

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
World War II at Illinois Oral History Project
Katie Harper Wright
East St. Louis, Illinois
April 11, 2008

START OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A (original interview is a digital audio file dubbed to cassette tape for transcribing purposes)

Chris D'Arpa: So if you can speak we'll test the level. Just say...

Katie Harper Wright: Just my regular conversational tone?

CD: Yes. Are we recording? Keep talking. If you could keep talking that would be good.

KW: That'd be good. Ok. I do want to welcome you to our house. I'm not the mayor of East St. Louis so I can't welcome you to the city and I can't give you the key to the city.

CD: [laughter] Ok, one more. One more test. Just, "testing one, two, three."

KW: Testing, one, two, three.

CD: Ok, keep...

KW: Testing one, two, three.

CD: Ok, we should be all right and I think it is picking me up somewhat. Let's try putting the mic right here and see if it will pick up both of us.

KW: Right here.

CD: I am going to put this (the mic) over here. Just like that. Will you say "testing one, two, three" again?

KW: Testing one, two, three.

CD: Testing one, two, three.

KW: Testing one, two, three.

CD: Testing, testing, testing.

KW: Testing, testing, testing, Chris.

[laughter]

CD: All right, I am going let you hold it. If we get me that is fine if we don't we will have me on the other recording. Try one more time.

KW: Testing one, two, three Chris.

CD: Ok. Prop this up so you can see it. Turn this on too. Ok. So, I am here today with Katie Harper Wright at her home in East St. Louis. It's Friday April 11, 2008. Mrs. Wright, this is part of the oral history project for World War II at the University of Illinois and I wonder if you could just give me some background about yourself, where you grew up, where you went to school, what kind of family you came from?

KW: Ok. I grew up in Saint Louis, Missouri during the Depression. My mother was a single mother. My father and his family, after they divorced, moved to East St. Louis over in Illinois. But the Lockes, my mother's family, settled in Saint Louis, Missouri. So I grew up in downtown Saint Louis during the Depression. And we were poor, of course, everybody was poor during the Depression. So we didn't even know we were poor. I got a very fine education at grade school. Of course, back in those days it was segregated. And got a fine education in high school. I was Valedictorian of my high school class, Vashon High School in St. Louis.

CD: And what year would that have been?

KW: I graduated from high school in 1940 at age 16 and went to University at age 16.

CD: Did you really?

KW: Yes.

CD: So tell me where you went to University.

KW: Where?

CD: Yes.

KW: University of Illinois. And, of course, I started out in the school of LAS, Liberal Arts and Sciences, which is a very strong school. University of Illinois is strong in all it's schools but is particularly strong in LAS. And I did well at the University. Loved the University. I was on the debate team. The first black girl to serve on the debate team. Remember it was segregated in those days but that didn't appear to be a problem to me. We could not live in dorms. Black people couldn't live in the dorms. Of course, we weren't even called black people in those days, we were called negroes, in those days, coloreds or whatever. So we lived out in town.

CD: Was there a large black population of city folks?

KW: Of city folks? Oh yes. Thousands I guess but we roomed with different people out in town. I lived at 410 East Columbia with Mrs. Lewis, practically my whole time at the University. And at that time, Chris, there was just about a hundred or so black students on that campus. There were not that many black students on the University of Illinois campus in Champaign or Urbana, at that time. And I was there from 1940 to 1944. I graduated in 1944 at the age of 20.

CD: And tell me too about your, I am sorry I am checking the levels on the machine, maybe if you want to hold the mic a little further away from your mouth that would help. So you went to the University of Illinois in 1940, how did you choose the University of Illinois given that you were a Missourian?

KW: Well, let me tell you. My father was in politics over here in East St. Louis. He had a wash rack, he washed cars for some of the white politicians, the mayor and all those people here in East St. Louis. And so my father got me a scholarship to go the University of Illinois.

CD: That's...

KW: That's how I was able to go there.

CD: And how did you get there? Did you take the train, the bus...

KW: Let me tell you and I remember it was on a Sunday and my father drove me there with my stepmother and a woman by the name of Margie Olive. So, we drove to the University of Illinois. To Champaign. And they took me off to college. Katie went off to college.

CD: Now, I am going to step back a tiny back because I was adjusting the machine and everything but I neglected to ask you more about your family. Did you have siblings?

KW: Yes. My brother, I have a brother, who in, when did the war start?

CD: '41.

KW: '41. My brother went into the Navy in '41 and there were just the two of us.

CD: And was he older or younger?

KW: My brother was two years younger than I. He died two and a half years ago. And I just miss him so much but we grew up together in Saint Louis. We always had jobs Chris. I've had a job since I was eleven years old. I washed dishes at Mrs. Spark's restaurant. He sold newspapers or whatever. Back in those days a newspaper only cost like a penny,

I think. My mother worked for a dollar a day and car fare for some of the white families over in Saint Louis who had a few pennies, I guess.

CD: And tell me where you lived in Saint Louis.

KW: Downtown St. Louis. We lived in downtown St. Louis at 1016 North Thirteenth Street. One of the tv stations is on there right now. But I am a downtowner.

CD: Ok. But were there department stores and things down there.

KW: Oh yes, it was called the Grand Leader at that time and my Aunt Clara used to take me to the Grand Leader. I was always in with my Aunt Clara and my people over here. My brother didn't pay much attention to them. And sure we had department stores. We had Jim Remley. St. Louis was thriving then. I went to Jefferson grade school when I was four years old. And I was at Jefferson grade school the day in September 1927 when the big tornado came to St. Louis.

CD: Through town? It came through the city?

KW: It destroyed the whole city.

CD: Oh my goodness.

KW: But it didn't do much to downtown. I don't remember it tearing down our house or anything. But I remember this, sort of reading about it, but I remember I was at the Kindergarten in Jefferson school in September 1927 because I went there when I was four years old. In those days they didn't have it where you had to be six years old. So I've been in school and loved schooling since I was four years old.

CD: That's terrific!

KW: I have loved schooling for eighty years! [laughter]

CD: That's great. Ok. So, can you talk a little bit about how the Depression affected you family, your memories of it?

KW: I surely can. First of all, let me say, I am not going to keep on saying poor because everybody was poor. But my mother was very proud. We never received any type of relief or handouts or anything like that. However, the Catholic Sisters were very good to us, to poor people in downtown St. Louis and I guess everywhere during those days. The Catholic Sisters gave us milk. We would line up at St. Patrick's Church, they would put milk in our pails. They taught us how to do embroidery. So, we got by.

CD: And you've told me that your father was instrumental in getting you into the University of Illinois. Did you know about the University of Illinois before he...?

KW: Oh yes I did. And the way I knew about the University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Ohio, University of Missouri, and all of those and let me tell you that in those days the University of Missouri did not accept black students. And so my teachers at Vashon were bright, all smart people, the state of Missouri paid tuition to University of Illinois, Ohio State and all like that for people, students from St. Louis, from Missouri to go to the Big Ten Universities. Can you believe that?

CD: No, I didn't know that.

KW: That's right. My teachers, Pruitt and Sawyer all these and my Latin teacher, Lane, all those people were from the University of Illinois because the state of Missouri had paid their tuition to go to the University of Illinois.

CD: So, and again my ignorance I really should know this but the public schools were segregated, I knew that, were the teachers in segregated schools also African American for African American students?

KW: Oh yeah. Everything was segregated in those days.

CD: So you had no white teachers.

KW: Nope. And can I tell you this, all the way up from, all the way through graduate school through my doctorate degree I never ever had a white teacher or white professor. Can you believe that?

CD: Even at Illinois?

KW: Oh no not at Illinois. There were no black professors in those days.

CD: Oh I am sorry I misunderstood you.

KW: Even at St. Louis U for my doctorate a few years ago there. Now there are plenty of black professors because I am one.

CD: Right. No, I misunderstood you. I thought you continuing the conversation about having only African American teachers in public school and grammar school but then once you got to higher ed you had no African American teachers only white instructors. That's interesting. When you started teaching yourself did you have a sense of being one of the few African American teachers on the faculty?

KW: No because I started teaching in East St. Louis in 1944 and you know that predated *Brown*.

CD: Ten years.

KW: And so East St. Louis was segregated. One of my friends, Delores Storman Ray was one of the litigants to help desegregate the schools of East St. Louis. So, I was a black teacher in a black school district for many years. Until after *Brown*.

CD: After *Brown*. Let's back track to Illinois and the War. You said your parents drove you to school the University of Illinois in 1940.

KW: Yeah, my father and stepmother.

CD: Father and stepmother. Did your brother come along?

KW: No.

CD: Where did they leave...Do you remember anything about first...

KW: I remember everything about it. I first said that I stayed with Mrs. Lewis my four years. I did not. WillieMae Pickens was a friend of my father and stepmother through religious circles so through the Baptist religious circle. So, they knew each other from around the state. So, my father got me a room at WillieMae Pickens house. That is where I first stayed.

CD: And do you remember the address?

KW: I should remember her address but I don't remember her address.

CD: But it was...

KW: It was Washington, she lived on Washington Avenue. 4th and Washington Avenue. She had a family. She had two girls and a husband. Leroy Pickens was the husband and she had two girls. But I stayed with her first. And then I became...I stayed with her about a year maybe and through church circles I became acquainted with Mrs. Lewis who was such a wonderful person in my life. A blind women, totally blind but could everything. Had a beautiful home, could cook. Taught me so much. I learned a lot from Mrs. Lewis from Lena Rivers Lewis.

CD: And she was in Champaign?

KW: And she was in Champaign. She lived at 410 East Columbia. I will always remember that address.

CD: That is where you spent most of your years. So you came to University of Illinois when you were sixteen. How did you choose your classes? Do you remember whether you had an orientation and did they get your classes together when you first arrived or...?

KW: Well I remember they did the usual things. We had advisors, of course, and a big University like that. They didn't have, you know, people all in a big auditorium where they told you stuff. I don't remember anything like that but we had advisors. I still have date books. Freshman got a date book each year and I still have all of my date books.

CD: That's great. That is just great. So, how did you select your first classes? Do you remember when you arrived what that first day was? Was it in August?

KW: It was in August.

CD: And your classes probably started shortly after that.

KW: They probably did.

CD: When do you remember starting to select the classes that you wanted to take and the direction you were going? Because presumably you had general ed classes.

KW: I did. But I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't go into pre law or anything like that so, I just had general studies. I do remember we had to have rhetoric but I was exempt from rhetoric I and went onto to rhetoric II. I guess advisors helped me select the classes.

CD: Someone I talked with mentioned testing that there were tests.

KW: Testing?

CD: Sort of placement tests?

KW: No, we didn't have any placement tests because I went in at the top of my class. See I was valedictorian of my high school class so I didn't have to get tested. They didn't have affirmative action in those days and I am real proud of that. And I am for affirmative action if people needed it but in those days we got into Universities because we were smart.

CD: Well, this was a woman who was telling me that I guess there were different types of rhetoric classes that they could take.

KW: Oh there were.

CD: And there were different directions that people were interested in.

KW: I may have had, I don't know if I had a rhetoric test or not but I don't think so. It probably went according to my transcript from high school.

CD: Sure. All right. This must have been an interesting first few weeks there because presumably there were very few African American students. So what was your impression? How did you feel, how did people treat you and engage you?

KW: Well I knew some of the African American students. I knew the ones from East St. Louis because I used to come over here to see my dad and so I had made friends with Carl Clemmons and the Adams boy. So I knew some of those students and they lived out in town too. And we were able to socialize together but I'm a joiner and I was big in the YWCA in St. Louis as a girl so I immediately got acquainted with the YWCA on that campus. And was welcomed and everything to the doll show and all. Also I was president of the debate team at Vashon.

CD: In high school.

KW: In high school. So then I engaged myself with the debate team. And I still have those clippings where we debated. Still have those news clippings from the...what's the newspaper there?

CD: The *Illio*, I mean the *Daily Illini*.

KW: The *Daily Illini* but of the *News-Gazette*.

CD: Oh, local paper.

KW: The local paper, yeah, I still have those clippings. So I just made myself at home on the campus and made friends and scouted about.

CD: Tell me too about since part of our interest here is about the war. Tell me a little bit about...because you were on campus in 1944...

KW: We were on campus on December 7, 1941 and I don't remember everything about that but I remember that it was very devastating.

CD: Do you remember how you heard about Pearl Harbor?

KW: You Pear....

CD: Or how you heard, how you found out?

KW: Well, we didn't have television or anything. I guess by word of mouth, I guess. I always like to hang out at what they call the Union building and so we got it by word of mouth by that and maybe the churches but we knew about it.

CD: And what was the mood on campus and among your friends and associates? What you heard. Did you talk about it?

KW: Well, we talked about it and we were angry about it because you know we had people who had gone to war. So my high school people, Clyde Williams and all were lost at Pearl Harbor. So, we knew about it and talked about it. We were being angry about it and we said bad things about Japanese people. I won't tell you what we called them but it was a bad time for us.

CD: Where there Japanese students on campus, do you remember?

KW: I don't remember knowing any but there were I am sure. They dug them out and put them in some camps somewhere but I didn't know any.

CD: So, we have Pearl Harbor...

KW: All during the war I was on that campus.

CD: And what do you remember? What impact did the war have on your life and on campus?

KW: Well, I am trying to remember. We went to our classes. We talked about the war. We became friends though with the young men from the 99th Pursuit Squadron who turned out to be the Tuskegee Airmen. See, they first trained at Chanute and we became friends with them.

CD: How did you get to know them?

KW: Through the USO.

CD: Through the USO.

KW: They had USO and we would go to dances and things at the USO and we became acquainted with them.

CD: And the USO was in Champaign?

KW: It was in Champaign.

CD: So they would come down to Champaign.

KW: Because remember it was still segregated. They would come down to Champaign and they made friends with us girls on the campus.

CD: And you made a point. You decided to go to these USO functions.

KW: Yeah. That was fun for us. That was some of our recreation, you see.

CD: Did you talk about the war and the prospect of them going overseas?

KW: We did and when they left...when the 99th Pursuit Squadron left we were all sad. And I still have pictures of some of them. I won't go into my personal life with some of them. I can't do that.

CD: Can't do that.

KW: No, but we had fun with them. We dated them. And those were some smart guys too because sometimes...I had a couple of friends we had quizzes at night that they would quiz us and help us with our lessons. Because these were college men. They were already college graduates.

CD: Were they mostly...what were their demographics? Were they from all over?

KW: A lot of them were from the South through like Georgia and like that.

CD: So you'd all gather in the Union? Is that where...where would the USO...

KW: No there was, if I could visualize, there was a dance hall at the end, the very end of Champaign. The very end of the street down there and they would come to our rooming houses where we were because I was not the only one who lived with Mrs. Lewis. Several of us did. So we would gather at each other's houses like that. But our recreation was done at the dance hall down at the end of the town. But we would have dances and he had the music and we danced to "Star Dust" and all those kind of war songs.

CD: Did you have live bands or...?

KW: People picking guitars, no live bands, no. And records. We had record spinners.

CD: So what about the soldiers that were on campus training. Did you have much contact with them?

KW: No. I didn't know too many of them that were on the campus. We knew the guys from Chanute. Those were our friends from Chanute Air Base.

CD: Did you have any...were you aware of the soldiers training on campus? Did it affect your life at all?

KW: I don't remember that it affected my life.

CD: But you were aware of them?

KW: Umm hmm. Yeah.

CD: Ok. So you told me that you when you first went to Illinois you were thinking that you might want to be a lawyer. Can you tell me why?

KW: Well, everyone said that I was good talker in school, in high school and everything. And I had heard of Lawyer Witherspoon in St. Louis and knew of some lawyers in St. Louis. Some blacks lawyers. And I said, Margaret Bush Wilson was one, and I said, "Um, I think I would like to be a lawyer too." A youngster, you know. "I think I'd like to be a lawyer." But then when I got to University later on, I changed my mind. I wanted to be a teacher like Alice McGee Smart and like Zephre Lane and those people.

CD: From your...

KW: From my high school.

CD: From your high school.

KW: And from my grade school.

CD: So then you started taking courses in the college of education.

KW: Well, you don't declare that until your sophomore year like that. So then I switched over to the College of Education.

CD: And what were the classes like? Were there many African American students?

KW: Just a few.

CD: Just a few.

KW: Just a few. You see there weren't that many African Americans on that campus. So I was always...just always one or two in our classes.

CD: And none of your instructors were African American?

KW: Not a one.

CD: So did you...can you characterize your relationship with the faculty and graduate students?

KW: Sure. I would always approach my professors and I remember telling one professor, B.O Smith who is the senior author on the Smith, Stanley, and whatever. He wrote the book and I remember telling him, "Now Dr. Smith I am an it shores A student." And I had the nerve telling this man that, "And I can expect an A out of this class and what I can do, the extra things that I need to do in this class to get an A." I think I intimidated the poor man because I might not have done a work but I got an A. But I always and when I worked at St. Louis University I always told my students, counseled my students

at St. Louis U, I told them, “Always get in contact with your professors, make office hours with them and go and see them.” And I knew to do that at sixteen or seventeen or eighteen years old. I would also go talk with my professors and ask them what I could do. I didn’t always get A’s or anything but I did very well.

CD: Do you remember other professors? Did other ones stand out for you either good or bad?

KW: Dolch stands out.

CD: Who is that?

KW: Dolch, Ed Dolch.

CD: Ed Dolch.

KW: Ed Dolch who wrote the Dolch list and all like that. You have to know...at Illinois University even in those days the professors, the people there were stars. They were stars. And I worked under some very famous professors like in grad school I worked under Sam Kirk who is the granddaddy of special ed and Merle Karnes and all those people. But I remember Dr. Smith, B.O Smith. I will never forget him. And I don’t feel that I was ever cheated out of a grade or anything except one time. One time there was a lady her name was Ms. McKerry and I can see her now. A white lady, of course, a white professor and I earned an A in that class. I really did because I had helped some of the white football players who weren’t half in class all the time because they were away. But I would help them with their stuff. She gave them A’s and gave me B’s and I accosted her with it. Well, I said, “Mrs. McKerry,” I don’t think she had a doctorate, I think she was Ms. McKerry. I says, “I think I should have gotten an A in this class.” But I didn’t hassle her or anything but that is the only time that I felt that I was treated unfairly in terms of grade wise at the University.

CD: And do you remember what class that was?

KW: That was an education class. It was an education class. It was a psych class I think.

CD: A psych class. How did you get in a position where you were helping the white football players?

KW: Well, we sat next to each other in class and we became friends.

CD: Ok. Now did you go to football games?

KW: I didn’t like football but I went once in a while.

CD: Did you. Do you remember...

KW: But I always went to the basketball games though.

CD: Did you really?

KW: Oh yes.

CD: How was the team then?

KW: The team was, I don't remember, I guess they did ok. But the football team was really good back in those days. Oh, what was the young man's name, his name slips me he was a young black guy. (Claude "Buddy" Young)!!

(phone rings)

CD: (Should I stop this?)

KW: (No that is fine they will leave a message.) Football player back in those days, had a twin sister, but I can't think of his name. But they had a good football team and there were several blacks on that team too.

CD: But the basketball team was where your heart was. In basketball.

KW: Yeah but I don't think they had any blacks on the basketball team at that time. I don't remember.

CD: Do you remember any sort of school wide activities. Sporting events or a good one given the band and the mascot at that time, Chief Illiniwek. Do you remember...

KW: You have to know that we were out in town. We didn't live on campus. We were not in the dorms and so we were not...African Americans were not really integrated into the social life of campus. That I remember. But I was off into YWCA that was my thing. I was all entwined into the social life of the YWCA but so far as the games and the mascots and cheerleaders and all we were not involved in that.

CD: You created your own social world.

KW: Yeah but my social world was the YWCA.

CD: Tell me more about that. Was it the YWCA on Wright Street right across from the Quad?

KW: That is right. And I was on Y cabinet which is one of the ruling rooms of the YWCA at that time. And I was able to make my way there because I had a good background in YWCA from St. Louis, from high school. And I was one of the officials and one of the greeters and all of that. So I was big on the YWCA on that campus.

CD: And what kind of activities did you help plan?

KW: We had international month, international receptions, we went out into the city to tutor, we had the doll show. The doll show was really big. We had made these dolls and shipped them overseas or whatever. I have news clippings of all of that.

CD: Oh that is terrific. And those will all be sent to the Archives at University of Missouri-St. Louis.

KW: Yes.

CD: That is where all your personal papers...

KW: No. I have some here. I have that scrapbook here. I don't let that scrapbook go away. I have it here. It's got all the clippings and all that stuff, pictures and everything.

CD: That's terrific it's nice that you kept it.

KW: I'm a keeper of things.

CD: And tell me again about the elephant.

START OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

KW: Well, I belong to Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. That's chapter, being on that campus in that chapter there is Alpha Nu but I just heard the sad news that Alpha Nu, I just heard, I don't know if it is true is suspended on that campus. I don't know what they did. I'll have to find out maybe by hazing or something like that. But Delta in there about two hundred thousand of us throughout the world and I am a past national officer and all of that. Delta is a public service organization. That elephant is not officially our logo but it is our logo. Deltas all over the world collect elephants and so you can see in my house there are elephants everywhere.

CD: There are elephants everywhere.

KW: Elephant lamps, elephant clothes, elephant pocket books, elephant hats and that's our logo. But the main purpose of Delta Sigma Theta is public service. We do education, we do library science, we do voter registration. Just a lot of community service.

CD: And when and how did you get involved? (can you hold that up just a tad?)

KW: Well, I wasn't made an Alpha Nu. I didn't make Delta until I was in the graduate school.

CD: At Illinois?

KW: Until I graduated and became a teacher here and moved to East St. Louis. But I have been a Delta now for fifty nine years.

CD: That's terrific.

KW: But people all over the world know Delta Sigma Theta. Most of the black women throughout the world who are in leadership positions are Deltas. And I do remember that, and I a lot of whites don't know Delta, but when President Clinton was here in East St. Louis several years ago and I had on my tag because I am one of the officials here. It said Dr. Katie Wright. And then I had on an elephant pin. Deltas always wear elephants. He says, "Oh", he looked at my tag, he says, "Dr. Wright you are a Delta." And I said, "Yes Mr. President and I am also Republican." And he said, "Oh my God, I don't hold that against you though." And he patted my hand and looked at me. I would have voted for him right then and there. [laughter]

CD: He knew his stuff! Ok, I transgress. Let's go back to Illinois. I have a list of certain areas we'd like to cover with you.

KW: Sure.

CD: And one is about rules and restrictions for students. Do you remember?

KW: Oh, do I remember! Because I remember...because even if you didn't live on campus you still had to abide by the rules and regulations of curfew.

CD: Keep talking.

KW: And if I am remembering correctly it was ten o'clock during the week and it was midnight on the weekends. If I am remembering right. And you still had to observe that and if anybody snitched and told that you didn't, even though you didn't live on campus, you got in trouble. And one time we had a weekend party. I mean it was a big party. We all stayed all together. We were having a good time. That whole weekend together. We didn't even go to where we lived. We had this big house just having a good time and somebody snitched to the dean, named Maria Leonard.

CD: Oh, she's on my list to ask you what you remember about her.

KW: But she was my friend and I had made friends with her.

CD: Now, how did that happen?

KW: Well, I don't know how I got in with the dean probably got in her face, I don't know. But then I worked at her house one time for her. So, she knew me. So, I was able to maneuver and get us not suspended from the University. To keep us from getting put out.

CD: Do you remember what she said to you about this?

KW: Well, she says, “Well, Katie, Katie Harper I’m just so surprised at you.” Because I lied, you know, and everything. I says, “Oh, but I wasn’t there but we didn’t do all that they said we did.” But I remember dean Leonard and she was good to me.

CD: Do you have any more stories about her?

KW: No that was the main story about Dean Leonard. I’m blessed Chris. I do have a gift of making friends. I really have that and it’s a gift. And so I was able to make my way on that campus because I had the gift of being able to express myself and to make friends and like that. And that’s how I made my way on that campus.

CD: Was dean Leonard...you know you have this gift that not everyone has and not everyone came to the campus or still comes to that campus knowing that the faculty is there for the students. So, did you have a sense that Dean Leonard was visible and accessible to other students.

KW: I had that sense! I had that sense. She really was and she was very watchful. She was strict though and I found her to be very accessible. At least I know to me, I could go in her office and all. She was accessible, she was a good dean.

CD: Where were the offices?

KW: I guess it must have been in Lincoln Hall. Probably her office, if I am remembering.

CD: So just across from the Y?

KW: I think.

CD: Lincoln Hall’s just across the street from the YWCA.

KW: But she had...she was not married of course and she had a nice apartment and everything and I went there and cleaned for her sometime. But she was very accessible to the students, I felt.

CD: Did you...

KW: And can I say this too.

CD: Please.

KW: Even back in those days when everything was segregated. I didn’t get a sense that the professors and the people with whom I came in contact were bigots. They were not bigots. These were scholars. And they were there to teach and they treated us all...you know you just had to make your grades and like that. I didn’t run into any bigots there.

CD: Even among the students?

KW: Overt. Of the students I guess...they had their own sororities and their fraternities and like that. But I just have to say I didn't run into any overt bigotry except that one time with that lady who cheated me out of that grade. And I will always remember that.

CD: With the football players.

KW: Yeah.

CD: What was her name again?

KW: McKerry.

CD: McKerry.

KW: Her last name is McKerry.

CD: That's too bad.

KW: But they were...oh, and I remember my Latin teacher and I can't think of his name. I remember he was from, is there a Bowdin B O W D I N University, Bowdin? He was from Bowdin, I remember, and I remember he was very tall and handsome and he was very elite and all like that. He was my Latin teacher. You see I took Latin at the University.

CD: For all...for the entire time you were there?

KW: Not the whole time, when I first started there. Because I had done well in Latin in high school but I didn't do all that well at Latin at the University.

CD: Really?

KW: I got B's and C's. I did not get A's and B's.

CD: That must have been disappointing.

KW: It was. But I got what I deserved.

CD: Were there classes that you particularly liked?

KW: Oh, I like history and I did well in history. I love...In particularly English history. I loved English history because they had a lot of scandals and stuff and I like to read about those. But I did really well and I did well, of course, in writing.

CD: And how long...so you did your undergraduate work there. When did you leave?

KW: I left in August of 1944.

CD: Ok. So the war was still going on.

KW: Yes.

CD: Until March or so. Were there other markers that you remember about the war? Battles, did you hear about battles? Did you read the...

KW: We read everything and we read everything about the battles. And of course the Pacific Theater of Operations, we read about that. But I was mostly interested in the ETO, the European Theater of Operations. Because I still heard from some of the guys who had been at Chanute and like that.

CD: Oh, you corresponded?

KW: Uh huh. I still heard. Of course, we lost some of those guys too. But we were very affected by the war but we kept on doing what we needed to do and got our degrees and everything.

CD: Do you have any specific memories about something that one of the servicemen wrote back to you about the experience of war? Does anything stand out?

KW: No, not really. Just general stuff. Just general stuff. But I don't remember being deprived either. I just...I am sure they had during the war they had rationing but I don't remember being deprived of any food or anything. You see I had two jobs when I was at the University. I worked two jobs for awhile there. I worked at the...I was a typist in the teacher placement office. That was when I was a junior and a senior then. And I was bussed dishes at the Union building.

CD: Really?

KW: So I had two jobs.

CD: And how much time did you spend at that...did that take? Do you remember when you worked or?

KW: It didn't keep me from studying. I remember that. But I do remember that I was a typist at the teacher placement office and I hated it and I said, "I never...I am going to get my education so I don't ever have to be a typist." I remember thinking that.

CD: This reminded me of something that, I completely...I just lost it. Oh shoot Chris.

KW: But they did have jobs for us on campus.

CD: To help you pay for school.

KW: Uh huh. But that campus was segregated, I guess, the whole time I was there because we could not live in the dorms. We lived out in town. And where I lived it was near the end of town and we walked from near the end of town to the campus.

CD: You walked to school.

KW: But everybody walked in those days.

CD: Did you get home much while you were at Illinois?

KW: Sometimes we got home for like Thanksgiving, Christmas but we didn't get home every weekend. But we rode the bus home. The Greyhound bus coming through Tolono and Effingham and all of that. I have good memories from the University.

CD: Do you?

KW: I do. Even though a lot of times you didn't have money and all. But I remember one time, Chris, Mrs. Lewis was blind she was totally blind but she trusted me. I would count her money for her and take her shopping and all of that. But my dad would send me the money to pay my room and board to her. But one time he sent the money, I lied and told her he did not send me the money yet. But she would always feel my clothes to see what I was wearing and she would say, "Oh, come here and let me see what you are wearing." And she would feel. I had a camel's hair coat. That was the one coat I had. But the new coat that I bought with the money that my dad had sent me to give to her was a Gabardine coat and it was smooth. And she felt that because she says, "Girl you got a new coat." And she and I laughed about that for years.

CD: So you stayed in touch with her?

KW: Oh, yeah. She became so proud of me when I became a teacher and a director and all like that.

CD: Now did...you went to graduate school as well?

KW: Yeah. My Master's is from University of Illinois.

CD: It is?

KW: Yeah. Now my Doctorate is from St. Louis U.

CD: Ok. But did you get your Master's right after...

KW: Oh no. I worked awhile. In fact I was teacher in regular ed and Dr. Pritchett, who was the new director of special ed...

CD: At Illinois?

KW: No here in East St. Louis.

CD: In East St. Louis.

KW: He says, "You're a good teacher. I need to recruit you to teach special kids." And I said, "I don't have any money to go back." Because back in those days we were only

getting a hundred fifty dollars a month as teachers and like that. And he says, "Well, I'll get you a scholarship, a Lion's Scholarship, to go back and get your Master's." So, then I went back to get my Master's in special and worked with some of the giants in the field.

CD: How long...and so what year did you go back to Illinois?

KW: I went back to get my Master's in 1956, I guess. I got my Master's in '57, I think. Or was it '59? I think I got my Master's...I started in '57 and got my Master's in '59, I think.

CD: How had the University changed...

KW: Change? Oh, you had change because it was not segregated or anything. And it was changed. It was more open. You could live where you wanted to live and go drink beer when you wanted to drink it and whatever. It was totally open at that time.

CD: Were any of your former professors still on the faculty?

KW: Yeah. And the School of Education director was there. Dolch was there, who did the Dolch list. And I can remember my professors' names but I don't and some of them were there Dolch.

CD: Do you remember changes in the University during the war when you were there for your undergraduate education? Did you notice as men were drafted...

KW: Oh, the men left. There were very few men on that campus. But the men were gone mostly. A lot of them were gone, I remember that.

CD: And what was that like?

KW: Well, let me tell you it didn't affect me that much, the black girls that much, because most men were white. And they had gone and the black boys we knew at Chanute were gone so it did affect us and we were very, we called the others that were there, we called them "four fs", you know. We didn't even like them. [laughter]

CD: Did it allow...did the war and the fact that there were so many more women on campus, did the war allow a certain kind of bonding between white and black women at all, students?

KW: I don't remember that that happened. But, I keep saying, see I had white friends, white girl friends, women friends on that campus but they were all YWCA girls. Just a bunch of them they were...some of them I can't remember their names and all but they were my friends. I had always bonded with them.

CD: Were...

KW: But now you see, on that campus they had a lot of sorority houses and they still have them. The Chi Omega's and these were white girls with long blond hair and blue

eyes and they still, the Chi Omega's are tall white girls with long blond hair and blue eyes. We didn't...some of them were my friends at YWCA but that was a campus where they had sororities houses that were very big. On that campus and these girls they all bonded together so the black girls didn't have much to do with them except at YWCA. So there was not a lot to my knowledge and with me, a lot of bonding with them or anything like that. There was not animosity of course. And when we were in class together, we talked, exchanged notes, and that kind of thing. But so far as social life, our social life was not together.

CD: What about in classes and exchanging notes and studying, studying were you required to go to the library at all?

KW: Oh now we weren't required to go but those of us who knew...for example when my professor would give me an assignment and the syllabus. And he said, "There are certain books on reserve at the library." I ran to the library to beat everybody to get the books that were on reserve. So there is competition at the University for grades. See they graded on the curve so there's competition for grades.

(Phone rings)

CD: (I am going to pause this one more time. ... Let's get this one going again. It's going again and recording and this one is going again. Ok. Are you doing ok holding onto the mic?)

KW: (Yes I am.)

CD: (Ok.) So tell me more about the library. What do you remember about the library?

KW: Oh that library and I am a book person. In St. Louis, we lived downtown as I told you, not far from the main library and that's the same library that is there now. And we would go there, I would go there, and sit there and read. So I have always loved libraries and you can see in my house I love books. There are books everywhere.

CD: There are books everywhere.

KW: I am book person.

CD: Books and elephants.

KW: Books and elephants. The library at the University of Illinois is fabulous. And they've got everything that you, just a lot of stuff that you need, and it's just a marvelous library.

CD: When you were there and you were...

KW: It was a fine library when I was, back in those days.

CD: Right. In your majoring in education.

KW: Uh huh.

CD: Was there a separate education library within the main University library.

KW: I don't remember that there was a separate one but of course in the Stacks, we could find the material in the card catalog and all. So we had what we needed.

CD: And the librarians?

KW: I don't remember the librarians.

(Computer voice saying Garage door)

KW: (It's my husband coming in. Everything talks here.)

CD: (Everything talks.)

KW: (The burglary alarm talks, the phone talks.) [laughter]

CD: Ok. Commencement. Did you attend commencement?

KW: No I didn't.

CD: Really?

KW: Because, well, didn't have money for that.

CD: You needed to...

KW: I just came. You see commencement...I had already...when they had commencement I had come back to East St. Louis. I had earned my degree so I was here teaching when they had commencement.

CD: Ok.

KW: And on the Master's level I didn't go back to commencement. I did march on my doctoral program at St. Louis University.

CD: (Hello.)

Mr. Wright: (How are you doing? The University of Illinois?)

CD: (Hi. That's all right. Chris D'Arpa, nice to meet you.)

KW: (He's an Illini too. He got his Master's from University of Illinois.)

CD: (Oh, my goodness!)

KW: And you asked me about the librarian. The University of Illinois has one of the finest libraries. Even when I travel abroad there are two places that I look too, that is the museums and the libraries. And the Universities' is very fine.

CD: So tell me more...when you were teaching at East St. Louis were you living here in East St. Louis or were you still living...

KW: No we lived here. No we have always lived here.

CD: Ok. And another...I am switching gears here entirely but since I have you here, the University of Illinois now has a number of projects going on with community groups in East St. Louis.

KW: Yes.

CD: And I wonder if you have any connection with any of those projects or if you could tell me a little bit about the history of East St. Louis.

KW: I don't have connection with the projects but being a writer and a person who is here all time I know about the projects. I know that the University is here, I think last week or this week or sometime they were here trying to do some clean up work. And the University used to have extension classes here. That's how we earned our Master's because the University would send professors here. We met at the high school to earn our Master's. So the University has always been, we call it looking out for East St. Louis.

CD: Now I've heard that East St. Louis during a certain period was the place to come for music.

KW: To come for music?

CD: Yeah.

KW: Oh, it is. It was. Because Ron Carter was here for one thing, a big musician. And years ago everybody talked about Miles Davis who I knew as a kid and all. It's a good music place.

CD: So would you say in the fifties was it, the heyday?

KW: Oh, it rocked during the fifties.

CD: Did it really?

KW: Yeah.

CD: Yeah, and people came from all over.

KW: They did.

CD: To enjoy the music.

KW: Yeah. We had the...Tina Turner was here during the fifties and the sixties, she was here during the fifties I guess. The sixties I don't think they were here. It was a place, it was a rocking place.

CD: And what about one of the community groups that the University of Illinois East St. Louis Action Project is working with is Katherine Dunham center and museum.

KW: Yes they are.

CD: Did you know Ms. Dunham?

KW: Oh, I knew her. I didn't know her real well but I knew her. I sure did and a couple of my public service groups that I am in gave money to that. In fact my Top Ladies of Distinction we are helping with that museum now to raise money for that now.

CD: Oh, really?

KW: But you remember now she was not University of Illinois. She was SIUE.

CD: Right.

KW: I have just gone on the board for SIUE School of Education advisory board.

CD: Oh, terrific.

KW: And I am not a alum from there but they know my work and they asked me to. So, this past April the seventh, April the seventh I was installed on that school of education board. So, I am connected with most of the Universities here. UMSL has my papers. I taught at Harris Stowe. I am from the University of Illinois. Presented a University of Johannesburg in South Africa and all that. I am a school person. I love schools.

CD: And what age, I know you focus mostly on special ed...of children of all ages or did you have a particular age group within special ed that you were?

KW: Well, my specialty is EMH that is mildly retarded.

CD: Ok.

KW: And then we have the profound, we didn't go exactly by ages. But I taught EMH, kids who were like thirteen to sixteen years old and like that. I've never taught...now my daughter is early childhood but I never taught little children. I've never taught lower than fourth grade. So, the kids that I taught were like from nine years old to up to graduate school.

CD: And how did you make the transition? You had your AB and you started teaching back here in East St. Louis and then you were encouraged and supported to get your Master's degree...

KW: In special ed.

CD: In special ed. And then you decided...how did you decide to get a PhD? What were you thinking about? Where was it taking you?

KW: Well, I was already director of special education.

CD: Here in East St. Louis?

KW: In East St. Louis.

CD: And was this in the public schools of East St. Louis or?

KW: Yeah for public schools. I was director for what we call, the joint agreement, and that took care of Venice and Brooklyn and East St. Louis. East St. Louis was the major part of it. You know we had to talk to politicians to try to get money for special and to try to build the department and everything. And some of my friends, Dr. Parks and Dr. Jenkins and all them, Dr. Mason were working on their doctorate and they say, "Come on you need to work on your doctorate too, we are going to SLU."

CD: Saint Louis University.

KW: Saint Louis U, uh huh. So that's what we did. But they got theirs in administration. I got mine at Saint Louis U in special education and political science.

CD: Oh my goodness.

KW: Because to be a special ed administrator you need to know how to access politicians in order to get things for your kids and for your people in your department.

CD: And so what was the next step after the PhD?

KW: Well, I have an Ed.D. I am Ed.D.

CD: Ed.D?

KW: Uh huh. Educational doctorate.

CD: Ok.

KW: And just kept...and I am still active in my profession because I belong to...I am still active in my professional organizations. I was president of all the honors societies that I been in. President Bush, I worked on his campaigns both of his campaigns because his mother was my friend from Girl Scouts.

CD: His mother was?

KW: His mother was my friend from Girl Scouts. His mother and I worked on Girl Scout national board together.

CD: Oh, professionally. I thought you meant as a girl scout.

KW: No. We were on Girl Scout national board together and I never even knew anything about her son but then when he got to run then she went and got all of the names and everything from Girl Scouts. Her friends in girl scout and asked me would I help her husband, her son. And so that is how I got on his campaigns. Well, he put me on the special education commission. The Commission for Excellence in Special Education. We went throughout the country looking at special ed programs and all and we had to write a report and everything. So I have kept up with special ed and I have been rewarded by it and I went to South Africa and China. They are working on special ed and making presentation in special ed. But it all started from Dr. Pritchett saying, "Kate you need to come over with me in special." And I said, "Dr. Pritchett, I don't have any money to go back to University to get a Master's in that." He says, "I'll get you the money." And I just really kept on with it. And I love special.

CD: So, tell me...if you could describe your time at Illinois in just a couple of sentences, what would you say?

KW: I would say that it was a good time for me. That we had hardships. We didn't have a lot of money. We didn't have cars, we had to walk and all. But nobody discriminated against me. Nobody bothered me. They gave me two jobs. I got a good education there. I did well at the University. I really did. The University helped to make me what I am today. And in fact, the University is proud of me. The University made me their distinguished alum in 1996.

CD: Oh, terrific. Congratulations!

KW: Thank you. So I had a good time. And you have to know, Chris, it is not money and stuff all the time. I remember we didn't have money but we got a good education

there. And I enjoyed my time at the University. I had a pretty good social life there and it was just a good time for me. It was a time for me from age sixteen to twenty.

CD: And the war...I mean if you think about, obviously, for me the Vietnam War was my war.

KW: Yes.

CD: As the same age. The ages for you those were my ages for Vietnam. And it had a very powerful effect on my life, daily life. Probably partially because it was Vietnam and not World War II. But it was something that was in the paper everyday and talked about it with my friends and in talking with people about World War II who were in college at World War II...

KW: Well, the same thing. We kept up with it through the papers and all. And it was...well, we felt for the boys. The World War II boys and all like that. And we kept up through the papers and all. And...but see we were proud during that time. We were proud of World War II.

CD: A lot to be proud of.

KW: See in your generation Vietnam was different.

CD: Was a problem.

KW: Yeah, but we just thought that our boys that were over there were heroes. We thought that they were all heroes and those who didn't go we called them "four fs" and we didn't like them and didn't date them. So World War II for us at the University of Illinois was scary, I guess, for war and some got killed but there was a pride there. Do you understand the difference?

CD: Oh, sure. Do you also feel that you had...I had this sense from other people I've talked with for this project that there was a directedness that you knew that you had to do...that college was an important stepping stone and this responsibility you took in to your adult life. So that it almost seemed for some of the people I've talked with that you were more focused.

KW: Oh, we were focused. You know I am from the focused generation. We knew what we had to do. Most of us had been poor and all like that and we knew that we had to work hard. And we knew what we had to do and we did it. We were focused. And we were focused about the war. We were pushing our people on and urging our people. We were patriotic.

CD: Were there any demonstrations on campus on terms...

KW: No.

CD: Not opposing the war but in favor, you know, when something dramatic would happen like Pearl Harbor. Would people congregate anywhere on campus?

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

KW: I don't remember that we did. I am sure that they may have but I don't remember that. But I am sure that we did. I am sure that we must have celebrated. I wasn't there when the war ended.

CD: Right.

KW: But I remember Pearl Harbor though.

CD: (Push this [the mic] a just like this. I can hold it if you like.)

KW: (No, I am ok.)

CD: (Ok. I know it is asking a lot.) Let me ask you one more question and then I don't want to take all your time. But you were teaching during the period...so you grew up in a segregated world in terms of, especially in terms of education. And you were educated at an integrated University that had very few African Americans.

KW: Yes.

CD: But then you went back into a segregated education...

KW: Teaching system, yes.

CD: And were you teaching during desegregation?

KW: Yes, I was teaching. See I started teaching in '44 and you know *Brown* happened in '54.

CD: '54, um hmm. And so what was it like? What was it like to be a teacher? How did things change?

KW: We didn't...you know people are saying that down South that black kids got the raggedy books or something like that. In East St. Louis our schools were segregated but I remember we were able to get our supplies. We were able to get...and you had a single salary system. We got the same money as the white teachers and all. We got the same things. The same books and things. It's just that we went to school separately.

CD: So, feeling that way about the or experiencing the segregated school system that way how did...can you talk about how you felt about *Brown* and about Little Rock?

KW: We didn't...well a Little Rock Nine girl, we just had a big thing for her. And Thelma Mothershed-Wair is one of my friends. We didn't like it and we talked about it. And we talked about these white people that, you know, had us segregated and all. Naturally we didn't like it. So, we didn't like it. The way it was with one of my friends and sorority sisters, Delores Ray, in 1952 sued the school district.

CD: Here in East St. Louis?

KW: Here. And so East St. Louis schools were desegregated in '52 after the *Storman* case before *Brown*.

CD: Before *Brown*.

KW: Before *Brown*. Yeah. And they started picking certain teachers like Catherine Stewart and all like to go over to teach, in the so called white schools. And some of them felt so honored that they were picked to go teach in some white schools. I am just saying that's how they said that some of them felt. So that is how...but gradually. Opal Harvey was one of the first, the first black teacher to teach at the high school. See that was...it was sort of gradual. But now we didn't like it. And we really thought it was wrong.

CD: You didn't like the segregation.

KW: No.

CD: Right.

KW: But my children did not suffer. We were able to teach our children to read and write and figure really well.

CD: And go to the University of Illinois.

KW: And go to the University of Illinois.

CD: All right, well, do you have anything else you would like to tell me about Illinois or life anything. As you know these tapes are for the University of Illinois Archives.

KW: Yes.

CD: And they are meant to supplement the sort of official records, the paper records, of the history of...

KW: Well, I can just say that the University of Illinois, I love it. I really do. And as I look back now it helped to make me what I am. I got a good education from kindergarten, segregated kindergarten, on up through, at that time, segregated University of Illinois. But all of that helped to make me what I am today. And I just love the University. I

really do. And I am not one, surely I've been discriminated against because I am black but I don't see that it has hurt me. It has hurt my feelings some time and if somebody...and nobody ever. One time one man when I was on a bus and some big white man...I bumped up against me when I was trying to get off and he says, "Get away nigger." Or something like that. And I punched that man in the stomach and hopped off the bus. [laughter] It's just things like that but I have not had a hard time with those kinds of things. But the University has really...and I have kept in touch with the University. They have kept in touch with me. I have helped to recruit students for the University. I am an ambassador for the University.

CD: Oh, terrific. That is great.

KW: I had put out of my mind anything that we had...didn't live on the campus. That's the way it was in those days. So I could not just still feel sad and bad and angry because I couldn't live on the campus at University of Illinois. And I got this wonderful education there for free because I got scholarships there.

CD: And you had a community of people.

KW: Yeah.

CD: You had your...what was the name of the women you roomed with again?

KW: Lena Rivers Lewis, a blind women. I shall never forget her. She meant so much in my life. Taught me how to eat broccoli which I hated. [laughter] And I just have really good feelings and I just welcome anybody at University to my home and a lot of them always...Bill Turner comes here. Lukeman called me the other day, yesterday to invite me to a big reception that they are having. So the University's kept in touch with me and I have kept in touch with them.

CD: Well, that is great and I very much appreciate you making time and accommodating the little glitch we had this morning. Being willing to start later today.

KW: And several who went to University, blacks and whites, were not able to graduate. But I was able to graduate from the University on time and to get a job and to move on with my life. And they named a school here for me named Dr. Katie Harper Wright Elementary School down at 77th and State. The University was here. They sent representatives here for the opening of that school and gave me a plaque and all of that.

CD: Terrific.

KW: So the University is real proud of me.

CD: Yeah, they should be.

KW: But they have helped to make me because I went there as a girl from poor, downtown slums of St. Louis at age sixteen and then was able to make my way with the help of people at the University to be successful.

CD: That is great. Well, again I thank you very much. I am going to turn these guys off.

KW: Well, I got to go see the tax man.

CD: Yes.