy Kennedy, the second time he ran for President, they promised him if he ran, they wouldn’t bring up all that stuff about Chappaquiddick. And he was urged by the press to run, urged by
the politicians to run, urged! The minute he stood out there and said, “I’m going to run,” you know what happened. They brought up Chappaquiddick, every thing he’s ever done, his drinking, his affairs, and they just crucified the man. I always felt sorry for him because I thought, you know, you need to learn that the press is never going to let you off the hook.

And I felt like that when I finally decided to go. All of a sudden, all of this support—first of all some of it evaporated rather quickly. But the other thing is, then the counter-forces came in. I won’t say so much that the support evaporated as that the support was not strong enough to overcome some of the resistance. I guess I’ll say it that way. And I did notice that there weren’t too many of my male white colleagues urging me. They were not the ones urging me. It was the women, it was the students, it was the Latino/Hispanic faculty. One or two of the white males suggested that I put my— but I did that because there was an absence of overt support from these people. So I knew it was going to be an uphill battle. And they’re the majority of the faculty, okay.

So, to try to collapse this, because this process takes almost a year. So I put in all these papers, then they set up a search committee, and the first thing they do is they have a search committee that is actually not just in the school, but it’s a broader search committee. It’s a very political process in some ways. You have two members from your school and the rest are from other schools. It so happened that the chairman of the search committee was a friend of mine who had also gone to Radcliffe. She wasn’t a close friend of mine but I knew her. And I knew that she would be kind of supportive to me, okay, because you know, you have that old school tie. The other member of the search committee was a man named Ed Nathan, whom I—did you ever talk to Ed?

McGarrigle: Yes, I know Ed.

Gibbs: Of course, Ed was a big friend of mine.

McGarrigle: Ed was the Zellerbach connection.

Gibbs: Yes, he’s the one who got me involved. Yes, he’s the one who got me involved, he helped me to get the chair, all of that. So, Ed was on the committee. So, sometimes he would sort of give me hints about what was going on. But anyway.

McGarrigle: And the woman from Radcliffe, she was not in your school?

Gibbs: No, no, she was not in my school, she was in another school. But she was chair of the committee.

In any case, I felt, oh, the committee looks good, except one of the people from my department who was on the committee was not a big supporter of mine. So I said, ‘The committee looks pretty good though and I think they’ll
be fair, that’s all I care about.’ So to make a long story short, the process goes like this: you put your papers in, and I mean your whole life, you know, it’s like a review of your whole life, and you get letters of recommendation, and then they schedule these people to talk, all of them. So they have five final candidates. Of the five final candidates, two were eliminated almost immediately. One was a woman from Harvard because she didn’t have any degrees in social work, very famous woman named Mary Jo Baine. She was invited really over the objections of a number of the faculty because she was famous, did a lot of work in social policy. But she had no degree in social work. And they had to have somebody with a degree or they might lose their accreditation. So they couldn’t risk that.

Another one was a guy who I think had been a dean at San Francisco State. And he was eliminated almost immediately. Now, the remaining three candidates were interesting, a very diverse pool. We had a guy who was a professor at USC [University of Southern California] who had been Assistant Secretary of Aging in the Clinton administration. He had a lot going for him as a candidate. He was Hispanic, he was personable, he was also disabled. So if you’re talking about affirmative action, the joke was this guy is going to get it because he’s got three things going for him. First of all, he’s Hispanic in a state where there are a growing number of Hispanics and you know, urge to get them in the University. He’s disabled which gives him a few points. In a field like social work, being disabled, to say you have a disabled dean is a plus and there’s also affirmative action for disabled people. And the third thing is he’s had federal government experience at a very high level; he was the Assistant Secretary of Aging.

So I came home and said to my husband after his talk—and he gave a good talk. I mean, let me just say he was qualified, aside from all that. Because I always wanted to say, affirmative action is only as good as the qualifications of the person. I mean, you really should have the qualifications. And this guy gave a good talk and he made a very good presentation and I came home and I said to myself, well this guy is going to get it, because you know he’s got a couple of things that I don’t have going for me. I think he will probably get it. But soon after I heard rumblings among the students that a lot of students didn’t like him because he really didn’t stand up firm for diversity. It’s always problematic when a minority doesn’t stand up for diversity because either he’s trying to please and placate the white conservatives in the audience or he doesn’t realize who he really is, he doesn’t have a sense of why he is where he is. And so the students, many of the students, were very dissatisfied with him. When they asked him a question about diversity and he basically said, he sort of said, well, it wasn’t his top priority and he didn’t know how it was defined and all that, I guess they said, “If you don’t know how it’s defined then you don’t need to come to Berkeley.” [laughing] Anyway, he said a lot of things and I was disappointed in his answers to that question, too. But I wasn’t with him when he met with the students separately. And apparently they peppered them with questions and were quite unhappy what his answers were, so. But I
didn’t know that at the time. I only knew that he didn’t handle that question well.

And the third guy was a guy who was a white male, born in South Africa, who was the provost or vice provost at Louisiana State University. Well, you know, actually, nobody took him seriously. And why didn’t anyone take him seriously? First of all, Louisiana State is not in the same bracket with Berkeley—we talk about major research universities, and then there’s a second tier. That’s sort of on the third tier. It’s not even in the second tier. If you talk about the major ones, we all know who those are. And then the second group would be like University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, they would be in the second group. The good mid-western land grant universities and a few private universities would be in that second tier. To be charitable, Louisiana State would be in the third tier, okay, that’s being charitable. Plus, he had been reared in South Africa, educated in England, and he did not have a degree in social work, he had something similar from an English university but it was not technically in social work, which is why that woman was disqualified, okay. So technically, he did not have a degree in social work, which is very interesting.

However, he was a pretty good friend of the acting dean who had encouraged him to apply. Most of us had never heard of him, ever. I mean, you know who the famous people are in your field. If you threw names to me in social work, I would recognize those names. I might not know the person personally, maybe I never even read his book, but I would recognize him, “Oh, he’s a big shot in social work,” but nobody in the school except two other people had ever heard of this guy.

Now, he comes on very charming. He has that—there’s a certain charm. I don’t know if you’ve ever met many South Africans, but in spite of their political views, some of their political views, some of them are quite charming. So, they kind of disarm you. And plus he was kind of round and he kind of gave you this feeling of being like a big teddy bear. He’s short and round. And very charming. I’m going to give him that. That is certainly true. And he kind of charmed all the members of the faculty and he got up and said—this is what he said which, again, politics is politics. He had been told apparently by the acting dean that I was kind of the students’ favorite. He had been told that. He gets up and he says almost immediately after he introduces himself, “Well, I’d like people to know that I have a wife who is a person of color,” which I thought, something doesn’t compute here. You wouldn’t say that. You shouldn’t say that when you’re being interviewed for a job unless there was some real sort of hidden motive here. And then I realized immediately what the hidden motive was. I’m sitting in the audience, so you know, “I have a wife who—.”” It turns out she’s Indian, an Indian Indian, Asian. So, that sort of gave him some kind of legitimacy with the students, that, “I have a wife who is a person of color—.” And you know, people thought, ‘Oh, good, he must be a good man because he has a wife who is a
person of color.’ He didn’t say what color and he didn’t say what race, which was interesting, but she was Asian Indian.

Anyway, so then, we all go away, we make our presentations. He had a pretty good crowd. I had a full house. People, I am not lying, were sitting and standing in the hallways. I had the biggest crowd of anybody. Everybody came. All these people, these students, these people on the committee. I just had a tremendous turnout. Friends from psychology came to hear me who were also in my corner, they wanted to see me be the dean. So I was encouraged. But you know, I knew there was this undercurrent and I wasn’t sure why this guy had been invited. I wasn’t sure. And I was more worried, I really was worried about the guy from USC. I kept saying to Jim, “Jim I can even understand why they would pick him. He has more experience, he’s had government experience, and he is more visible nationally than I am. He’s an expert on aging and everything.” And I said, “And I won’t even feel bad because he’s still a person of color and it would be nice to have—I think it’s time this school had a minority or a female dean.”

In the meantime—and this is the part of it that is disheartening but, I mean, realistic—the three Latino men, they switched their allegiance. Now, no one ever told me this. I found out later with the vote, I could figure out when you look at the totals. But apparently, they felt they needed to support their own brother, their own Latino candidate. So those were three votes that disappeared from me overnight. I mean, you know, I can understand that. If it had been a black woman or black man, I think I would have felt the same way. I mean, if they are equally viable or equally competent, then why not pick the one that you can relate to, who you feel—? They’re more underrepresented in the academic world than blacks.

So, I kind of lost—because they never thought that a Latino would get to the top. So they found the one Latino in the country probably that would get to the top of the search. And I kind of lost their support.

Now I have to tell you, this is all by the hindsight. This is from all the conversations were told to me later and people who were in the meeting when they did the voting—some of whom were absolutely infuriated about what happened—told me all this. I would have no other way of knowing it. But apparently, they switched their support. Because people have to speak up for you. It’s a secret vote, but you have to speak up on why you’re supporting so and so.

Then, in the meantime, one of my close female friends on the faculty said, “Jewelle, most of the white males wanted somebody in their own image. And that image was the man from South Africa.” My friend said, “They invented every reason in the world why he should be the best candidate. And when people spoke up for you or the other candidate, they always countered with something from him, that he had more experience as an administrator in a
major university and blah blah blah. And of course he knew about diversity because he had come from South Africa.” Please. [laughing] Is that how you learn about diversity?

So the point is this, that it is the kind of thing, first of all, that does go on in the academic world. But the thing that disheartened me I think, most of all, was how they could find a candidate, who certainly, if you look at all the criteria, was no better qualified than the other two of us, but that this is the person who they would be the most comfortable with. And that is someone who is white, male, and “looks like us.” And they would have more difficulty dealing with a Hispanic male or a black woman, even though I was their colleague for seventeen, eighteen years. So, anyway, the final vote came and—well, he was first and I think the other candidate did get a couple of more votes than I did. I’m sure he did actually. So, it was disappointing, it was disappointing.

But what happened was, when it was sent up to the bigger committee—this was our faculty vote—when it was sent up to the university-wide search committee—this is the interesting thing and then I’m almost done. They met and they decided—they had all the same information, so they didn’t have those other kind of ties to people and those little undercurrents that were going on in our department. They’re just looking at a record, three records. They did not interview us. And then they had the faculty vote.

They decided that all three candidates were equally competent and we each had our own strengths. Not the same strengths, which was true! But we each had different strengths, so they decided that any one of us was qualified to be dean and they would send all of our names to the provost and she would make the decision. Okay? And I am sure this is true because my friend, the chair, called me to tell me. She said, “Jewelle, I can’t send you a copy of the report,” she says, “but you may get a letter in the mail.”

So actually someone—I guess she did, I don’t know—did send me a copy of the letter that went to the provost, which I still have somewhere, outlining each of our strengths. So, each of us, they gave each of us a paragraph, and they said, “This person has these strengths and maybe these are some weaknesses,” and all three us—they said that overall, each of these candidates is qualified to be dean and that the provost would have to weigh whom she—it was a she at the time—felt was the best candidate.

So, now this is something like—the provost gets the report in I think the beginning of April, or certainly before tax time as I remember. And we didn’t hear from her for a long time. I mean, one of us was going to be called. And so the guy from USC called me one day and he said, “Jewelle, have you heard anything?” I said, “No.” He said, “Well, I’m hoping if I don’t get it, you get it.” And I said, “Well, guess what, I’m hoping the same thing.” [laughs] I said, “Because I think you have a better chance of getting it than I have, so let’s
hope one of us will get it.” And again, we really didn’t take this third guy seriously because of where he came from and because he didn’t have a big name in the field at all. And both of us, at least in this country, had more visibility. We were better known in our work. And he did not. That’s just a fact. I’m not—I’m trying to be objective, that is a fact.

In the meantime the students started to get very upset, my graduate students and people coming up to me, “Why haven’t you heard? What’s going on?” I said, “I don’t know, but it’s almost the end of the year, I have other things to think about.” And they said, “Don’t they have to let you know?” I said, “Yes, they have to let us know before the end of the year. Don’t worry about it, we’ll find out.”

On the very last day of the school year, the very last day, the provost called me at four o’clock that afternoon and said to me, “Well, Jewelle, how are you?” And I said, “Fine.” And I knew the way she was doing this that I did not get it. She said, “I have to tell you, all of you were good candidates, but,” and then she said, “we chose the guy from South Africa,” whose name is Jim [James] Midgely, who is the current dean. I was so shocked. I was more shocked that they chose him than that I didn’t get it, because I had kind of thought the other guy, the Spanish guy was going to get it. I was just shocked. And then I realized, why are you calling on the last day? Well, I think she might have thought that the—this in my mind—that if she had announced earlier, the students were still there and there might have been some protest or something, because there were a lot of minority students who were very, very committed to having me become the next dean. I think she was aware of that and I think she didn’t want any kind of incident on campus so that was the end of it.

It was, you can imagine, a very difficult process for me. Because, having been urged by all these people to run, and then finding that in the end, it wasn’t my competence or my qualifications or anything else that made the difference. There were some politics going on and those politics overcame everything else and what really mattered in the end was the good old boys—and I am going to say that for the record—wanted someone in their image. And that’s who they made dean. And I think this is what goes on over and over in the academic world, it goes on in the business world. And this is why you see so few female and minority CEOs or presidents of major universities or companies or—you know, this is why. Because at the end, where there are choices, they are more likely to choose a person who they feel, ‘Well, we have similar backgrounds and we can get along, we speak the same language,’ than to choose someone who’s a little bit different.

What happened to me is not so much an individual tragedy or anything as it is really a symptom of a much larger problem in our society, of mobility patterns and opportunity patterns. And there is a glass ceiling for women and minorities. And it is true some people break through it. There is no question
that some people break though it, people like—people always speak of, “Well, look at Colin Powell and look at Condoleezza Rice.” I said, “Yes, but if you got to the person you’d have to ask them what sacrifices did they make to be where they are.” What kind of sacrifices did they make? What kind of compromises did they make to get there? And I am a person who is fairly uncompromising about my values and my views on things like diversity and racial integration and affirmative action. I am fairly uncompromising. I am not going to compromise those views. And there were I think a few of my colleagues who were threatened by my views. I would speak out very strongly on these issues all the way through from the time I got to Berkeley. And I think there were a few—these were white males—who felt that if I became dean, somehow there would be a revolution in the school. Well, there wouldn’t have been a revolution in the school, but I would have insisted on making sure everybody was treated equally, making sure everybody had equal opportunity, making sure we were admitting all the black students and Hispanic students and American Indian who would qualify. I mean, those are the kind of things I would have insisted on.

And there are some other things I would have insisted on that they might have objected to, some of the things with the graduate students that I didn’t like. I had complained bitterly about exploitation of graduate students. They all knew that I felt very strongly about the way some of my colleagues, not all, just completely exploited their graduate students, in terms of the amount work they had to do beyond what they were paid for. Sometimes they didn’t give them credit on their publications. I said, “You know, if you work with them and they do the work, they ought to be an author. It is not fair.” “Well, we pay them!” I said, “No, I don’t care how much you pay them. If they’re going and writing a first draft or doing a lot of the work, let them be an author. Give them credit.” So, there were things like that that were way beyond racial issues that I had very strong views on. And I would state these views. And I think that I alienated some of my colleagues because I was always—I was outspoken, but then I was honest. I said, “You know, we’re in a field where we have ethics where we’re supposed to do the right thing by these students.” And I also spoke out against colleagues who dated graduate students, especially if they were married. There were several instances that occurred that I felt very strongly about.

So, I think that over the years, standing up for those things and speaking up for those things, I think I alienated—I know I alienated some of them and I felt that that was part of what was playing out in their selection process, that they didn’t want anybody who was going to be really strong on some of these issues.

McGarrigle: Well, you had the burden of being the internal candidate.

Gibbs: And that’s always hard, yes, that is always hard. Anyway, you know, it was difficult for a while, but you know me, I smiled. I went to work everyday and
smiled and just got over it. I mean, you have to get over it. And I think there was a lot of feeling of kind of embarrassment afterwards so people were very nice to me. I think the only people—well, there were a few people that I felt had been sort of dishonest with me and those were the only ones that I was kind of annoyed with. And the rest of the people I said, “Well, you had your vote.”

And the irony of it is—[laughs] and I may regret these words—but within that year, the new dean had alienated half of the faculty. They were mad with him. And I would come up, and I turned out to be one of his few friends. He would take me out to lunch and complain to me, several times, on how he was having trouble with faculty and how they weren’t doing this and they weren’t doing that. And then they would complain to me. About two years into his term, we had lunch and I told him what I thought he needed to do. I said, “I’m telling you this really as a colleague.” Before I retired, I said, “I think there are some complaints about you that you need to take care of.” And he thanked me for it. He was away a lot, that was the big complaint, he was away a lot. He was not a hands-on dean like the previous dean, Harry had been a hands-on dean. This dean left everything, he delegated everything. Well, after a while, there are certain things you can’t delegate. And he wasn’t doing much fundraising. I won’t say anything more except the fact that I felt that I was kind of doing him a favor by telling him that he needed to know those concerns, because people were getting restive.

So, anyway, now I think he’s in the beginning or second year of his second term and I think he’s doing better. And we’ve become friendly. He and I. So that’s the way it goes. I mean, I figured, better for me to be his friend than to be his enemy. He was there for three years before I retired, and when I retired, he really was responsible for that really nice—he gave me a beautiful retirement dinner. So I think he was responsible for that. And I think everybody was very gracious and very nice. So it all worked out.

McGarrigle: I think Jim told me that your sons were—?

Gibbs: Yes, they did. They had the audience practically laughing in tears. They spoke, they were very funny. They told all of mommy’s secret stories but they were good. It was nice, very nice. It was at the Claremont Hotel, beautiful. They had cocktails, dinner, and dancing for me. So, I can’t complain.

McGarrigle: That must be a little bit out of the ordinary.

Gibbs: It was! And then the same provost who decided I wouldn’t be the dean came to give me the Berkeley Citation. That’s what I was going to tell you. That was ironic, too. She was the one who—Carol Christ—who came and gave me the Berkeley [Citation]. She got up and she said, “Well, I’ve never seen a university retirement party like this. This is wonderful.” [laughs] But I always said to them, “Look, don’t give me one of those dry parties at the Faculty
Club. If you give me a party, let’s have a lot of fun. I want a nice party!” So they did.

Oh, but wait a minute, they didn’t pay for it all. They charged people to come. And I had 180 people who paid $65.00 each to come to this party. 180 people on a night like yesterday. It was raining cats and dogs and 180 people showed up from all over the Bay Area. Because I invited my friends, too. We invited Berkeley colleagues, Stanford colleagues, and friends in the community from all—from Berkeley, San Francisco, San Jose, the Peninsula, all over. And 180 people came. I was so thrilled because I didn't think anybody was going to show up. The rain was so bad, it was really terrible. And only two people turned back. I mean, it was that bad. Two people said they just couldn’t get across the bridge so they turned back. But we had a good time. So they paid for the dinner but the university paid for the band and some extras. So it was very lovely. We got a big photographic book out of it, an album.

So they voted to give me the Berkeley Citation—you know you have to be nominated to get it. You know about the Berkeley Citation?

McGarrigle: Yes, yes, it’s really the highest honor.

Gibbs: It’s the highest. And I was very pleased. I just read the other day, they just gave it to Clark Kerr posthumously. I was shocked! Why didn’t—I wonder why he didn’t get it earlier? But they said they gave it to his son posthumously. And he was the president of the whole system!

Yes, I did get it and then I—well, they nominated me and then I had to again submit all these papers. So I submitted the same papers I submitted when I went for dean! [laughing] So I said, well, maybe they won’t give it to me. But they did give it to me, so I was pleased because it’s really quite an honor.

McGarrigle: So, it’s not a surprise at all then. You come up for a nomination and you have to—

Gibbs: Well, the reason it’s not a surprise is—they don’t guarantee that you’re going to get it but you have to cooperate because you have to give them your materials and then about five letters of recommendation. So I got the best people I knew to give me letters of recommendation. I had some good people to give me letters of recommendation.

McGarrigle: Would that be Berkeley support or not?

Gibbs: All over. I had national people and Berkeley people, some leaders in the field. I can’t even remember who all I asked, but I think there were five or maybe six letters I got. People who were really well-known, both through the university and in the academic world. So I was pleased. My dean said to me, who was then this same guy, he says, “Well, I think you have a good chance
of getting it. I’m going to write you a good letter.” And the Provost presented it to me and I thought to myself, do you realize how ironic this is? [laughs]. But anyway, she came. And [Chancellor Robert] Berdahl came to my reception, too. He couldn’t stay the whole evening but he came to the cocktail part and he was very gracious, said some nice things. I have a video, so they interviewed everybody, and he’s on the video before he left saying, in fact, some very nice things, and I appreciated it. [moves away from the microphone] This is a picture I keep of that night. [returns and shows picture] And this is me with Berdahl. That’s from my retirement.

McGarrigle: Oh, yes.

Gibbs: I have a nice picture with my boys somewhere else. Anyway, so I felt like it capped my career with something joyful. I like happy things and I love celebrations. I’m a big person for celebrations. So, any time I can have a celebration or do a celebration, I love it! And I think it’s nice to get people together, your friends and your family for happy things, because you know, we get together all the time for funerals and sad things, but I like people to come together for happy things. So this was just really wonderful.

And I told people, “Get dressed up. Don’t come in blue jeans!” [laughter] I saw some of my colleagues I had never even seen in a tie! They all got dressed up! And one of my colleagues’ wife came up to me and said, “Jewelle, I’m so glad you told Paul to dress up because I had an excuse—,” she had gone out and bought a black velvet dress, a cocktail dress! She said, “I had an excuse to go out and buy this gorgeous dress.” [laughs] So everybody really looked good and was in a good mood and you know, it was a nice way—because actually it was two months after I actually retired. So I retired January 1st and this was the end of February, maybe the beginning, February 11th. So it was about six weeks after I retired.

McGarrigle: This was 2002?


Anyway, that’s the story of the dean search. And basically the Berkeley Citation recognizes your contributions to the University, you know, scholarly and community contributions and professional, all that. So, I felt honored. It was a nice thing to get. I have it in a big frame. I haven’t put it up anywhere yet because I can’t find room, but I am going to put it up eventually. I’m going to clean my study and put it up.

McGarrigle: Let me check our time.

Gibbs: How are we doing?

Gibbs: Okay, well while I’m talking about Canada, let me go a little bit more into Canada and England. Is that okay? Yes, that’s great. Then we’ll finish up with that. I don’t have my watch on but we need to start winding down by quarter of four so I can change.

McGarrigle: Before you start, I’m going to change the tape.

[begin minidisc 30]

Gibbs: Well, I think I mentioned to you that I had decided that I wanted to go to England to look at—first of all let me say, in 1992, I was a distinguished scholar at a place called the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C. That is really the foremost think tank on African American issues in the country. It’s very highly respected, the head of it, the president is a man named Eddie Williams who you often see at election time talking about the elections. And next fall, if you look at the election, you’ll see him on one or two of the stations giving kind of the African American perspective on the political results.

Eddie and I and my husband had known each other for some time through various organizations. His institute offered an annual fellowship for a senior scholar in African American politics and economics. Now, that was not my field, but when I told him what I was interested in doing, he told me to apply and I got the fellowship, which was my sabbatical in 1992-93. So spanning that September to June, I was a fellow there. In fact, I was actually the fellow for the whole academic year because we didn’t come back here until the end of August.

When I was there, I was really looking, trying to compare the socio-economic status, of young blacks in Britain with young blacks in America, because I had been doing some reading and found that they had these very similar patterns that not only intrigued me but also alarmed me. Because I’m saying, now here are two different countries, separated by the Atlantic Ocean, how can we explain that black youth or basically Caribbean youth, West Indians, in England, Great Britain, are having almost exactly the same problems as kids in America? What’s going on? And there’s a different history. They were not slaves in Britain, and that’s the excuse that people use here all the time. So I went over there and I convinced them during my year that they were going to give me money to go spend some time in England, and what I did was to go do a preliminary survey, very preliminary.

I visited three cities: London, Birmingham, and Liverpool. I knew I would come back so what I wanted to do was establish connections with youth agencies, with leaders of youth organizations, social service agencies, lawyers, so forth and so on. And to talk to them about what the problems were for these youth so then I could come back and do some more research with the youth themselves. And so I did the famous method, now everybody is doing
focus groups. I went over and met with individual leaders and did something very similar to what I did in Los Angeles. I did focus groups and met with young people and also with these community leaders in groups in these three cities, quite a few, and found out that they were having the same problems about education, employment, teenage pregnancy, and problems with the law. Those four problems were almost identical to the problems that black Americans were having at the same age, between about fifteen and twenty-four. And it just really intrigued me, and then I said, this is really an interesting area of research.

I decided—I was there for one month in the spring of 1992—that I wanted to go back and that I really wanted to talk to these young people in greater depth, talk to government agencies, police people, lawyers, social workers, all those kinds of people, immigrant officials and gather a lot of data on what were the problems, statistics, so I could compare and try to figure out what were these common factors that were going on. So I went back in the summer of ’93 and that grant I got, fortunately, after I got my chair at Berkeley, which I told you about, you knew about. After I got the chair, the money generated by the chair allowed me to go back to England. And at that point I visited four cities: I went back to London, back to Birmingham, back to Liverpool, and then the fourth city—people said you need to go to Manchester, which is an industrial city, very much like Birmingham. But there are different issues in each city. So I went to four cities and again conducted interviews with young people.

The focus groups then had much more of a structure. I had a structured questionnaire or an interview that I talked to them about. I met with individual young people, met with a range of professionals who served these young people, I mean every profession you could just about imagine. But my real luck was that I had made some connections on my first trip with the office in England which is very similar to, I guess, our Equal Opportunity Commission. It’s headquartered in London and they have offices in each of these big cities. I had made very good connections with them. They had even given me a tea. We would almost call it something more like a cocktail party but they call it a tea.

In the afternoon before I left, they introduced me to a number of very high-ranking British black people, including one member of Parliament. That had been on my first trip. So I had made these terrific contacts, left everybody my card, and when I came back, I called these people and I said, “I’m going to be here for the summer of ’93 and I’m going to be visiting each of these cities and I really need to talk to you to get your perspective.” And I knew there were some government reports done by what they called the Home Office. These reports had not been published but they gave a lot of information about the topics that I was interested in, you know about discrimination in schools, discrimination in jobs, discrimination in health care and all that. Well, I knew the man who actually worked in the Home Office. I had met him through these contacts. I went to meet with him and just before I left, he said, “I’m
going to give you two basically confidential reports.” He said, “Now, you can’t ever tell anybody where you got these reports but you can use the information. These are official government statistics.” And boy, it was the best contact I think I had ever made in any research I ever did. He gave me these two reports in a brown bag! [laughs] And it says on them “Her Majesty’s Home Office” and so forth and so on and the government seal. These reports were just blistering reports. One was about education and the other one was about employment. I also got reports on police brutality, and discrimination in the health service which is supposed to be equal to all, and reports on teenage pregnancy, reports on all those things. So I came back with a trunkload full of information. And it took me a whole year to just begin to even analyze all this stuff.

But, the long and short of is that these reports show the same pattern of racial discrimination that we have in this country. And so, on the surface, it’s very similar and my question was: but what’s the common denominator? I would talk to people, I would say, “But you didn’t have slavery here, what’s the excuse?” Well, they felt that it was just racial discrimination against black people, because Britain really has a very long history of colonialism. They felt that when the black people came to England after World War II—they were invited to work because of all the men who were killed in the war, they were invited to work in the subways and do things like that, to be nurses, all those things where they had a shortage of people—they were treated just like colonials. They were used to treating them as inferior people. And even though they were invited here to work, they still represent inferior people. They said, in Britain, everybody is inferior, including the Irish and the Italians. It doesn’t matter. So, it’s not just race, but race adds to it. And the fact that they had this history of being the masters of the people in Africa, India, and the Caribbean, that is the role they continue to carry on.

So, even though they were never enslaved literally, in England, all the people of color who come there as immigrants have all been colonial subjects of the British, and so basically, they really view them as inferior people. That was their explanation and I really do subscribe to that. And so they have a lot of ways of discriminating against them in class and education. They don’t encourage them to go into the college preparatory classes which they have different names for. They discriminate against them in employment as teenagers. And they keep them—they have a hard time climbing up the ladder. It’s the same thing. The police brutality against them is terrible. They don’t even use guns over in England, but they use their billy clubs. And you know, every black male on the street is accused of being a drug dealer. I’m exaggerating a little bit here but the statistics are so similar, it’s just amazing.

Now, there are some differences. Those kids, the girls, do better in school than the boys. Of course, that’s similar here now, too. But they are finishing school at a higher rate than the white kids, which is the reality, but the perception is that they’re not. But the reality is that statistics show that black girls, black
women, are going into higher education at higher rates than white women who traditionally don’t go to college much in England. Isn’t that interesting? And yet, there’s still this perception, but the perception is more negative of black males as it is in America.

So, then to try to tie all this together, I was so intrigued by what I saw in England, that when I was invited in 1994—now this is the next year—to go to Canada, I quickly asked the school if they could help me facilitate a research project because I was going to be there for three months. I said, “Now, I’m going to be there for three months, but can you facilitate a project so I can do this?” and they said, “Yes.” So then, I went and used exactly the same questionnaire, exactly the same method in Toronto. And I did some interviews in Quebec, in Montreal. Not a lot, but I was there for two weekends and I did some.

And met again with young, black, mainly Caribbeans. There are some blacks who are really native, I mean, have been there so long they are not considered immigrants. And I met with the agencies, met with the people who work with them, the adults who give them services. And found the same thing.

So, here you have these three countries where what they have in common, of course, is they are all Anglo American countries originally, I mean, from England, speak English as a spoken language and you have these people of African descent who have come to these countries either as immigrants or—in our case, of course, it was a little different, I will say—but had been in those countries for quite some time in many cases and are still grappling with these issues. So this is what partly inspired me when I wrote the book, Preserving Privilege. And I do have a chapter in there where I talk about these other two countries, but these persistent patterns of discrimination, persistent patterns of racism, persistent patterns of oppression which seem to me to be based basically on race. Basically on race. I mean they can use every excuse they want to use, and they do, of course, but when they compare them to the white immigrants, I always say, “Yes, but the white immigrants don’t experience those same things when they come over here.” They don’t experience those things. They say, “Well, look at the white immigrants, how mobile they are.” I said, “Well, what if you gave black people the same opportunities you give to the white immigrants? You think they would not be that mobile?” [laughs] So anyway, that is what has kind of informed my view and broadened my view about racism. It’s not just America. People like to say, “Oh, we’re the most racist country in the world.” That’s not true.

McGarrigle: It is quarter to four. We have talked about Brazil also.

Gibbs: Well, that’s a different kind of pattern. And I don’t know as much about it, but that’s a different pattern. That pattern is more based on color and ancestry than it is on race, because they don’t define race in the same way. So, if your skin color is light enough, you’re treated differently than you are if your skin
color is dark. So they look at you and your treatment depends largely on your skin color. See, in Brazil, I am defined as a mulatto; I’m not defined as a black person. I’m not defined that way. So when they look at me, they’re treating me as they treat the mulattos, who tend to be the upper-class people. That’s another whole long story because I’ve been there twice now and I’ve noticed it. And my son says he’s treated as a mulatto, not as a—a black person in Brazil is a dark black person with very dark skin and they are treated differently, more negatively, and they have fewer opportunities. But if your skin is light brown or even lighter, you are treated as a racially mixed person and most of them are racially mixed, so you know.

McGarrigle: I’ll just ask you a question and then we have to end. In Britain and Canada, was there as much racial mixing as there has been here?

Gibbs: Quite a bit in some of the big cities. If you go to any big city in England or in Canada, you find a lot of racial mixing among the younger generation. In Canada, there are some towns near the border where the—you know what the Underground Railroad was—where the Underground Railroad ended. Up above Detroit, say, in a place called York, Canada, and near Toronto, there’s a city below Toronto, I can’t remember the name of it, but there are a lot of mixed families who had been there for over a hundred years since the Underground Railroad, since slavery days. The slaves would come and they would mix or marry the people who lived there or their children would and so you have whole communities of mixed people. It’s very interesting in Canada. Much more distinctiv[e] than here because it goes back to that historical Underground Railroad.

In England, there’s a lot of mixing in this generation. Not so much before, but this generation, if you go to London, and any of the big cities, you see a lot of mixed couples. And not only white and black but of course, white and Indian, and so forth and so on. The Indians tend to stick more with each other and the newer immigrants, the Indians and the Bangladeshis and all, but the blacks and the whites, there’s a lot of mixing, a lot of mixing, which always changes things. Especially in the city of Liverpool, it has a very, very mixed population but those people are not Caribbeans, basically. They call themselves something else, they call themselves Black British. So there are these differences. Black British means that their ancestors came as sailors, basically from West Africa, a long, long time ago. They weren’t slaves. They came as sailors, they settled in what was a huge port at that time, Liverpool, and they married white women. They were black sailors from West Africa. Their descendants are now a whole separate group of people. And they call themselves Black British, but they are basically mulattos. So they’ve mixed.

McGarrigle: Well, let’s end there Jewelle. We could go on and on.

Gibbs: Well, it’s all very interesting. I’ll just say this, because I do really have to go, but the more you’ve traveled to countries outside the U.S. and looked at the
patterns of race relations, there is this pervasive racial discrimination around the world, but it takes different forms. It just takes different forms. But in England and Canada, it’s more like the U.S. than any place else. Because it’s based really on the notion of kind of the one drop rule, that if you have one drop of black blood, you are a black person, whereas it’s different in Brazil. It’s really based on the skin color. So that makes a difference.

[end of session]
McGarrigle: Today is March 9th, 2004. We are interview sixteen [sic: seventeen].

Gibbs: Oh, my God. [laughter]

McGarrigle: With Jewelle Gibbs. And we were just talking off-tape about this issue of balance for women in their professional lives and the timing of childbearing.

Gibbs: Well, I think what you were saying prompted me to think that looking back on it, it doesn’t seem like such a challenge but while I was going through it, I’m sure it was. [pause] I think that it takes enormous energy and organization for a woman with children to have a major type of professional career. I mean, I think there are things that women with children can do that are easier like maybe nursing or teaching or any nine to five job where you can leave in the morning and come back at five o’clock, that you don’t bring home with you. Anything like that, where it’s sort of an eight-hour job, and it’s limited. Even though it may be a professional job, it isn’t a job which requires you to bring your work home with you. In the academic world, or say, in science and in fields like law where there’s really a very blurry line between professional life and personal life and home life because often you have to bring your work home. If you’re a lawyer, you have to work on cases at home on the weekends. If you’re a person who has a big executive job you are often reading or writing reports so that you often—I mean, there are people who even have to take work on vacation in certain professions. And the academic world is one of them.

What I found was I sort of knew what it was like because my husband had been in the academic world but I don’t think I was fully aware of how difficult it was going to be for me because when I started my actual career at Berkeley I had one child at home, but while I was doing my PhD, I had two. And the year I started my job at Berkeley, I was fortunate in a way that my oldest son graduated from high school the same year. He graduated from high school in 1979. That’s the year that I started my full-time academic career. Before that, I had worked part-time, I think I had mentioned earlier, and I worked on campus and I was easily accessible. I worked three days a week and it was nine to five. So it was really a good way to kind of ease into a career after I had been home for some years. So I was able to do that.

It sort of gave me a false sense of security. I thought, well, you know, this is going to be easy, because I knew that I would not be going up to Berkeley every day. I made a deal with the dean that I would try to have my classes and committee meetings and everything academic on three days a week. And over twenty years, pretty much I was able to do that. I was able to actually teach, do my committees, see my graduate students, and do all the things that are
associated with what professors do three days a week. There were some weeks when I had to go four days and that was difficult. But the major problem I had was the commute, because I had to add usually about two and a half hours most days to every day I went to Berkeley. So that by the time you get to the end of the week, you’re talking about another day driving. Two and half hours a day, three days a week, that’s a whole workday. And so, this turned out to be a much more exhausting task than I had ever thought it would be. Now, when I was younger, it was easier. As I got older, the first ten years seemed easier, the next five years got harder, and the last five years, I was tired all the time. [laughing]

But in a way, the timing for me was, as I said, fortunate because my second son went away to college in 1981, two years after I started. So then I only had my husband in the house. But also there’s a whole life, you know friends, social life, which basically, in my case, we gave up a lot of that, because there was no way I could have a full career, run a household, and also have a full social life. I also gave up a number of my community activities. I was very interested in politics, civil rights; I had been active in the NAACP here; I had been vice president of the NAACP; I had worked with the urban coalition here in Palo Alto; and had worked with one of the museums in membership, actually San Francisco Museum of Modern of Art. So, I had done a lot of things in the Bay Area. I had been extremely active as a volunteer interested in art and politics and civil rights primarily, and done some volunteer work with young people. So when I went back to work, I realized that I just had to give it up. I couldn’t do all those things. Even though you think you’re a superwoman, there comes a time when you realize that you do have to get at least seven or eight hours of sleep a night. [laughing]

So, my life for twenty years was really pretty much going to Berkeley, teaching, doing research, doing my writing, and running my household. As I say, primarily after my second child left there were just two of us. But my husband had an active life at Stanford and sometimes I would go to things with him here at Stanford, too. So there was kind of a double academic life that I had. I had one at Berkeley and then I had another one as a wife at Stanford. And so sometimes, there were conflicts, there’s no question. Basically, my weekends were devoted to my research and my writing. I had almost no free time for twenty years, except in the summer, when I would just make free time and we’d go away for maybe a couple of weeks.

But except for the summer, when the pace slackened primarily because I didn’t have to drive to Berkeley—it gave me like an extra day a week!—but in the summer, I did my writing, I did most of my writing in the summer. And I would go up to Berkeley maybe once a week to see my students and get my mail, things like that. But I really did try to preserve the summer for my writing and research. Fortunately, I did the kind of research where I didn’t have to be at Berkeley because I wasn’t doing the research in Berkeley. I was doing other kinds of research.
Basically, I think I was blessed with a lot of energy. I’m an energetic person, like my mother was a very energetic person. And, I think for a woman to have a successful career, not only does she have to be energetic, but healthy. I’ve been very healthy all my life, until of course I retired and then my whole system breaks down. But I was very healthy. I hardly ever missed a class, hardly ever got sick. And when I did get sick, it was interesting, it was always usually at the Christmas holidays when I would be exhausted. And then I’d have a bad cold or flu or something. But I hardly ever, ever missed a class unless I was going to a conference.

And so, I think that if you are blessed with energy, basically a healthy constitution, and in my case, a supportive husband. I mean, without a supportive husband, I could not have done it. I think I told you earlier, he learned to cook, and he would cook three nights a week usually. The nights I went to Berkeley, he would cook. So, I would come home and I wouldn’t have to worry about fixing dinner. He was just supportive in many ways. If I had to go spend a night in Berkeley, that was okay. And sometimes there would be dinners we’d have to go to in Berkeley, he’d come with me, social things with my colleagues. He kind of took up the slack of certain things I just couldn’t do in the house. He did most of the little repairs and things. So I had a supportive husband. But, having said that, having said all that, I still think that for a woman to have a professional career in our society, given the way it’s set up, is very difficult. And the stress is mainly on the woman and sometimes on her marriage and if she has children.

So part of it is timing. I, because of my age and my generation, timed my career so I had married and had my children. Then I went back to school for my graduate work. And then I went to my career. They were very big when I entered my career. But I did, in a way, put them first. And then when I felt that they were kind of safely launched in elementary school, then I went back to get my master’s and after that, when I felt that they were doing okay and going into junior high and high school, that’s when I went back to get my PhD.

[interview interruption]

Gibbs: So, what I did was to plan my career in stages. And you know, I really don’t regret it. As some people say, “Well, you know you probably could have done even greater things if you had—.” I have often been told, “You would have been college president or this that and the other if you had started earlier.” I said, “Well, that’s true, and I might have written one or two more books but maybe my kids wouldn’t have turned out as well.” So my feeling always was that I chose to have these children. They are my major responsibility. And I don’t think a maid should raise my children. And I still feel that way. And in some ways that’s kind of an old-fashioned sentiment. But I wanted to feel responsible. If they do well, then I want to get the credit; if they do badly, I’ll take the blame, too. But I didn’t want to be in the position of, if they did
badly, I would take the blame because I had worked. I didn’t want to ever be in that position. So, I wanted to say, let me give them the best kind of mothering that I know how to give them and try to be a good parent and hopefully they’ll do alright. And you know, I think they have done alright. I think they’ve done pretty well actually. And so I’m proud of my boys and I don’t know that if I had worked full-time when they were young if they would have turned into such, you know, they’re very self-confident and successful young men. I don’t know how they would have turned out. So I don’t have to worry about that, because I don’t have any regrets.

The other side of that is that the one thing that I wish I’d had more time for when I was working was my friends and things like, you know, sort of hobbies and recreation. So, I was not able to do much in terms of hobbies or recreational things or like a night out with the girls, or—I happen to like playing bridge. I gave that up. I used to like to play tennis, and tennis, I used to do in the summer. But I never really could become a good tennis player because I couldn’t play all year around, I would have all these obligations, so I didn’t play all year around. So, I felt that there were some friends that fell by the wayside and I had only time for a few close friendships. And we entertained once in a while but it was almost always when I was free, you know Christmas time, summer long weekends, we would entertain. But basically, that was what I had to give up, the kind of level of friendships that a lot of women have during their middle years. I just didn’t really have time for it. I had to make my choices and I think almost always chose my family and career over everything else.

McGarrigle: You had professional friendships with women.

Gibbs: Yes, I had professional friendships with colleagues. And we did have some couples that we stayed in touch with, but it was mainly as couples, we would see them on weekends. I just didn’t have time during the week to go out to lunch with my girlfriends and things like that. Or to play an evening of bridge. I rarely could find time for that. But we had a few friends, and they were loyal friends, and you know, when I would sort of say, “I’ve got to write a book and I’ve got to take three months and I can’t see anybody,” they would understand. So that, we were fortunate to have some really close friends. And it’s interesting, most of our close friends, if you look at our three or four closest couples, they are also from the East and they had similar backgrounds. And so we all understand each other. Most of them are from the East Coast; most of them went to Ivy League schools. So we had these similar experiences. You know, they were middle-class black people living in a world where we had to work hard to get ahead. So we all feel that we overcame a lot of barriers and so we enjoy each other’s success, because these are all very successful couples. We enjoy each other’s success.

And then, of course, I had some academic friends, some female friends. Didn’t always see them socially but like, we’d have lunch and things.
McGarrigle: What kind of transition was it when your sons left the household? First was Geoffrey and then Lowell.

Gibbs: Well, you know, it’s always hard when the first child leaves because when the first child leaves, in a way, the family is never the same again. Never, if they really leave to go any great distance. Even if they go to school nearby, if they live out of the home. So it changes the dynamics of the family. And in the case of the second child, it was harder for me because he was the baby and of the two, he’s more outgoing. He was very sociable, so there was always kids around, he was always on the phone, it was a lot of noise. And he was one of these finger-popping kids, music was going on all day, finger-popping, and it used to drive me crazy. But when he left, the house was like a mausoleum. I didn’t realize, and I got very crabby for about three months, and my husband finally said, “You know, I know what’s wrong with you, you’re so crabby. You miss Lowell, don’t you?” And then I admitted to myself that I thought that I was crabby because both the children had gone and I didn’t have to be a mother in the sense of being a daily mother hen anymore. So I was crabby. And really, I was a little bit depressed. Maybe I wouldn’t admit it to myself until he mentioned to me, “You’re awfully crabby these days. I think because you really miss Lowell, don’t you?” And neither one of my children was a good writer so we’d have to call them to find out what they were doing. So we weren’t getting these weekly—I think a lot of boys don’t write as much as say a girl would write.

So, then he came home for Christmas, and it’s funny, the first time they come home for Christmas and they go, you sort of say, well, they’re grown up and now it’s good to have the house quiet again. So, that’s what happens, I think it happens in every family. You’re glad to see them but then you realize how much time you had to spend cooking and cleaning and answering the phone and nagging them to make their bed or whatever. And so then, when they go, the house is quiet. And then you realize, you know, you’re enjoying each other as adults. So, it’s a transition but you get over it.

I think it’s the hardest transition when the last child leaves. And then the next phase is when they get married. And my kids, it’s taken so long for the oldest, who just got married—they still came home for Christmas all those years. So I never had that next step until Geoffrey got married last April. They had been home for every holiday—well, when they were in school, sometimes, they didn’t come home—but practically every Christmas and Thanksgiving all their lives. So, I mean, I didn’t have the feeling that they were off with somebody else’s family. And he came home for Christmas this year because we wanted them to come and have our friends meet them. Well, he has moved to Rio and I do feel he’s far away, in that sense. But Lowell still lives in Oakland, and we get to see him more than Geoffrey, and he’s not married, so we get to see him a little bit more.
So, anyway, I think when you’re retired, you begin to, in my case, go back and try to sort of rekindle your friendships because I know that I—I feel like I did neglect some of my friends, people I really liked but I just couldn’t spend the time that maybe they wanted me to spend with them. So, you start by rekindling your friendships. And the other thing about retirement is that some people do stay involved with their research and writing more than others. And I had stayed involved for a couple of years and am now beginning to feel myself withdrawing. I don’t have the same need to sit down and write or do research now. I figure, I’ve done a lot. I’ve written four books and I feel I’ve accomplished a lot, and now I want to do other things with my life.

So, one of the things I mentioned to you is I never had time for gardening, my husband did all the gardening. I used to admire it. But he was the gardener and we have somebody to come in once a week. And I said, one of the first things I want to do when I retire—I love roses—is to grow roses. So, I planted some the first spring after I retired. And now, I just planted eight more bushes, so now I have two dozen bushes. And they do take a lot of time, but the enjoyment is seeing them grow. I like the nontraditional colors of roses. So my roses are beautiful. They are oranges and yellows, and various kind of golden colors. And then when they come up, they are absolutely beautiful. I don’t have any red roses. But I have the roses in the colors that I like. You know I like the kind of corals and all. So, when they come up—I just love to do this. And then we have the kind—I have the floribundas so they come in these big bunches. So, when friends are sick or somebody’s celebrating something, then I can go out and get a big bunch of these gorgeous flowers and take them. And now, see, that’s a side of me that I wasn’t able to develop when I worked. I just didn’t have the time, not at all.

And there are other things. We have more time now to go to the theater, more time to read books. I like certain kinds of novels, I like historical novels, you know I like dramatic stories and stories of families, three or four generations of families and what happens to families. So I love to read. And all the reading I did most of my life was for my courses and my research and now I can read other things, you know, fiction and nonfiction. But I don’t have to read the kinds of books that I’ve been reading all my life anymore unless I want to. It’s a time in my life where I do feel that there is a transition. And I think I have one more book left in me. And it will be more a personal book. It will be a book about, maybe about my career, and the people who influenced me. I’ve been thinking a lot about that lately. Who influenced me, who are my role models, what did my career mean to me. What were the kinds of barriers that I experienced. And sort of the idea of an African American woman in a field dominated by white males and what that has been like for me. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, partly out of our talks, but partly some other things that are going on out in the world that are not related to what we’ve been talking about. So, I’ve been thinking maybe I’ll sit down and write a memoir about these things. Maybe.
McGarrigle: Have we spoken about some of the people or most of the people who were the influences who you had considered—?

Gibbs: Well, you know, I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, and we’ve spoken about some of them and maybe we haven’t spoken about them. The reason—I was thinking last night about what did I think I achieved in my career and who were some of the people that really influenced me very early on and how did that play out in my career. And sometimes, I realize, that it wasn’t always conscious. But one of the people—I’ve been reading Thurgood Marshall’s biography by a man named Juan Williams who writes for the Washington Post. And he, I met when I was a little girl, probably around twelve, or thirteen or fourteen. He was a friend of my father’s and he came up once to a rally in New Haven and I met him. I was just so impressed by him and that’s when I first thought I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up. So all my life, Thurgood Marshall’s presence and the fact that he was so active with the Legal Defense Fund. And I’m sure he was an influence probably on Thelton [Henderson], too, I suppose. But he was an influence that I haven’t consciously acknowledged until I read the book and I realized how much that early meeting with him had made me admire lawyers, had made me interested in supporting the NAACP.

And one of the high points, actually, of my career was getting an award from the Legal Defense Fund. I have an award from—it’s the Northern California Branch but—I got an award from them at a dinner with Attorney General [Janet] Reno. And that was really one of the high points of my life. Actually they gave both of us awards there. [moves away from the microphone as she looks at awards] I don’t which one is mine but we got the twin awards, one is mine and one is Jim’s. This is mine. We got it the same year, it was interesting, as a couple. It was acknowledging our contributions to the community, civil rights in the Bay Area. They were different, the kind of contributions we make, but they were praising me for my books on young black males. That was actually before Race and Justice came out, I think. But they were praising me—what year was that?

McGarrigle: This was 1993, November 12th, 1993.

Gibbs: So it was even before Race and Justice, but I had two books, and one was Children of Color and one was the one on young black males. And you know, I was thinking about that the last few days, what it’s brought up reading this biography, and thinking about how that ties in. It was almost like my life has come in some ways full circle, from meeting Thurgood Marshall as a little girl with my father to getting this award from the same group, the Legal Defense Fund. So, it’s kind of a nice arc, you know?

And then I was thinking about another person who influenced my life was Dorothy Height. Do you know who she is?
McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: She’s a black woman who is president of the National Council of Negro Women, a very, very distinguished black woman leader. She’s a major woman in the civil rights movement. And if you look at the films or pictures from the 1963 march on Washington, I think she and Coretta Scott King were the only women up there on that platform. There may have been one or two others but I don’t remember them. I’ll show you her book. [gets up and walks away from the microphone to retrieve book] I went out and got several books the other day and biographies. Let’s see if I can find her book. I went out during black history month, I went out and got several biographies of people that I knew and these are new biographies. Oh, no, this is his. This is about Martin Luther King. But I got one about King, one about Marshall, and one about Dorothy Height. [goes away again]

I met her as young girl in Washington, D.C. with my—you know, my parents as I think I told you, knew all of these people—and she was a friend of my godmother, my mother’s older cousin, my grandmother’s first cousin, in other words, who was like a godmother to me. And she was one of the people who was instrumental in what they called at the time the Colored YWCA, the YWCA for colored girls, because they weren’t admitted to the white YWCA. So she was one of those who was in that movement. And my cousin, who was older than she was, my cousin who also my godmother used to just love her because she was a young woman with lots of energy. And so I met her first when I was a young girl with my mother. My cousin lived at the colored YWCA in Washington, D.C. She just admired—she said, “This woman is going far. She’s got so much energy,” and all. Well, Dorothy Height is a woman who never married. She gave her life to her career. She is quite famous. The book came out about a month ago and she was in the Bay Area on a book tour, and I couldn’t go to any of them because of conflicts, unfortunately. So I went out and bought the book and I just wrote her a note and told her that when I come to Washington, I’m going to have her sign it. But she has been interested in me all my life because of my cousin. And I have been sort of looking up to her. And our paths have crossed several times during the years.

I used to be co-chair of Minnesota Women’s Committee on Civil Rights, as a volunteer, and the first person we asked to speak for our first convention was Dorothy Height. She came out and I met her at the airport and everything. And then, when I got this award, I guess it was three years ago, from the Black Leadership Forum in New York—she’s a member of that, too—I saw her. She was in the audience with a man we call her “gentleman caller.” I don’t know what their relationship is but he’s an older man and they’re always together but they never married. So she was in the audience as I got that award and it was just so meaningful to me. I have a picture with her. I went up and hugged her. And she said, "Jewelle, if anybody deserves this award, you
deserve it,” because she’s been following my career. In fact, when I wrote the book Race and Justice, she—do you know Washington at all?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: They had just built a new headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue. In fact, they didn’t build it; it was given to them. It was an old beautiful—it had been somebody’s beautiful ornate office building sort of built in the twenties I think, sort of art deco, just gorgeous! And this, I guess, white philanthropist gave them the building for a dollar a year in maintenance or something. So they had just opened their building. And she heard about my book and she called me and she said, “I want to give you a book signing.” This is, as I say, one of my icons, and she gave me a book signing for my book, Race and Justice. The place was full of people. They’re near Capitol Hill, so people from Congress, Congressional aides, all kinds of people came, civil rights leaders from Washington, they all came to that party. It was wonderful! So I was very sorry I missed her reading. But anyway, this is another one of the people who really influenced my life.

So, I just see that my life is sort of in these arcs, follows these arcs. These people as I knew as a child or a young woman, like Martin Luther King, you know, there is an arc there. And a lot of the things that I have done, I think, are unconsciously, I can almost say, well, they have influenced me. Well, Martin Luther King has influenced me consciously, no question, but the others, there’s been a lot of influences in my life of role models and heroes that I’ve had who have been there for me. I mean, they’ve been lodged in my consciousness, they’ve done wonderful things to advance the cause of civil rights or women’s rights.

Because Eleanor Roosevelt’s another one of my heroines. And I connect her with human rights and women’s rights. I also met her as a young girl and was very impressed by her, very impressed. So when I think about a lot of the things that I have wanted to do and tried to do, a lot of those things are things that for a long, long time, they’ve been kind of perking along in my mind that these are the people who I want to grow up and be like. I want to do things like they did, and even in a small way, it may not be on the same stage, not at the same level. But you know, most of what I’ve done in my career can be connected to either civil rights, human rights, or women’s rights when you think about it. When you think about the books I have written, they all fit into one of those three categories.

McGarrigle: When you met Thurgood Marshall when you were with your father as a young person, was there one thing in particular about him that stood out? Things that he said or his way of being?

Gibbs: Well, actually, it’s not so much that I remember what he said or did then but I had another encounter with him at college. I was very active in college in the
NAACP. In fact, we had a chapter at Radcliffe and I was the president, only Radcliffe didn’t want us to name it NAACP. So we called it Radcliffe Association on Minority Problems. You know, they thought NAACP was too radical. But still, we used NAACP literature and everything. So, one summer, I wanted a job in the national office and my father said, “Well, go down and see Thurgood.” We lived in Connecticut. And he was already becoming quite famous. This was really just before Brown v. the Board of Education. He was really becoming quite famous. And he said, “Go down and see if you can see Thurgood. I don’t know if he’ll remember you but he’ll remember me and maybe he’ll give you a job.” Well, I went actually to see what they call the Youth Secretary, who was the person that we had the contact with in the national office, a guy named Herbert Wright. He kind of liked me in a way, you know, he said, “Oh, Jewelle, you’re so feisty.” [laughs] I guess I was in those days.

And so I asked Herb for a job, like an intern, you know, going to New York I thought it would be very exciting. He said, “We don’t have much money. We just have a little money.” I said, “Salary really isn’t important. I just want to live in New York and have fun.” I’m not sure I said, “Have fun,” but “I just want to live in New York and need just a little money, if I can have enough to pay for living with a girlfriend and just buy my food and all, that’s fine. I just want to be here.” So he said, “It’s okay with me but you’ll have to see Thurgood.” And I said, “Is he in today?” He said, “I think he’s going to be in a little later.” He’s a big man, a very big man. We heard this sort of RUMP, a person stomping down the hall. He said, “I think that’s Thurgood.” Because the offices weren’t very big. So he said, “Let me tell him you’re here.” So, I went in the office and—this is a funny story, that’s one of the things I might write about, all these people. Well, you know, I was young, I was tall and slim and when you’re young, eighteen or nineteen, and tall and slim, there are all these men who kind of look at you and so forth and so on. So I introduced myself, and Thurgood said, “Oh! You’re Reverend Taylor’s beautiful daughter.” [laughs] He said, “Yes, I don’t remember you but boy, now I will.” Something like that.

So then we talked and he said, “I don’t know, I’ll think about it. You know we have all these Southern kids who come from poor families who need jobs.” That’s what he said to me. He says, “Your father rides around in a big car. You don’t need any money.” I mean, first of all, he was also very funny. He was very funny. And he said what he thought. He said, “You don’t need a summer job, your father can take care of you! He rides around in a big car.” So, I stood up to him and said, “Well, that maybe true but it’s not my father who is here asking for the job. I’m in college and I could use the money. I’m at Radcliffe—”. “Oh, one of those fancy girls’ schools!” [laughing] I said, “Yes, but still I need spending money.” So he said, “Well, I’ll think about it, I’ll think about it.” So then, he walks me to the door and as we get to the door, he pats me on my behind. I mean, it was so funny. So, of course, I remember him. And he had a reputation. I didn’t know what to say. I got out and I said,
“Should I laugh, should I cry? Should I scream, should I hit him? What should I do?” [laughing] It was too late. By the time I had figured out what I should do, he closed the door behind me!

But you see, in those days, that wasn’t considered sexual harassment. Now it would be. But in those days, here was a grown man and just takes his hand and [demonstrates] kind of patted me on the behind. “Nice to see you!” he said and patted me on the behind. [laughter] So I have a very strong memory of him. And I don’t know if that’s the last time I saw him but that is the time, of course, I remember the most. And then a week later, I called Herb, I said, “I haven’t heard anything.” He said, “Jewelle, I’m sorry. But Thurgood is determined to hire somebody from some of the black colleges. I hope you understand.” I said, “Yes, I understand. I don’t like it, but I understand.” He said, “Because they need the money more than you do, the kids from the South.” And of course, he ended up hiring a boy. So it was kind of double discrimination. I didn’t get it because I was middle-class and two, he hired a man, not a woman. So, of course I remember him.

But nevertheless, it was quite thrilling for me—it was a couple of years later they had the decision—it was quite thrilling for me to say, “Well, I know this man. I’ve met him, I’ve been in his office and he is a great man.” But I didn’t tell people, “And he patted me on my behind, too.” [laughs]

McGarrigle: I mentioned a couple of times but we haven’t spoken about Leon Higginbotham. I told you that Thelton Henderson did take a trip to South Africa and that he was very influenced by Leon Higginbotham.

Gibbs: Yes, yes! I was too, I was too. Leon was brilliant. He was just brilliant. He was I think probably one of the most brilliant people I have ever met and I admired him tremendously. I met him at a conference in Chicago. I remember Lowell was a year old and I left him for a few days and he didn’t like it. I mean, he was very upset when I came back. But I was not working at the time and I was active—I think it must have been an NAACP conference. I’m not sure exactly what kind of conference it was at the time, it was some kind of civil rights conference. I went and I heard him speak and I was just was, literally, mesmerized. Afterwards, I went up to him—my father also knew him as a student at Yale—so I went up to him and I introduced myself to him. And he said, “Oh yes, I remember your father. I think I spoke at your father’s church once. I remember your father.” He said, “Some of us are going out for supper. Would you like to come?” I was absolutely thrilled. So I said, “Of course I would like to come.” So I went out, we went out to supper.

And after that, he wrote me a nice note when he got back to Philadelphia—he was still in Philadelphia at the time, I think—and after that we kept in touch and then he came out to Berkeley in I think about 1980 or ’81 when I was just new on the faculty, he came to the law school. And I asked him would he speak for my school, too. He was a visiting scholar and he was going to be
there several months. So I said, “Would you give a talk connecting social welfare and law?” He said he’d be happy to. Well, my dean was very impressed. And we got a wonderful crowd. We had a four o’clock, a late afternoon seminar. No, it was more like a colloquium. We had it over in the School of Education. And we had, must have been, certainly over fifty people, which at Berkeley, to get a crowd like that outside your school is pretty good. And they all wanted to hear Judge Higginbotham, because he, by that time, was also quite well-known. And so he came and he spoke and I think I got a lot of points for that, from the faculty. “Well, how do I know this man?”

[laughs]

And then he was a visiting scholar at Stanford for a while. Do you know Bill Gould?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: Have you talked to him?

McGarrigle: Only on the phone. I haven’t met him. But I know of him and I know his book that he wrote, his family history.

Gibbs: Yes, he wrote a book about his great-grandfather. Well, Bill is a good friend of ours, too, and so when Leon came here, in the meantime, he had met Jim I think when he spoke at Berkeley, because he didn’t know Jim, and they hit it off. So, then when he came here, we had him to dinner, I think. I know Bill Gould had him to dinner. And then I don’t know whether we did or not. But anyway, one night we went out with him to dinner and then we went to dinner with Bill Gould. Did you ever meet him [Leon Higginbotham]?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: He’s a little bit overwhelming, you know, he’s a big, tall man, deep voice, very brilliant and very talkative, great sense of humor. I was going through my desk the other day and I found a note from him. Well, let’s see, he was going through some personal things last time he was here and he talked to us about it. So, when he went back to Philadelphia he divorced his wife, and then he married a much younger woman who was a professor at Harvard. And then he left Philadelphia, where he had lived nearly all his adult life and been very famous as a judge, he was on the Court of Appeals, I think that’s the Third Circuit. He left his wife, went and married this younger woman who’s a very well-known scholar in religion named Evelyn Higginbotham—now she’s Evelyn Higginbotham—and moved to Harvard and became a kind of floating professor at Harvard. He had one of these joint appointments at Harvard. But his health was not so good after he remarried. So he wrote me a letter I guess, probably a year or so before he died, and told me that he had been thinking about us and how were we and was very interested in my older son’s career because he was a lawyer. He always asked about how was Geoffrey and what
was he doing. And he said, “I had triple bypass surgery and I wanted you and Jim to know.” And to my everlasting regret, I meant to send a card, and I meant to write and I never did. Within a few months, he died of a massive heart attack. I think I kept the letter. I saw it the other day and I said, “Now, this is why we shouldn’t delay. If someone is sick, don’t delay the card, just send it.”

I met him too late in my life to say that he was that influential but certainly, he was influential. I mean, I was through college and married with children. But he was influential. I admired him in the way that he stood up for civil rights and I admired his work and so in that way he was kind of a role model, too. But there have been a lot of people like that in my life that either I met when I was very young—I think the people who influence you most are the people you meet when you are young and in college and after that the levels of influence probably are not quite so high.

In any case, in thinking about my career, the two things that I feel in some ways most satisfied about are the students that I’ve taught who have gone on to do interesting things and helpful things and been scholars in social welfare. Some of them have gone into psychology. Some of my students got masters’ in social work and then went into psychology. But the students that I have taught who have either—not necessarily gone into the academic world but those are the ones who are going to write, but also the ones who have gone into agencies and become directors of agencies like family service agencies or mental health agencies or become medical social workers, you know, that is the satisfaction that you get from your teaching career.

I went to a memorial service on campus about a week ago. It’s interesting, as I say, how things go round and round. This student who was in my first year of teaching who I have to admit was one of my favorite students ever, she was a red-headed girl named Cathy Kirschenbaum, and she and I just hit it off. I think we have similar personalities. She was high energy and very smart and just delightful. We just hit it off and I really liked her a lot. I tried to encourage her to get her PhD but she never went on. Then she did medical social work for a while, moved to Boston. I hadn’t seen her since 1981. When I was sitting in Memorial Chapel, this young woman with sort of dark red hair came up and tapped me on the shoulder. She said, “Do you remember me?” I said, “Oh my God.” She came out to this memorial service because the woman who died, Cleo Eulau had been one of her supervisors. We got together afterwards and I’m telling you it was just a wonderful reunion. She was saying how much I had meant to her as a teacher and how she thought of me often and invited me to Boston to meet her two girls, showed me her pictures.

And then I realized how happy I felt to see the second generation. These are the students, these are my students, who are now really almost at the peak of their careers, and they are doing well in social work and they are helping other
people. So, to me, that—being in a career like social work rather than in a purely academic career means that you are almost every week hearing about or reading about or seeing a student who is doing good for others. And that for me gives me the highest degree of satisfaction, more than anything else, that I know they are doing something good for others. Whether they’re teaching, they’re writing, or they’re doing therapy—I have a number who work in hospitals. I have a number who work in schools in school social work. I have a number who work in mental health clinics, a number who work in family service agencies. Another one of my favorite students started her own agency in San Francisco called Girl Source. She was one of my PhD students. And she is doing wonders with girls in the mission, with Latino, black, and Asian girls, teaching them skills and encouraging them to finish their education, teaching them leadership skills, trying to get them to prevent getting pregnant, and taking charge of their lives. She has a wonderful program, it’s called Girl Source.

So, it’s those things that really give me so much pleasure. And when I see an article sometimes of a student—oh my God, it just makes me feel so good. These are the students who I used to grade their papers. [laughter] “Don’t forget to put chapter headings,” you know. And now they’re writing articles and giving speeches at conferences and being consultants. I think that those things have made me feel that I have a worthwhile career.

McGarrigle: I mentioned to you that I didn’t yet speak with Teiahsha Bankhead. I did speak with Joe Merighi. And he said that he was really interested in hearing about your nurturing of students and how—he said, that you came to his rescue actually, because he felt part of a group of people who were marginalized and without support—

Gibbs: He was gay.

McGarrigle: And he said he was one of the few openly gay students and now is on the faculty at San Jose State.

Gibbs: That’s right. I guess he told you, the white male professors didn’t want to hire him. And I hired him. His sexual orientation wasn’t any difference to me. He’s very nice, very smart, very well-spoken, very polite and I hired him. He was a wonderful researcher, very careful, very smart. And we’re still friends, did he tell you? We have our kind of annual lunch or dinner together. He comes up here, we go out to lunch or dinner. And when he got tenure last year, Jim and I took him out to dinner at this new Chinese restaurant up here in the Stanford Shopping Center, P.F. Chang’s?

McGarrigle: Oh, I know, on El Camino.

Gibbs: Yes. Pretty good, pretty good. So we took him to dinner. And you know, with my graduate students—not so much with the MSW students, but with the
doctoral students—you know you work with them five or six years. You can become very close to them and mostly when they’re finished, very often they become your friends, they’re your colleagues and they’re your friends. So several of my PhD students—he’s one, Teiahsha’s another, another one named Laura Abrams is in Minnesota and I’m going to her wedding in May. They become your friends. I mean, you know them almost as well as you know your children after five or six years, meeting with them every week. And they know you, all the little warts. And you have lots of intimate times together, you get very close. Sometimes you have disagreements and arguments. But you’re training them and you’re trying to train them so when they get out in the world, they will do the right thing. And they will know how to do it, whatever they do. So, I’ve trained quite a few who are in colleges all over the country now. Some of them in top schools, some of them at sort of mid-level schools, but I have students all over the country now teaching. University of Minnesota, University of Washington, Sacramento State, San Jose State, Columbia, I have students at Columbia, I mean just all over, Case Western Reserve—

McGarrigle: That’s where my father went.

Gibbs: Oh really? And when I was at Washington University last year—was it last year?—I think so, when I went for two days. Three of my former students are on the faculty. And they all took me out. So I was really pleased and the dean said, “You’ve really trained three of our younger assistant professors. Everybody here knows your work and they always talk about you. You’ve trained some good people.” So that really means that when I’m gone from this world, that I feel like there will be these people who carry on a tradition of—because one of the things that I always stress with my students: be a good teacher. Be a good teacher because you can do all the research in the world you want, but if you’re not passing on your skills as a teacher, there is something missing here. So, yes, I want you to write, I want you to do your research, but I also want you to take time with your students and be a good teacher. And I tried to be a good teacher and a good mentor. I mean, I spent a lot of time with my students, and I try to make myself accessible and available. If I were not there in person, then I hoped that I would see them—they could come to my house, some of them lived down in this area. Or we would talk on the phone. But I wanted my students to be like I tried to be to them. So I tried to show the model of—it’s more than just being a researcher that really counts. I mean I know some people think that’s the only important thing. But I think being a good teacher and a good mentor and mentoring another generation of academics is very important. So that’s what I tried to do.

McGarrigle: It must be something to step back and have your sons be launched and then have this whole generation of students launched—

Gibbs: Well, it was. In a way, you probably hit the nail on the head. In a way, it’s almost like, in some way like your children. But they’re bigger, they’re adults
and you have relationships with them sometimes like your children. But it’s a different kind of relationship but it’s still that you’re nurturing and mentoring human beings that are younger than you are and trying to be a good role model. I think it’s true of my husband too. I mean his students just love him. And I think one of the nicest things that I got, one of my nicest awards was the Berkeley Citation, which was quite an honor, but that says for your scholarly contributions and whatever. But that award was—that was, of course, the highlight of my career to get it. I really didn’t expect to get it. I knew I was nominated for it but I really didn’t expect to get it. I said, well, they only give this to Nobel Peace Prize winners and Pulitzer Prize winners and I probably won’t get it. I was very thrilled when I got it. It sort of made it all worthwhile to have that award. I really felt that it made it all worthwhile.

But I really did have an interesting career. Twenty years, exactly twenty years. Actually twenty years and six months. They asked me to come back for the fall. Did I ever tell you this part?

McGarrigle: No.

Gibbs: I wanted to retire in July of ’99 and my dean prevailed upon me to come back for the fall because he wanted me to chair a search committee which happened to be a rather controversial search committee. They were replacing a person on the faculty who was a very major part of the faculty. He was actually a big name on the faculty, what we would call a star. And he was leaving to go to the University of North Carolina. And it was very controversial about who was going to replace him.

So the dean wanted me to run the search committee. I really didn’t want to do it. I said, “I’m really tired.” You know how you look forward to something and then you think its over. I said, “I don’t want to do anymore teaching. I’m tired. My mind is not as agile as it used to be and if I do some more teaching, I will have to bring up all of my things up to date, and I really don’t want to do that now. I’m really getting tired.” And my mother was ill, which was the other thing. I said, “You know, I may have to go home at any minute, my mother is getting ill and getting old.” He said, “Okay, let’s make a deal. You’ve done more than your share of teaching, several semesters here. You’ve had more graduate students and more doctoral students than almost anyone else on the faculty with the exception of two people. You’ve trained more doctoral students. You’ve had more teaching responsibilities. Let’s make a deal. You don’t have to teach anymore. And I as a dean can determine that.” I said, “Yes, but, what kind of salary?” He said, “Full salary, because when I look at the number of doctoral students”—because you get credits for each doctoral student you have as what they call tutorials every year—he said, “You have done more than your share.” And that’s true. He said, “If I count up all your doctoral students just over the last ten years, that’s worth two or three courses. So I’m going to ask you to come back, you’ll get a full-time salary, no teaching. Only this committee and one other committee. I do want
you to serve on the doctoral committee and this other committee,” because I
did have several doctoral students who were finishing up. I said, “Okay, fine,
it’s a deal. I’ll do it.”

So, what I thought was going to be my exact twenty years from July 1 to June
30th of 1999—it would have been exactly twenty years—but it ended up
twenty years and six months. So I did chair the search committee and actually,
the two top candidates were my former students. So, I was torn. But actually,
we chose a woman, who took the job and she’s still there. It was interesting.

McGarrigle: Well, we spent all these hours together Jewelle, and I’m sure when you review
the transcript there’ll be things that I left out and that you may want to add in.
But if there’s anything else you’d like to add, I’m going to stop the tape and
you can tell me.

Gibbs: Let’s see—

[begin minidisc 32]

Gibbs: Women and minorities have so many barriers at a major university, so there
are many]—reasons they don’t make it to tenure. One of the major reasons
they don’t make it to tenure is because they have so many demands. The
university puts demands on them for committees—when the university hires
you, if you’re say, any kind of minority, but especially blacks and Latinos and
American Indians, as opposed to Asians, they hire you and then, they not only
want you to teach the regular things that everybody does, but they want to sort
of showcase you, so they’re always sort of putting you on extra committees,
so they can say, “Well, we have a person of this ethnicity on this committee.”
When there are alumni functions, they invite you to show up and be on a
panel. They have these competitions every year for graduate fellowships. I
don’t know how many times I was asked to serve as one of the people on the
fellowship selection committee, so they could say, “We have a minority.” But
you see, what happens when they do this is that you are putting additional
burdens on those people, the minority faculty. And they are spending more
time on committees and university functions so they can be displayed, in a
sense, and that time ought to be devoted to their research and writing, which
the white scholars can do.

So, while the white scholar on a Saturday is off in the library writing his essay
or reading another book or doing something like that for his research, the
black scholar, the black male or the Hispanic female, is out at an alumni
function giving a talk. And so it’s not a level playing field. So, when they say,
“They don’t make it because they don’t,” I’ve read this many times, “they
don’t publish enough,” you know, blah, blah, blah, that’s only the tip of the
iceberg. What they don’t say to you in those statistics is how much time is the
university asking them to give other than their teaching and their research.
How much time were they devoting to university activities and events, okay?
And this is one of the things that I think needs to be better publicized and also understood. I also think chairmen need to protect their people, their new hires, their assistant professors. They need to protect them. And unless you are very, very assertive, it’s hard to say no when the chairman says, “Will you do this on the weekend?” or the dean calls you and says, “Will you serve on this committee?” It’s very hard, because you’re only an assistant professor and you feel you have to please these people. So you are in a continual bind.

McGarrigle: Is there an analogy also with law firms do you think in terms of what happens to associates?

Gibbs: Probably not as much, no. Probably not as much. I don’t know about law firms. Although I think our son, who was in a big law firm in Los Angeles, made the mistake of doing too much pro bono work. Somebody from the community came to him, actually it was a local representative from Los Angeles, to take on a case. And the firm said, “Okay, you can take on the case.” And they probably should have said, “No, you can’t take on the case. You are a second year law associate. Why do you think you should take on this case?” But they said yes because I guess they thought it would have political implications. And although they won the case, while my son was doing that, he should have bringing in clients for the firm. So yes, I think there may be—I don’t really know about all the other things they do but certainly I think that it’s true in the academic world and it may be true in big business firms and maybe in law where the minority person is kind of showcased. But the showcasing is to the detriment of that person’s career. It is definitely not helpful.

And I finally had to complain my second year to the dean. He had us on too many committees, too many people—a black woman, a Chinese-American woman, and a white male. And we all agreed we were on too many committees and if we were going to make it, we had to get off some of those committees. It took a whole year to convince him. The provost got wind of it and called him and told him that he had the assistant professors on too many committees. So he then finally relented and we were able to go from seven to four, which was still too many. It was that kind of thing.

And then the other thing that happens to minority professors is that the minority students and the communities surrounding the university, especially an urban university, expect you to do more that—even if you’re not in that department. So then you get called on to serve. I served on all kinds of committees of minority students in education and psychology and sociology and ethnic studies. People I hardly knew, they would call me and say, “Well, my chair says that you would be interested because I’m a black woman,” or, “You would be interested because I’m a black man,” or, “You would be interested because you wrote about black males.” Well, I mean, you know, how many committees can you serve on because you wrote about black males? So I would find myself just overwhelmed by requests from other
chairmen to do this. Also, the chairs in other departments would call me and ask me to give a lecture on cultural competence or something. But then there’s the community outside the university. So you get invited to give speeches at things like churches, community groups, civil rights groups, if you’re black. I suppose if you are Indian or Hispanic, there are similar groups where you would be invited in the community, political groups even, to give speeches.

Now, if you say you are busy, and if you are not always out there, then they accuse you of being what? Snobbish, a traitor to your race, I mean, all kinds of things they can say about you. You’re not interested in helping your community, you’ve got so much education and you’re not sharing it. So, this is the dilemma of minority professors. They always have these mini-claims on your time. They always are caught sort of on the horns of the dilemma, “Do I do something in the community? Do I do something for a student in another department whom I hardly know or do work in my own department, stay close to my own obligations as a teacher and researcher, and just do that?” And what happens is many, many, many of us, all of us, are torn in many directions. And sometimes, you know, you’d go in the community. And then, in my case, the more I went into the community, the more I was invited back to go into the community, you know.

So, I guess I did lot of speaking after my first book came out, the book on black males, all over the country because people were very interested in that book. And it did have, I must say, quite an impact. But it was easy for me, to just get really overcommitted—I mean, I was all over the country, I was speaking. I spoke in Congress, testifying about the plight or the status of the black male. And here are all these people sitting next to me, using my book, which was very funny. There were five so-called experts, and three of the other four were quoting my book. So, you know, I said to myself, “I could have stayed home in Berkeley.” [laughs] They were saying, “As Professor Gibbs said—,” it was funny because I’m sitting right there, you know. But then I was glad too, I must say.

But the thing is that this particular book launched me into that speaking circuit, which is exhausting. And at first, I found it very intoxicating. Okay, I have to admit. I loved it, I loved it. You write your first book—I wasn’t young in age as a professor but I was young in status as a professor. So, I’d been there about four or five, six years. Actually, I was almost up for tenure. And these people are calling me all over the country asking me to talk about my book, so I’m getting all these invitations, some of them paying, most of them actually, quite a few were paying invitations. And I thought, ‘Oh, this is nice! Just think, I can make some extra money.’ Well, about a year of that, and I thought, ‘Oh my God. I’ll never write another book. I’ll never get anything else done.’ So I had to cut back.

But for about two years actually, I was really traveling a lot. And by this time, my second child had gone. But I was traveling a lot, and I was on the speaking
circuit. And as I say, the more I spoke, the more invitations I got because—it wasn’t just because—I guess I am a pretty good speaker, but it was also because of the topic. And the topic was, what do we need to do to help black males in this country. And all of a sudden that whole issue exploded. I mean, everybody wanted to talk about it. And so I’d get invitations for TV, I’d get invitations for radio, I’d get invitations for churches. You know, it got to be absolutely exhausting. And as I said, for a couple of years I traveled and then started to cut back. But this is what happens to—I mean you read about people like Cornel West, when he gets in a fight with the president of Harvard about whether or not he was doing the right research. It’s very easy—and Cornel succumbed much more than I did—it’s very easy to become—it’s not easy to become a public intellectual but it’s easy to become a speaker on topics that are very much in the public eye and that’s what happened to me. I might not have gotten tenure if I hadn’t settled down and said, wait, enough is enough.

So I think that’s something that lay people don’t really understand, what the pressure is on minority scholars. They don’t really understand that. And I don’t think most people who write about it try to even make it clear what is really happening, why it’s hard for them to get tenure. That’s why you have to make choices and you have to decide at some point that you’re going to put your work first or you’re not going to get tenure. And that’s what I had to decide. You have to decide that. It has to be a really conscious choice. So, I think that’s one of the things that I look back on and think thank God I came to my senses early enough so I could make that choice, because I was obviously getting involved in—it’s easy to get seduced into being—maybe you’re going to be a public intellectual, maybe you’re not—but certainly, it’s easy to get seduced into becoming a kind of minor celebrity, you know, speaking all around the country and that kind of thing. It’s easy to be seduced. So, you have to decide what is really important.

Now, after I got tenure, I must say I continued to speak. But I was speaking more at my own pace and I was speaking feeling secure that I had the tenure. And you know, I liked speaking about issues to try and inform the public and that might impact our public policy. I do like to do that. But, the question is when is the best time to do it. And I tell my students, wait until you get tenure and then go out there if you have something you want to change, something you want to inform people of, that’s when you do it, but get your tenure first, so you can have that security. And also, the status of having a tenured position, too. It gives you more status and security.

So, I guess when I look in the Bay Area, I feel that I’ve done a lot in the community, as a scholar in the community. I think I’ve done a lot here. Hopefully some of it has had some impact. I’ve done a lot of speaking, writing, being parts of panels and being parts of conferences, just speaking a lot. If you look at my CV, I’ve done a lot of that. In some ways, I did enjoy it and in some ways, it was a little bit exhausting.
So what else would you like to know?

McGarrigle: We could go on and but I think we’ve covered so much.

Gibbs: Yes, I think so. I think it’s been interesting. You say this is the sixteenth [sic] session?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: That’s wonderful. When did we start?

McGarrigle: I would say the beginning of 2003.

Gibbs: I think it’s been almost two years.

McGarrigle: Probably since we first spoke, it’s been two years.

Gibbs: Yes. I’m sure it’s been over a year but I thought maybe it had been closer to, like a year and a half or so.

McGarrigle: I would say about a year and a half.

Gibbs: Because we have been meeting approximately every two weeks except when you went on vacation and when I did, approximately every two weeks. So I hate to see it come to an end but you’re going to take a lot of time to edit—but you say you don’t do much editing.

McGarrigle: This will be transcribed and then what we call audit-edited where somebody listens to the tapes against the transcript for corrections.

Gibbs: But I think we’ve gone over some things maybe more than once.

McGarrigle: We’ll have an opportunity to change the things that we want to change. And then it comes to you for your light edit, corrections and so on, additions and deletions.

Gibbs: Good. So how long do you think the process will take before I have to do that?

McGarrigle: I’d say by the end of the year?

Gibbs: Probably just around Christmas time. [laughter]

McGarrigle: Realistically? Maybe before, depending on how things—

Gibbs: Well, you know I really enjoyed our talks. It sort of helps me to put—it’s sort of like a life review almost. It is a life review.
McGarrigle: It has been a life review.

Gibbs: Put things in perspective and think about my life and who’s influenced me and things I’ve done and things I haven’t done. We don’t talk about that but—

McGarrigle: Do you think that the process of talking about it has been different than it would have been had you written about your experiences—a different process, but I don’t know from your perspective.

Gibbs: Oh, it is! I think verbalizing it is different, yes. I think you could write about it better after you’ve verbalized it. Because verbalizing it helps you to see the chronology almost, to put it in perspective. And writing about it is more cerebral. I think when you verbalize it, you also have feelings about it that you might feel or express or both. When you write it, I’m not sure how much the feeling part comes in. I would think that the writing is more a kind of intellectual exercise. And then you’re thinking about the right words here and the right—when I talk about it, I just talk. I don’t stop to censor myself very often. Once in a while, I do. But I don’t stop constantly to censor myself. When I write, I want to make sure I have the right words and the phrases and the grammar. And see, that’s a very different process. So you’re already editing yourself, you are already editing yourself. You’re not just being spontaneous. So the speaking—and that’s why I like oral history—is a much more spontaneous activity. And I think you’re much more in tune with your emotions somehow. And I think writing is a much more intellectual activity.

McGarrigle: That’s a very good way of putting it.

Gibbs: And I definitely think there’s more self-censorship that goes on in writing. And I guess one other thing that I would say is that I think that as I’ve gotten older, and in my recent work is that I was much more interested in how my work intersects with politics and political and social issues so my last book is really quite deliberately an effort to tie those trends together. Because what we call social welfare is really quite broad and it includes healthcare, education, social issues. It includes a lot of things. I would even include the environmental issues. Social welfare is in the broadest sense how to improve human life in our society. What kinds of policies and programs improve the functioning of the individual and the family? So, you see that’s extremely broad. That’s why we call it social welfare instead of social work at Berkeley. Because social welfare is a much broader concept and so it includes everything that helps to improve human functioning, as I said, individual, family, and community, on a higher level, and community. So, in my recent work in about the last ten years of my career in my writing—I guess I started with *Race and Justice*—actually my first book was like that, too—but I came back to those issues. I really went away from them and then came back to them.
So, I started with the social and economic problems of the black male in our society, I started with that. And got into more psychological problems of minority kids in the schools and in the other systems where they are. It was much more individual family centered, not so much community. And then in the last part of my career, I came back to those issues because I realized that when you deal with the individual and the individual family, it’s like putting your finger in a dyke, because you may help that individual child and you may help that individual family but then you’re going to have a hundred thousand other children and families with the same problem who you haven’t reached. So, how do you really improve the functioning, especially in my case, of the poor people in our society—the disabled, the minorities, the people who are what I would call the disempowered people, the disadvantaged, disempowered—how do you help these people?

You have to help them on a broader level. You really have to look at the community, the programs and policies that affect them, and that is why I have gone beyond the individual reform and written about the justice system, which really discriminates against poor people, minorities, and especially young male minorities. So I’ve looked at the justice system and found it terribly unjust in America, terribly unjust. And it’s very much biased toward wealthy people and people who can afford good lawyers and white people, and it is very much biased against poor people and minorities. So, that started, as I told you, with the issue of the beating of Rodney King and how juries look at minorities depending on whether the jury is mainly minority or mainly white.

But then also this last book that I did, I was very disturbed by all these propositions coming up. And I thought this is really bad public policy and it’s really going to impact, mainly negatively, on Latino immigrants and minorities, black people. And you know, I felt an obligation almost that if I can get the information and if I can educate the public, it may be too little and too late, but somebody is going to read this book and somebody may read about this book and it may help to enlighten people about what really is going on about these propositions. What they’re really trying to do here is to set minorities back. It’s to set them back and it’s to disempower them and it’s to punish them in many ways.

So, this whole idea of all of the early influences which were around social justice from my family, my father and growing up in the church, have kind of really been a very, very deep influence on me in my work, coming back to that and looking at it in the last book that I did and even now things that I’m doing, the kinds of things I’m going to volunteer doing, it’s really coming back to civil rights, human rights, and women’s rights and how we can make our communities work better for minorities, poor people, the disadvantaged people and women. And that’s what I have done. And I think to myself, well, you know you are just one voice out there in the wilderness, but I feel better having been that one voice and I feel that somehow I have contributed to that dialogue, to the dialogue about these issues. And you know, I don’t feel like I
have changed that much, no, I mean the issues, nor have I changed the world. But I think that I’ve had one of the voices, a small voice, in at least bringing to the table and bringing to the attention of the public, at least the educated public, a better understanding of these issues, a deeper understanding of these issues, and how unless we, as a society, can solve these issues, it’s going to be like the Titanic. The rich and the poor are all going down with the ship. I mean, a few rich got off, yes, but by and large, when the ship went down, people in all of those classes went down with it, with the exception of the few who got out. And so this is why I guess I continue.

And I guess the last thing I will say is in volunteer work, those are the things I want to do. So, I’m still involved with two foundations now. I told you about the women’s foundation that I just joined?

McGarrigle: Yes.

Gibbs: And the two foundations I’m involved in are carrying on that same tradition. They are interested in granting grants to minorities, disadvantaged, immigrants, et cetera. And the women’s foundation is helping women and girls to be empowered and to take charge of their lives. So these are the things that for all of my life I have been interested in them and now I feel that in a very different way, that I can give up the scholarship to the next generation. I don’t feel as if I need to continue doing the scholarship, because I feel like I’m using the information, the knowledge, the experience I’ve had in my scholarship and my teaching in sort of helping with these programs that will really go out there in the communities and help these people. And that gives me a lot of satisfaction. It really does.

McGarrigle: I just keep thinking about what your mother must have thought about you having this very professional existence in the work that you did. What was her—?

Gibbs: Oh, I think she was very proud of me. I think she was very proud of me. She was very proud of all her daughters. I think my mother, coming from the era that she came from, where it was most women didn’t work and where it was a sign of status not to work, but my mother’s work was always with my father, so as a minister’s wife, you work. There’s no question that you are part of his work. So my mother was part of my father’s work, so she worked in civil rights; she worked helping foster children, you know, she raised six foster girls who were my foster sisters, in her home. And she always worked with the disadvantaged. She liked to work with young people, she worked with youth groups. There were disadvantaged people in our church, but in addition, in the community. And she worked in politics as a volunteer. So, my mother worked without pay. Her work was as a minister’s wife, where you work in the church and you do charity work. I mean, my mother did charity work all her life. And so I think I get that charitable impulse from my mother.
But I think she was very proud. Now, you know, my sister down in Los Angeles is an author and used to be in TV and radio. And my sister in New Haven has been a school teacher, school principal, and social worker. Now, she retired early and she’s now a consultant to the special education programs for the city of New Haven. The special education teachers, she’s a consultant. So she was a principal for a while, she had her own school. So I think my mother was very proud we were all working women and we all had careers. But we all also had children and made time for our children. I guess all of us had our careers a little bit later. Patty, my baby sister, she went to school and finished school after her first child was born. So, she went to school and then she had two more children and then she—so, we’ve all raised children and had families and had interesting careers, all different kinds of careers.

McGarrigle: Well, let’s stop there for today.

Gibbs: Okay.

[End of Interview]
**Insert: Epilogue to Oral History for Jewelle Gibbs**

August 9, 2007

Nearly seven years have passed since I retired from U.C. Berkeley in January 2000. These early retirement years have been far busier and more productive than I had ever anticipated. The transition from my fulfilling academic career to a meaningful retirement has sometimes seemed challenging but never boring. It took me at least three years to complete several writing commitments that assured my continued involvement with the School of Social Welfare and my colleagues.

I’ve just completed my last “academic project” cleaning up the transcribed interviews from my research project comparing the trial of Rodney King’s police assailants with the trial of O.J. Simpson for the murder of his wife and her friend. UCLA has requested all of my original research materials on the project for its Archives of Southern California History. I’m really pleased that they will preserve the transcripts of my interviews and tapes of community leaders about the impact of these two racially-sensitive trials, as well as the subsequent 1992 riots, on the youth of South Central Los Angeles. This material, that places these events in the context of a long history of police brutality and economic and educational disparities in the community, will be available to students and scholars in the future, so that they will be aware of the racial, class, and cultural inequities and conflicts in Los Angeles in the final decade of the 20th century.

Since 2000 I’ve also been invited to several major professional conferences to present papers or give special lectures. I especially enjoyed an international conference in Switzerland in 2002 on adolescents in multicultural societies. For that conference I wrote a review paper on comparative suicide rates and patterns among black, white, and American Indian youth in the U.S. that was published in 2005 as a chapter in a book entitled *Ethnicity and Causal Mechanisms*. In 2002 I was invited to give an endowed lecture at the annual meeting of the Council of Social Work Education, and that lecture was subsequently published on-line earlier this year. The second revised edition of our book, *Children of Color*, was also published in 2003 and is still selling well. Several journal articles about my comparative research on the status of black youth in Canada, Great Britain and the United States, have also been published since I retired in the journal *Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*.

I’ve also been surprised and pleased by the continuing interest in and recognition of my work. Between 2001 and 2006 I’ve been honored by several national and local organizations, including the national Black Leadership Forum and Girl Source, a local San Francisco program for disadvantaged adolescent girls. One of the memorable events in my life was an invitation to deliver the Commencement address at the College of Social Work at San Jose State University in 2005. When I arrived just in time to march in the ceremonial procession, I was greeted by four of my former students who are now faculty members, so it was a very special moment. The new dean, Alice Hines, is also one of my former doctoral students and a co-author of two of my
articles. It is a great source of satisfaction to me that so many of my former students are successful in their careers and still consider me as a mentor for career advice.

My husband and I have both been included in a series called “The HistoryMakers,” which has an online site with brief video biographies of nearly 5000 prominent African Americans. I am still surprised when I am called for media or newspaper interviews on topics ranging from juvenile justice and teen suicide to multiracial families and African American political issues. It certainly keeps me intellectually active to be consulted on these issues, although I’m not as familiar with the current research on these topics as I would like to be.

Soon after I retired I joined the Board of the Van Loben Sels Foundation, a small San Francisco Foundation whose priorities meshed with my research and teaching interests, that is, small grants to programs for disadvantaged youth and low income families, juvenile justice, and civil and human rights. Fortunately, as the vice-president of this Foundation, I have been able to use my professional knowledge and experience in assessing grant applications and evaluating program outcomes.

Four years ago my husband and I both became involved in establishing the new Museum of the African Diaspora, a small museum located a block away from the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. The Museum features the art and culture of people of African descent throughout the Caribbean, South America, North America and Europe, so it has fascinating exhibits and programs. During the first decade of our marriage, we lived in Liberia for 21/2 years and purchased a small collection of African art, so this is a natural activity for both of us. Jim has served as a major consultant for the content and graphic displays at the museum and I’ve worn several hats as a member of the Board, currently the vice-president, and recently as the chair of a major fundraising gala at the San Francisco City Hall Rotunda last March.

I’ve always been interested in politics as a volunteer, but have been more active since I retired. I served one term as an elected member of the Santa Clara County Democratic Central Committee and had even considered running for a local office until I had to have my knee replaced in 2001. Just before he was recalled, Governor Gray Davis appointed me as a member of the Advisory Board to Agnews Developmental Center in San Jose for a 4-year term. But the Center was under tremendous pressure to close, so I found myself in an untenable situation trying to lobby a Republican Governor (Schwartzennegger) to reverse the decision to close the facility. After two years, I decided that this was a losing proposition, so I resigned from the Board.

Since I retired I’ve also been involved as a volunteer in the RISE program at Menlo-Atherton High School. The son of our friend, Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children’s Defense Fund, initiated a very creative program to motivate underachieving African American students to prepare for college, so my husband and I both tutored in that program for several years. I’m also a member of the Links, Inc., an African American women’s organization which sponsors local and national projects to support the arts, improve health and nutrition for black families, increase educational opportunities for black youth, and maternal and child health in Africa.

In the past seven years I have turned from academic writing to more personal writing and wrote a chapter about my mother for a book called *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on*
Motherhood published in 2004. I am currently working on a family memoir focusing on my father’s family. I’ve also tried my hand at writing poetry and was both surprised and delighted when my first poem was published in the January 2006 issue of Essence Magazine, a very popular magazine for African American women. I was moved to write the poem after witnessing the devastation and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on the poor people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. I’ve discovered that, as one ages, the creative process seems to be released and one’s deepest feelings begin to surface and seek expression. Yet, I find it much more difficult to write creatively than to produce scholarly articles and books, so it’s more challenging but ultimately more satisfying.

I’ve spent the last two years sorting through family scrapbooks and photos in preparation for the family memoir I’m working on. I’m also working to fill in the gaps of our family genealogy, which my sister Shirlee and I had begun about 20 years ago. It’s so much easier now to track down forbears with Ancestry.com and other internet sites with their extensive data bases. It has been a wonderful way of reviewing my life, my family experiences, the interesting people I’ve met and places I’ve been, and the highlights of my career. It has given me a renewed appreciation of the importance of family values and support, of the exposure I’ve had to prominent African American and female role models, and of the good fortune and exceptional opportunities I’ve had in my life.

There were two special occasions last year (2006) that really crystallized my feelings about my family and my career. My husband and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary last August with a weekend of events for 125 closest family members and friends. We had a mini-reunion of 20 family members who converged on the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley from Connecticut, Maryland, Virginia, Los Angeles and the Bay Area, representing four generations of my family. I was struck by what an accomplished family we have, all college graduates with successful and interesting careers, contributing to the community in a variety of constructive ways, and carrying on the legacy of our parents and grandparents. Our extended family is also a true multiethnic and multicultural American family, including our Brazilian daughter-in-law and the spouses of our nieces, nephews and cousins who are proud of their Anglo-American, Irish, Italian, and German heritage.

Last December I had a reunion with some members of my first class of graduate students, who were celebrating their 25th class reunion from the School of Social Welfare in 1981. It was a warm and wonderful party, full of nostalgia and funny stories of their two years at Berkeley. They reminded me of how must I had enjoyed teaching and mentoring my students, particularly helping them to shape their professional identities. Many of them had arrived as idealistic reformers, but most of them left the program as realistic pragmatists, having come to better understand the limitations of the helping professions to effect long-lasting change. Hearing about their successful careers and flourishing families gave me enormous pleasure and satisfaction. Like all teachers I felt my ultimate reward was neither fame nor fortune, but the joy of seeing my students blossom into professionals with successful careers.

Our first grandchild, Julian Angelo Gibbs, was born on May 11th, 2007, so now we feel as if we have a new lease on life. We are looking forward to watching him grow into a healthy, well-adjusted, and intelligent child, exploring the Bay Area with him, and passing on our family stories, values and heritage to him. Now we feel even stronger about doing whatever we can to
make the world a better place for him to grow up—a better environment, a stronger economy, and a more civil and humane society with equal opportunity and equal justice for all people. I intend to continue to be active in politics and to support those candidates who promise to work for the common good, to unite people across racial and class lines, and to improve America’s relations with the rest of the world. Julian has already attended his first political fundraiser for Senator Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and our hope is that by the time he grows to adulthood, race will no longer be a significant issue in American society. As a multi-ethnic child with the genes of four continents in his DNA, I can only hope that he will learn the important lessons passed down from generations of his forebears on how to navigate the shoals of change and how to negotiate the bastions of privilege in the 21st century.