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Interview with Joan Gerig

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JESSICA PEOPLES: I’m Jessica Peoples interviewing—

JOAN GERIG: Joan Gerig

JP: Um. The date is April 23, 2009. We’re at my apartment which is Van Buren and Dearborn in the Fisher Building. How many years did—were you active in the Anti-Apartheid Activism?

JG: OK it was ten years. I was a full-time worker, seven years I was in Chicago before that and three years in Southern Africa. So that’d be twenty years.

JP: Twenty years in total. Great and so your—Can you please name again the locations of your activism?

JG: Well I became um (coffee pot noise) revolutionized, you can say, in Botswana in 1977 I was sent there with my husband to set up a school for young people (coffee pot noise) who were literally running away from Soweto during the Soweto Uprising and we set up a school for these young people and um (coffee pot noise) we heard their stories, listened to their stories and learned about South Africa through them and (coffee pot noise) we really liked it there. We, we were ready to stay but these young people said no you’ve got to go back to North America, my husband is Canadian and I’m (coffee pot noise) American, you’ve got to go back to North America and tell them what’s happening here, because we wouldn’t not be Apartheid if the North America did not want it to be. (Coffee pot noise) So after our initial assignment of three years was up we came back and uh tried to carry, carry on the work that they (coffee pot noise) placed on our shoulders.

JP: OK um now I just want to get some biographical information from you and then we’ll start the whole process, um the year of your birth?

JG: 1946 I’m the—January, very first of the baby boomers.

JP: Nice Um the place of birth?

JG: A small town in Southeast Iowa, (coffee pot noise) farming community, um I mean I never saw—I remember the first time I saw a person of color (coffee pot noise) so—

JP: Wow—

JG: You know it was when a college choir came through and it was one um black man in the choir and I told my mother what is that? Who’s that? (Jessica laughs) So it gives you a feel for, for where I’ve came from—

JP: Yes—

JG: Every, everybody looked the same
JP: And you—were you also raised there? Is that where you were raised—
JG: Yes I was raised there. I didn’t leave until I went to college.
JP: Ok um your father’s place of birth?
JG: Was the same (coffee pot noise) was the same small town in Iowa and my mother as well.
JP: OH and as for your mother. Ok. So let’s get into the earliest memory, the earliest part of your life so what is your earliest childhood memory?
JG: (coffee pot noise) I think it was, I think it was when my younger sister fell, we had a, our home was on an uh on a farm and she fell threw the cold air register. You know how there would be, would be a place for the cold air to go down into the furnace into the fireplace, wood and coal and the warm air to come up, but she fell into that cold air and I was so scared cause I thought she was going to go into the furnace and I remember my mother reaching down and pulling her out by her legs
JP: Wow—
JG: That’s what I remember. Now on my sister’s death dead a few years ago I was telling people around we were trying to help her move on because she was ready to die and so we’re talking about her memories and I said um my first memory is of my sister Jane and when I said Jane she opened her eyes and she pointed to me. Meaning it was me that fell threw and she saw me being rescued (Jessica Laughing) and there’s nobody else to ask. Anyway, Thank you for asking that cause that’s such a point in my life.
JP: Ok that’s great um describe the house that you grew up in?
JG: A farm house two stories um one bathroom um six girls, parents (noise)
JP: Ok
JG: Um we um our whole focus— I mean our focus was the farm. It was my job to go out and help with the milking, help with the turkeys and um we worked together because that’s what you have to do on farm
JP: Ok
JG: And it was it was a very simple house certainly adequate but not very different than any others in our community. I grew up with a telephone um party line. Have you ever heard of party line?
JP: Yeah—
JG: Like ring when the phone went ring, ring, ring, ring-ring, ring then that’s when we knew it was for us

JP: Oh Wow—

JG: Of course you listened when it was for anybody else (Jessica Laughing) because you listened in on people and knew everything

JP: (laughing) Wow ok that’s really cool um what are the most special items in the house that you still remember?

JG: Um interesting I, I can picture that telephone that connected us to the rest of the community um I can’t think of anything there is a dining— part of the dining room set that my parents got uh I have that but that’s— um you know the very closest memories I have are of being read to in the evening and, and the gifts I can remember are gifts of books. I remember a middle school teacher asking how many people in your class—how many of you think you have one hundred books in your house? And nobody raised their hand and I wasn’t sure and I went home and counted our books and we didn’t have even one hundred books but I had my two books no I had three books that had been given to me as gifts but it’s such a different world that I live in now.

JP: Ok so what was your favorite toy?

JG: Oh I don’t— I must have had a favorite toy but I— like I said all my memories are around my books

JP: Ok what was your favorite food?

JG: Oh we had such a limited diet. Um probably ice cream, that was ice cream, and watermelon were the two treats we had.

JP: OK what pet did you have growing up—

JG: Oh Well when your on a farm you’ve got lots of cats, cats, cats, and we always had a farm dog um the last one was—It was dog who could help chase pigs, get the turkeys in and all of that. So uh pets and the dogs weren’t— were useful the cats were— lived in the barn they didn’t live in the house

JP: Oh Ok

JG: And they were of course they lived in the barn to catch the mice. So I never— I didn’t have a pet I had six little sisters, five little sisters I didn’t have time for a pet.

JP: (Laughing) what was your mom’s occupation?

JG: Um she was a farmer like my dad.
JP: OK

JG: Now one interesting thing is she had really wanted to go to college and her parents hadn’t allowed it. They barely allowed her to go high school. She wanted to be a teacher but she couldn’t—wasn’t allowed to go to college and uh and uh all six of her daughters became teachers (laughs)

JP: O Wow—

JG: See you can see so but she worked more than anything in the big garden she would go out and take care of the animals, and help with the harvest like I said we was all in this together

JP: Right ok um how did you manage your allowance?

JG: I was one of the very few people who I knew who got an allowance. Um I think oh dear I don’t know how much—I think it was ten cents a week you know the first I can remember and five cents was going to the offering at church. I grew up with the very—church was the um focal point of our lives, It was the social connection, almost everybody we knew went to the church. So I gave a lot of it away and uh which — and save a little bit—I couldn’t walk to the store to buy anything and uh later as I grew older I was given more and more money and finally in um I think it was in middle school at a time I was given ten dollars a week but I had to buy my school lunch and my clothes with that money. So learned very young how to save money for what I wanted.

JP: Um—

JG: I don’t know. I just, I just— Am I’m giving you appropriate answers?

JP: Yes, yes you are, your doing great. Um how were your holidays celebrated in your family?

JG: We-Um my, my parents— I grew up thinking we were poor, and that was because we didn’t spend money. We grew all our own food. My mother sewed our clothes. Um for Christmas it was—I really wanted a Christmas tree that looked like what other people had or what we saw in books or like that. We didn’t have TV’s. Um but my dad would go out and find an Evergreen tree in the ditch somewhere and bring it home. And it looked pretty nice out there, but when you bring it inside it was all frail. That was always a disappointment. But I had a good time when I to fill out buying gifts for my sisters it was fun. And we always got together with cousins, and aunts and uncles. That was the high point of the day. And my mother made lots of wonderful candy. Do you know what Divinity candy? Made with whipped egg whites, whew I can’t make, wouldn’t even try. With Peanut Brittle, my grandmother would make it with pepper nuts; we’re German origin, Swiss German. So that’s—we had special foods. Sweets, we really liked sweets; like Ice-cream. And uh Easter, of course we didn’t believe in the Easter Bunny. Like I
said we’re religious. But we dyed lots of Easter eggs. I can remember one Easter morning
looking out on the lawn and there were colored eggs. My—one of my parents had gone
out and out them. I could not believe this and said well what happen? And my mom said
well the Easter bunny came and we knew there wasn’t an Easter bunny; we knew there
was no Santa Claus. I never believed in any of those. Not that they were evil like some
people have been thought in my community. It just um wasn’t the way we celebrated.
What other holidays are there? Like Fourth of July you’re out there combining oats. So
that was not never celebrated. (Noise) Um I remember I went to school, my first year of
school—School must of started um late august or so but we got out for Labor Day and I
told my mom it’s Labor Day, what does Labor Day mean? I never heard of it. She said
well labor means work. I worked—she said I worked the whole day anything she’d say—
that means I would have to do more work; that’s what labor meant. (Jessica laughs) So
you see I grew up working.

JP: Ok um how were you expected to behave in front of adults?

JG: Um I think it was more children should be seen and not heard. Now that I’m quite
immersed in the African American community now threw my work threw my church. I
was never taught to call them by respectful name like um called Miss Jones or Aunt Jones
or something. We all— we called people by their first names, unless they were a relation.
Like my aunt Ruth, who was my, you know, my mother’s sister. So we didn’t but there
was, um, you— we didn’t disrespect them but we didn’t respect them with titles. I don’t
remember ever being—I was clearly disciplined by my parents, but I don’t remember
being disciplined by anyone else in the community.

JP: Ok—

JG: But I was the pretty—I was the oldest child and I felt, you already heard this, and I
felt the weight of all those younger sister on me and I was a hard worked, I was a pleaser.
I wanted to please.

JP: Who were your friends growing up????

JG: They were my cousins. Those cousins my dad shared farming machines with one,
one of his brothers who had a girl my age and there were other cousin. So they

JP: OK

JG: Later there were (coughs) Now when u say growing up do you mean all the way
through high school or do you mean—

JP: Um just childhood for now

JG: Childhood, so like twelve and under—

JP: Yea
JG: That would have been my life that was cousins.

JP: Ok what did you do for fun?

JG: Uh Sunday afternoon, well Sunday there was no work. Sunday afternoon we would go play, we would play ball. And that’s when my dad, I understand now, how he dearly wanted to take a nap because we worked six days a week and that was one time he could nap cause he couldn’t go out to work, bible Sabbath right? And so I remember him saying you let me sleep until two thirty or something and then I’ll go—go play ball. So that was always fun playing ball. Um we would occasionally walk to a neighbor’s house to play and um we were all girls and sometimes we’d go it was another—a neighbor who lived close and they had all boys I think it was twelve boys or something it was an enormous family. (Car horns) One of my sisters reminds me of how once we went down there and we said we’ve come to play and I don’t know what —those boys were all a little older and we were but they were very nice and they would play hide and seek with us and the little kids’ games. And no—we didn’t go to movies. We didn’t have TV’s.

Um, what else would you um bowling, we didn’t go out we did our own fun. And we would go visit, you would go visiting. Like after supper if there was—wasn’t anymore work to do, we might get in the car and drive over to somebody’s house to visit them or my grandparents would come to visit and um that was an important part of social life. And Sunday after—Sunday, having, inviting people over for a meal on Sunday or being invited to somebody else’s house for their lunch time dinner, noon time dinner. That was part of our social circle with the way we socialized, had fun.

JP: Ok what would u say is your fondest childhood memory?

JG: Um. Oh my. I didn’t have a lot of time to think of that. Um I remember— birthdays were special and that we got to choose what the menu would be for that, the meal. So that was always special. We didn’t have parties we could have one party as you was growing up, you have one party. So on my tenth birthday I invited well I started by inviting everybody in my Sunday school class and I wanted some people from school and my mom said you can’t invite some if you’re going to invite any so there was twenty-five girls at our house for my tenth birthday party. That’s one memory where I think, well I knew now from my own daughter whew it’s a lot of work getting a party together and I know that my mother asked her younger sister to help do the games. And so that’s very special that my—they said we worked hard. But they made that a very special day for me.

We have one grainy and black and white picture of us. Oh one other thing, can I add something else? That was in winter, because I was born in January there was a very special summer thing is that through our church our denomination had—that had um congregation here in Chicago. And we’re about five hours from Chicago and children who attended Sunday school here in Chicago were sent to Iowa for two weeks. It’s called the Fresh Air Program. And there was one girl who came— didn’t stay at our house, she stayed at a neighbor’s house. She was the same age I was and every summer I would look forward to her coming because we loved the way she talked Chicago. We’d all practice saying Chicago. (Jessica laughs) and that was nice because that was a little bit of a
picture into a world beyond our little town. That was a warm feeling knowing that Carol
would come again every year.

JP: OK what was your worst childhood memory?

JG: Um well my parents apologized for when I was eleven my parents bought a farm and
we was share cropping we didn’t use that term. But that’s when you use someone else
property and you give them part of whatever what was grown. The night before we
moved I was set of playing around and we went upstairs, my parents slept downstairs and
I must have turned out the lights and she grabbed me and pushed me threw a window and
broke a window and my parents, I didn’t fall out the window, I got, I remembered I got a
cut on my butt. My dad heard the screaming and came up and he yelled and spanked me.
I don’t ever remember being spanked, but I know now that he was tired and he had to get
up and work and move then he had to replace that window because it was a rented house.
We had to leave it and he spanked me. And I didn’t have any clothes on. Then he sent me
downstairs to my mom. My mom came and put some iodine in my cut. I was totally
embarrassed and that was probably my worst, yes that was my worst memory. The
scariest one. Can I tell u about the scariest one? One year later we was sitting on a
Saturday evening at the dinning room table eating our supper. My dad looked out the
window and said Tornado. So we ran down stairs and I don’t remember hearing anything
and he said we can go up now. All the front of the building was gone. All the turkeys
were running around and some with their heads cut off. Part of the roof was blown off
and all the windows was broken. Pretty much the house was there. There car was sitting
there where it was in the garage, but the garage was gown. U say u have the garage the
machine sheddy. Of course u had the turkey houses gone that was scary. My sisters and I
was afraid to sleep upstairs alone and my parents bedroom was downstairs and I
remember sleeping on the floor outside there bedroom for probably a week or so, because
we were too frightened and I remembered my dad got up, I heard him get up. My mom
started crying and she just cried and cried and cried. I was too scared to see what was
wrong. I was sure that my baby sister has died, who was sleeping in the crib has died.
That was the only thing I could think of that could make her cry. Well later I learned that
my dad would go out and cry in the turkey house, actually one turkey house. And he
would sit on a stack of hay and cry cause all this work had to be done. That was a scary
time for not only what happen but what I saw my parents go though.

JP: Ok Lets move on into your youth, what was your religion growing up?

JG: You heard it was a major part of my life. We’re Mennonite. Are you familiar with
Mennonite? We’re not Amish that’s what people think we are. Mennonite is a Protestant
and a Baptist group meaning we’re baptized not as children, but as adults. I was baptized
when I was thirteen but when you reach the age of reason. It’s a group that started in
Europe in the fifteen hundred in addition to having adult baptisms; it’s also one of the
peace churches. There are three historical peace churches. Quakers, it’s not even that
name and the church of the brother. Young men from our church did not join the arm
forces they did alternative services, they did three years or whatever but they did not do it
with the arm forces. A neighbor went over to build houses in Greece so um they’d did
that kind of thin in the Insane Asylums and so um in part of the um menu of being a
Mennonite was a simple life you heard about that no TV no movies no internet and also
no jewelry no make up I didn’t cut my hair until I was twenty one because there’s a place
in the bible that says the women hair is the women’s glory so something that was
interpreted about this. I did not wear pants or shorts for gym at school there is this coo
lots we could wear but we did not wear them. And therefore as you could see I’m a tall
women I could be really good in basketball. In Iowa women’s basketball reigns in Iowa.
The couch the sisters tell me and I think I must have blocked this out The couch came out
to talk to my dad to try to get me, because I told the couch I couldn’t play basketball
cause my parents wouldn’t let me, to try to get my—him to say—to let me play
basketball. And um my dad said this is what my sister said she can if she wants to. But I
knew that playing basketball would mean I wouldn’t be able to do all the church things
that I was expected to do. So like I said I wanted to please my parents and the youth
group at church we had fun even with our skirts and long hair we had fun So and
Mennonites although I don’t look the same as I did back then.

JP: Ok um so who were your role models?

JG: Role models as far as people I knew were probably my parent although the older I
grew I knew it wasn’t the life I was going to live I wasn’t wanting to be on the farm Now
are you talking about high school or the role models in college or—

JP: Um any role models that you care to talk about—

JG Ok When I went to college in a summer of what was called Voluntary service and this
was threw our church I went to St. Louis and I lived very public housing that just a block
away there was a church there and then I worked and it was my first time living in a
African American community. It was a very warm warmly embraced community. It was
just wonderful it opened my world up and it yet embraced me at the same time. There
was um a pastor there that was so caring and so wise how to operate he was a white man.
But how to operate in this situation and he became a role model even though he was a
male and then I saw somebody I can identify with being in my own race but living in two
worlds, but not only making since he enjoyed it. So there was joy in the way he lived and
the way his family lived and his wife that I didn’t know as well because she was
somewhat preoccupied with the kids. She was a role model to her kids.

JP: Um when you say living two worlds or how he enjoyed that situation do you mean
how he was active with his family and then also in a community where most of his
followers in his church were African Americans?

JG: He had colleagues he wasn’t well we called him pastor he wasn’t or reverend but he
had true colleagues in the community organizer also and they were equals he wasn’t
telling them what to do?

JP: Ok um what was your first job?
JG: Well um probably was cleaning the church we had a big church of three or four
hundred people, it was a big building and my sisters and I would clean the church and we
got three hundred and sixty five dollars a year. And so we all put that away for our
college.

JP: Wow

JG: and that would have been my first job and in the summer we would de-tassel corn
now do you mean my first full time job or what I got paid for

JP: Yeah what you got paid for

JG: That would have been cleaning the church and that’s when I opened a bank account
but they told me don’t out it all in one place and I took it serious

JP: Ok um what world events had the most impact on you growing up as a teenager?

JG: Um Well I remember reading about before the election the um Kennedy, who did
Kennedy run against? It was Kennedy and someone anyway I grew up in a large
republican community and we were clearly Catholic and John Kennedy was Catholic and
you don’t a Catholic being the President Terrible that I can’t remember and I remember
my dad saying why don’t we want a Catholic and that sort of opened up we don’t have to
be what everyone else around us. Now that’s not quite a world event it was much bigger
than Wayland, Iowa. No I do um sort of the election I cam home from first grade with a
Do you know the Eisenhower hat? Or perhaps it was a kernels hat I think Anyways the
company stopped by the school and given us all these hats. I like light (??). Now this is
nineteen fifty two, I remember coming home with that and the neighbor laughed of
course the neighbor knew that my dad was a democratic and I didn’t know anything
about that. I didn’t understand the laughing so that um I don’t remember anything about
the Korean War Although I could have it’s um I don’t remember anything about
we didn’t know anyone in the service because in our circles no one went into the arm
forces. But I do remember a talk about Martin Luther King. My mother was our church
librarian and somebody bought a book and now I think it was a book about the bus
boycott and uh put it in the church library and somebody else didn’t think it should be in
there so she brought it home to read and I read it. It was my opening to uh to what was
happening there it was a little bit too young to be apart of the Freedom summer, freedom
school but that’s where my heart was.

JP: Ok um moving on to education, what were your best and worst subjects?

JG: Math was by far my worst subject and I always did very well in reading. I can
diagram a sentence.

JP: Oh ok Um what was high school like for you?
JG: It wasn’t that I was not a popular person in high school and being popular is what it was all about or was back then. I did well. I had a few good friends so we had a few slumber parties. That was probably the highlight and then we had our youth group and I was— I had some rules I was suppose to go by in the youth group and church. But um I always knew that there was more beyond high school and high school was just something you did to go further it was not a high point.

JP: Ok um what did you want to be growing up?

JG: I remember in the first grade drawing a picture of being a mommy. And it wasn’t long after that I’d say I wanted to be a teacher. Although looking back I don’t think I had great teachers at all. I didn’t have any teacher who um I could say was a good teacher, excellent teacher; they were good people but not excellent teachers. Maybe I just wanted to show them I could do better.

JP: Um what college did you attend?

JG: I went to church schools I went to junior college in Kansas it was called Hessen College. It seemed pretty bid because it was two hundred and something people there and it had been sixty two people in my graduating class and um all throughout high school. And then I went to uh—my final two years in Neosho, Indiana. And then another school in Neosho, Indiana and that was um again I—it wasn’t—it was good, it was good not great, the best years of my life were to come. I knew that. I could feel it. And I got my education degree there.

JP: Ok um lets move on to your Anti-Apartheid Activism, how did you first learn about them apartheid?

JG: Well, can I put a little connection here? First of all I had to get a love for Africa and after my— during my senior year in college I seen this note on the bulletin board about teaching in Mississippi and I told you I was interested in Civil Rights and I was told Mississippi is where it’s at in nineteen sixty eight. My senior year Dr. King was killed. And that was the first time I ever did a public march or public demonstration in Neosho, Indiana with people from the college down to the court house. In Indiana it’s um this town has KKK but we stood around the court house silently and it seemed like a long time but I remember some friends from the college said Aren’t you scared to go. It was not everybody didn’t do this. That book that I read back in from my church library and it took home the course I experienced in St. Louis. And in the summer I went to Mississippi and there I met this woman and there she—I lived on this Piney Woods school it was called the country life school who had married an alumni of the school. Now as a child I had been afraid that God would send me to Africa I was a religious kid and I was afraid God was going to send me to Africa. So I made a deal with God I’d go to Puerto Rico just as long as I didn’t have to go to Africa and I felt that God said Ok. In college I almost failed Spanish. My GPA just dropped when I took Spanish. But I didn’t make the connection then, but then I told Oh Africa I’d like to see what’s happening there and then I went back to St. Louis to teach then back to Piney Woods and took a course at Jackson
State University about integrated African American history and art and um literature 
did not have African American literature in them. My students in St. Louis who was 
ninety percent African American didn’t know who Langston Hughes was. And we take 
that for granted now things have changed, and I took this course for Margret Walker, Do 
you know the name Margret Walters? And if you’re in literature she wrote for my people 
but anyway it was a wonderful experience but through that I just—my love—my 
yearning for Africa grew. So

JP: Well why were you afraid to go to Africa when you were younger?

JG: Oh because I heard missionaries and it sounded so scary and it was so far away see 
Puerto Rico wasn’t that far I could. And because I didn’t know anyone from Africa it was 
the Dark Continent for us in our little white neighborhood. So how did I get to the Anti 
Apartheid? Then I decided I want to go to Africa and I went to Nigeria for three years to 
teach and it still wasn’t the anti apartheid but I bite with what people say is the Africa 
bug. Than I just wanted to go back and I came back to the US and um went to seminary 
I’m so religious I’m a very religious person and I was trying to put together what has 
happening and when I left the United States now of the students were wearing pants to 
school because they were skirts and when I came back teachers were wearing blue jeans 
to teach. Now in the village I was in the only people who ore jeans were prostitutes. Can 
you see what a—this is three years when I was gone this was third Woodstock everything 
was happening I wasn’t here and I came back I was just really—and I didn’t— and 
somebody suggest I go to seminary it would be a good place to go and think about what’s 
happen to you and also there were people there who had experiences overseas. Well one 
of the people I met was a man who taught at Columbia and he was trying to figure out 
what was happening there or whatever to him and then we got married and it took us 
threw some steps and we moved to Canada and then I moved to Canada cause he 
wouldn’t move to Kansas and I said Ok I’ll go to Canada but then the next move is mine. 
Equality right? And so his job sort of fell apart and I was like ok that’s cool maybe it’s 
time to move to another country. So we looked around in this organization and turns out 
it was the place where they needed people to start a school in Botswana. In Botswana 
there was a man who worked in the United States Percy Nesbitt have you ever heard of 
him? He actually visited us in our home and we had never heard of him before. And um 
that’s where we met him and uh we was like well lets settle in Chicago we didn’t know 
where to settle but we did a lot of and we set up a school there in Botswana and um our 
first child was born in Botswana and he was still born so we had our very first child in 
Africa buried there in the hills and I just couldn’t get a hold of myself because you know 
it was far from family but then we had a opportunity to move into Africa to do some 
research on force of relocation which was really happening and we spent six months 
living in South Africa and traveling to a thing where it was happening and put together a 
packet that was in a couple languages and a slide show just before and to prepare to come 
back like these young people had told us to come back and tell people what was going on 
it was seventy seven to eighties we were in the regions when this was going on in South 
Africa and that’s how we got connected and we came back and we spent five months 
traveling in Canada and the US talking to church groups, youth groups, school groups
about what is happen in South Africa and my husband became a pastor here in Chicago
so we moved here and connected with some anti apartheid work. Now you know that
there was an office in this building? Nobody told you?
JP: NO!
JG: It said Committee for Illinois divestment in South Africa and that’s how I knew this
building
JP: Wow that’s crazy well what did your family think about your activism?
JG: Uh they uh they endured it my parents were I think were somewhat proud and some
or my sister just didn’t understand and none of them really grasp it. We were in another
world. All of them were in their white worlds it had opened up a whole multi cultural
world for us. There was a time when I didn’t go to family reunions much cause this is my
life going to conferences, organizing protests and walkathons and news conferences and
all that.
JP: Ok um what kind of group, institution, or coalition did you work with or were apart
of?
JG: Many I told you cidsa the committee in divestment of South Africa actually that was
when our daughter was very young so my husband did that more than I would we would
take turns it would be monthly meetings and events then that organization then morphed
into cassa committee in solidarity in south Africa and actually Illinois did divest during
all this work it was certain funds they divested and they passed an ordinate that they
wouldn’t do business with companies that did business with South Africa. So there was a
lot going on in those days. My husband and I was the founding members of a
organization called Synapses it’s what takes messages from one part to another I didn’t
know that but and so we were a group of people here who were getting information back
and forth and out connection was from South Africa and other friends were threw the
Philippines; the US bases and the Philippines and other friends were working on there
Nicaragua. At the time Reagan was doing awful thing in Central America so threw this
organization we connected we worked threw then. My husband became a pastor at the
church of Brethren and we started a little organization Church of the Brethren in South
Africa I worked for that. I worked for that and then I was hired by the Lutherans Southern
African Network. I worked for them for five years this was a time when I was full time I
never made more than twelve thousands dollars a year. Church world service and
walkathons. It was a Mosenbeck solidarity network. But in the Anti Apartheid group we
were the church contacts and we often time had people from South Africa coming threw
and we would connect with other people. One of those are now the ambassador and
others members of the _______(??) they were thrown in jail and now leaders.
JP: Um I have a couple of questions that I’m going to ask you’ve covered some but I
want to ask you so that they can take this down so why did you get involved in the anti
apartheid movement?
JG: It was the young people from Soweto who said you need to go home and do this while we were in Botswana Steve Beko was killed do you know? Look it up he was head of black consciousness movement. At that point in the seventies ANC Mandela was locked up and his organization was ANC the black national and that’s what got the Soweto Uprising and the police killed him and there’s a movie Beko and um there books about him. We keep a picture of him in our house. He was an icon to the people we listened to.

JP: What was your main role in the movement?

JG: I was the church I knew how to talk the church language I would go to the church and explain to them what was happening. And I would explain how the church can be apart of this movement; part of the religious committee of the anti apartheid movement. One of the first – I think I organized the first camera bell Standing of the truth campaign and he sent me one a big pack cards standing for the truth silently. Are you from Chicago? I don’t know, there were some pretty big names there. But there were these young people who got word of it and they had these wild poster and they came down and started singing now here we were silently standing for the truth and they were singing. I went over there and tried to talk to them but the kept singing and I was think we have to harness this singing. And so from there we did every for six seven years on Martin Luther King Day we had a sing out for anti apartheid. It was always the coldest year, kids were out of school and the church choir it was fun and we take pictures of that and we send them out. Like ok you’re a Methodist lets send it to the Methodist magazine to show what their members are doing. We sent them to all these church papers so they could see what their members were doing I like to think that moved it along a little bit.

JP: Ok Um so were you active the whole time or were there some times when you were less active?

JG: Well from when we came back in nineteen eighty six to ninety six I was most active because then I quit teaching school so I could do this full time.

JP: Describe the food and living conditions in South Africa.

JG: We lived very differently then any other people live. I just don’t— you mean how we live? The main meal is pop it’s very stiff porridge you take it and dip it into sauce there would be lots of meat for special occasions but to tell you the truth we did not eat like that. We ate rice and beans I can’t remember it was a long time ago. I had a stove I had a fridge and many people would not have that so we did not live on the same level as poor people we lived like upper middle class.

JP: Ok how was your living condition different in South Africa different from your living conditions here in the United States?
JG: Uh well you didn’t have a telephone now everybody has cell phones of course it’s just so different now from thirty years ago. The furniture was uncomfortable and it got very cold cause there was no inside heating so we build a fire in the fireplace. There were no washing machines so we had to hire someone to do our laundry for us and she did it in the bathtub but we had reasonable furniture the government provided furniture or the organization rented furniture and it was very basic in a cement block house. It was very adequate. It would have been nice to live in a thatched roof round off but we lived in the city and uh in the capital of Botswana so it wasn’t an option.

JP: Ok as a um foreigner in South Africa what conditions were applied to you that um what conditions were applied to other South Africans that weren’t applied to you?

JG: Well it was more as a white person. There were things that white people could do that black people couldn’t do. One time I remember I was at Johannesburg getting a train and evidently I was on the black station and something came over the intercom but it was in African so I could understand it and a kind old African man explained to me I was on the wrong train. But there were hotel in Johannesburg that black could go to it was very expensive and we felt like we could afford it so we went to the one across the street. It was run by whites and much cheaper and they told us it was so different in South Africa. If you were white you were safe because all the civil service people were white and they looked out for you; a very scary thing. I usually traveled with my husband.

JP: Tell me how you felt when you first experienced when you first seen the injustice of um the blacks and what they had to do in South Africa with the badges and they weren’t allowed to be in the city without certain qualifications how did that make you feel when you seen that?

JG: I’m trying to go back. I think I felt the weight of all the oppression that my race has caused. Ok course in the white area children went to white schools and they had accepted his policy. One time I was there without my husband and the daughter came in and said a racist joke but I couldn’t let that go and I commented I can’t remember what I said and uh the father said you don’t understand what life is like here. But I’m sure I didn’t understand what life was like for black people. There was a family that really opened their home up and he had hosted him and his wife at our place for six weeks and they shared very deeply about their fears. I felt honored to be in their home and for them to tell us their stories but who gave us the right be there. I don’t know if I’m making sense here.

JP: Um yeah you are how about I ask this question um because in South Africa a lot were mistreated by the whites and you being of that color were there ever a time they didn’t understand what you were doing and you experienced and conflicts?

JG: Uh yes Uh Let me tell you one story about this little school we opened for where the exiles were coming in. I went in once when hardly any students were there and started cleaning I got down on my hands in the office and started scrubbing the floor one kid poked his head out and said I didn’t know white people could do that. These kids lived in
a – kids, they were young people lived in town there was no refuge camp they found
places to live and they were given a stipend they came to school partly for something to
do cause there lives were— there they were without family they were young people on
their own and we didn’t have meals but on our coffee break we could get a lot of bread
not coffee tea. And the tea committee decided that some of the guys were taking too
much bread so they would go open the window and serve the bread out this window. I
was in the office doing something and they were having tea time and all at once it was a
enormous hullabaloo they were shouting and they said King Victoria served our families
this way we not going to take this. They said we’re not going to drink your tea we’re not
going to eat your bread. They knew how to protest and so Orlando went out and he said
well lets figure this out and they had two days of talks and they did resolve this but that
was although it wasn’t our decision to make but it was the young people who saw their
people are puppets almost cause we did buy the bread and we bought the tea. But that
was the most conflict and it took a while to get it solved but we didn’t solve it. I didn’t
know whether the whole school would be up for grabs.

JP: Ok how did you mark the end of the apartheid?

JG: Well when the elections were held in Chicago South Africans came to vote here and
it was a group of us who got the food together and flowers and we were in the front of the
conciliate and we handed everyone out a flower after they had voted. It was a lot of fun.
We were dancing we were there for twelve hours. It was a lot of dancing and we had
music and hospitality suites down the block with food and drinks. So that was one of the
celebrations. When Nelson Mandela was released we had a big party at Malcolm X
College that was really a fun time. It was after the elections because people had come
back from the elections with their hats and we gathered around the art Institute with this
banner and we gathered because it was right across the street from the African Conciliate.
That’s also where we would often meet and do our little not our little our protesting and
we took that photo but then two years ago the South African Conciliate invited everybody
who was on that photo to an event at the conciliate. You heard about this?

JP: I think I seen the picture

JG: Oh ok and then they gave us placks with our names on it. Not a plack it’s a dish and
that was very touching. Then your school started the archive so we got our things
together and brought in our things in put it in a little box along the way. Now I’m getting
requests from other people about the archive.

JP: Oh ok um describe what you went threw when you transition your move from South
Africa back to the United States.

JG: It was hard. The fact that people weren’t really interested in what was happening; it
was hard. People were trying to fix up there living spaces. I saw the great disparity in
what made people happy in small places. It made people happy to live in an enormous
mansion. Some of my family had big houses and it didn’t make sense to me. We didn’t
have jobs so we was trying to figure out where of course would we live and not having
the connection. It took about a year or so to connect with the Anti Apartheid people here
so we didn’t feel grounded but once it was made we felt we belonged in Chicago.

JP: Ok how did you feel the Anti-Apartheid Movement change you?

JG: Oh in so many ways, it gave me a reason to be loud it gave me a reason to dance I
told you I grew up not dancing right? I can dance when I’m in South Africa. It gave me
reason to sing it uh I was a English major suddenly I’m editing news letters I’m writing
press releases I’m doing all the things I was trained to do. It gave me reason to go out and
meet people and talk to people and call those papers and said you need to be here. We
have something happening you need to come see it. Sometimes I’m amazed to think I
was allowed to be part of this momentous thing. I was part of it; something so much
bigger than I was and I had my place. I had my little place where I could do my work. It
fit in locally, it fit in nationally I connected to the people In Africa, the sister community
project in San Francisco and in South Africa and I went to visit there it was very exciting.
There were New York and Philadelphia people it fit nationally and then it fit
internationally not only South Africa but the groups in England and the groups in Canada
and all over and the Netherlands. It was just wonderful I wish that everyone could feel
apart of something so big so much bigger then they are that also made them feel bigger
than what they could ever be, better than what they thought they could ever be.

JP: Looking back, what are you most proud of?

JG: I think of the friends that I have as a result of all of this in June I’m going to Liberia
and Cape Town but I’ll see so many of the people that I knew back from those days and it
just feel s like Oh with open arms, I feel like mother Africa has already reached out and
circled me. The connections I’m most proud of.

JP: What do you regret?

JG: From my time there or here?

JP: Well just from the Anti Apartheid Movement

JG: I regret that I haven’t kept some of those contacts. I have slipped away from people.

JP: Ok what is the one thing you want most people to remember about you?

JG: Uh Well I’m a hard worker I’m a conscientious person I liked to be known that she
didn’t let down those young people. I just thought of that now but Yeah I say I’m going
to do me job and I do it and I do it pretty damn well. From a girl who came from the farm
and grew up in a very strict religious community that didn’t see much outside itself.

JP: Um Is there anything else you would like to share?
JG: There’s one thing I wanted to add I told you it was books I kept and there was an author of one of those books who opened up the world to me and help me to get to Africa. Louise Linksys who wrote books about children in other cultures. My sister got a book about a girl who was a migrant laborer another sister got one about a boy who lived in China town, the one I got was called Mama’s Hattie girl it was about an African American girl who lived in Mississippi you don’t know how many times I read those books through but I think how my mother got her hands on them but those books opened up the world to me and that’s probably why I’m a librarian now but I think also help me make that connection to South Africa.

JP: Ok well thank you the interview is over.