BARBARA SMITH INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Barbara Smith
Activist
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

Barbara Smith
Activist

INTERVIEWER:
I'd like to start out talking a little bit about growing up in Cleveland, can you tell me a little bit about what it was like at that time?

00:00:13

BARBARA SMITH:
From this perspective, sometimes I think it was like, uh, Leave it to Beaver because it was the 1950s and it just seemed like a safer world in retrospect. But when you think about what was actually going on in the country and the status of African Americans at that time, our family made us safe, but it was not a safe world.

INTERVIEWER:
And were you aware of it not being safe? In what ways?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Barbara Smith, Her Twin Sister & Mother

00:00:37

BARBARA SMITH:
When I think about, uh, that period, I think of it as like, Leave it to Beaver because it felt like a safer time. But as a Black person, it was not objectively safe. Uh, I was born in 1946, by the early 1950s, I was in elementary school, so I remember when Emmett Till was murdered. Uh, it was a name that we heard around our dinner table. We didn't necessarily know everything that had happened or what it all meant, but we certainly could tell how upset our family was.

INTERVIEWER:
You've said that you've learned a lot about struggle from your family. Can you tell me what you meant by that?

00:01:12

BARBARA SMITH:
Well the… one of the major things I think about growing up in my family, it was a very well educated family. What, regardless of race or gender. My mother was actually a college graduate, but the job that she had during our short time with her, she died at a very early age when I was nine. I'm a twin, so I always say we, uh, when we were nine, my sister and I, our mother died at the age of 34, but her job as a college graduate was to work as a supermarket clerk. And that was, to me, that embodied struggle, my understanding that before we were born, she worked as a nurse's aid. So having that level of dedication certainly didn't lead to wonderful opportunities for her. Although we did have a pretty stable home. And after

our mother died, we didn't have to go to an orphanage or leave where we were or go to another school. We lived in the very same home with our extended family after that.

00:02:07

BARBARA SMITH:
But, um, there's no way that you can grow up during that period as a Black person and not be aware of struggle. Uh, we never saw white people except in school. We did live in, well, our neighborhood… the block we lived on was not really integrated, but we always went to integrated schools because the neighborhood as a whole, the community as a whole was integrated, and our family had moved to that neighborhood so that we could go to better schools. But, uh, white people were as alien, in some ways, to us as, uh, actual aliens from other planets might be, if such exist. It was a very segregated world. And when we were small, my sister and I, like when we went to settings like downtown to department stores where there were white people. I think that even as young children, or as a young child myself, I could feel like the elevated tension that my, uh, adult family members had when they were in a context where they did not necessarily feel comfortable accepted and where they were trying to protect us.

INTERVIEWER:
Was it a sense of fear or what, what was that tension about?

00:03:12

BARBARA SMITH:
Uh, just tension. I would say, not necessarily fear, but just carefulness. Don't say too much. Don't talk too loud. Uh, I remember once when we were

extremely young, we were on an elevator at a department store and someone reached out to touch our hair, and I could tell that our family members who we were with were not pleased at that at all, but they couldn't really do anything about that.

INTERVIEWER:
You've actually said that when you were growing up, you and your sister seldom spoke. You were more like looking and seeing and thinking, but not speaking. Can you talk to me a little bit about that sense of not being heard?

00:03:50

BARBARA SMITH:
Oh, it's not that we weren't heard. It's that my sister and I were so very shy that we really didn't want to say anything. And since we had our own language, we think we taught each other to talk. Uh, since we had our own language, we didn't really need to talk to other people that much. But there's a great story that my maternal aunt used to tell about how she and her husband took us to a picnic when we were four years old. And of course, we were like little dolls because we were dressed exactly alike, and our hair was exactly alike. And we looked exactly alike even though we were fraternal, and we didn't say anything. And people kept coaxing us to speak and to say something, girls say something, say hi, say something. We would not say a word. And then we got in the car and we said, we didn't say anything, did we? And it's kind of like Gotcha.

INTERVIEWER:

So it came from more from a sense of shyness as opposed to a sense of not being heard?

00:04:42

BARBARA SMITH:
Oh, absolutely. Well, the thing is, growing up in an old fashioned family, at an old fashioned time, children were to be seen pretty much and not heard. But there was a lot of agency, I think, and among the women in our family, they all worked. They had– did important things, things that they thought were important. They did them with great, uh, energy, and I think with great skill and talent and, um, I… it wasn't really about us being silenced, I think, as little females, it was about just being shy and, and also being expected to be well behaved.

INTERVIEWER:
You said also that growing up watching The Donna Reed Show and, um, Father Knows Best that you just wished you were a part of a regular family.

BARBARA SMITH:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
What did you mean by that?

00:05:28

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, a regular family was a white family and a regular family had a father. So we never, my sister and I never knew our father. We never met him. I've never

even seen a photograph of him to this very day. We did not know any of the family members on our paternal side. So our kind of family was not at all visible. There were virtually no Black people on television except for those who were portraying maids. And then on Sunday night on Ed Sullivan, there were people tap dancing. And it was a great… there was a great deal of excitement whenever a Black person was on television. These were the golden years of tv. This was let's invent televisions, or atleast let's get TV's mass marketed. I grew up in that very critical era when there were only three major networks, and television was black and white.

00:06:20

BARBARA SMITH:
And in any event, as I said, if a Black person appeared on tv, the whole household stopped. And whoever was watching ran and got the other family members so they could see the Black person on television. But it was not generally anything that would make you feel very proud. I remember Amos and Andy, the TV show and being both very attracted to it because there were some people who looked like us and then being puzzled because they didn't act like us.

INTERVIEWER:
What was the message that you got from that?

00:06:51

BARBARA SMITH:
The message that I got was that Black people and Black women in particular did not matter when I was a pre teenager and reading *17 Magazine* and *Ingenu Magazine*, those were, well, 17 still exists, but those were two

magazines for young teenage, uh, girls. There was never a Black, uh, young person, young woman in those magazines. And if we were looking at *Glamour* or, you know, other, uh, *Madame Mazel*, those kinds of magazines, Ladies' Home Journal, you name it, we weren't in it. And that was really, uh, very, uh, undermining and very upsetting.

INTERVIEWER:
It seems like you kind of got two different messages in a way. You seem like you had strong, uh, female role models at home, and yet you have this other message. So what did you do with that?

00:07:40

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I think I became the person I turned out to be because there were high expectations in our family for everyone, including my sister and me. One of the things I always tell, and I work with a lot of teenagers and, and even younger children now, elementary school-aged children. And one of the things I'd let them know is that no one ever persuaded me to do well in school or paid me for doing well in school. It was just what you did. So when we brought home, my sister and I, and I have to say we, because it was both of us, but when we brought home our all A, our virtually all A, um, report cards, and some of them were definitely all A's, uh, when we would bring home those report cards, what we got from our grandmother, who was our primary caretaker, was, that's nice, honey. Now go change your clothes

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BARBARA SMITH:

I mean, it was not a big deal. And there was certainly no bribery involved, but it was such a model, I believe I grew up with people that their standards were so high that you couldn't really live with them if you didn't kind of do the same things they did, but it was not, uh, miserable. It was not, I don't wanna do this. I always loved school, probably because the people I was around, uh, that I, uh, grew up around also valued the things that you got out of books. They valued, uh, literature. We had, uh, I think in Cleveland, when I was growing up, there were three daily newspapers and we subscribed to two of them. So newspapers were read, news was listened to, news was listened to on the radio, news was watched on television, current events were discussed. And that was just the way it was. There was an expectation that if you had a mind, you were supposed to use it as opposed to throw it away.

INTERVIEWER:
What about your family's expectations for your future, and what would you, and your own?

00:09:31

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I mentioned already that my mother was a college graduate. So I actually grew up with the expectation that I would go to college. And when people would ask in those early, very early years, I believe even before I started kindergarten, when an adult would ask, and I chose to speak to them, which was not always, as I mentioned, but if I chose to answer the question, what do you want to be when you grow up? I would say, I'm going to college. And that was as a four year old, and that was just really what was the game plan. And there was a specific college that people in my family talked about

always, and that was Spelman College, which is still a distinguished Black women's college in Atlanta, Georgia. And that was a school that they talked about. And that was the school that I think my sister and I were being groomed for.

INTERVIEWER:
Why did you choose to go to a woman's school?

00:10:23

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I was, uh, in the age group and the generation of young women who did not have a choice of going to the Ivy League. I started college in 1965, so no matter how much I might've wanted to go to an Ivy League school, it wasn't a choice. And I had a wonderful guidance counselor at my really good academic high school, uh, considered to be probably the best, uh, high school on the east side there, a couple who were vying for that title. But Cleveland had many, many high schools and many, many schools. It was one of the 10 largest cities in the United States at the time. And I never had any idea what a cosmopolitan environment I was growing up in, because once I found out there was a New York City, that's the only place I ever wanted to be. But in any event, um, our, uh, guidance counselor, uh, was very supportive to, uh, us, and I'm talking about young women of color who, uh, she was, um, uh, mentoring and advising.

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BARBARA SMITH:
So when we started talking about colleges, uh, there was, I guess I was always kind of interested in going to a women's college. And there was a college in

Ohio at that time called, uh, Lake Erie College for Women. And I remember going to ta, uh, to have an appointment with her. And she asked, so, what are you thinking about? And I said, well, I've, uh, been reading about this college Lake Erie College for women. And she said, you can do better than that. And isn't that remarkable? Because I met students when I was at Mount Holyoke. And, uh, since that point, who could— Black students who told me an apocryphal tale of having those aspirations, of really wanting to challenge themselves and being very intellectually motivated and also qualified, and having their guidance counselors and their teachers say, oh, that's not for you. You should get into a vocational course. So I had the opposite experience. I was very fortunate.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you also choose a woman's school because of the issues of sexism?

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Mount Holyoke College
1969

00:12:18

BARBARA SMITH:
I actually went to Mount Holyoke College, which is the oldest of the seven sister colleges. Because of growing up in the civil rights era, there were new opportunities that were opening for students, and that that is for Black students to attend previously white elite colleges and universities. And I figured that given that I was Black, that if I went to a women's college, at least, I would not have to deal with the, uh, downplaying or the, uh,

condescension that would come to me as a female on a white campus that is a white co-ed campus. I thought if I go to a women's college, uh, they will at least expect me to be a woman and not think that I'm inferior, as a result. There was no such word of sexism in those days, but I certainly made a conscious decision based upon racial concerns and, and the, uh, context of racism at that time. I didn't wanna have to deal with both being thought to be less based upon being both Black and female.

00:13:22

BARBARA SMITH:
So going to a women's college really worked for that. And then also, those were some of the most competitive schools that, uh, young women could go to at that time.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Pre-First Year Classbook
Mount Holyoke, 1964

INTERVIEWER:
Are there specific, uh, examples or memories of certain racist things that have happened to you growing up that made the most impact?

00:13:40

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, my first experience of racism was consciously of racism, was in a context where I, before that point, had always felt completely comfortable, which was in a school classroom. Uh, when I was eight years old, my sister and I were chosen, among thousands of students, apparently, or at least well,

hundreds of thousands of students in the Cleveland Public School system to take a course in French at Western Reserve University. It was at that time, Western Reserve hadn't combined with Case Institute. So we were picked because of our academic, um, capacity and our capacity, and we started taking French. And we were very excited to take French. Our, um, maternal aunt had studied French in, uh, high school in Cleveland, and she sometimes spoke to us in French. So we were interested, you know, we were interested in that. And, uh, we couldn't figure out why our teacher was so mean to us.

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BARBARA SMITH:

She was really mean to us. And she was always speak—she always spoke sharply. She never smiled at us. She never complimented us. So we had experiences, I had experiences in a classroom setting that I'd never had before, which was to feel unwelcome and to feel, uh, really not valued. And the, uh, ultimate horror of that experience was that, uh, this was a time when most mothers did not work, and there wasn't nearly as much prepared and fast food as there as, uh, uh, now. And so different kids every day would bring enough cookies or other treats that their mothers had made to share with the entire class. And we begged our mother, who was a wonderful cook, and a wonderful baker in particular, to make cookies so that we could take cookies to share with the kids in our French class. And we took those cookies and there were students who refused to eat them. And that was my exposure to racism for the first time. It was devastating.

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BARBARA SMITH:

But then, you know, we lived through it, and I never got good at languages. And I think it's because of the trauma of l learning… my first experience and trying to learn a foreign language was in a context of great racism. So I never really got comfortable with learning languages. I've studied three of them, but I never got comfortable.

INTERVIEWER:
What was it about activism that affected you?

00:16:06

BARBARA SMITH:
I had a really profound sense of injustice and of what was fair and unfair. I think all children do, I think innately, children just have a sense of, this is right, this is wrong. This isn't nice. This is mean. They put it into their language. But I think all children have that. I think the fact that my mother died at such an early age, I actually had an experience, a profound and shaping experience of something that was really, really, really not fair. And I don't know if that was the root cause of it, or if it was because my family attended a church where the minister was a civic and race leader in the city of Cleveland, the probably the most prominent leader at that time in the city of Cleveland. So every Sunday when we went, not only did we hear about what was going on in the Bible and all that, we also heard about what was going on in our actual lives and what was happening in the Civil Rights movement in the South, where most of the people in the church, of course, had actually come from.

00:17:10

BARBARA SMITH:

And I don't know, there were, there were lots of factors, but I think the bottom line was that sense of, it's not fair. Uh, I grew up thinking, we talked about tv, we talked about magazines where we were completely invisible. Uh, I grew up thinking that I was really ugly because I never saw anyone who looked faintly or slightly like me being looked at as a beautiful person. And there were a couple of exceptions. There was Lena Horn, there was Ertha Kitt. Eventually there was Diahann Carroll. But as I said, the general perspective was that we just did not count, and that we did not matter. And as I said, that sense of what's fair and what's not fair, paying attention to current events and what was going on. I watched the civil rights movement unfold on the television in my living room. It's not something I read about in a book. And I also had the experience of seeing how people in my family who came from the deep South, they came from Georgia, seeing how they reacted to what was going on.

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BARBARA SMITH:

I knew that it was important. And that's really, I think those were the roots of my activism. People have sometimes asked me, often asked me, were the people in your family activists? And I laugh because it's like, no, they weren't. If you mean by activist, somebody who goes and marches on picket lines and carries a sign and et cetera. But they definitely had that sense of justice and injustice and deep concern. And before I was ever known of, long before I was born, they were living in a context where activists are not, they were dealing with the repercussions of Jim Crow and U.S. apartheid every single day of their lives. And they brought that to us. They didn't talk about race that much.

They, and they certainly didn't talk a lot about the South and how bad it must have been, but I could feel it, I could feel it through my pores.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you know early on, or how did you know early on that standing up was gonna be a lifelong path?

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BARBARA SMITH:
I didn't know it was going to be a lifelong path, because like most young people of my generation, and this is a generation that came of age in the 1960s, we thought, we're gonna have this all finished by the time we were 30, because of course, you didn't trust anyone over 30. So by the time we were 30, everything was gonna be taken care of. We actually thought that, I thought that we all did. So we were all, you know, coming of age at the same time, and we were going to change the world. Uh, by the time I got out of college, uh, I think I knew that it was going to take a bit longer. And also because I studied movements of the past and saw how long they took. So I was, I was beginning to get a clue.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me a little bit about when you knew writing was going to be a love of yours?

00:19:59

BARBARA SMITH:
It was in junior high school, I always was interested in writing and in English and in reading, and particularly in reading devouring books.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Barbara & Beverly Smith

BARBARA SMITH:
I was reading all kinds of things. I was reading what was assigned in school. I was reading teenage novels, I was reading biographies, I was reading all kinds of things. And then I had the opportunity to read, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953). At the time that I read it, he was a popular, extremely popular and well-known author, and he was at the height of his career during that time. So my aunt, who actually worked at the main branch to the Cleveland Public Library and could take out as many dozens of books as she wished with no due dates, she brought home Baldwin because she was reading those books as well.

00:20:47

BARBARA SMITH:
So I had the opportunity to read, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, and it was like the top of my head flew off or whatever, because it was like, wow, I did not know. I did not know. And what I did not know is that someone who was a lot like me could write a book that was a wonderful book, a magnificent book. And that the story of not well off Black people, poor Black people could actually, uh, be literature. It was a complete break point moment, because that was the first time I'd ever read anything that was remotely similar to the kind of family I was growing up in, the kind of life I was leading. So that was really, really, really important. And despite some of the things that I've mentioned about taking French and all those kinds of things, our family did

not have a lot of money. They, uh, struggled, but they really were committed to us having a stable life and having a good future. So…

INTERVIEWER:
You said it was a breakthrough moment, what did it do for you?

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BARBARA SMITH:
Well, it made me think if he could do it, then maybe I could do it too. I actually thought that because many Black writers at that time actually became expatriates in Europe, specifically France and Paris. I just thought that after I finished college, I'd be taking a boat or a plane to Europe so that I could be a writer. I absolutely thought that that would be a necessity, because I was looking at, so what did they do? I was completely interested in and fascinated by what they did to get to where they, they, uh, were. And since so many of them who I admired had followed that path, I just thought, well, I guess I'll end up being an expatriate, because that's what you have to do to be an African– an African American writer. The burden of racial oppression was so great during that period. Uh, and that would be writers writing in the twenties or thirties or forties and into the early, uh, 1950s. They did leave. But because of my generation and because of the women's movement, I didn't have to leave

00:22:53

BARBARA SMITH:
When I was in, I think seventh or eighth grade, we had a wonderful English teacher. And she went to a professional teacher's convention in the summer. She had, uh, students, and this is probably a yearly assignment. I don't know

if it was connected to the convention or the conference. That would be a conference, not a convention. But any event, um, I don't know if it was connected to the conference she was attending, but she had all of us write autobiographies, and of course, my sister and I just did it… You know, to the max, you know, whatever they asked for, you know, we did twice as much or whatever illustrated, you know, you know, we typed, um, uh, we had a typewriter at home. So we typed it as opposed to wrote it. And she took, uh, our little biographies that we had written to the conference, and she told us that she was going to do that. And she also let us know how– how much people were impressed by these little biographies, autobiographies that we had written.

INTERVIEWER:
What did you love about it? What did you like writing

00:23:57

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I liked reading, so I wanted to do what the people did who were giving me so much, uh, pleasure. And then, um, we had a junior high school newspaper, and we could participate in that in ninth grade. Uh, junior high went through ninth grade. So I took journalism in the first part of ninth grade. And then I was on the school paper. And, and when we were, uh, in the journalism course, we had to again, make our own newspapers. And again, we took it to the max and we did beautiful student newspapers. And then we were on the actual newspaper that… uh, my sister and I were on the actual— we had very similar interests, clearly, uh, –

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Beverly & Barbara Smith
Lesbain & Gay Rights National March, Washington, D.C., 1979

BARBARA SMITH:
–on the actual student newspaper that was a printed newspaper with hot type, cuz there wasn't any other kind of type in those days.

00:24:45

BARBARA SMITH:
When I was in graduate school, I'd finished my masters at the University of Pittsburgh, and I was at the University of Connecticut, and I took a Milton, uh, seminar, yawn. But I did it again, the way I did everything thoroughly and, uh, with– to the best level I could possibly do it. So when I went to pick up my paper about Paradise Lost, I think it was about, uh, Eve and Paradise Lost and, uh, how women were viewed in the, uh, in that, uh, literary work. I went to pick it up and my final paper and the professor was there and I got an A or either an A plus, I can't remember which. And I remember the look that he gave me was like, how did you, how, how did I give this grade to you? And not that he was going to take it back or anything, but it's just kind of like it… I think it just struck him, like, we don't think of Black women… I don't think of Black women as being that gifted intellectually, certainly not being really good writers, certainly not getting A's or a pluses from me. And there I was. He just gave me this kind of quizzical… really? Is it you who's picking up this paper? Yeah, it was my paper. So yes, it was, I.

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BARBARA SMITH:

You know, by that time I got, uh, one of the things I got from Mount Holyoke, and it was not automatic and it was not from day one, but by the time I left Mount Holyoke, I had a really strong sense of my intellectual capacities, and I knew I'd gotten a really good background. So when I went to graduate school, uh, to work on my masters, I certainly was prepared for whatever they had to, uh, throw at us. Uh, there, I…I was not discouraged. I'm not saying that I never lacked self-confidence. I absolutely did lack self-confidence. But, uh, I've never really lacked self-confidence intellectually, or not very much. Uh, I think that I've always kind of led with that. So, um, I I, I didn't feel discouraged, just thought. Yeah. And I'm gonna get some more A's too.

INTERVIEWER:
We talked about your, you know, becoming active in the Women's movement in the early seventies. Before the National Black Feminist Organization, why did you feel that the organized women's movement had left you out?

00:27:04

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, the organized invisible women's movement was white. We didn't really see, uh, women of my generation, women of color. We were not really seeing, uh, women of color leaders in the movement. I was just interested to know what alert people were interested in, in general. So if there was a women's movement, whether I was involved or not, I was certainly going to be reading books like *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, et cetera. But they didn't seem to be talking about race and how race and gender, when they combine, actually have some different results and different ramifications. So I didn't see how I could be involved.

INTERVIEWER:

What were their priorities versus yours?

00:27:49

BARBARA SMITH:

There's a visible women's movement that made media, uh, got media attention, and then there was actual grassroots women's movement, which I probably had no way of even knowing about. Uh, I'm trying to remember the name of, uh, this book, uh, Marge Piercy's, *Small Changes*. That was like a revelation for me too, because I was living in Boston at that time, and that book was set in Boston. It was about women, young women around my age, uh, getting involved in the women's movement and really changing their lives. And it was just like, wow, there's this whole world right across the river because I lived in Boston and that was set in Cambridge slash Somerville. And I thought, wow, there's really a whole world, uh, out there. But, um, the women's movement, for example, like with reproductive rights, which are so important, they define them generally pretty narrowly as just abortion. When you look at the context of reproductive freedom for women of color, you have to look at sterilization abuse. You also have to look at access to quality healthcare in general. So if your definition of reproductive freedom is just the right to abortion, you leave out the experience of women of color, particularly those who are economically oppressed and don't have a lot of, uh, of financial resources to get their good healthcare.

INTERVIEWER:

A large part of the mainstream woman's movement was about jobs. Can you talk to me about that priority?

00:29:17

BARBARA SMITH:

Yes, I will. But, but another example, and this is a leading women's issue to this day, the issue of violence against women. And that was really important to me. Uh, I just, I absolutely supported the movement to provide a critique of violence against women, battering in particular, but also rape and sexual assault. I was so excited when in Boston, friends who I had met by that time, I was active in the women's movement in the mid seventies, were starting one of the first shelters, battered women's shelters in the country. But often, again, when mainstream or white women talked about issues of violence against women, an immediate kind of default solution was to go to the police. And that's just like, are you kidding me? We've had such a troubled and conflict filled relationship. Communities of color, Black communities in particular, have had such a traumatic relationship often with the criminal justice system and with the police.

00:30:20

BARBARA SMITH:

So for your first solution, if you're talking about violence against women, go to the police. It's like, no, that's not gonna work for us. We're not necessarily going to want to turn over even abusive men to a criminal justice system that has been absolutely draconian in its, uh, abuse and, and terrorism of, uh, communities of color. We just couldn't do that. So we had to figure out other sanctions and other ways of addressing the issue of violence against women. And it's not that no woman of color ever went to the police, nor was there,

there, there were no women of color being encouraged to do it. It's just that there were subtleties, there were layers.

INTERVIEWER:
What was the feeling for yourself and for other Black women at the time? Why did they wanna start the NBFO?

00:31:07

BARBARA SMITH:
I think we wanted a women's movement that reflected our own experience. We wanted a women's movement— The NBFO is the National Black Feminist Organization, started in 1973. Margaret Sloan was–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Margaret Sloan-Hunter & Gloria Steinem
Brooklyn Montessori School, May 15,1973

BARBARA SMITH:
– the most visible leader in that formation.

INTERVIEWER:
And when you would hear some of the mainstream feminists talk about their lives, I mean, you've talked to me about what you thought when they would complain. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

00:31:31

BARBARA SMITH:

Well, that, that wasn't necessarily in person, but it was kind of as told to, or what I was reading in *Time Magazine* or whatever, you know, it wasn't necessarily being in a room with them and hearing, uh, them, them so-called complain. But when I first– the first time I met someone who identified as a member of Women's Liberation, it was 1968, I was still in college. And, um, that's what, you know, she was traveling actually with Mark Rudd of Columbia Fame. And she was a part of women's liberation. I thought, what is that? I mean, what does it mean to be a privileged white woman? And not to be satisfied? Because the relationship between Black women and white women in particular, especially in the context of domestic service, was just so negative.

00:32:18

BARBARA SMITH:
So here's a person who we had been waiting on hand and foot since before slavery ended, since the time of slavery, the mistress of the plantation, so to speak, the mistress of the house after slavery. And she's complaining about her situation. We have to go out and work in order to have our children and our family survive. She doesn't have to work, and we wait on her. And yet she's complaining. Don't get it. Didn't get it. But I— that soon changed when I got out of college and started relating to the world of work and all of that, it began to make more sense to me.

INTERVIEWER:
When you founded the Boston chapter, why did you call it Combahee? And what was its significance?

00:33:00

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I went to the first, uh, re Eastern– Eastern Regional Conference of the National Black Feminists Organization. I lived in New York— I'm sorry, I lived in Boston, and it was in New York. But, uh, we started a chapter of the National Black Feminists Organization. But it was very hard for an organization, NBFO, to sustain the great excitement, the great vision that had come together at that conference, because they didn't have infrastructure. They didn't necessarily have funding. They didn't necessarily have a lot of paid staff. As difficult as it was for now, the National Organization for Women, it was even more difficult, I think, for the National Black Feminists Organization, because they didn't have the structure and the, and the resources. So we were feeling dissatisfied with the amount of interaction and the amount of responsiveness we got from the national, uh, organization. But we also had a critique of class in a way that I think that, uh, maybe was not as prominent with NBFO.

INTERVIEWER:
And why did you call it Combahee?

00:34:04

BARBARA SMITH:
Why did we call it Combahee? Because the Combahee River in South Carolina is where Harriet Tubman led the only military campaign ever planned and led by a woman in US History. That was the raid on the Combahee River, which freed over 750 enslaved people. And she was a scout for the Union Army. She planned that raid because she knew where she was. That was

Harriet Tubman. And I thought that instead of naming the organization after an individual, we should name it after an action. And so that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER:
At the time, you said that it was very radical to deal with race, sex, class, and sexual identity all at once. Tell me why it was so necessary to deal with it all at once.

00:34:52

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, the reason it was necessary is because that's the way life actually is for a lot of people. If you're Black and female and don't have a lot of class and economic access and privilege, that's your life. And you need to have a politics. You need to have a way of making change and defining issues and creating an agenda that's relevant to you. Some people happen not to be heterosexual. I would be one of them. And we need to have a political movement that reflects those concerns, too. The concerns of lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender people of color. It's quite different than the agenda for white male privileged people who are also gay. So that's why, just to be realistic and to be effective.

INTERVIEWER:
You also said the Black nationalist movement didn't address Black women's needs.

00:35:45

BARBARA SMITH:

The Black Nationalist and Black power Movement came into, uh, kind of its, uh, height of, of energy and, uh, and, uh, attention following the Civil Rights era of Stokely Carmichael and others asserted and said very loudly Black power that we're tired of begging and asking that we're now going to assert that we're gonna take this into our own hands. Malcolm X was certainly a part of that kind of perspective too. But a part of the Black nationalist kind of perspective and analysis was that Black men were kings and Black women were supposed to be queens. And our major role was to walk three or seven steps behind our men and have babies for the nation. And there were a lot of very, very smart and motivated Black women during that period who were kind of around my age, who felt similarly frustrated during that time.

00:36:46

BARBARA SMITH:
And the Civil Rights movement also had been really very much, uh, a movement that was kept alive, and that was made successful by the unseen work of Black women. So you'd had a kind of content— continuity, a continuation from invisible— Black women being invisible in the Civil Rights era and in Civil Rights formations to Black women having this really, really patriarchally defined role in the Black nationalist and Black power movement.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there any incident that happened to you?

00:37:20

BARBARA SMITH:

One of the things that I remember that was really crushing to me, I was involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and I was very committed to it. I'm always committed to the things I choose to be involved in. And there was a major mobilization against the war in Vietnam. I believe it would've been 19… fall of 69, my first year at graduate school. And I went, and the kinds of things that were said about me that got back to me very easily, obviously, they were intended for me to hear about my going to that mobilization were just devastating. There was a Black studies department, a new Black studies department at the University of Pittsburgh, and it was very much dominated by people who had a nationalist perspective. But here I was a graduate student who was going to graduate school. The reason I went to graduate school was so I could teach African American literature.

00:38:15

BARBARA SMITH:
So clearly I was concerned about building Black women's– our Black studies too. But as I said, they were, they made very caustic remarks about my concerns–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Barbara Smith, 1988

BARBARA SMITH:
– and my interests. I actually thought I would never go to another demonstration in my life. I thought that was my last demonstration. I actually wrote something for myself, and it was called "The Last Demonstration,"

where I wrote about going to Washington for the first time, uh, against the war, and thinking I would never be able to do anything like that again.

INTERVIEWER:
What did they say?

00:38:46

BARBARA SMITH:
Um, probably…I mean, I can't remember direct quotes, but the general, the general, uh, attack was that I was white minded. That the anti-Vietnam War movement is a white movement, and anybody who's involved in it isn't Black enough. That's a paraphrase. But that was definitely the sense of it. And it was, as I said, it was devastating because I've been Black ever since 1946, and as you can see, I still am. And, uh, it was really… that that's one of the worst things that another Black person can say to a Black person, is that they're not sufficiently Black. It's devastating. And that's, that's what happened.

INTERVIEWER:
Your work towards a black feminist criticism is considered ground breaking, opening up the field of Black women, the literary tradition. What was the field like before then? Why did it resonate with you?

00:39:38

BARBARA SMITH:
I went to graduate school really, very consciously because I wanted to teach Black literature. I had done an independent study on Black writers when I was a senior in college. All the, uh, all the authors I chose, the four authors I chose were all males. And I had heard the names of some Black women

authors, but I had never really read their work or studied them. And that was pretty much the way it was. That Black studies in black literature about, uh, Black male achievements and Black male experiences, definitely from a very male perspective. And women's studies, which was just beginning at the same time, was very much about white women's experiences. When I went to, uh, the University of Connecticut, um, I took my first year there, my first semester there, I elected a course, a seminar in women's literature.

00:40:38

BARBARA SMITH:
It was one of the first courses in women's literature ever offered in the country. And this Black woman was interested in that. So I signed up, and there was of course not a single woman of color on the syllabus. And when I went to talk to my professor and ask her about ideas for my final seminar paper, she really didn't have any suggestions for me except to give me the wonderful book by Gerda Lerner *Black Women in America: A Documentary History*. It's a wonderful book, but it is a historical work. And I looked at it, I thought, what can I do with this? I'm supposed to be finding literary topics to write about. But we were just left out of the curriculum. I've read every major white male author who writes in English, on Earth. I mean, I'm, I'm not kidding you. That's, you know, that's what I had to do to do the literary academic work that I did.

00:41:32

BARBARA SMITH:
But we wanted to do something, those of us who were coming of age at that time in various fields, we wanted to do academic work, teach subject matter that had something to do with the experiences that we ourselves had and

what we valued. So, sociologists, historians, psychologists, people in various fields, even Black women in science and in medicine, we were all looking to try to find primary sources and material that we could begin to analyze and begin to put into our college and university curriculum in the United States. And we, and we were successful. I might add.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there one moment when you realized that you had to do this or spoke to the lack of it? Why Black women were so invisible in the field of literature?

00:42:20

BARBARA SMITH:
I told you about taking that seminar and there being no women, uh, no, uh, Black women or other women of color included in a women's literature seminar. I had not taken a Black literature seminar. Those were not even offered very much on the graduate school or, uh, level in integrated universities at that time. But, uh, I was just aware that there was something missing. I was a charter subscriber to *Ms. Magazine*, which started publishing in 1972. And in one of the early issues, if not the very first issue of *Ms.*, I had read Alice Walker's work in literary magazines like *Harper's*.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Alice Walker, 1985

00:42:57

BARBARA SMITH:
I read that Alice Walker was teaching a course in Black women writers, and that was where I lived. I was so excited. I wrote her a letter, that's what

people did in those days, as opposed to emailing. And, uh, I sent her a letter asking could I audit her course. She was, uh, supposedly teaching it at Wellesley, and by the time she responded, she actually had moved over to teaching it at the University of Massachusetts. And that was really my first solid introduction to a lot of Black women writers all in one place with a great perspective and all at the same time. And I decided that was the fall of 1972. When I audited that course, the literature, the women's literature course that I described to you, I took a year earlier in the fall of 1971, I said to myself, the next time I teach, I don't care where it is, I'm gonna be teaching Black women's literature. I didn't know if I was gonna be teaching on Mars. I had no idea. I just decided I'm gonna be teaching Black women's literature the next time I teach. One year later, in the fall of 1973, I was teaching at Emerson College, and that's when I taught my first course on Black women writers.

INTERVIEWER:
What did it feel like?

00:44:08

BARBARA SMITH:
I loved it. It was the best teaching experience I ever had. It was so exciting, and my students were so excited. It was 1973, that was really, really early, still in the second wave of the women's movement, but they were so just entranced by the writers. We were reading Zora Neal Hurston, Ann Petry, Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, Tony Morrison. What's not to like? I mean, they were magnificent writers. Uh, at the time, it was like being a part of a cult. Only, uh, very few of us actually even knew who they were. But now, Zora

Neal Hurston's on a postage stamp, and she's in the, what is that? The Library of American— I can't remember what it's called. But you know, that– that canonical, you know, thing of being, uh, looked at as a really important, uh, American literary figure.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me if Alice Walker, whoever was that first Black woman writer that you read that made you think this is me.

00:45:10

BARBARA SMITH:
When I was, um, auditing that course with Alice Walker, who was so generous to let a young Black woman graduate student do that. We are about the same age, though, so we were both young, but in any event, one of the books that, and one of the authors that we, they were reading was *The Street* by Ann Petry. And when I read *The Street*, I said, that's it. That's it. I still needed to do my seminar paper from that women's literature seminar that I mentioned, because my aunt had died suddenly in the fall of 71'. So I had taken an incomplete, so I was still looking for the, the topic for my final paper. Just as I had discussed with my professor a year earlier, I still had not completed it. So when I read *The Street*, I said, that's it. And that's who I ended up doing my seminar of paper on, and just loved Ann Petry. I read every single one of her novels. I got to meet her. She actually came to Boston because she lived in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and she came to Boston when I was teaching one of those early Black women's literature courses at Emerson.

00:46:17

BARBARA SMITH:

And I made sure that my students and I both got, all of us got to see her and– and to meet her. She was speaking at Suffolk University. So I was just mesmerized because she, unlike some of the other writers who may be better known, she was a naturalistic writer in the tradition of Richard Wright. So Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, which really just blew the covers off of US racism in a really, really dramatic way, and really was a benchmark for kind of before *Native Son* and after *Native Son*, and then also *Black Boy*. I feel that Ann Petry did something similar for Black women's experience in an urban environment, in her novel, *The Street*. I just loved her, and I love it.

INTERVIEWER:
What did she do?

00:47:08

BARBARA SMITH:
What she did was to write about what it's like to be a single Black mother in the 1940s, raising a kid by herself. When all the forces of the, the social forces, the economic forces, the racial forces, and the sexism or sexual forces, they're all lodged against her. No matter what she does, this woman can't catch a break. She's talented, she's bright, she's hardworking, she is all the things that a person you would expect to succeed. She, even in the novel, talks about Ben Franklin on the streets of Philadelphia, and him having, I guess, some bread or, I don't know what really happened, but she was thinking about Ben Franklin and how if he could make it so can I. I can make it in this country. I have all those qualities. I certainly had the passion, and she was really destroyed by those forces that I just described, the oppressions of race, gender, class.

INTERVIEWER:

So what did it feel to you to be able to bring this literary tradition out in the open?

00:48:16

BARBARA SMITH:

It was wonderful. Those were some really, really exciting days. It was like every new day was a revelation. Every day you found out about a new author, every day you met a new friend and or a colleague who was interested in the same things that you were interested in every day that someone said, that's what I thought about that book, too. It was just remarkable. It was so exhilarating, so much fun. And we were learning about ourselves. I mean, one of the ways you figure out who you are in the world is that you experience art that reflects your experience, whether it's music, whether it's drama, whether it's visual art, whether it's literature or film. It really makes a difference to see something that resonates with you, that seems familiar, that you can kind of glam onto hang on to. And that's what we were doing every single day.

00:49:17

BARBARA SMITH:

"Wow, I just read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, you will not believe this book. Would you like to borrow it?" I mean, it was just every single day. Uh, and as I said, I was young. I was in my twenties then, uh, teaching, uh, you know, teaching these, uh, new courses and meeting new people, meeting people like Audre Lorde, and I met a lot of the authors, most of the canonical authors who are, were alive during my lifetime. I've met them. And that's,

that was great too, because they were just like you, just trying to get your work done, their, their work done.

INTERVIEWER:
I guess in a way you could look back and then see how alone or, or isolated this was a community.

00:49:58

BARBARA SMITH:
Mm-hmm. Well, we built community. We were constantly figuring out ways to build community. Um, we would bring, uh, like people to the MLA. I was involved with the Modern Language Association Commission on the status of women in the profession. And they were like, those, those conventions, which are the largest professional academic conventions in the country. Those conventions were like feminist cultural festivals, they were wonderful. We got to see all the people we wanted to see and just knock the socks off of, uh, a very stogy profession.

INTERVIEWER:
Why did you take the fight to publishing? Why did you start the Kitchen Table?

00:50:38

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I just mentioned Audre Lorde, and I met Audre Lorde in the mid 1970s. I knew who she was, again, because I devoured print. And she was a major Black writer. She was published by a small press in Detroit that was called Broadside Press. And they literally printed Broadsides and stapled booklet

type, um, works. But Nikki… they were Nikki Giovanni's first publisher. They were wonderful. Uh, and that's how I knew about Audre Lord. And one day, when I was involved in coming out, I went to a bookstore in Boston, and there was a new magazine called *Amazon Quarterly,* and that was a really important lesbian feminist literary magazine. And I opened up the magazine and who was their portrait editor, but Audrey Lord. And I was just like, are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? This person who's such a leading light of the Black Arts movement.

00:51:36

BARBARA SMITH:

Literary arts movement, she's a lesbian too. Uh, is she really a lesbian? Oh, I don't know. I don't know. But I was so excited, and, um, so I got to be friends with her, and we were, uh, participating in things like special issues. I, uh, co-edited the Black Women's Issue of Conditions magazine. We got invited to do things like that. Off Our Backs, the women's newspaper out of Washington had a third World women's issues, uh, Heresies, I think, another wonderful feminist magazine, literary or Arts magazine, had a third world or women of color issue. So we were doing the special issue things and contributing to journals and, uh, anthologies and publications, but we didn't have anything that we were controlling and defining. And one day we were talking on the phone, Audre and I, and she was coming to Boston, this was in the fall of, uh, 1980 to, uh, do a, um, Black women's poetry reading on Halloween. And she said, you know, Barbara, she said, we really need to do something about publishing. I said, yeah, we really do. And I said, I'll get together a meeting, a group of people in Boston during the time that you and other women from

New York City are here, and we'll talk about what we might be able to accomplish. And that was really how Kitchen Table was born.

00:52:58

BARBARA SMITH:
There was a flourishing women in print movement almost as soon as there was a second wave of the women's movement. We talked about *Ms.*, I mentioned a few periodicals just a few minutes ago, and it was very clear that this was a movement of words as well as actions. And we realized that until we had our own means of production, our own means of getting our voices out, and our points of view out that we would be a few steps back, that we really needed to have some of the same mechanisms of communication, of doing political analysis, of reaching women who we would never meet, and people and audiences we would never meet, not just women. We really needed to have that. We needed to have a press of our own. And that's exactly, uh, just like Virginia Woolf had a room of her own and talked about a room of her own, we wanted a press of our own. And that's really why. There were other people who were doing similar things around the country too.

INTERVIEWER:
Why do you think Black women's literary tradition was so invisible for so long?

00:54:01

BARBARA SMITH:
The reason that Black women's literary tradition was invisible for so long is for the same reasons that, uh, women of European heritage are also invisible in literature. You could get a doctorate in literature and never read a single

woman during the era when I was involved in graduate work. It wasn't unusual, and it wasn't just racial. But I think that, uh, gender discrimination happens within racial and ethnic groups just as it happens in, you know, the, the wider world. So, no one, it ever occurred to people that there was this mother load, this gold mine of wonderful, uh, art, literary art that had been created. There's also the stereotypes of women and people of color. Women of color belong to two groups who are considered to be congenitally intellectually inferior women are supposed to be stupid, and Blacks are supposed to be stupid too.

00:55:04

BARBARA SMITH:
So frustrating when you're neither, you know, and that's, that's one of the major burdens I feel of my entire life. The assumption that I am stupider, stupider than any white person I encounter. I can't stand it. I just can't stand it. But yeah, it's an assumption of inferiority, the assumption that they have nothing to say. The assumption that women of color have nothing to say, and that their experiences are, uh, constricted to the domestic and to the romantic. You know, just whatever way you can dismiss someone, that's, that was what was going on.

INTERVIEWER:
And you devoted so much time and love and passion to it. What did it mean to you personally?

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Morago & Hattie Gossett

00:55:45

BARBARA SMITH:
During the first years that I was involved with Kitchen Table, it was really a labor of love because we were–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Kitchen Table Press Meeting, 1981

BARBARA SMITH:
– doing things that were really important to building the movement that I was already so engaged in. We were controlling, uh, the means of production, so to speak. There was a slogan, our saying, that one of the women's presses had, I think it was Diana Press, and it said that the power of the press belongs to those who own the press. And that was really where we were coming from. And there was such a vibrant women in print movement that we could be a part of. And the things that we created were so, uh, the books that we created and the pamphlets and the posters, they were so embraced. People were so excited to see work of that quality that had the genuineness and the authenticity of our point of view as women of color.

00:56:40

BARBARA SMITH:
It was just really much needed. It's like you're in the desert, or maybe not in the desert. You know when you get dehydrated and weather like we're having today, and you don't know you're thirsty until someone gives you water, and you just start drinking and drinking and drinking and drinking, it's like, oh, wow. I didn't know I was that thirsty. And that's the way our books were. Uh,

and the other books that were being produced that we distributed, we distributed a lot of books by women of color that we didn't publish, but it was like, wow, I didn't even know it was missing.

INTERVIEWER:
What was the message that you couldn't get across if it was just the mainstream media?

00:57:16

BARBARA SMITH:
Well, I think that the mainstream media always wants to sanitize things, although that's kind of hard these days. I think they always want to sanitize and put just a simplistic gloss on stuff. And it's not simple when you're dealing with multi-layered identities and multi, multi-layered oppressions. It's not simple. There's a great complexity there, and it doesn't necessarily fit into a sound bite or into just a little slick piece of fluff. Uh, authentic voices of women of color are not fluff. And if the mainstream media only wants to deal with fluff, then we get kind of crossed off the page. We get erased from the page. So we really needed to, uh, control it ourselves. One of the things that happened though, and this is not generally known, or necessarily documented, our doing the kind of publishing that we did, had a great deal of impact on mainstream publishing.

00:58:18

BARBARA SMITH:
People like Isabel Allende and Louise Erdrich, and I probably can't think of other names right off the top of my head. Uh, Amy Tan, um, Maxine Hong Kingston, those writers and Alice Walker and Tony Morrison, those writers

had a different relationship, I think, to mainstream publishing, because there was this little press in Brooklyn that was publishing, uh, voices and of women of color. And those women that I mentioned, almost all of them, supported what Kitchen Table Women of Color Press was doing. So we were not doing it in isolation from leading literary figures who sometimes didn't, uh, have access and did have access to mainstream publishing. We really made an impact on mainstream publishing. You saw more and more women of color being published by those presses, and it's because we started it.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think all your effort and your achievement has given Black women and women in general, uh, that you didn't have?

00:59:19

BARBARA SMITH:
I think that there's some younger Black women who have come of age thinking that they had great value, that there was nothing wrong with the way they looked, the way they sounded, the things that were important to them, the things that interested them and the way they lived. They didn't feel apologetic or that they had to fit in, in ways that people of my generation were virtually forced to do. Um, and I, I think that's so empowering and so healthy. I meet younger people all the time because I still speak on college and university campuses, and I just meet people who are so self, uh, you know, self-empowered, and so self-assured in a way that I don't think that women of my generation and older would be in quite the same way, because they do look out and see their faces reflected in different ways and places that we do not.

01:00:27

BARBARA SMITH:
Uh, we did not. So I think that's, you know, we did something important. And we also talked about justice. I think that's a word I haven't used yet. But we were committed to justice. We are committed to justice. If there's anything that we created and that we contributed to that was, uh, of the most important, it was that we were working for justice. When the women's basketball team at Rutgers, when Imus, Don Imus felt the need to go as low as he could, low, uh, go as low as he could go in insulting them, it was understood, particularly by the women who were the target of that attack, that it was both an attack on their racial identity and their gender identity, and the way that it was reported in mainstream media. They got it too. And I said, wow. So now it's not just a racial attack, or it's not just a gender attack. They actually understand that it's intertwined. And I think that's support of our work.

INTERVIEWER:
How did you end up getting into the Albany Council? It seems like a rather unlikely choice for you to join such a mainstream political organization.

01:01:36

BARBARA SMITH:
Yes, it is a very unusual choice, and one I'm still trying to figure out. Um, I live in Arbor Hill, which is an area of Albany, which is not exactly like Harlem, because Harlem has experienced quite a boom in recent years, at least a real estate and commercial boom. Uh, Arbor Hill is the largest Black section of Albany. It's a predominantly Black and poor community. I've lived there since

1987. I had never gotten involved in neighborhood kinds of issues or organizing, but as things continued to get worse in the neighborhood, particularly around issues of crime, I found myself calling the police on a regular basis, having experiences I did not wish to have, and is seeing a real change in the quality of life. And in 2003, someone came to my door and she had, uh, what was called a public safety declaration for Arbor Hill.

01:02:35

BARBARA SMITH:

And there were all the issues that concerned me, and I signed it. But she also said that there was a meeting a few days later, uh, in the neighborhood, and again, the flier about the meeting encompassed issues that I was concerned about. And I thought, well, might as well go to this meeting. It's not like I'd never gone to a meeting in Arbor Hill, nor never done any organizing in Arbor Hill, but I just… I was doing other things, running the press, doing things around national issues, et cetera. So I went to the meeting, and at that meeting I met, uh, two very key people. One of them was an assistant district attorney. Someone who I knew at the meeting said, you should talk to him. So I did. And he was an assistant, an assistant district attorney, uh, a young Black man. And he had an office in Arbor Hill. And I also met his colleague, who was a commander in the Albany Police Department.

01:03:31

BARBARA SMITH:

And those were two people that the person who I knew and who knew why I was there, said, you should really talk to them. David Soares was the young district attorney, assistant district attorney. And he immediately invited me to become a part of something called the Community Accountability Board,

which was an alternative sentencing initiative that still exists. And so I joined the Community Accountability Board. We were seeing low-level, non-violent criminal cases, sometimes misdemeanor, uh, cases. And instead of them going to court and going to a judge, a panel of people from the community would actually hear what happened, ask about the harm they had done. It was a restorative justice process, and then come up with a way they could make restitution to the community. So I did that for about a year. I got involved in a community flower garden near my home. Again, someone I met that fateful day in April of 2003, in the spring of 2004, um, David Soares decided to run for district attorney of Albany County.

01:04:35

BARBARA SMITH:

I worked on his campaign, but I also had been going to a lot of common council, that's what we call our city council in Albany. I'd been going to a lot of common council meetings around police issues because that police commander, who I mentioned who was David's colleague, was summarily fired in early 2004. So I found myself going to every common council meeting. Every time they opened the doors, I was there, as were some many others who were concerned about this. We started an organization called The Coalition for Accountable Police and Government. We were so effective that we got rid of the police chief and the director, or the Commissioner of Public Safety. Now, they would never say that that's why they decided to exit. But we know why. Uh, the president of the common council during that period was a wonderful woman named Helen Desfosses. And she just so happened to be a Mount Holyoke alumni. We did not know each other when we were in college, because she graduated the year I started, but we did know we were alums.

01:05:39

BARBARA SMITH:

And one day I called her about something that the council member, uh, who was then in office in my ward, I called her about something that concerned me, and she said, Barbara, she said, is there someone else in Arbor Hill? Do you know someone in your neighborhood, in your community who might run? And I said, well, I really don't know. She said, it's not too early, because that was 2004 election. The election year would've been 2005. And then she said, Barbara, she said, what about you? Now, this is like Mount Holyoke alum to Mount Holyoke alum. And like most people who go to that school, she never let it go. We are very tenacious, you know. So every time I saw Helen from that point onward, she would always say, oh, hi Barbara. And then she'd raise her eyebrow and give me a little smile. And that was to say, so what are you thinking? What are you thinking? So I got involved in the David Soares campaign. That was kind of my learning experience. I had never really worked in electoral politics before. And after being involved in his campaign, I decided, I will never do this. I am never going to run for office. It's too dirty. It's too upsetting. It's just too, too.

01:06:47

BARBARA SMITH:

Then in early 2005, a woman who lived in my neighborhood called me and she said, oh, actually, she emailed me. She said, if you run, I will support you every step of the way. And this is a person who lived in a Habitat for Humanity home. And I was thinking, wow. So the universe is telling you, you have the president of the common council and somebody who lives in your neighborhood both telling you the same thing. Maybe you have to think about

this. Of course, everybody else thought it was a fabulous idea. And that's how it happened. And I'm now on my second term.

INTERVIEWER:
And so you ran the first time and won.

01:07:26

BARBARA SMITH:
Oh, yes. Absolutely. Yeah. I can say I've never lost an election. I've run, I've only run twice, but I, I, that gives me a lot of pleasure though, because, uh, the first time I was not an incumbent and, um, I was not running against an incumbent. So I was considered to be the front runner because we just had a really professional campaign. The second time, the mayor got somebody to primary me and to run against me. And that's a mark of honor in Albany because, uh, all the progressive council members get primaried with a candidate supported by the mayor. And that's what happened to me in 2009, and I won two to one. So I feel good about that. And one of the reasons I also ran is because I was already doing a part of the job. I was involved in neighborhood cleanups. I was helping senior citizens to get handicap signs in front of their houses. Uh, street lights get fixed, you know, I was doing a lot of the things that a council member does, so I thought, might as well do the job all the way.

INTERVIEWER:
What's the, um, what's the most meaningful piece of advice you've ever received?

01:08:30

BARBARA SMITH:

The most meaningful piece of advice I ever received was, and everybody's heard this saying, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. And the reason it's so meaningful is because it's something that my mother told me. I remember virtually nothing that my mother ever said because I was nine years old when she died. And that's one of the few things I really remember her saying. And I remember exactly when, how it happened. My dear aunt, her sister had given my sister and me something, some little gift, and we didn't like it. And I guess we let that show, and she was not pleased with us. And so she told us, and she was tucking us into bed, and she said, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. And it has stood me in good stead. I like to remem— I like it because, and it's important to me because it's one thing I remember explicitly that my mother said. And then the content is also extremely useful.

INTERVIEWER:

A piece of advice you would give to a young woman on building a career.

01:09:35

BARBARA SMITH:

Uh, that it is really, it's really important when you're thinking about your career, that it's something that you wanna get up every morning to do. Don't choose to do something because your father told you. Your mother told you, your teacher told you, your friend told you, or you read about it in a book or a newspaper, or saw it on tv. Do not choose a career that way. Think about what really makes your heart sing, and then go for it. It's so important because

everyone's work life is challenging. If you are not really crazy about what you do every day, it's going to really, really be hard for you.

INTERVIEWER:
And what about advice on pursuing your dreams?

01:10:15

BARBARA SMITH:
That just believe that you can have them. Don't let, uh, don't let the, um, turkeys get you down. Um, I got very discouraged about being a writer when I was in college, because I took a short story course and I got a C, and I was just so absolutely defeated by that. That's also a part of why I decided to go to graduate school. I thought, well, if I can't write, at least I can teach literature. And, uh, that was not a good lesson for someone. I mean, we're all, we're all going to get discouraged, but I really think that keep that dream of overmost in your mind and try to figure out ways to make it happen. Uh, I have never really made any money to speak of just enough to take care of my bills. Sometimes, not even. But what was most important to me was to be able to determine my activities and my priorities on a day-to-day basis. Uh, I was at a meeting yesterday and someone was talking about in the corporate world, and I thought, thank God I've never worked there. Hallelujah. They said, you know how in the corporate world, in the business world, I said, no, actually I don't.

INTERVIEWER:
We know what you wound up doing, but I'm wondering if there's anything different you wanted to be when you grew up?

01:11:38

BARBARA SMITH:
Not different from what I ended up doing. No. The only thing I wanted to do was be a writer.

INTERVIEWER:
Well, what accomplishment are you most proud of?

01:11:46

BARBARA SMITH:
I would say of functioning with integrity in whatever realm I operate. That's very, very important to me. That I've maintained a sense of integrity and of ethics no matter what. And it's certainly in the context I'm in now. That's more than a notion. And I think having that kind of clear or clarity about what is right, uh, correct to do, and, and how to be humane in a world that doesn't always value that, that's important to me.

INTERVIEWER:
And what was your very first paying job?

01:12:22

BARBARA SMITH:
My first paying job was as an assistant in a tutoring program. I was in high school and there was a tutoring program at my old junior high school. So I was doing something there. I can't remember exactly what I did, but I was an assistant for a tutoring program when I was in high school.

INTERVIEWER:

What three a adjectives best describe you?

01:12:43

BARBARA SMITH:

Tenacious, ethical, and intelligent.

INTERVIEWER:

What person that you've never met has had the biggest influence on your life?

BARBARA SMITH:

James Baldwin. James Baldwin was a young Black person growing up in Harlem. Not with class privilege, but with such vision, such passion, and a writer like none other. I just love his prose. I think he's just the best. And when I read *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, that's what gave me the idea that maybe I could write too. I love him.

INTERVIEWER:

I was gonna ask you what it means when you say all women are white and all Blacks are men. To the person who's not familiar with the literature, can you explain that?

01:13:31

BARBARA SMITH:

Well, the whole… I have to say the whole thing, all the women are white. All the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave. And then Black women's studies, we were asserting that you could actually look at the experiences, the, the, um, perspectives, the intellectual production of women of African heritage, and find something of value. You didn't see it in Black studies, you

didn't see it in women's studies. You had to be brave in order to assert that. And that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER:
Looking back, what do you think the NBFO accomplished for Black women?

01:14:15

BARBARA SMITH:
For those of us who were lucky enough to go to that first Eastern Regional conference in 1973, late 1973, it was a transformative experience. Shirley Chisholm was there. June Jordan was there, Faith Ringgold was there, Alice Walker was there. My sister was there. I was there. We were the young ones, my sister and I, but people we looked up to, it was just so, so, so exciting. I think Eleanor Holmes Norton was there and hundreds of other Black women from around the country. It said it was an Eastern Regional conference. People came from as far away as California. It made such a difference to think that we could define a women's movement of our own. And that's exactly what we did. And some of us are still doing that.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think is the biggest challenge that you still face?

01:15:09

BARBARA SMITH:
The thing I dislike the most is the stereotyping. I really don't like the stereotyping, and I don't like the fact I'm going to be 65 for the end of the year. I'm in the first year of the baby boom. All those baby boomers were making people so frantic around Medicare and social security. I'm one of 'em,

but as old as I am, or as old as I get to be. I don't think I will ever be fully seen for who I am and taken at face value, if you see what I'm saying. I try to explain this to friends of mine, particularly in the context that I operate in now, because I'm often in corporate context, government context, highfalutin context. I'm over at the state capitol constantly. I know, uh, our congressional delegation, I've met all of them, you know, our congress member, and also, uh, our two senators from New York. So I'm in very highfalutin, kind of agreed upon powerful settings.

01:16:14

BARBARA SMITH:
But I just feel that if I walk into a room and no one knows who I am, that there are stereotypes and assumptions are made generally until I open my mouth and then they begin to fall away. But I would like to be seen as a person that I am and valued as a person that I am without ever having to say a word. And I don't think that will ever happen. Even with a Black president. Because we see how he is disrespected. If his father was from Sweden as opposed to from Kenya, nobody would be asking about his birth certificate. Let's be very clear about that. The level of threats that the first family gets that are not disclosed, but that are constant, and that include threats against those dear children. Some things have changed, some things have not.

END TC: 01:17:14