BYLLYE AVERY INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Byllye Avery
Activist
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Interviewed by Julie Cohen
Total Running Time: 1 hour 32 minutes and 4 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

Byllye Avery
Activist

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me a little bit about your childhood, uh, where you grew up and what it was like.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
Well, I grew up in, um, DeLand, Florida, which is a small town in central Florida, and it's spelled de capital Land. And, um, I lived there with my mother and my father and my, um, two brothers. And, um, it was a small town, only 5,000 people. And all during my growing up years, I was dreaming of when I would leave. I hated being there. I didn't want to be in a small town. And the irony is now I've retired to a town that's even smaller than that, so that's life. But, um, my mother's a teacher. She taught in, uh, um, she taught in several places, but when I was growing up, she taught in De Leon Springs, which is a even smaller little hamlet. Um, about 10 miles, um, from DeLand.

She taught in a one room schoolhouse, and she is– has been a teacher pretty much all her life.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
She taught her own sisters and brothers. And, um, my mother, who is 103 now, went to boarding school. Um, so she went to boarding school when it was not really very common for, um, Black people, especially living in Georgia to go to boarding school. But she, um, went there. She was… she's quite an outstanding person in school. She learned poetry. She was in poetry contests, and she still recites poetry today. And so she taught all while I was there. She finished college while I was, um, in elementary school. And she finished her– got her master's degree when I finished high school in, uh, from New York University. And, um, that's another interesting story you want me to talk about later, that I can. Um, and I always knew that I was going to college. I mean, you didn't know much about what was happening, but I knew that I'd be going to college.

INTERVIEWER:
Did it impress you at that time that your mom,--

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Byllye Avery With Her Family
DeLand, FL, 1950s

INTERVIEWER:

– from her era was a college graduate, or did you just think, uh, that's kind of the norm all women are going to college?

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BYLLYE AVERY:

I knew it wasn't the norm. Um, and I hadn't thought much about her going to boarding school until actually I became an adult and realized what a big deal that was for someone, um, who was born in 1908 to go to boarding school. And then when I started asking her about how the boarding school came about, then I realized what a big deal it was. Um, the fact that she got her, um, she first got her bachelor's degree from Bethune Cookman College, which is a historically Black college in Daytona Beach. And, um, I spent a lot of time on that campus with her and got to meet Mrs. Bethune, who was the founder of the school, who was a giant, who really did a lot of work at the White House. Um, and she was very good friends with Eleanor Roosevelt, and she did a lot during the Roosevelt administration.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

So I kind of grew up knowing about college and knowing that that was my destiny. And then when, um, she went away to NYU, and the reason she went to NYU is because the state of Florida didn't have, um, programs for Blacks, um, to get master's degree in education. So, the school board would pay, uh, um, for them to go away. So the Ivy League schools all bound together and provided education for blacks that was integrated education. They got to come north. So you have a lot of people who were my mother's age, or was in her age group who got their degrees from Harvard and Yale and Princeton, NYU, and places like that. So it was ingrained in me that I was gonna go to

college, and most of her friends were teachers, and they were all college graduates. And what we had was a lot of women who graduated from college, but you didn't have very many men who graduated from college because the thinking was among Black families…Um, you know, post-slavery was, we have to educate the women because they'll be the ones who will have to take care of the children in case something happens with the men, if the men are not able to, to get a job, or if the men leave or if something happens, the woman was seen as the person who would be taking care of the family. So there was this whole push around educating the girls.

INTERVIEWER:
Within the family, there was that expectation. How about sort of society at large, and not just with education, how much support and encouragement was there for an African American girl when you were growing up, uh, in Florida?

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BYLLYE AVERY:
Well, there was a lot because, um, people of my mother's generation felt that what's wrong with the world is that people need education. And I mean, my mother will tell you today, there's nothing wrong with that person. They just need to go to school. And so they held education very, very high and in high esteem. And, um, it was expected. And I would say of my, um, I, my graduation class had only 19 in it, and I would say about at least nine or 10 of us girls went on to college. So it was kind of expected that you would do something, especially in, in, in, um, the families who my folks associated with who were like, you know, middle class, um, professional, uh, semi-professional families.

INTERVIEWER:

And as far as were, were you somewhat protected then from people that had a different view or were bigots or…

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BYLLYE AVERY:

Oh, no. You couldn't get protected from all of that. You're just taught how to deal with it. And, um, you know, like, um, you know, people had ways of rebelling, you know, like we were taught never to say yes ma'am, and yes sir, to white people, but– but we always knew that we needed to say it to Black people. Um, but that was one way that we rebelled. And I remember another thing, uh, my daddy had a, um, he owned a juke joint and— in DeLand he owned a cafe, and in De Leon Springs, he owned a juke joint, but at the cafe across the street, we used to like to go and, um, uh, sit under the trees and eat watermelon. And Daddy stopped us from doing it because he said the white tourists would come by and take our pictures and go back up north and– and laugh at us.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

So we always had to eat watermelon in the backyard where people couldn't see us. But, you know, we were taught how to deal with things and there were bad white people, but there were also good white people. And, uh, you had enough of both in your life to not make it be a judgment toward everyone. And I thought that was a real interesting balance that we had living in the south, because you expected racism, you expected bigots. And so the trick was to learn how to distinguish who were the really good people, who were

the people who really cared, who had real good hearts, and who were the mean ones and– and how to deal with that.

INTERVIEWER:
How about speaking out and speaking up for yourself? Was that something you could do in all circumstances? Was it something that–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Byllye Avery With Her Family
1969

INTERVIEWER:
– was encouraged by society, by your family?

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BYLLYE AVERY:
No, not a whole lot of speaking out and speaking up for yourself. Because see, you had to be careful. We don't insult adults, or you certainly didn't say anything negative to adults or anything bad to adults. So if I'm speaking out and speaking to myself, I'm only speaking to my peers, which doesn't seem much, but you know, you never, uh, disputed a teacher or you wouldn't dispute a neighbor because all of these people were your– were your parents. And, uh, any adult could come and tell my mother that I did something wrong and I would be punished. There was no question, because there wasn't any idea that this person would come and say something like that about me, unless it was true. So it wasn't, no, we were not taught to speak up and speak out about ourselves that way.

INTERVIEWER:

I'm asking because obviously in your grown up life, you became quite a speaker upper and speaker outer. Was that your personality as a kid? Were you—

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BYLLYE AVERY:

Well, I always, um, you know, like I— when I– when I learned about feminism later on in my life, I didn't ever have a word for it, but I always saw the inequities that went on in the family. Like, I never understood why Daddy always could have the last word, and that we had to do everything that he said, no matter if me and my mother, uh, felt differently, and why couldn't my mother have that? You know? And I always questioned, uh, within myself, why did I have to be the one to do certain things, and why did the boys not do certain things? And the sexism, I always saw it. I saw it all of my life. I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't see how girls and boys were treated differently. So, I guess my speaking up and– and all of that was growing inside of me until it all came out at a time that was, um, the right time for me, um, to do the speaking out.

INTERVIEWER:

What was growing inside of you, other than speaking. What were the feelings that you were having?

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BYLLYE AVERY:

Well, the feelings were, I couldn't understand why men always had so much power, and how Daddy could say, “You can't go this place. You can't do this.” And his decisions were always the final ones, and it didn't matter what the rest of us felt. I did not like that. I always saw that. I didn't like the way that I had to do certain things, and the boys didn't have to do it. And I think a lot of my, uh, I– I must have said something to my mother because, uh, or my mother might have had this herself, but, you know, my brothers all learned how to wash dishes. They all learned— we all had to take turns clearing the table, setting the table, et cetera. And the things that were usually girl jobs, um, they did a lot of them. So there was that bit of equality. But on the larger issue, when it came down to the real important stuff, Daddy was the one who made all the decisions, and I sort of grew up resenting it.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me a little bit about college. What was that experience like?

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BYLLYE AVERY:
College was wonderful. I went to Talladega College, which is a small college liberal arts college in, um, Talladega, Alabama. I read about it in *Ebony Magazine* when I was in the eighth grade and made up my mind that that's where I wanted to go to school. I never changed. And, um, the first time I ever saw the campus was the day that I went to, went to college. And, um, it was an incredible experience right from the beginning. Um, I remember, um, my– my, uh, parents took me early because, um, my mother got a new teaching job, and this was something that happened every time it was my first day to go to school. My mother would get a new teaching job. When I started in the first

grade, she got a new teaching job. Then when I went to Talladega, she got a new teaching job, so she had to be back for school on that Monday.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

So they took me up on Saturday. And, um, I got there and, um, they took me over to my dorm, huge dorm that holds 300 girls. And you gotta understand, I'm this little scared girl from DeLand, Florida, who's never really been away from home, uh, very much. And I was left there in this huge dorm. And I remember when they drove away, it was raining, and I was standing on the porch waving to 'em, crying. Oh, it was just so, oh, it was so scary. And I went back inside to my room. And, um, then I took a walk across campus and I saw these two boys coming across campus. And, um, they came up to me and they said, “Hi, what's your name?” And I said, my name. And they said, “Where are you from?” And one of them was Wesley, who later became my husband.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

He was there early because he was a waiter, and all of them had to come in early for– for the weekend duties. Um, later on that evening, it turned out alright. The president's daughter came and stayed with me and spent the night with me. You gotta understand, growing up Black in the south, um… things can happen pretty quickly. When I got to Talladega, a lot of my professors were white, and I also, um, had never had white teachers and didn't know how this was gonna work, and– and didn't know what the expectations would be. And also, I ran into a whole upper middle class of, um, African Americans who were very, very fair-skinned. As a matter of fact… Um, um, the president's daughter was very fair-skinned, and she took me to

meet the dean and his wife, and they both looked so white until I almost said to her, oh my God, they look like they're white.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And I didn't, because she took me to meet her own mother, and she looked like she was white. So here we– here I was, you know, just confronted with how am I gonna deal with this? But, you know, we moved through that. Other students came and my college was just great. I– I just love it. Um, I was there at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement and, um, Martin Luther King was our founders day speaker one year. And then for my graduation, he was my graduation speaker. Um, it was a campus, um, where, um, Autherine Lucy, who was the first Black woman to integrate the University of Alabama. Um, they brought her to our campus for safekeeping. And– and I remember, uh, all of us gathering and being told that we had to go to the dorms and we had to stay in the dorms. And nobody could come out on the streets after six or seven o'clock because the whites in Talladega knew that she was there. And they were riding up and down Battle Street, yelling and screaming, and, you know, making all kind of loud noises.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And, um, that was a little scary. But we didn't ever feel threatened by any of it at all. Um, our professors were incredible because they told us that we were powerful. They told us that we were smart, that we were brilliant, and that we had good things to offer the world. So Talladega, um, will always hold a special place in my– in my heart. I grew up there. I fell in love there. I still have lasting relationships. I just went to my 50th class reunion last year, and,

um, uh, we recall the whole Martin Luther King speech, um, when he talked about the three kinds of love, um, and– and that we needed to, um, be redemptive in our love, and that we needed to be forgiving in our love, which was really the right message to hear right at the beginning of the, uh, of the Civil Rights Movement.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
Um, one trip that I remember fondly was my, um, uh, psychology professor, Dr. Bross, who was white, took a carload of us to Montgomery. And, um, he took us to Montgomery. And I was surprised that Dexter Avenue Church, Martin Luther King's Church is a stones throw from the Capitol. I was just amazed that– that they were so close together, you know, in proximity, but so far apart and in ideology. He took us on– took me on my first trip to Tuskegee, and we went to, uh, George Washington Carver's lab and all of that. And he took us all around. And he's the person who introduced us to, um, to Alabama, to, um, Martin Luther King, where he, where he preached, you know, all of that was just wonderful.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me a little bit about what your career, uh, ambitions and dreams were. Were you thinking, I wanna be a big success and make a lot of money? I wanna go out and write the wrongs of the world?

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BYLLYE AVERY:
I didn't have any of those thoughts. I was just trying to get out of Talladega. It was hard for me, uh, academically. I had to really study in order to get out.

And I majored in psychology cuz I always kind of liked about how people think and how people feel. That was really very important to me. And so, but I didn't quite know what I was gonna do because it's not much you can do with a bachelor's degree in psychology. And I hadn't thought much about going on to graduate school. I kind of wanted a little break, you know, and I wanted to get married, which Wesley… My mother said I had to work a year before I could get married, so I left Talladega and I started working at a mental institution in, um, McClenney, Florida. And, um, I really love working with mental patients and, um, I found 'em to be very interesting, a lot more interesting than other people in, in, in a specific kind of way.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
And, um, Wesley, who was in Alabama before we got married, he started working there. So we got to work together. I was in occupational therapy, and I enjoyed that. And, you know, I wanted to be pregnant. I wanted to have children. And, um, it was a good thing I did because, um, I didn't know that he would leave me so soon. So, um, I knew him a sum total of 15 years, 10 years of being married and, um, five— the five years, four years of college and one other year. And, um, and we had the two children. So I'm glad that I was pushed in that way. That's what my interest— I never thought about what was I going to do, you know, at that time.

INTERVIEWER:
At that stage, did you get into other branches of the healthcare field other than the mental health institution you worked at?

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BYLLYE AVERY:

Um, no. I– I just sort of did that. But I did start, um, teaching and, um, I started working with emotionally disturbed children and, um, and I, um… they had a brand new program that came about and I wanted to do it, but I wasn't quite sure that I was qualified. So the state of Florida had a, uh, fellowship program that they offered, and I applied for it and got it. And that sent me to the University of Florida. And, uh, there I majored in, uh, what was called variant exceptionalities, uh, in special education. And, um, that led me to my path that led me to women's health. Um, uh, as a practicum I worked at the University of Florida Schands Teaching Hospital, uh, on the children's unit unit for, uh, autistic children, psychotic and autistic children.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And really became immersed in that unit. And what was so great about it, it was headed up by a man named Paul Adams, who was a Quaker. He was a conscientious objector, and he was a person who had a big influence in my life. Um, he, um, he didn't like living in the present. The present was very boring to him. So he was in the future all the time. So he kept all of us in the future with him. And, um, I'd only been there about three months when Wesley died. And, um, I was just so impressed with how these people who I barely knew banded around me and gave me support and gave me love.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

I left, um, Jacksonville teaching and I went to the University of Florida on the fellowship. And while I was there that year, I started talking to Wesley about don't you wanna go to graduate school? And he said, “Yeah, I'd love to go to

graduate school." And so he said, "Find out how you can go to school and be married while you're down there." So that was my task. So I found out about student housing, I found out about fellowships and everything, and I was already there and got him there. So we pulled up the kids and all from Jacksonville and moved to Gainesville. He was getting his doctorate in, um, educational research. As a matter of fact, he was about four months away from his doctor when he died. Um, we visited my mother for Thanksgiving, my mother and father for Thanksgiving. And as, um, we got back home, Friday after Thanksgiving, um, because we were gonna go to the Gator game on that Saturday.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
And this was in 1970, um, November 27th. And Wesley had a massive heart attack. He had never been sick in his life. Um, he was hypertensive and we didn't know it. He, um, uh, had a, um, um, myocardial infarction, whereas if he, if it had happened now or if he'd been a younger man, I mean, uh, you know, a older man, circumstances would've been different. Um, but he died suddenly. And I– I– I just, um, am still affected by it, even though it was in 1970. It's been quite a few years now. Um, I went into shock for a while. And, um, the anniversary of his death for 10 solid years, I got sick every Thanksgiving when there was nothing wrong.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
I'd go to the doctor, I didn't have a fever, I didn't have anything, but I was physically ill. And it was only in year 11 that I noticed that Christmas had come and I hadn't been sick. Um, before Wesley died, he was a very, he was a

brilliant man, number one, he went to college from the 11th grade. He, um, was just real smart. Um, and he was an avid reader. And before he died, he read a book that he told me he thought I'd like to read. And it was, um, Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. And I didn't read it while he was alive cause I was kind of mad at him because I thought he should be helping me more with the kids and all. So whenever he wanted me to read something to talk to him about so he could spout, I wouldn't do it. I would just sort of hold off. You know, one of the ways I got at him,

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BYLLYE AVERY:
So after he died, I read it. And when I read that book, oh my God, it was like all of the thoughts that I had earlier in my childhood, all of the ways of seeing the world, all of the things. Here it was right in front of me. Something that I really agreed with. Um, meanwhile, I'm working in a very, um, liberal, wonderful environment, an exciting environment. The children's mental health unit with Paul Adams and all of the other folks there. And I met– I met two women, Margaret Parish and Judy Levy, who were also, uh, uh, feminists. And, um, the second wave of feminism started in Gainesville, Florida. So Gainesville was just a fertile place for us to have these ideas. Then one day, Paul Adams assigned me and Judy Levy the task of talking about, um, reproductive rights.

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BYLLYE AVERY:
Uh, no, not rights, wasn't called that reproductive health, women's access to abortion as a topic. And he wanted us to talk about it, um, before all of the physicians, when they would do the didactic clinics for the, uh, fellows in

child psychiatry. So this was like a big order for me. And I kind of got a little scared because I didn't know what would my mother think about me talking about abortion. I mean, this was not a word that I'd ever heard. Uh, people didn't speak the word. Um, you know, if someone, uh, they would say they threw away a baby or they went to see Miss Jane or they did something, but nobody said the word abortion. And here I am, supposed to do a presentation on it and actually be for women getting abortion. So this was very challenging to me. But then I decided, you know, it was my job and I was at work and I justified it. And spending time, uh, with this new information that I had and all of the books and the readings, and paying attention to what was going on around me in the world with women, um, dying from self-induced abortions and not having access. Um, I started to understand it a little better.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

So Judy and I did the presentation and, um, shortly after that, um, the word got out in the Gainesville community, you know, that we had done this presentation. And so folks started coming to us and asking us if we could help them get abortions. Well, we didn't really know anything about helping anyone get an abortion, but you know, when people come and they sort of anoint you as the expert, now you become the expert. And so we got busy and found out information as to how we could help women get to New York to get abortions because they weren't, you know, um— Roe v. Wade hadn't passed at that time. So the first woman that came was a white woman. And so we found out about clergy consultation, which was a group of Catholic priests who were in New York at Justin Church who, um, would help women get to New York to seek abortions.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And so we were given the telephone number for them to call. So we gave the woman the phone number. She thanked us since she left, and we presumed that she went on and had her abortion. When a black woman came to talk to us, we tried to give her the telephone number, which she immediately said, "I don't have money to go to New York. I don't know anyone in New York." And we learned that just having that access was not helpful to her at all. And she later died from a self-induced abortion. So all of us knew that we had to do something that was different. And, um, by this time, abortion had become legal. Uh, Roe v. Wade had been passed, and women—we were starting to take women to Jacksonville to get abortions.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

Well, that got kind of old because we were going every Saturday, either to take someone to get an abortion or to get a checkup, et cetera. And we started dreaming about having a clinic right in Gainesville. So we would gather at, um, a colleague of mine, Judy Levy, who was a child psychologist, and Margaret Parrish, who was a business manager. We would all come together and dream about having a center that, um, would not only— that would address all of our reproductive needs. We were not just about abortion, we were also about menstruation. We were about menopause. We were about all of the things that sort of fit within us as women. And, um, so we started dreaming first about the abortion clinic. And, um, and we opened up the center in May of 1974. And, um, it was a first trimester abortion clinic and a well-woman GYN center.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And, um, it was just, um… it was an incredible experience making it all happen, because you gotta understand the environment around women, women's rights, women's empowerment was just very fertile, very alive. And feminism was just the rage and just the talk of everyone that I had anything to do with. And it was a very exciting time. And so we, um, we had to raise money to open the center, and none of us had any money. And so what we decided was that we would use our, um, privilege, our middle class privilege to get the things that we needed. So we all belonged to the University Credit Union, which you could borrow 2000– up to $2,000. So we borrowed our limit. We each borrowed our limit with a commitment to pay it back ourselves, um, to purchase equipment. And I remember, uh, we, we, uh, didn't like, uh, the–the facility that we found used to be the health department.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And so it had great awful tiles on the floor, and the walls were all gloomy gray and all, and we wanted to make it be an attractive, beautiful center. So we got shag carpet and put it on the floor, which was just, you know, the cat's meow. In 1974, that was the latest, best thing. And my job was to get the furniture. So I bought this denim, low slung furniture, uh, from, uh, Sears. And that made it all just look really great. The blue carpet, the blue, um, denim. We put up feminist posters and, uh, we painted the clinic, you know, um, wonderful color, put posters up.

INTERVIEWER:

What was the idea behind making it look really groovy? As well as…

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BYLLYE AVERY:

We wanted to demedicalize it, that we felt that, um, the medical, um, model was sterile. Uh, we wanted to make not quite like your home, but we wanted to make women feel real comfortable and feel real good when you go inside. That it was really okay to have colors, that it was really okay to have a rug on the floor, that we could have plants, that we could have pictures. And while that sounds like nothing now, it used to be that did not exist. That did not exist. So all of the changes you see today, they came from the Women's Health Movement. Uh, in the exam rooms we took care there. The model we used was, we wanna create a facility that we want to go to. And so I still use that whenever I'm developing any kind of program or any kind of anything. Is this something that I would like?

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BYLLYE AVERY:

And if I wouldn't like it, then I certainly wouldn't present it to anyone else. So the exam rooms, we had posters on the ceiling. We, uh, so that when a woman is laying back in lithotomy position, she has something to look at other than the boring ceiling. We put, uh, potholders on the stirrups. Uh, so because there's a cold metal and you get there and you put your feet there in that cold metal. So we put potholders on them. We had special gowns made. We didn't know, we didn't like the paper gowns that opened up in the back. And we had printed gowns made. We just had wonderful facilities.

INTERVIEWER:

List for me, what were some of the services that the clinic provided?

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BYLLYE AVERY:

We provided first trimester abortions, um, and which meant we had to hire the physicians and the nurses who would come and work with them. So we put them through the test because the, um, Feminist Women's Health Center, which was another whole group of, um, health centers, had set up certain standards for us to use. So we knew exactly how we– the attitudes, not only the attitudes, but also the practices that we wanted the doctors to adhere to.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

So you could also come and get pregnancy tests in there, um, counseling, lots of counseling to women to make sure that abortion was the decision that they wanted to make. It didn't really matter to us whether they had an abortion or not, it wouldn't matter to us that it was the right decision for that woman. Um, we had a wonderful recovery room where we had recliners where women would sit in recliners after the procedures, and then, you know, and then later go home a couple of hours later. Um, we provided well woman GYN care, uh, where people could come and get pap smears, get breast exams, um, get all kinds of checkups, get birth control. Um, to sit down with women and explain what's happening with your body.

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BYLLYE AVERY:

You gotta understand that before the eighties, there was a lack of information, uh, especially about, um, uh, reproduction, about– about birth control, about how you use them, what you used. There was really no place

for you to, uh, ask these questions. And doctors, at that time, gave you kind of short shrift, and most of them were men. Um, most of the OBGYNs were men. And they were uncomfortable. They were uncomfortable doing this. And so they, um, and so they didn't give us the full information that we needed.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you… do you have any specific memories, um, yourself of being confronted with, of having to deal with male doctors in that…?

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BYLLYE AVERY:
Oh, absolutely. I remember, you know, the, um… my first pregnancy probably was the result of a doctor who I asked him about, um, um… I wanted to get a diaphragm, which was the birth control method of choice at that time. And he told me that I really didn't need one, that I could practice the rhythm method. And so I was unable to successfully practice the rhythm method. And so I have a 50 year old son here today, uh, which I'm really happy about that, but I'm just saying he didn't– he didn't give me what I wanted. And then when I finally got a diaphragm, um, the doctor really didn't give me much instruction as to how to use it. And the first time I used it, it was so uncomfortable until I remember crying, and I went back to him and he said I just needed to wear it for a while, but I didn't think I could stand the pain of it, you know?

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BYLLYE AVERY:
And I finally pushed through it and I was able to do it, but it was sorta, um… they hadn't been properly trained either as to how to talk to us. And all of this is coming in brand new, on top of old ideas and old ways of doing things. Um,

one of the things that we did, um, that was very helpful around the training of doctors, um… one of the nurses who was there, Betsy Randall-David, and several nurses came up with a pelvic teaching program in which we would go over into the medical school and they would use themselves, the nurses, as models to teach doctors how to do, um, um, vaginal exams. Because prior to that, doctors had done vag— were taught to do 'em on women who were under anesthesia. And so who can say, this is hurting, this is not hurting. But, uh, our nurses in the pelvic teaching program taught them how to do, uh, exams.

INTERVIEWER:
To put things into context a little bit, talk about what situation was like for women with unplanned pregnancies prior–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Women's Liberation Army
New York, 1972

INTERVIEWER:
– to Roe versus Wade, and particularly for Black women.

00:36:21

BYLLYE AVERY:
Before Roe versus Wade, I can remember being in college and, um, hearing about girls who would get pregnant. And what they'd do is go to someone in the community who would give you a bunch of pills, uh, some of which did nothing. Or people would try to take a douche, which absolutely did nothing.

So there really wasn't much access. You had to have the baby, um, go away, uh, somewhere, have the baby, put it up for adoption. Um, it was sort of unheard of, of women having an abortion because you didn't know where to go except to back alley abortions, of which a lot of women died from that. And, uh, so, so that wasn't really a good option. More–more women chose to, um, to have the babies and put 'em up for adoption.

00:37:19

BYLLYE AVERY:
Even still today, um, um, Black women have over 50% of the abortions, um, when, and it somehow is seen as a white woman's issue when in fact, it really is an issue that really affects all women. And a lot of Black women, due to the power relationships they're in, due to the fact that they have children that they cannot support, due to the fact that, um, some of us are awful at, um, practicing birth control. I had one woman tell me, "I have failed every single method of birth control there is." It's a very hard thing to do. Um, so Black women have abortions, but don't talk about 'em. And that is what the big difference is. White women tend to feel a lot freer, a lot whatever, and share more about it. Black women talk about 'em and, and sort of think it's the personal business. I don't wanna discuss it. But a lot of Black women die from self-induced abortions, uh, abortions at the hands of, um, of, um, back alley people who did not know what they were doing.

INTERVIEWER:
And why were, uh, why were Black women in sort of greater danger for getting into those?

00:38:34

BYLLYE AVERY:
Well, because white women could go to their doctors and they would do a DNC, or they would give, uh, or– or they would have the situation where I learned from one of my friends that all the white girls had a thousand dollars, and I'm saying a thousand dollars in case you needed to have an abortion. Everybody had a thousand dollars somewhere. Not everybody, but a lot of people did. And then if a girl who was in the group got pregnant, then people would pull from their money and give it to her so that she could go away and get an abortion. Or the other doctor would do a DNC. Black women did not have that access. Did not have that access.

INTERVIEWER:
So now we're back in the early days, you've got, uh, this clinic going on. You were also having a lot of groups of women meeting–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
National Black Women's Health Conference
Self-Esteem Session, Spelman College, 1983

INTERVIEWER:
to sort of… I don't know if consciousness raising was the word that you–

BYLLYE AVERY:
Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER:

– used at that time.

00:39:24

BYLLYE AVERY:

My consciousness raising in Gainesville, I did with, um, with my white sisters. And I was amazed at some of the thinking and some of the feelings and some of the ways that I thought were just the Black people. I learned it was more to being women, that– that a lot of the things that were happen had to do more with sexism than it did with racism, et cetera. So it was just a period for really learning about yourself, learning about how you sit in the world, learning about what all can happen. And we got a lot of support from each other during that time.

00:40:00

BYLLYE AVERY:

A lot of the things that we had been growing up to believe were we, you know, we were, we were confronting these things and saying, no, we are not doing this. We are not doing it this way. We want to do it another way. We wanna direct our lives. We wanna be in charge. We wanna be equal with men. We want— all these things are very scary things to do. And it's real scary to, um, confront that kind of power because it can be so destructive, it can destroy families, and, uh, it can be very harmful. So it was a brave thing to do, to be able to get together and laugh and talk and learn together.

00:40:37

BYLLYE AVERY:

I got involved by hearing about a group of women were gonna get together over at someone's house and– and– and– and– and come and let's talk. And that's the way we did it. And we had certain rules around CR, you know, you

didn't interrupt when someone else was talking. We paid attention to time. And that would be a topic. So one time you might talk about your relationships with your mother, the next time you might talk about your relationship with your father, the next time was relationship with your, um, husband or your male friends, uh, and relationships with other women. Uh, so it was very structured, but it was very, very informative and it was eye-opening. And once you open your eyes to see, you really cannot not see.

00:41:25

BYLLYE AVERY:
The impact it had on us is breaking the silence, because before this women lived with whatever was going on in their houses and– and cried and, and, and, and cried in silence, or no one saw, or you certainly didn't talk to anyone else about it unless they form a bad opinion about it, about you.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
First National Black Women's Health Conference
Spelman College, 1983

BYLLYE AVERY:
So here we are talking openly.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me how this went from just, uh, groups that you were showing up at to what you decided to do about this, and how this became something much larger.

00:41:59

BYLLYE AVERY:

In, um, I think it was 1976, I came to Boston to a conference that was convened by, um, our bodies, ourselves. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective is what the name of the organization. They had a conference at Harvard and at the medical school, and I don't– I'm pretty sure the people at the medical school had no idea what was really going on. They–they really didn't know. I think they just thought this was a group of women who want to have a conference. But that conference was historic, and it launched so many of us in terms of being involved in the Women's Health Movement. Um, it, it, it made us wanna become a part of it. It made us— it solidified what we were gonna do. And it was there that I knew that I was committed to women's health. I didn't know exactly what I was gonna do with it at that conference, but I knew that I would be doing something.

00:43:03

BYLLYE AVERY:

I could just feel the, the, the spirit of it. The energy of it was just all through my body. I was, um, breathing, wreathing. Everything was women's health. I– I couldn't get enough of it. And I, um… I became a board member of the National Women's Health Network. And, um, it was there that I got to meet a lot of the women, a lot of the wonderful women who started the Women's Health Movement. Um, and just, I mean, these are people who I'd read about, and I'm sitting in a meeting right next to 'em. You know, I, I, I just couldn't believe it. So I was on the board for many years and, um, I can't remember how long I'd been on the board when one– one day we were meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan. And, um, I remember Nina Finklestein and, um, Norma Swenson, who Norma Swenson is with the Boston Women's Health Collective.

00:44:07

BYLLYE AVERY:

She and Judy Norsigian, who have been women who have been very influential in my life. Um, I got the idea that I wanted to do a report to the network on the health status of Black women. And so I remember saying to Norma, "I just got this idea. I think I wanna do a program on Black women's health the next time the network has its board meeting," because we would always have these little educational components. And they said, "Oh, I think that's a great idea." And I left there, went back to Gainesville, and started to think about how could I start to think about this? Not having, um, any education around how do you deal with health statistics where they are. And I remember Francie Hornstein told me about a book that she had learned about called *Health United States*.

00:45:00

BYLLYE AVERY:

And told me that I could get it from, um, health and Human Services. And so— health, education and welfare, whatever it was, HEW at that time. So I, um, had to go to DC on an occasion and made what was a big mistake. I thought I could go over to HEW and ask somebody to help me get this book. And so, I went around in that building for at least an hour and a half before I found someone who was able to tell me where I could get this book. And they said, "The next time, don't come in, write for it. That's an easier way to get it." But, you know, what did I know? So anyway, I got the book and I went home, and I can remember being shocked at what I saw. I had no idea that the health statistics of Black women, of Black people was as bad as, you know, as they

are. I, I just had no idea because I was only thinking about the illnesses in my family, what was happening.

00:46:06

BYLLYE AVERY:

And I knew there was Wesley's untimely death, that there had to be some explanation for that. But I hadn't quite gotten that far in my thinking yet. So as I started to look at it, I looked at the health statistics and, uh, one statistics stood out for me. And that was that, um, in 19, um…no, this was *Health United States*, 1979, that's what it was. They did surveys with Black women, um, ages 18 to 49, I think. And they asked them to rate their, um, psychological well being. And these women rated themselves as living in greater emotional distress than white women of the same ages who were diagnosed mental patients. And oh my goodness, I was like, I remember throwing the book across the room. I was so angry that this kind of, uh, statistic could exist somewhere, and it's just written in a book and no one is doing anything about it.

00:47:13

BYLLYE AVERY:

And so I wanted to learn what is all the distress that we were living with? And–and– and we are not talking about people who are, who are, um, psychotic. We're talking about emotional distress. And I'd always been interested in the emotions. So it all sort of tied in. And I looked at the infant mortality rate that Black babies were dying twice the rate of whites that 40% of Black women, um, are hypertensive. Um, at that time, the obesity numbers were not like they are now, but certainly there was some obesity, there was diabetes, there were all of these health problems. So I started to think, well,

no wonder Black women don't talk much about abortions. We dealing with a whole bunch of other stuff that is really a higher priority. You know, if you think about it, if you got psychological distress, how can you even think about anything else except what's on your mind?

00:48:15

BYLLYE AVERY:
You know, what's clogging up the cobwebs of your mind? And so I, um, thought, well, I wanna have a conference like the one I was at in Boston, because it brought people together. It, um, energized a group. It motivated people, it got us going. And so I decided that one of the first things I needed to do was to learn how to write a proposal. And so Belita Cowan was the executive director of the National Women's Health Network, and she said, "I will teach you how to write a proposal." And, um, I wanted to do this conference. And I remember Dr. Um, June Jackson Christmas was then the president of the American Public Health Association, and I think she was probably the first Black woman to be the president. And I took the risk, me a little person in Gainesville, Florida, and I wrote her a letter and said that I was concerned about the health of Black women, and that I wanted to do a conference on Black women's health.

00:49:22

BYLLYE AVERY:
And wondered if she thought it was a good idea. And, uh, she wrote me back and said she thought it was an incredible idea and that I should do it. And I often wonder, what would I have done if she hadn't answered me? But anyway, with Dr. Jack–with, um, Dr. Christmas on my side in Beilta helping me, um, we put together our first proposal and I went to New York to do

fundraising. It was very acceptable. Uh, people, um, were very helpful. Um, I remember, uh, it's a tie between joint Foundation support and the Miss Foundation as to who gave us our very first money. And so I went back to Gainesville feeling really good that yes, I could do this. I started to try to bring together a group of Black women in Gainesville to help me work on this.

00:50:16

BYLLYE AVERY:

And the first meeting I had, um, only one person came and I was so, um… I was just demoralized by it. And, um, I remember telling my mother that I tried to have this meeting and only one person came. And so she said, "Well, did you try to have it last year?" I said, no. And so she said, um, one person is one person more than none. And she said, "Don't give up your dream." And so I sort of came to realize that if I wanted to do this, I needed to move to an area that had a larger population of Black women. And secretly I'd always want to move to Atlanta anyway. Um, because, um…um, we had in Jack— in Gainesville, we had done the, um, abortion clinic. Uh, we had done the birthing center, which I haven't talked about. Uh, and really it was nothing really left there for me to do around women's health. I was back working at a community college, so I was really ready for a change and really ready to take on this, um, Black women's health challenge.

00:51:33

BYLLYE AVERY:

I moved to Atlanta and I convened the first national conference on Black women's health issues. Uh, we planned it for two solid years. We thought we'd have two to 300 women come. We had over 2000. We had it on the campus of Spelman College. It was the first time Black women had ever come

together to talk about health. And even though there had been a lot of other health conferences, uh, what I learned is the way racism has affected us. When you hear the word women's health, you think white women's health. But when you hear Black women's health, you know, we are talking about us and how our health forms us. So we held the conference for three days in Atlanta. Um, we, uh, didn't know exactly what we were gonna do next, but before the conference in those two years, we had started forming self-help groups, which was sort of like the CR groups that I attended early.

00:52:32

BYLLYE AVERY:
So we made an announcement that we would continue to form self-help groups. And after the conference, as I travel around speaking, I would ask women in cities, do you want to form a self-help group? And I would meet with them and get them to form groups. And that's the way we started. And, um, got the organization going, which later became the National Black Women's Health Project.

00:52:56

BYLLYE AVERY:
We convened the first national conference on Black women's health issues at Spelman, um, in June of, um, 1983. And, um, women came together from all over the country, as well as Canada and some women from the Caribbean. What was extraordinary about that conference is that women came together to talk about the reality of their lives. And for the first time, Black women broke the conspiracy of silence. And we started to learn what was some of the psychological distress that we were living with. So women talked about being victims of domestic violence. Um, one woman talked about being the mother

of 11 children, and, uh, having her husband beat her all those years. And when she tried to tell her mother, her mother said, “You made your bed, now you lying it.

00:53:56

BYLLYE AVERY:
And how she was able to leave her husband and, um, and– and take charge of her life and how that happened. And I met that woman many, many years later, and she and her husband both went and got counseling, and they were back together, and the abuse had stopped. Women talked about, um, being victims of incest. Um, and when you sit in a circle with 25 women and you get 10 or 12 people who were victims of incest, you realize this is not your personal business problem. This is not business you want to have, that we have a problem of institutionalized sexism going on right within our families that, um, that we are being partners to. And, um, we– women talked about being abused themselves and then seeing it happening with their daughters. And, uh, some of the women didn't know what to say because their mothers told them, “Oh, just put up with it. You'll be leaving home soon.’ But we challenge that, that's not a good enough answer.

00:55:03

BYLLYE AVERY:
And we say to women, if you are living with a man who is abusing your daughter, get over your feelings of being alone because you are not with anything in the beginning. You see, there's nothing in the first place. So we had to help women learn how to confront these things. We had one woman say, “What's what's so bad about incest? It's the only time I was held. It's the only time someone told me they loved me.” So we had to talk to folks about,

it's important to be able to say, I love you to your children. It's important to be able to hug them. It's important to do that. But first of all, you gotta feel good yourself. So we encouraged women to talk about these issues. Um, we would convene task force meetings where we would take women through the process of how you deal with the feelings, how you feel the pain, how you cry, how you understand the hurt, how you forgive yourself to know that you didn't do anything to attract this.

00:56:05

BYLLYE AVERY:
There was nothing wrong with you. You didn't deserve to have this, you deserve to have the best life has to offer, and that you weren't put here on earth to be messed with by anybody, and you don't have to take it. Well, it takes a while for this kind of message to seep in. We had to help women who were victims of domestic violence to learn that you first have– you can't just leave. You have to make a plan, that there are people in the community who can help you make a plan, and that you make a careful plan as to how you are going to free yourself and your children, what you're going to do. And, um, and so this unraveling of– of this emotional distress was really a very good thing. Uh, we also learned that we have a lot of, um… and all of these things I'm saying, they are not just common to Black women, they are common to all women across all ethnic groups, everywhere.

00:57:10

BYLLYE AVERY:
Because I've sat in a circle where, um, pretty much most of them, and you hear the same thing happen. So, but we were dealing primarily with– with Black women. How do you learn to, um, be open with your children so that

you can talk about some of the difficulties that you are having, not that you wanna dump on them, but don't make them seem like everything is alright when it's not alright because they know it's not alright. And how do you involve them in the whole process? How do women free themselves from these environments? How do you seek help? We have a lot of rape, a lot of rape going on. How do women deal with being victims of rape? Uh, we had women talked about being raped for hours by people who are family, friends, et cetera. Um, people talked about their daughters being abused from the time they're four and five years old.

00:58:09

BYLLYE AVERY:

How do we deal with that? We learned that a lot of us have been reared by mothers who are emotionally disturbed, who are psychotic. How do we deal with that? And– and that it's nothing for 'em to, um, put a Black woman away for a while and give us some medication and send her right back home to that same environment where nothing, no talk therapy or anything have been done to help, um, help people deal with their realities. We were committed to working with women who live on lower incomes because I feel that their– they struggle the hardest. They don't even have the money that can help them do things. And quite often feel all of the, um, less than, uh, non deserving, uh, low self-esteem. Uh, everybody in these situations have low self-esteem, but when you don't have any money on the top of it, you don't have access. It, it, it, it, it, it's devastating.

00:59:11

BYLLYE AVERY:

Um, but I can remember working with women who live in public housing who come to our meetings and after coming and spending a weekend, they go back home with a new sense of self. It's that opening those eyes and getting the awareness is the first step for women being able to free themselves and go on to even think about living lives that they want to have. We didn't want to have all of these people saying, “My life is going by and I'm not living in it.” We want people to be able to live in their lives as well as being in charge of their lives. So once you can get the emotional stuff straight, then you can start talking about the body. Because if I'm worrying about someone coming home and beating me, I'm hardly thinking about, I haven't had a pap smear in five years, or I, uh, I haven't had a breast exam or whatever. You only thinking about surviving the next moment, you know, so how can you get this future kind of thinking going on? So once we were able to do that, we moved to the physical.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me the name of the organization you founded, when you founded it, and in your view, what its biggest accomplishments have been.

01:00:27

BYLLYE AVERY:
Um, we founded the National Black Women's Health Project in, um, 1983.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Byllye Avery
National Black Women’s Health Project Poster

BYLLYE AVERY:

We organized Black women to come together to first figure out what diseases are facing us? What, what do we say is ailing us? What are the things we think are important that we work on? And when Black women came together, they thought the emotional, the psychological was the right place to start. And that is where we started. And I think that probably has been our greatest, um, achievement. We, uh, we figured that you gotta get the head straight. If the head's not straight, then it can't really direct the rest of the body. And some of it, we just needed to sit in a circle with our sisters to find out that we are not alone. No, we are not crazy. That people are racist, people are sexist, that homophobia is rampant. And, um, and, um, classism, classism is a big thing.

01:01:29

BYLLYE AVERY:

One of the things that we accomplished that was quite incredible is that when we came together, we did not identify ourselves by our jobs. Because the minute you say what you do, that lets people know what class you are in. And so you could come the whole weekend and be sitting next to a maid from the Holiday Inn and not know it, but at the end of the day, we were all Black women who were all dealing with the same stuff. And that was what was important. How do we unhook, how do we, um, become in charge of our lives? So breaking the conspiracy of silence around our psychological well being, um, being one to claim all of who we are, to learn what our power is, to learn how powerful we are, to know that power is not just our being powerful ourselves, but it's about empowering others and sharing of power.

01:02:28

BYLLYE AVERY:

And that we are all powerful together. Being proud of who we are, being proud that we are Black women, that we have survived, that we have done all these things. Stop trying to be the strong Black woman. Uh, we, uh, don't wanna be the mules of the world. We are strong, yes, but we also are vulnerable. We also have feelings. And you don't have to always be strong all the time. Sometimes that can be to our detriment, know when it's time to be strong, know when it's time to be vulnerable. And, and then how do we share these with the men in our lives? How do we share it in an empowering way so that our families grow? How do we rear our children? How do we rear our children to respect themselves, to respect us as parents? How do we do effective parenting? We learned that parenting is a difficult, long process.

01:03:31

BYLLYE AVERY:
A lot of people are giving up on parenting. They say it's too hard. So the children are just kind of rearing themselves, or they're not being reared at all. They have no manners. They don't know boundaries. They need structure. They want structure. And a lot of it, a lot of 'em don't get it because their mothers and their fathers are functioning like empty wells. And when you are a well that's not being replenished… You know, you give and you give and you give and you give. And if nothing is spilling up that well, you become empty. And that has a reflection on our society, on our community, and our society.

INTERVIEWER:
Give me a quick kind of overview–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
National Black Women's Health Conference
Cancer Prevention Session, Spelman College, 1983

INTERVIEWER:
– of what the regional Black Women's Health Project sort of has. Like how many groups it spawn, where it operates.

01:04:20

BYLLYE AVERY:
We created self-help groups all over the country. Um, we also did work with women in the Caribbean, in, um, Barbados, in Jamaica. Um, we worked with women in Brazil. We, uh, worked with women in South Africa. So we were able to take our self-help methodology all over. And it worked just as well, even with language barriers. There were no language barriers. Um, we found that we are women everywhere. Um, we were able to get people to put themselves first, our message to women, put yourself first. We didn't care that much whether you joined our organization, we wanted you to get your head straight, get your body mind straight, and start living your life, your yourself. That was what was more important to us than like signing up on the dotted line. We needed you to take charge. We wanted to become ingrained in society.

01:05:18

BYLLYE AVERY:
One other thing that happened that I'm very proud of is that we were able to work with other women of color. Um, I remember Luz Martinez used to travel with us everywhere. And I said, Luz, you really gotta go do this work with

other Latinas. You can't just follow us around all the time. And she started the National Latina Women's, uh, Health Organization, which was one of the first, uh, Latina Women's Health. There are many now that have come from her example. Uh, we worked with, um, Native American women. We worked with Charon Asetoyer with the Native American Resource Women, uh, group up in, um, um, St. Andes, um…. North– South Dakota. We work with them. Um, Mary Chung and her group, the, um, Asian American women. We sort of said to women, it's, I, uh, all colors. It's important for you to come together, do the analysis about your health as it applies to your ethnicity.

01:06:23

BYLLYE AVERY:
You know, what is it like, what are the health issues for Asian women? They'll be different than they are for African American women. They'll be different than they are for Native American women. And we got women to look at health and got people to look at health through the eyes of ethnicity, because our background plays a large part into how we view health and how we practice it.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you just reflect a little bit on– from the time that you first walked into a consciousness raising group? Could you ever have imagined what this was gonna grow into?

01:07:00

BYLLYE AVERY:
I had absolutely no idea. I think if I had known then I would've been scared to death and probably wouldn't have done anything. But my thing is, you move

from one thing to another, one path leads to another. And I've always felt that I was on a path. I just didn't quite know exactly where it was gonna end up. And I can't say even today that I know where it's gonna end up. I'm very proud of the things I've done. I would not have change anything that I've done. I've enjoyed it all, but I still don't know what the end's gonna be. And I think that makes life very exciting and, uh, it makes it worth living.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there ever any concern in convening particularly Black women to talk openly about some of these issues?

01:07:43

BYLLYE AVERY:
No, there was never— there was not any concern about us having women come together to break the silence. Because what we did is we created, um, a, a realm of confidentiality. And we are also said to women, first of all, realize you are in charge of your mouth, and you are in charge of what you say. And if you got something that's so deep and so dark that you think that you will be damaged by saying it, then you don't say it. You know, we'll help you find someone that you can go and talk to personally. But women held true to the confidentiality. And then we taught women, how do you talk about what has happened here? You talk about the topic, the issue, not about the person. It doesn't matter that such and such happened to Byllye, that's irrelevant. The point is, a woman was beaten, a woman was raped, a woman was, you know, these are the issues that you need to talk about. You talk about the issues and the prevalence of the issues so that it's not directed at any individuals.

01:08:47

BYLLYE AVERY:
So I think that gave women a comfort level. And then the third, um, point was when you hear so many people around you telling your story, you then come to understand that it's not really your story. It's a lot of people's story.

INTERVIEWER:
When you look now at things that are now, as you say, things have gotten a little more mainstream in terms of talking openly about even some of the problems confronting African American women in this country today. Is that, is that progress?

01:09:18

BYLLYE AVERY:
Oh, I think it's progress when you hear people talking openly, and I said that we came along before Oprah was doing, um, self-help on at four o'clock in the afternoon. And, um, I think it's great. I think it's really good. The messages that we send to our children, that it's not a good thing to be abused. You know, you don't need to be touched, um, you know, inappropriately and to know what bad touch, good touch is. That kind of thing couldn't have been taught with the whole, um, conspiracy of silence going on to have women know what you can do. You don't have to be victims. You don't have to take abuse. You don't have to take it at all. And also, to have women know that men also were abused, that a lot of the very bad things that happened to women also happened to men.

01:10:10

BYLLYE AVERY:

And as men start to open up and talk more about their lives, and since we're talking about Oprah, one of the most powerful programs she did was all of those men who were victims of, uh, who had been sexually abused. And I can remember Wesley telling me before he died, he told me that most men have their first encounters with men as— They're boys, and they have their first encounters. He told me that he died in 1970. So now we know that there are a lot of people out there that's walking around hurting because of things that happened to them, but men don't feel that they can talk about it. So that's why Tyler Perry and some of these other men who are coming, coming forth to talk about what's happened with them, it's a good thing. Even the good that's come out of the, um, priests sexually abusing the kid, the boys, that is— the good part of that is that it's in the open. And people, now, young kids now know you don't have to take that kind of thing. That is inappropriate behavior. And maybe, maybe not in my lifetime, but maybe in someone's lifetime, that will be a behavior that will be totally eradicated.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Women's Health Week
Belize, 1984

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think is the biggest change for women since you were in your youth?

01:11:33

BYLLYE AVERY:

I am always amazed how feminism has evolved, so that women are feminists and not know that they are, so that it has become so ingrained until it seems to be for a lot of people that's the way it is. And which sort of implies that that's the way it has always been. Uh, that's been the biggest surprise to me that, um, that women… I, I, I don't think I'm a feminist. I wouldn't declare I'm a feminist. However, they're accessing themselves to all of the things that feminism has brought for them. Uh, I don't understand how it became a full letter word. It really is an absolutely wonderful, empowering word for men and women, because I think feminism also freed up a lot of men, um, who were bound by, um, the roles that sexism, um, held us to.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you think there's a difference between the way men lead and women lead?

01:12:33

BYLLYE AVERY:
Um, yes. I think men sort of ready to jump right in and do business right away, you know, and everything is like, kind of cut and dried, you know, and women need a little bit more time and need a little bit more emotions brought into it. And I hate it when I see corporate women try to be like men, you know, I don't think we need to be like men. I think we need to be like women, because I think that that's what we bring to the situation. I sit on several boards with men and they wanna come in and jump right in there on the agenda. And I say, ho, ho, ho, hold, hold here. Let's do a little check in. How is everybody feeling today? How are you doing? And just by adding that element of civility in there, it makes for a much better meeting because then you kind of, you

kind of know what, where people are and you know what they're dealing with. And, and, and it just really is a nice thing to do. So I think that, um, I think men need to be a little softer and women need to be more who they are.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think is the successes of the women's movement? And have there been downsides?

01:13:40

BYLLYE AVERY:
Well, I've been really a lot involved with the Women's Health Movement. And, um, and I think one of our biggest successes has been the way we based the model for other health movements to grow. You think about the Women's Health Movement, then you think about AIDS, then you think about breast cancer. All of these grew off of each other. And Women's Health movement, in some ways, grew out of— and feminism, the Women's Movement out of the Civil Rights movement. So you can see how these movements are all linked together and how there's some of the thinking from the Civil Rights movement right on up to the, um, up to the breast cancer movement. If you look at it, there's like a thread that goes through the movement that brings growth, um, for population when we enter into that consciousness that we all develop together, how we move right along that continuum. And I think that is, that's power.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think is the biggest challenge for the next generation of women?

01:14:54

BYLLYE AVERY:

You know, we live in a global society now, and, you know, it's not just us over here on this side of the pond. You know, we have to relate and think about people all over the world. And I think the next challenge for us as women who live in the developing world, to learn how to, um, live who, who live, um, in the developed world, to learn how to relate to people in the developing world, and to understand that we are really all the same. There is one race, and it is the human race. And that as long as we have no education, um, no rights for women and girls all over the world, we will suffer as a people. That the one thing that, uh, our, our, our freedom, our progress all hinges upon is the education of women and girls.

01:15:55

BYLLYE AVERY:

And that's not to say boys and men don't need to be educated. They are usually getting their education. It's the women and girls that are left out. And as long as women and girls in Afghanistan, in Ethiopia, in any country of the world are being marginalized, not given any education, it will have a negative effect on us. We have one job as people: that is to learn how to live and work and play together. That's, that's why we are here. And that's what we have to do.

INTERVIEWER:

You told me about when you didn't read *The Feminine Mystique*, but how about, uh, I assume you ultimately read it.

BYLLYE AVERY:

Oh yeah, I read it.

INTERVIEWER:
I'm wondering how you felt about it.

01:16:44

BYLLYE AVERY:
Oh, I thought it was great. I couldn't believe it. I hated that I didn't read it before he died, so we could have had some discussions cuz I could have confronted him about the dishes, you know, but, you know, and I'm making him sound like he didn't help. He did help a lot, but he did love to read a lot too. But I, I, um, I thought it was, I thought it was great. I thought she did a really, really, really great job and it opened up a whole world for a lot of us.

INTERVIEWER:
Were black women aware of the pill when it popped up in the early sixties and…?

01:17:14

BYLLYE AVERY:
Um, well…I don't, I'm trying to remember. I don't know whether Black women jumped right on the bandwagon of it because people were dying from blood clots and all. So there was all this controversy around it. And, and I remember Barbara Seaman talking about a conference where OBGYN stood up and said he wouldn't, he wouldn't prescribe it for his wife. And so I think in the beginning when a lot of Black women were prescribed, um, birth control pills, they were having troubles with it. And so until they reduced the amount of estrogen or whatever was causing the problem, I think that, um,

I… certainly Black women knew about it, but probably were a little slow to jump on the bandwagon because of these awful side effects.

INTERVIEWER:
What about recollections of Gloria Steinem–

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Gloria Steinem
1972 Democratic National Convention, Miami Beach, FL

INTERVIEWER:
– and your feelings when she was first sort of really coming into public?

01:17:59

BYLLYE AVERY:
Gloria's quite wonderful. She's one of my heroines and she always encourages us to be as outrageous as we can be and still be legal, which I think, and sometime if we have to step over the line, she's there to encourage us to do that. But she's quite a wonderful thinker, scholar, and I've liked her because Gloria has always been very inclusive. She's always, um, included issues that I care about, perspectives that I care about, uh, always spoke for low income women who have to struggle. And, um, she's– she's a good human being.

INTERVIEWER:
Were you aware of Phyllis Schlafly when she became so prominent?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Phyllis Schlafly
STOP Era Rally, 1975

01:18:31

BYLLYE AVERY:
Yes, I was aware of Phyllis Schlafly, and she's also a very powerful woman. Um, I watched Phyllis Schlafly come to the University of Florida, which was a very liberal audience, and I watched her control that audience. We were all trying to go crazy on her, and she actually ended up coming out on top. So she's not to be taken lightly. She's very bright and very skilled.

INTERVIEWER:
How about, uh, Shirley Chisholm?
ON SCREEN TEXT:
Shirley Chisholm
1972 Democratic National Convention, Miami Beach

INTERVIEWER:
Did her presidential candidacy have an impact on you?

01:19:06

BYLLYE AVERY:
Shirley Chisholm was another, uh, dynamic woman. I mean, can you think the nerve of her at that time to think that she could run for president? What a wonderful thing. She was really, um, uh, quite, uh, extraordinary. Um, and such a good model, such a good model for us. Another person who was a good model for us was Audre Lorde, who, um, died of breast cancer. And I remember the first time Audre Lorde came to Gainesville, Florida. I saw that

she was coming and I had the flu. And I, and I knew because she was a lesbian, because she was a Black lesbian, that there might not be any Black people in the audience. She was speaking at a white church. So I got out of the bed and went to see her, and I sat… I was the only person in the back, on the back seat.

01:19:59

BYLLYE AVERY:
I didn't wanna sit near anyone. And of course, I didn't say anything to her. Um, but years later when I had an opportunity to speak to her, I said, um, "You won't remember me, but you were in Gainesville, Florida," she said, "and you were the woman sitting in the back in the seat." And so, you know, after I started speaking myself, I came to understand, yeah, you would remember the, somebody, the one Black person in the room when you were there speaking, you know. And, um, she was– she was, uh, a very forward thinking woman and, um, just a real trooper, and someone who I greatly admire. And, um, um… it's too bad she's no longer here with us, but she was very good.
BYLLYE AVERY:
What kind of impact did Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy have for you?

01:20:50

BYLLYE AVERY:
Well, I, I, I first met Hillary Clinton, um, in the eighties, um, um, when I was on the board of the New World Foundation. As a matter of fact, she called me up in Atlanta and interviewed me, um, for being on the board. So I sat beside her for about eight or nine years, um, as we, um, um, did work for the New World Foundation.

01:21:16

BYLLYE AVERY:
Hillary's campaign was kind of hard for me because I was torn between, um, being female and being Black, which is a real hard, um, you know, it feels the same, you know? And I could have… I really could have gone for either one of 'em. Um, and I, and I loved it that she got so many votes and it was just, um, it was just a good thing. It was– it was a good thing. You know? Why is it whenever there's an opening for a person of color or a woman or something like that, we end up being against each other. You know, we end up being pitted against each other. Why– why does that happen? It always happens that way. You just notice if there's an opening that could be a Black person or a woman, it's gonna be the Black person and the woman running against each other. I don't know how life can slice it so thinly.

INTERVIEWER:
What was your sort of emotional and intellectual reaction to the Clarence Thomas Anita Hill, uh, hearing?

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Anita Hill During Clarence Thomas Hearing
Washington, D.C., October 11,1991

01:22:20

BYLLYE AVERY:
Oh my God, the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill event was embarrassing. I felt real embarrassed. I remember I was in Alaska when it was on, I turned on the tv. I didn't know what, what in the world is going on in the Lord 49. I mean,

we had been in a meeting all that day, and I just couldn't imagine. I just couldn't imagine what I was hearing and seeing. And it was two Black people having to do this. I felt so bad for Anita Hill, and I know she wasn't lying because she wouldn't wanna put herself through that to do that. And I'm still upset that Clarence Thomas is on the Supreme Court. I'm still upset about it.

INTERVIEWER:
How did you feel about the way the country reacted to that and reacted to her?

01:23:09

BYLLYE AVERY:
I thought the country was wrong in its reaction to her, and it just shows, um, you know, what do you have to do as a woman to get a little respect around here and to understand it. I also understand– understood how tight the conservative movement was, because I testified against, uh, Clarence Thomas becoming the Supreme Court Justice. And I was shocked to hear people from Tennessee, Alabama, all these people, um, testifying far on his behalf. That was a wake up call. So then I understood that it is a right wing conspiracy, and that was the way I felt about it.

INTERVIEWER:
But you testified against him prior to the, in the beginning part of the hearings, I assume, before the whole Anita Hill thing happened.

01:23:55

BYLLYE AVERY:

Right. We testified against, uh, Clarence Thomas becoming a Supreme Court Justice because we felt his appointment to the court would could lead to the overturn of Roe v Wade.

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me about the award you got in 1989.

01:24:08

BYLLYE AVERY:
In 1989, I received the MacArthur Award, the MacArthur Genius Award. And, um, in hindsight, I realized I was at my peak. I just wish I had known I was at my peak then. I think I would've enjoyed being at the peak a little bit more. Um, um, but, um, I– I was very aware of the, uh, award, but never thought that I would get it. However, there were people around me who used to say all the time, my good friend Ammas Arrand [?], she said, "you're gonna get the MacArthur." I'd say, please, "you're gonna get the MacArthur." She would say it all the time. And I just never thought more anymore about it. And I was just about doing my work. And, uh, my daughter was working at, um, at the, at, at the Black Women's Health Project answering the phones. And so I had gone out to lunch, uh, with my… the person who is now my partner, um, Ngina. And, um, we, uh, we were at lunch, we were at a Chinese restaurant, and they brought the, um, fortune cookies.

01:25:10

BYLLYE AVERY:
And so I handed her a Fortune cookie and she says, "Nope, I get my own fortune cookie." So I kept it, and the fortune said, "You'll be coming into money and we'll be traveling." And so I said, Ooh, I'm keeping this fortune. So

I go back to work and my daughter is there, and she says, "Mama, you got a call from the MacArthur Foundation." Well, I didn't think anything about it because we were applying to them for a grant, and I thought it was a program officer calling, telling me something to do. So I get to the phone and this man comes on the phone, and he said, um, he asked me to identify myself. And I said, and he said, um, "Well, you just won the MacArthur Award." And I fell to the floor, and he went on to tell me something. I don't know what it was, that I won the award. And then he said, uh, "Are you sitting down?" And I said, "I'm on the floor." I fell to the floor.

01:26:08

BYLLYE AVERY:

And so we continued our conversation and I don't know to this day what all he said. And so I hung up the phone and I said to the woman who was my secretary, "I just won the MacArthur Award." She said, "Well, how much money are you getting?" I said, "I don't know." So I had to call him back. I had to call him back to ask him how much money was it? I–I had no idea. But, um, the MacArthur Award was such an honor, uh, such, um, prestigious award and really, um, was just the crowning point in my life. I– I just still relish that moment and think about all of the wonderful things that it allowed me to do, including being able to pay all my bills at one time, which was real nice. And we did a lot of traveling. I went around and, uh, visited a lot of places I wanted to go. Some for pleasure, but not really all of them. Most of them, if I went for pleasure, I also went to visit whatever Health Women's Health group was there, and just saw how people lived all over the world and, and used it to open up my mind. And it still has my mind opened.

INTERVIEWER:

What's the most meaningful piece of advice you've ever received?

01:27:24

BYLLYE AVERY:

Two pieces that are number ones. One is to be yourself and not try to be out there in the world and be someone who you are not. Um, another piece is only talk about what you really know, that it's a difficult thing to talk about, things you have no idea about. And then the third one, I'm cheating, is because this has been so valuable for me. A consultant once told me that whenever I have a real big problem, that at night before you go to bed, that your brain really takes over and solves things for you. And she told me to put a committee together of people, and you can put a committee together of people who are living. They could be dead or whatever. They can be anyone who you think about. You assemble that committee together, you give them the charge, and then you go to sleep. And when you wake up, you'll have the answer. That has served me on so many occasions, I can't tell you why.

INTERVIEWER:

What's the advice that you would give, um, about raising children?

01:28:30

BYLLYE AVERY:

Remember that children are gifts to us and that children are our teachers. And that when you are rearing children, you learn a lot about yourself. You learn a lot about the world, and you learn about them. And if you would take the challenges that they present to you as lessons, you will understand that there is no such thing as being grown up. That it is a growing process. And

that our children teach us something every single day. And if we look at– look at them from that perspective, we all will come out being better human beings. Uh, always be the parent that your child can come and tell you anything. Be open. It might just… you just might wanna scream and holler and run and be crazy, but go be crazy in the other room and come back and deal with whatever they're telling you.

INTERVIEWER:
And how about the whole work-life balance thing? How do you have a full career and also raise your kids?

01:29:36

BYLLYE AVERY:
Oh my goodness. It is so important that all of us learn how to take time for ourselves. And I have a prescription for that. Everybody should take one hour a day just for yourself to do nothing. You can go look at your naval if you want to. You can go home after work. You can run your bathtub full of water. You can get in your tub for an hour. You can go for a walk by yourself. Don't take no dog. Don't take no people, don't take anyone. Don't have anybody talking to you, because you need that time to clear out the cobwebs of your mind. And when you clear out the cobwebs of your mind, you don't feel so put upon by every little thing and you don't feel cheated. I get my time at the beginning of the day. That first hour of the day belongs to Byllye. I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't wanna have to answer any questions, no computers, no nothing. I do whatever I want to do as long as it's nothing.

INTERVIEWER:

What did you wanna do when you grew up? Did you have any idea?

01:30:42

BYLLYE AVERY:

I think I wanted to be a teacher because I probably wanted to do what my mother was doing. And so I think I am a teacher. I just have a large classroom.

INTERVIEWER:

What's the accomplishment you are most proud of?

01:30:54

BYLLYE AVERY:

I'm very proud of my children. Um, they're good citizens and they're good human beings, and that's what I wanted them to be. They're citizens of the world. They know how to treat people. They know how to behave. They're respectful and, um, they're real good thinkers.

INTERVIEWER:

What was your first paying job?

01:31:15

BYLLYE AVERY:

I worked at the Northeast Florida State Hospital, um, for… with crazy people. I worked there for like, about, um, seven, eight years, and I loved it.

INTERVIEWER:

Which three adjectives best describe you?

BYLLYE AVERY:

Passionate, loving, creative.

INTERVIEWER:

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

01:31:41

BYLLYE AVERY:

The person who's had the most influence on my life, who I've never met is Harriet Tubman. Because many days leading the Black Women's Health Project, I felt a lot like her taking people through the marsh, looking for the North Star, and hoping that we reached the Promised Land together.

END TC: 01:32:04