

GENEVIVE YOUNG INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Genevive Young
Ex-wife of Gordon Parks
November 21, 2019
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 1 hour 6 minutes and 33 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Genevive Young
Ex-wife of Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks' memoirs

01:00:17:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I actually think that he wanted to relive his life, and- 'cause it was so interesting to him as well as everybody else. Of course he was totally irresponsible at dates, ok. I mean, he just wrote it. I mean, but I think that's why he did it and of course because somebody asked him. I mean Simon and Schuster asked him, etcetera. But I think he enjoyed doing it.

01:00:42:13

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think it was a little harder than he remembers. You kind of—I must say, he did remember the good things, and the one thing that I kept on questioning him about, his mother couldn't have been that much of a saint, but he swears to God she was a saint, alright. He never wavered from that. But you read about her and you think, this is not a real person.

01:01:04:01

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He was really—I always told him that, “You know, you think like a bad novel. You know, there are good girls and bad girls.” And so good girls were like his mother and bad girls were just bad girls. I mean, I used to accuse him of that all the time.

Gordon Parks' relationship with women

01:01:26:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He ran around an awful lot of women before we were married, after we were married, all the time. So he had a lot of girlfriends, but I think that his wife was always separate, ok, from all of that. That was his mother equivalent. Oh, of course he um always arranged his life so he

was never living at home; starting with his first wife who really in the end walked out and just abandoned the family because she couldn't cope. Gordon was gone all the time, she had three rambunctious kids, so she just left, Sally, you know.

01:02:03:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Um, then when he was married to Liz, they lived at 15 Adams Place, but Gordon had this other place in the city, and he only went back on weekends sometimes. And then when I was married to him, most of the time he was in Los Angeles while I was living here 'cause I had a job. But—and I think that frankly, I'm not sure how good he would be at intimacy. In fact, when he moved back, we got a divorce within eight months of the time we got back. We argued all the time, and mainly because he was really quite spoiled.

01:02:43:13

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, my one achievement—so we lived together, I had a job, he stayed home. However, if anybody had to talk to the housekeeper, she had to wait for me to tell her that there's no starch in his shirts. When I came back, I cooked dinner and my great triumph, towards the end of our marriage, I got him to pick up his dishes and put them on the sink. He was really spoiled by the women in his life and by his cousins

like Marcellus. And they'd always say, "Don't touch a thing. Don't do anything."

Intimacy

01:03:29:07

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Um, in real life, I don't think his—I really don't know exactly who the real Gordon was, you know. And I don't think his kids were—he had an outer veneer of real warmth, but it only was a veneer. I mean, at the bottom he was really pretty rock hard. Solipsistic I think is the word that I use. He was concentrated on his work, and so his kids all were kind of mixed up when they grew up.

01:04:01:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Yes, he did seduce me but I still—basically the thing that was the most important to him, which was his work, I had some control over so I don't—it's very hard to figure out exactly what that was but I think that made the separation is that I was always—and we never argued about anything except housekeeping and his advertising budget because I was still working for his publisher.

Personality

01:04:36:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He wasn't very forward, ok. He was always in the background, sort of gentle, quiet. Um... So that he wasn't intrusive, and I think he got people to trust him because he was so unaggressive. I remember once he came back after Muhammad Ali got beat somewhere and he said, "So I didn't take his picture." He said. You know, he was very discreet, very quiet, yeah. He never was—it's very funny, at parties either he was on, the life of the party or he was sitting there like half asleep.

01:05:16:08

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

There were no—he never participated in just a general thing. He was either on as the main star or he wasn't there at all. I always thought that was kind of interesting.

01:05:28:12

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, he had been very lucky in his life, and I think he understood that. We were always saying, well if he lost everything, he could be a short order cook. [Laughter] Yeah.

Gordon Parks at *Life* Magazine

01:05:49:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Um... well, I think he was their pet and also he had a protector who was um Phil Kunhardt, ok, who was the managing editor. And... also I think because he did brave things. I mean he went down south and stuff like that. He earned, you know, he earned the affection of the people at *Life*.

01:06:15:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

There were these ghastly times like at the end of the year or two years actually where he had to improvise his expense account, ok, because he didn't remember anything. It just—he and people from *Life* would sort of sit there and make it up. But *Life* in those days was so open handed. I mean, every Thursday closing night, this huge cart would come in from Louis the 14th, which was a fancy French restaurant loaded with liquor and food and stuff like that.

01:06:50:12

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And everybody just sort of drank themselves to death. I mean, it—they'd finish closing. I don't think anybody ever went home on

closing night. They just sat there and got drunk. People got drunk a lot in *Life*. And those are really the glory days of *Life*, yeah.

01:07:07:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Even in the office, ok, you had a researcher, usually a girl who did all the carrying, all his cameras and stuff like that. The girls would carry, ok. He didn't do anything except march around.

The Learning Tree

01:07:27:18

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

It's so interesting. I was getting sort of tired of *Life*, it was getting to be an old man's magazine with distinguished things like history of the English speaking peoples. And then suddenly this wonderful story came out, you know, and I thought, "oh this is the old *Life*, terrific." And I paged to the end, and I was interested to see that the photographer was Black, that was fine. So like maybe three weeks later, Carl Mydens came in towing Gordon. I happen to be the Black person's—I mean, I had done several books by Black people by that time.

01:08:03:08

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

So I was the Black person's editor. We had a Jewish editor, too in a deeply WASP house, ok. And Gordon had seven pages of a novel, which turned out to be *The Learning Tree*. And I was at that point a junior editor and I had worked for my boss, Evan Thomas, for seven years, first as his secretary, then—so anyway, Evan got all excited about this and said, "You know, I'll give you 3,500 dollars as an—" I was sitting there and Gordon sort of went, (Mumbles) like that. And so Evan kept going up by himself, ok, to—it went to 7,500 dollars.

01:08:47:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And Gordon then said yes, ok. And he said, you know, "I will—Gene will be your editor." That was fine. And after he left I said, "Evan, you're crazy. How do you know he can write more than seven pages for God sake? You're crazy!" And Evan said, "Don't worry about it." And I—Gordon later said he was wondering whether he could write more than seven pages. But he did, and he was—because it's so autobi—I mean, *The Learning Tree* is also an autobiography, ok. So at that point he needed quite a lot of work.

01:09:24:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He had the des—he always had a tremendous desire to communicate, he didn't have quite the tools yet. I mean, I just discovered, I think,

from one of his—that he’d actually finished high school, which I didn’t think he had, but I’m sure he didn’t go very much or any—so he had good oral language, but sometimes it didn’t translate to the page anyway. So there was a lot of work to be done on *The Learning Tree*.

01:09:52:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And so it’s funny. I was thinking, you know, he’s such a demanding author ‘cause he really did need a lot of work. So I saw him all the time, ok. I used to read and I used to get—I hate doing this. I hate reading something page by page because by the time the book comes in, you practically can recite it, you know, but we did this like chapter by chapter and redid it and redid it and it came out.

01:10:17:17

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And it was made a Harper Find. Actually, usually we used to get it out of the slush pile, we’d find something but this time they made it a Harper Find, which brings it a little bit out of the ordinary, got a little more promotion, and it did quite well. I mean, I think it maybe went into two printings, which was not bad. You know, I mean in publishing, you really don’t—you just sort of throw them out there as you know, and you see—most of them sink, some of them swim.

01:10:50:13

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

So that was that and he moved to France and I think he married—I thought some point he married Liz I think.

01:10:56:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

They moved to France. And *The Learning Tree* was published to modest success. And then he wanted to write *A Choice of Weapons*, and in France I remember he sent me four chapters. And I sent him back just a huge heap of notes, and I think this is when he became a writer. He threw his four chapters away and started all over again and really wrote it very well I think from then on. It was when he somehow—he was really a terrific student. In other words he really did do it fast. And so that was done quite fast.

01:11:37:00

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

There's one scene where the kids are running under the stands looking up women's skirts. That was the most awful thing it has. That's what they objected to anyway.

Conversations about race

01:11:55:01

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

We never talked about race per se, it's interesting. In fact, once—when he was making movies, he always insisted on an all-Black staff, ok. Then he'd complain bitterly about how they're fighting like that and I was defending somebody. This was much later in our life. And I said, "Look Gordon, give her a little leeway. Imagine what you would feel like if you were Black." And the both of us burst out laughing. But, I mean, we didn't really discuss race per se.

01:12:29:01

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think that was part of his basic make up, his ease. I mean, you know, here he was a... porter on a train and somehow he was able to get a camera and go into the fanciest store in Kansas City and take pho—I think that was really part of his basic make up, is that he could get along with anybody, and it was because he was so unaggressive, gentle, soft spoken, you know. And people wanted to help him.

Gordon Parks' creative process

01:13:07:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He was a perfectionist. He couldn't go on until he had the first—you know, what went before it. And I said, "Gordon, just get it all down, then you can fix it." No, so the first chapters of his books are always terrific, ok. Because he's worked on it for three months. Then somehow after that he gets released and he can go on, you know, but he had to have the beginning just set somehow like that. And it was a tremendous waste of time and effort I always thought, but I could never get him to change.

01:13:36:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He wanted to tell you, he wanted to express himself, and- and he did it in every way he could; in music, you know, and in writing and photography. And in all of them he was, of course, an amateur. I mean even in photography I remember when we were living in California these kids would come to sit on his feet and want to talk about F-stops and Gordon—you could see Gordon's eyes glazing over. I mean, he was not technical, you know. He just did it, yeah, in everything.

01:14:12:15

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

In music, he had a sort of a scribe. He would play it on the piano, and a music teacher in—I can't remember, somewhere up north would transcribe it and put it into notes, you know. And writing he did

himself but music, he never did learn to read music because he was actually basically too good. He said that he and his sister were given music lessons, but he got bored with it so he just sort of started improvising himself and dropped out and you know, just did it himself again, you know. And somewhere I remember I came across these little checks from his mother paying the music teacher every week to teach him.

01:15:06:17

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Yeah and he never took his camera anywhere, which is another funny thing. I mean, some photographers have a Leica or something in their pocket, he never took—so a lot of times we missed a lot of things and for instance, we used to go skiing in Vale, it was so beautiful and I said, “Gordon, why don’t you take some pictures here?” He said, “It’s too beautiful.” And I remember I only had—I never had the bin at the bottom of the fridge because it was full of sometimes-outdated film, which he used anyway.

01:15:35:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, he really—I really think that technically he probably did not know a lot about the workings—the technical workings of a camera but he just did it, you know, and it came out fine. And those beautiful

blue pictures; you know there's one of a little girl, there's one of—I think was done with outdated—I think it was—maybe it was—I'm not good at technical, I think night film in day or something like that. So he was inventive, yeah.

The Flavio Story

01:16:13:12

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

It was heart-rending, you know. And you wanted to do something right away, you couldn't believe that people—and I grew up in the Philippines, ok, which is really terribly poor. But Flavio, this was beyond imagination. I mean, the whole country felt that way. You didn't really need to have any special sympathy to be really moved by that story.

01:16:41:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And I told him how much I liked it of course, but people have been saying that forever, you know, so yeah. And you see again, Carl Mydens was such a friend to him just like the Kunhardts, I mean they really sort of nurtured Gordon. Yeah.

First impressions

01:17:06:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I really thought he was a pretty demanding author because I had to see him practically every week to work on it, and once I was—met him for a drink before I went home. I lived—I was married and I lived in Great Neck, and we were sitting there and talking about something or another and I was getting ready to leave, and Gordon blurted out, “You know, I’m in love with you.” And I was so stunned; I just got up and left. But we discussed it later on. We were both married. I asked my husband for a divorce and he went to such a fit that I stopped talking about it so it took a long time.

01:17:40:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, Liz was pregnant I think with Leslie, and I had a husband who was inconsolable and so this went on for like at least two or three years, we sort of just tried to cope somehow. So I’d meet him in his pad on—at 23 Beekman Place, you know, but very quickly because I had to get on the train to go home. So this went on very, very—our affair was very stop and start for a long time.

01:18:17:13

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

So, it was painful because then my husband tried to make me happy by taking tennis lessons with me and, you know, this is painful to watch when you know that you don't want to be there anymore. So I have a lot of guilt about that. But he did get married again after—after a decent interval.

01:18:39:08

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think I must have been very bored with my marriage. I also had very little experience, ok, because I had this strange upbringing where I had lived with only women until I went to work at Harper's. I was—after the—in the war, you know, my father and all his staff were interned and so all the women of the staff, we all lived together in a house full of women. 26 women and children, and then from there I went to Abbot Academy, a girls school, Wellesley, a girls school.

01:19:14:17

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I swear to God I had never encou—which is one reason I married my husband, ok, because I knew him very well. We'd grown up together. He was one of the kids in the—so I had never really encountered a man until I encountered Evan Thomas, who was really a terrific boss. He was really a great guy, and so Gordon was really something exotic

and exciting and everything that my husband wasn't, you know, really. So I'm not sure exactly how to analyze my feelings except the fact is that yes, it was glamorous and he had a bigger world than I experienced, yeah, being—you know, commuting from Great Neck every day.

01:20:01:14

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He didn't have to worry about everything as I learned when I married him, ie. *Life* got his shots for him, his—you know, got his passport, got his tickets, etc. All he had to do was go. And he had somebody to carry his cameras. And when he became a contract photographer and lost all this stuff, guess who took up—except I never carried anything. But then I got the tickets and got his shots and stuff like that. Yeah, he was really quite spoiled by *Life*.

Family dynamics

01:20:39:10

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

His kids were more or less grown by then, ok, his first three. And Leslie had a terrific mother; Liz was really a great mother so he didn't have to worry about her. I used to joke that his horse in California cost

more than Leslie did, 'cause I did of course all the bookkeeping in his house. And... he and Leslie really had a very fractious relationship. You know, he knew what a little girl should be like and Leslie was not like that, and we—it would always come to a head before Easter when we'd go to Bloomingdales where Gordon would want her to buy a little hat and a little coat and Mary Jane shoes.

01:21:21:18

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And Leslie was having none of this, ok, so there'd be this tremendous fight in the middle of Bloomingdales about what she was gonna get, and usually somehow it ended up she'd get some blue jeans and she would accept maybe a dress that she would probably never wear anyway, but it was—he had expectations for his daughter that she would not—refused to fill. And this happened all the way through I think their lives, they were always arguing. He always fought a lot with Toni too, his other daughter.

01:21:55:00

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

It was like a bad marriage, you know. Every time they had a fight, they'd bring up all that stuff from before and I told them they should maybe go to a marriage counselor because this is not working, but Toni was a very—she was the smart one in the family. Very bitter and

disappointed because I guess she was smart and she didn't—nothing worked for her, basically. I mean, he sent her to a music school, and then she got pregnant and he dashed up and got her an abortion and she got pregnant again and this time he wouldn't and she had Alain, you know, her—and had to drop out of school.

01:22:37:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And from then on, she was using Alain as a kind of a... hostage. In other words, you know, when she wanted something she would use Alain as a—Alain spent a lot of time living with Liz and Gordon, actually, so it was a bad relationship. He also didn't have a particularly good relationship with Gordon, Jr. because he felt that Gordon was using him and his name and I said, "Gordon, why did you call Gordon after your name? I mean, this is what happens." He said, "I didn't know I was gonna be famous." That's what he said.

01:23:16:13

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

The two elder children, he really did—really had a tough relationship with them. David was ok. David was a very sweet, loving guy. So he wasn't much of a problem.

01:23:29:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Well, he certainly wasn't a very good father. He wasn't there, I mean most of the time. And he didn't really know anything about, you know, what their grades were or what their schools were. I'd say he was a very detached father, so I don't really know much about that time after Sally walked out. I think by that time Toni was 13 and I think the kids just raised themselves. I think there was a housekeeper and, you know, Adams Place there was also kind of a nice neighborhood, people looked after them.

01:24:06:21

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

But Gordon wasn't there, you know, most of the time. And then with Leslie was just, you know, once in a while he would—she would come in or we would—we'd take—every year we would take Alain and Leslie to Vail for Christmas for a couple of weeks. That's really the most he saw of the kids.

Marriage

01:24:35:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I finally detached myself and moved into my own apartment, and then Gordon was shooting—must have still been *Shaft* (1971). Yeah, and so that was much easier then. He had an apartment, I had an apartment, it was easier. And then of course, like most men, once he had me, you know, it was—so I just said, “We’re gonna get married or I’m gonna go on my own.” So we set a date, which was when he came back from California to play tennis in the RFK Tournament, and we got married on a really hot day in August.

01:25:15:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He didn’t fight very much, he was just— and then he went back to California, you know, where he had basically hot and cold running girls and I was here working away and doing his books, but as I said, I didn’t really have a lot of experiences in the world at that point and I was quite happy actually. I loved my job, yeah.

01:25:42:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, I was sort of irritated. He could’ve—he could’ve edited *Shaft* in New York, ok. I knew that, but he wanted to do it in California, again because I think he couldn’t stand living together all this time. And so since I—you know, I had another focus, so it didn’t really bother me too much. I was living very comfortably in the apartment.

01:26:07:18

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

A part of his makeup is that it fed his ego to have a lot of women, and I kind of understood that. You know, and then he'd gaslight me. I mean, I remember once he came back from the West Coast smelling of shower and toothpaste. Obviously he had made a stop somewhere. And I said, "Gordon, do you think I'm an idiot or what?" You know. He was absolutely not careful, ok.

01:26:34:22

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

But I think he got more careful when he realized I was really much more sharp-eyed than Liz, who was very forgiving. Liz was a terrific—is a terrific person. She—when I had—you know, she made a name for me, you know, mama Gene for Leslie. And she never talked against me. She made Leslie love me. You know, to this day Leslie and I are very fond of each other. So that was really noble of Liz.

01:27:02:02

JOHN MAGGIO:

(Cross talk)—

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

To the very end I think there was some woman who visited him. Yeah, it was just—again, I think it was ingrained in his personality and it's funny, it didn't bother me as much as I—you would think it did. I really did know that I was primary to him, you know. And I didn't divorce him for that reason. I divorced him because basically it came down to—this is what I've always thought, is that I could live his life or my life, but couldn't do both because he needed so much help. It's like being a conductor's wife.

01:27:40:21

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, you can—you just need to be on all the time on... on his business. Reading his script, keeping his books, entertaining, you know, etcetera. And I— and he wasn't appreciative. You know, he always said, "Well, why don't you just hire somebody?" You know, I thought, "Well, he doesn't really care." And so I left, at which point he really got heart broken, but I never wanted to go back. I'd been there, done that. Because all the rest of my life he kept on proposing again saying, "Let's just get married again." You know, and I said, "Been there, done that."

01:28:23:07

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And till the very end actually, you know, 'cause when you get a divorce, you have to get really angry for a while, so I got really angry. I didn't see Gordon for a couple of years, and he had a girlfriend Renata, but eventually I moved back into his orbit because he was getting lonely and old. And so I would—every Wednesday I would bring sandwiches and have lunch with him and a neighbor from—an adoring photographer neighbor from upstairs, Claire Jaffa.

01:28:56:06

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And we'd have a nice social lunch and he would sign photographs, which the Kunhardts are so grateful to me for. You know, we needed something to do when, you know, for the lunch. So all the photographs that were in his closet, which are hundreds, ok; he signed them you know, like that very happily and so we did this for quite a while. And as you know, I ended up as his executor because he didn't think that his kids were capable of doing it, which I think is right, frankly. And they were really—all the kids were really good.

01:29:35:23

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, nobody ever argued about how I distributed the money or how we—if we were going to Kansas City, to get—you know, to watch his funeral, etcetera. They were really good, and I never had any

problems with them, but for a while I had this trail of Parks', about ten of them.

Insecurity

01:30:04:06

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, your inner—inner merit shining through. No, you had to have it all on your outside, ok. So he was really a nut about—which is why I was talking about Leslie and her clothes and his suits, and he always had to have the best of everything.

01:30:22:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think that he thinks that merit doesn't shine from within, it's—you have to wear it. He was always well dressed, you know, really.

01:30:33:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He was a classy guy. Um... socially up. You know, in other words, high socially. And that's—he depended on his clothes for that. Um... So I said, "There's none of this inner merit business of your reality shining through. He wouldn't depend on that, yeah.

01:30:59:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And I think he was really quite humble usually. I mean, he was always willing to take advice about his work. Um... And he was always helpful. Yeah, I mean one of the nice things about *Life* was how much everybody liked everybody else.

Shaft

01:31:22:08

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, this swaggering guy in terrific clothes with those—that black leather jacket, which became an icon. You know, I mean—what else can I say except that this is Gordon's... other personality.

01:31:40:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

But it was in the script. And Stirling Silliphant wrote the script, ok. So Gordon just saw himself in it and built on it I think.

Gordon Parks' style

01:31:56:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He spent hours in the morning, ok. He'd take a shower and then he would comb his hair and I swear to God, in front of the mirror... he would cover himself with Ponds cold cream. That smell has lived with me. Including his hair, ok. So he'd be there and he'd cut his hair and comb it and he never—never let anybody—you know, I think actually his hair was terrible and so did—what's the name of the HBO—Sheila.

01:32:24:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Sheila Nevins and I tried to get him to go to a real barber, ok, because he sort of plasters everything down, but it's not a good shape, ok. But nonetheless he would not let anybody take it. Every morning he's with his comb and his scissors, stark naked in front of his bathroom mirror, you know. So yes I'd say he's vain, yes.

Previous marriages

01:32:55:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Sally was, to the end of her life, just furious, ok, furious at him. I mean, she really had nothing, but he paid her alimony all the way through until he died. She outlived him, but she got his al—yeah, so he was—'cause Gordon was not exactly—Gordon was quite cheap except

when—on things that were important to him like clothes or his horse or where he lived, etcetera. But otherwise he sort of—like when Gordon wanted to borrow money from him to make a movie, he really almost didn't give it to him until I intervened really, basically. But— So the fact that he paid Sally's alimony every year I thought was quite something.

01:33:45:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Elmer Campbell was a neighbor in Adams Place next door, and Liz was a friend of Toni's, so Elmer then moved to Switzerland and Liz, I think maybe age 22 or like that, came and visited Toni, moved in and never left. And so Gordon always said that he got roped into marrying her. Well I imagine that it was a two-way thing. But they always behaved as if he—as if he hadn't really wanted to do it, but he had to because I guess he was sleeping with her. And Elmer was furious from- from um Switzerland. I remember these—I just heard little reverberations of it really, but... so it was—you know, it was really—it was like marrying his daughter, basically. Toni and Liz were the same age, yeah.

01:34:46:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And Liz did take Alain a lot because Toni was broke, Toni didn't have anywhere to live, etcetera, like that so he'd take Alain. But it must have been very hard on him, too.

01:34:58:21

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, she was Toni's age.

Gordon Parks' attractiveness

01:35:08:07

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, and he had wonderful, warm hands. And um-- for one thing, I didn't find him attractive in the beginning, I just thought of him as a job. But I do know that women just sort of fall—really, literally falling at his feet. I think it's that part—for one thing, there are Black women and there are not that many famous Black men, ok. So there was that, the aura of success and great clothes. So it's not all his personal charm, but also he was quite receptive and nice, etcetera. Unthreatening.

01:35:41:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Being a *Life* photographer was really a big deal, you know. I mean, so he was a big deal guy, and he was sophisticated, you know. And he went to the best places, took them too, took me too. So I mean it was just what was there not to like? Or basically.

Gordon Parks' relationship with Gloria Vanderbilt

01:36:07:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

They loved each other. They really did. Um-- And yeah, and she actually spoke at his funeral.

01:36:15:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, the only thing I ever heard was her calling him in the middle of the night weeping because she had lost half her fortune, so she was down to 30 million instead of 60 million. That's all I ever heard. I mean-- It was a completely separate relationship, as Gordon kept all his relationships with women separate, you know. So I don't really know much about it. Anderson probably knows a lot about it. It's too bad that she died before he could—because I'm sure she would talk about it.

01:36:46:15

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

But I don't really know much about it except that they were really intimate friends. He did mention once, I don't know whether he made it up or not, that Gloria wanted to marry him and he said no. I think because her light would overcome his. She— he would become Gloria Vanderbilt's husband.

01:37:10:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, I think that her name actually hurt her. I think she had quite a lot of talent as a painter and as a writer, but because she was a Vanderbilt, people thought she was a dabbler. Actually, she worked a lot. I mean, she—when I cleaned out Gordon's cubby down at 860, he had many, many paintings from Gloria. I mean, she must have been very prolific, but I think she suffered because of her name.

Gordon Parks' relationship with money

01:37:44:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think it's a typical poor rich guy, is that they spend a lot of money, but they also suddenly stop and think, that's too much. As opposed to people who've had money all their lives, which makes them cheap the

whole time usually. I think only poor people spend a lot of money on—like Gordon had—he was shooting a movie out in California and he bought a Rolls Royce instead and I was yelling at him because, you know, the company would pay for a rental car, but they weren't gonna pay for a bought Rolls Royce and he had the thing repainted, etcetera, like that.

01:38:25:22

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And it was a lemon basically 'cause I remember once I was out there and the electrical—the car just quit on the Santa Monica highway, and you know something? Nobody stops for a Rolls Royce. I mean traffic was just going by and so we finally clamored up to some guys—took us to apartment, we called AAA. Otherwise I don't know what we would have done. But the thing is, the funny thing is after he left California he sold the Rolls Royce and he made money on this thing. So that it all came—as I said, Gordon was very lucky in many ways so that—that was a plus. But I mean, can you imagine buying a Rolls Royce just to make a movie, you know, for six weeks or so. And he had it repainted at enormous expense.

The Jaguar

01:39:23:06

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

It was the most painful car to get in, you know. You have—and his kids were always saying, “Dad you’re getting too up there to get in there, you really have to crawl in. And once we drove to Newport, the heat of the engine dri—you know, it’s just the most impossible car, but he had this car and he was always promising it to different people. He promised it to the Kunhardts I know. And he—in the end he sold it for 25,000 dollars.

01:39:49:21

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And I said, “Gordon, you’ve been had.” You know, because it was—by this time it was a collectors item, but he never—he never left it to anybody. It was really—and he of course knew—I was married to a car guy, so I knew a few things like, you know, when it won’t start, you know—and this car wouldn’t start. And I said, “Gordon, we’ve got to clean off the points.” “What are the points?” It’s—you know, so we get towed away by AAA instead.

Divorce

01:40:27:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

It's funny; I mean what gives you a divorce is really resentment. I think Sally was that way too, she resented it. But I did get over it and Sally never did.

01:40:42:00

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

At least for a woman. You have to get mad enough to leave.

Photography work

01:40:50:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, I think he always saw the story, so I guess in a general way you can say his humanity. He did, he saw people. You know, he found—he got their story, and I think that's really the secret of his success is that his best story—his best pieces were always stories, and as an editor I understand that. And I think he just did this instinctively. You know, the Fontanelle's and not just Flavio but the Fontanelle's and Red Jackson and all those were stories basically.

01:41:24:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And of course there's this drive. I mean, he really was driven, but the interesting thing was that you didn't really feel it unless you were

close to this drive, you know. Otherwise he seemed like this happy, relaxed, gentle soul. But really underneath there was this tremendous drive to express himself, to do it. It didn't show.

01:41:52:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean he worked—he was basically a night worker, so he would really work all night sometimes writing just a little bit, but over and over again and he—I remember he always played music. There was a foray piece that I must have heard 16,000 times. But I think—I don't know, he's just—he really nee—you know, on his deathbed he was still making marks to show music. That was how he did it, you know, he did marks. And he just had this drive to work all the time.

Assignments covering Black subjects for *Life Magazine*

01:42:37:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I mean, he was the Black—their link with the Black community. Yes, so they assign him things. Then once in a while they would assign him something nice like world markets so that he could travel all over the world to photographing market—but no, he was their Black photographer, and he was always sent to do that.

01:42:59:15

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Whether they always had the story idea or whether it was sometimes Gordon would say, "I want to do this." I suspect that most of the time it was *Life* wanting him to do something, yeah.

01:43:16:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think that Gordon volunteered not very much and that *Life* assigned him things, and he was their link to the Black community so Black story, he would do it.

01:43:28:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think he liked it. I mean, he felt you know that he was important to *Life* for that reason and that he really did have a connection to the—to—he was never ashamed of it or felt that that somehow denigrated him. He was really quite proud of it.

01:43:44:22

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Basically, I think he would think, here's a story, this is what you're going to learn from me, you know. And I don't think he thought about

the... context. No, or that it was enforcing racial stereotypes. I'm sure that he wouldn't think that.

Criticism

01:44:08:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

The whole Black community rose up and criticized him for *Shaft* because I guess he was—I mean, this was the middle class Black community, but they were writing essays and articles about him saying, you know, that he was bringing shame and enforcing stereotypes, etcetera, like that. And of course Black audiences just loved it, you know, the kids just loved it. Because otherwise, movies showing Blacks— I remember David and I went to see I think it was *Souder*? Some Black movie and he said, “You know, all they are is just these—all these hanky heads. You know, I don't want to watch this movie.”

01:44:55:12

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And *Shaft* was completely different; there was no hanky head there. What do you call it, they were worthy movies, slightly boring. In fact, I'm not gonna watch *Tubman*, I think it's that way, too.

01:45:11:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Yeah, worthy. Just all the Black people are good and everybody else is—

01:45:16:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

It was taken amiss by the middle class Black community; they didn't like it at all.

01:45:22:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He didn't answer them back or anything like that. It's very Gordon for him not— to just bear it in wounded silence and not do anything about it.

01:45:30:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Well for one thing he didn't read many of the reviews. He was always onto the next thing already, you know. He was thinking about something else by then, so I don't think that, you know, unless it was forcibly brought to his attention like, you know, the Black press was unsympathetic.

01:45:49:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And actually I remember thinking, you know, the credits for *The Learning Tree* (1969) was, you know, written by Gordon Parks, directed by Gordon Parks, music by Gordon Parks. I said, “People are gonna start laughing. I think—” He was—he really preened, ok, he was proud of it.

Working in Hollywood

01:46:16:00

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He really wanted to keep on being a director, but after *Leadbelly*, I mean nobody asked him anymore. I mean, he was, you know, I guess a creature of the blaxploitation thing and that char—because of the success of *Shaft*, it carried on for a couple more movies, but really they weren’t interested in him as a director. I mean, he had—and I think it grieved—that grieved him a lot. He never talked about it, but I know that he was really dying to do another movie.

01:46:47:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think that Gordon thought that the term blaxploitation was insulting to him. He made a movie, it was a good movie and it wasn't, you know, a genre movie. He created a genre but—and that of course leads me to *Superfly*, Gordon, Jr., is that he made—it seems to me he made it possible for Gordon, Jr. to do *Superfly*, which was a blaxploitation movie. But I think that Gordon felt that *Shaft* rose above them.

01:47:22:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I don't think it changed Gordon very much, being as—he always expected to be a success and I think he always thought of himself as a success and... you know, the movie life is kind of fun, going to those parties and seeing Swifty Lazar and stuff like that. But I don't know. That wasn't... as real to him as just having a successful movie or a successful book was. That was sort of ancillary, though he enjoyed it.

Leadbelly

01:48:06:22

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

The movie was really quite easy to make, ok. But what happened was the management changed at the studio, and this was the old management's movie. So, they just kind of dumped it, which you do. If

new management comes in, new broom starts—but it was just unfortunate because I think *Leadbelly* was quite a good movie, so they didn't market it properly. You know, it showed some place. I think they had probably—I don't think they even had a premier for it, they just threw it out there. And um, you know, that's life in Hollywood basically.

01:48:45:18

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, I guess his agent and Benjamin fought for him, but Gordon was not that kind of guy. He doesn't find out who the levers of power are and go hit them. You know, he doesn't know how to do that kind of thing. He'd complain, basically.

01:49:00:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He really put a lot of himself into *Leadbelly*. He really had great expectations and I thought he had also learned how to make a movie.

01:49:08:12

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Hollywood soured on him. He would've given anything to do another movie, and I think all his life he always hoped to make movies. It's too bad. It was his great disappointment. And it was all—you know, you're

as good—really, you’re as good as your last movie and the last movie was a huge flop. So nobody asked him anymore. Yeah, so he went on and did something else but still I know he really hoped to be able to do another movie.

Malcolm X

01:49:44:18

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He was really very involved in it and there was some talk about people coming to kill him, ok. And *Life* actually put him in a hotel to keep him out of gun range, as it were. There was—apparently two men were coming to assassinate Gordon because he’d done the Malcolm X thing. A lot of drama.

01:50:09:08

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Malcolm was really—they really liked each other. Did I tell you about what happened when I was—after I was clearing out Gordon’s library after he died. And you know, you can’t get rid of books. Nobody wants them. So I finally got a friend of mine to come in and he had a secondhand bookstore in Hasting.

01:50:30:07

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And so he was there packing up the books, and the guy who had been appraising his stuff was just flipping through one of the books and found seven postcards from Malcolm X that Gordon had just stuck in the thing like that and so of course he sold those for 11,000 dollars. The estate got 11,000 dollars more but it was, you know, Malcolm kept in touch with him, you know, sending postcards from wherever he was. I thought that was kind of nice.

01:51:00:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think he just loved Malcolm. He just thought he was terrific and he thought that he was being—you know, that the Nation of Islam was gonna get rid of him. And they did, you know, basically. That he was in danger from them, and Gordon was really quite worried about him.

01:51:20:07

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Well, don't forget he's this famous *Life* photographer. They wanted the publicity, they invited him, ok. So it wasn't a question of—and so, I mean, he just hangs around the way he did for everything.

01:51:34:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

All I know is that it was said—this is what Gordon relayed to me, that two men were coming from Arizona to shoot him, to kill him. And it seemed to me so preposterous that, you know, I didn't (Inaudible)—and I didn't hear anything more about it and after a while I think Gordon just moved out again. But he was I think in that hotel for a couple of weeks.

01:51:58:12

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Why they wanted to do this now, and whether it was true or not I have no idea. But as I said, it was enough for *Life* to think that they should. Too bad that Phil Kunhardt's dead because he was the one that did all of this.

01:52:12:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I think what he did was he went out somewhere to photograph the reaction, but I don't remember him saying anything or doing anything and then of course, there was this threat that came so that sort of preoccupies you.

01:52:32:23

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Though they weren't close the way Malcolm was. I mean, Gordon almost did it because he was required to basically, you know.

01:52:43:03

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

But I think he saw an opportunity to do something different, you know?

Muhammad Ali

01:52:54:10

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Oh now he really loved Muhammad. Yeah, I told you about the time when Muhammad was defeated and he had his camera with him and he decided not to take the photograph of Muhammad in defeat, ok. No, they were just sort of like buddies, and he spent a lot of time with him. He went to I think—I don't know if he went to the Thrilla in Manila. But he spent a lot of time in training camp with him, and he just as I said hung around. That's what you do as a photographer if you're doing a story.

The Fontenelle Family

01:53:32:04

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Now speaking of stories, you know, I don't exactly know how he found the Fontanelles, but I was—their—I mean, their life was so full of drama, you know. I mean, those wonderful—and at some point where—when the story was in process, Mrs. Fontanelle boiled sugar in some water and threw it on her husband's face. I can't remember why she did it anymore, but I mean this all happened. They were living their lives in front of Gordon, basically. And, again, I think it got a tremendous reaction and I think that *Life* gave them some money.

01:54:16:09

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

But you know, no good came of it. They were all dead pretty soon. I think that their apartment got trashed, the new apartment that they got. It was very—just very sad. I mean, it was a sad story. But he was really—he was really involved with them and with the kids, with the Fontanelle kids. And he stayed in touch with one of the Fontanelle kids for a long time.

01:54:40:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He loved kids. Funny because he was not really terrific with his own kids. But he was, he was always a sucker for kids, yeah.

01:54:50:18

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Again, I think—I think that Gordon was not—in hindsight, Gordon was not very good at prolonged relationships, like having kids or having a wife. I mean he couldn't do it all the time.

01:55:08:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He couldn't—and he always fixed his life so that he wouldn't have to.

01:55:12:20

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, the interesting thing is I never—except for a couple of fashion shoots, I never went with Gordon when he was photographing. So I don't exactly know, but I think it's probably this business of being a fly on the wall. He's not aggressive with his photo—with his camera. He doesn't talk or intermix with the people; he's just there. He does spend a tremendous amount of time with them. Days and nights and things like that, and I think that's what gets them into it. They get used to him being there. They live their lives in front of him without a problem.

Gordon Parks' personality

01:56:00:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

I don't know. I mean, I don't know how to answer that question. Um, I really think that this aloofness or whatever it is really not part of his life experience, it's just the way he was. He couldn't cope with, for whatever reason, with a lot of intimacy. I'm not sure it's the experiences that did that; I think it was just his nature. There are people like that.

01:56:31:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, when you're with your home—home guys, you talk like them, you know. And when you're in society, you talk properly, etcetera. I think that's nothing extraordinarily unique about it except that he was really good at blackish. He was always telling me the vocabulary, you know, like doing—telling the rounds or dissing people or, you know, yeah. But I mean I don't think that's extraordinary, especially, but he would yeah. But it was notable I mean when he was among Black people that his whole aspect and his language would change.

01:57:14:15

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

As I said, I think that's a natural human thing. Well, maybe it's more marked because Black English is so much different from regular English, but I think everybody does it to try to fit into who—with whoever you are with. And of course, Gordon was upwardly mobile so he— you know, his language was always excellent, and his English was excellent.

01:57:41:00

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He didn't really have peers. There are people who were slightly hangers on, you know. Um... And he had quite a few of them, played tennis with him, ok. Mainly, that was mainly his thing is his tennis partners. Maybe Arthur. Arthur Ash seemed to really like him and so did Genie, ok. Um... But I think it was a slightly one-way relationship. I mean, Arthur came around a lot and I don't think Gordon ever went to see him. Yeah, but aside from a few acquaint—he had a lot of acquaintances that really the ones who were close to him really expected to get something from him sooner or later I think.

01:58:37:14

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He was richer and more successful than they were. It was, you know, star—star quality that they—I don't think it was particularly venal; they just liked to be close to success and fame, yeah.

01:58:56:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

The interesting thing about Gordon is once it was done, he really went on. He was always thinking about the next thing. So, I'm not sure how much—how often he rested on his laurels, in other words. He was just always thinking about the next thing to do. So—and I—he had very little abstract thinking, like social justice or whatever now. It always came back down to the person and the story.

01:59:22:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He really thought about his work, his stories, etcetera. Never mind where he was in the pecking order. He did have some scorn for some photo—photographers who did a lot of things for money. I guess some *Life* photographers did. I remember he was always small licking them as they say. And that's true; he didn't do things for money really.

01:59:48:14

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He made a lot of money on the whole. You know, *Life* paid him well. When he be—I—by the time I married him, he was a contract photographer, which means no income. But yeah, I mean you know, he—and never wor—he never worried about money, it was just always gonna be there somehow. Like I worried about money because sometimes we didn't have any, but things always worked out. You know, when—just when you thought, well you know, how are we going to pay for Champion? Which is his horse, next month. Something, a check would come in from something or another. But being middle class myself with a steady salary and being the bookkeeper was fairly nerve wracking.

02:00:31:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

You know, he had-- Irving Pology, his name. This is probably libelous but he had a crook for an accountant. That's why I divorced him, or else I would have stayed married though separated, ok. But I didn't want to have to sign his income tax returns because they were fictions. Now I was sure he was gonna get arrested one day, he never did but his tax returns were really scary, which is why I had to get out—I had to really not be responsible. And I kept on wondering when he was gonna get audited and the axe would fall. Well, Irving would call up and say, "Give me 1,500 hundred dollars." He was gonna bribe

somebody. His whole thing was so dirty. I hope Irving's dead by now so he won't sue you.

Reconnecting with Gordon Parks

02:01:35:11

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He had a friend who was a doctor, who—Gordon acted like—any doctor he ran into he would ask them something, you know. And so in the end, instead of having one doctor, he had you know, a heart doctor here and a doctor in another hospital there, and he had this friend who was a fr—who was a doctor and who would prescribe for him, and so he prescribed cipro I remember once for something he had, and Gordon would run around his apartment for exercise and he tore both his achilles tendons. And that is one of the—one of the side effects of cipro is that you tear your tendon. And so Gordon was crippled; I mean, and he had to be in the hospital for—a very fancy hospital, it was at Mount Sinai in 11 West, which is—and I think that's when I went back there. He was completely helpless and he was in a wheelchair for a long time and looked like he might never get out of it, but he did. And I guess that's when I came back to help him, basically. But I mean, Gordon was like a peasant medically. I mean that doctors were like shamans, you know. Anything they told him, he would do.

02:02:57:23

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Yeah, he was afraid of death, yeah. And not like most people, the process of dying which can be—he was afraid of being dead, yeah. And it's in his books, I think in almost all of them. He was quite obsessed by it—he never talked about it of course, but he wrote about it a lot.

02:03:17:05

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

Well, Gordon was very quiet about most of his innermost feelings. He really only got 'em out in his books, really. So he always had this nice façade of you know, happy go lucky whatever or not. When he was very sick though, he didn't seem to realize he was dying.

02:03:38:15

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He had prostate cancer, which had been not troublesome for like 15 or so years. Then it got into his bones. And then he got treated, and the treatments really what wore him down; the radiation and the chemo. Um, and finally, I mean, he was bead ridden, and then I signed him up for hospice. I remember it made him happy because, you know, they were always rousing him and rushing him off to the hospital on some emergency, and it's really hard on some people. So, I said, "Gordon,"

you know, you're not going to have to go to the hospital anymore. They're gonna come to you." And he said, "Oh, how much is it gonna cost me?" I said, "It's all on your medical insurance," and a big smile came.

02:04:23:16

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

As I said, he was cheap about some things, you know. So, anyway, hospice came for the last maybe 6 months of his life, and it really made a tremendous difference. Um, but I don't think he thought he was dying. As I said, he was working until the last minute. We found on his night table these marks that he was-- to remind him of a melody, ok.

Legacy

02:04:54:02

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

As a humanitarian. I mean, basically, he had a great eye for troubled people. They happened to be Black a lot of the time, and it really got to him, and he really-- that's what he really did. You know, whether it was Muhammad Ali when-- being beaten, or the Fontenelles, or Flavio, Red Jackson. I mean, that was-- he really did have a feeling for

the underdog, and a desire to help fix it, you know. I think that's his legacy. More than social justice of whatever.

02:05:32:15

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

And the thing that was lucky about him was that he could help. That with his camera he could really bring their story and show it to people, you know. So, he had found-- he had found a way to do this. A lot of people-- I mean, you get-- upset about somebody, a homeless person. There's nothing you can do about it, you know. Give them a dollar. He really did find a way to do it. And I think it was kind of accidental. It just, you know, it just happened.

02:06:06:19

GENEVIVE YOUNG:

He would have been perfectly happy photographing beautiful ladies; you know, he did a lot of fashion photography. I think that because he was assigned in the beginning that he found his *métier* kind of from his assignments, but basically if he hadn't, I think that he would've just gone on photographing fashion if that's where the money was, you know. And he had a terrific eye for fashion, so.

END TC: 02:06:33:20