

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

ANDERSON COOPER INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Anderson Cooper
Journalist and friend
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 17 minutes and 10 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Anderson Cooper

Journalist and friend

How Gloria Vanderbilt met Gordon Parks

01:00:10:03

ANDERSON COOPER:

I think—I'm pretty sure—I know my mom met Gordon on a photo shoot, I think it was for Life Magazine in the 1950's. I can't remember if it was in Paris or in New York; I'm not sure where the photo was taken. But I know I remember my mom saying that that was—I think that was the first time they actually met and hit it off, and there was a relationship that they had that, you know, lasted for the rest of their lives.

01:00:35:23

ANDERSON COOPER:

And my mom's—I went with my mom to Gordon's funeral and she spoke at the funeral, and I grew up knowing Gordon Parks as, you know, as a family friend, as a close friend of my mom's and as somebody who—you know, I always knew that there was a very deep relationship between them. She was going to be in a play called *The Swan* and I guess *Life Magazine* was doing something about it, an article about it and Gordon was the photographer assigned to it. And it was the beginning of—I mean my mom, as she would describe it as like, they just instantly sort of clicked.

Gloria Vanderbilt's childhood

01:01:16:16

ANDERSON COOPER:

She grew up, you know—she was taken—she grew up in France in the first ten years of her life when she was a child and, you know, when she came to America she was involved in this terrible custody battle and ended up being raised—you know, she was taken away by the courts from her mom, raised in a, you know, a fancy estate to—that Gertrude Vanderbilt-Whitney owned in Long Island and you know, was incredibly isolated.

01:01:40:23

ANDERSON COOPER:

There were detectives around her at all times; there were kidnapping fears, there was great notoriety that had surrounded this trial. So she really grew up in kind of a bubble and then she—you know, was involved with kind of a thuggish guy and they lived on an army base in the 40's and then she married Stokowski. And you know, she lived a very isolated life with him; she had two kids and they were traveling doing symphonies and so yeah, it wouldn't—that would make sense to me that Gordon was probably the first African American person who she really had a close relationship with and had the chance to have a close relationship. And obviously there were many more throughout the course of her life who she—you know, who were part of our lives, but Gordon—I didn't know that Gordon was the first, but that seems entirely possible to me.

01:02:30:09

ANDERSON COOPER:

So yeah, for my mom I think it was—you know, my mom had grown up in a very sheltered way. She'd been taken away from her mother by the court. She'd lived—when I say shelter, I mean literally, physically sheltered in an estate in Long Island with detectives around her and being raised by some aunt who's—Gertrude Vanderbilt-Whitney who was a remarkable person, but who my mom didn't really know very well and couldn't connect with. And so um in some ways my mom had been sheltered in that way, but I think that was the beginning of what would become this extraordinary lifelong friendship.

Gordon Parks' work at *Life* Magazine

01:03:09:23

ANDERSON COOPER:

Well, you know, we all think back of this like—you know, so many people say oh, well you know back in, you know, there was this golden age of news and when, you know, anchors were trusted and people believed, you know, what they read and stuff, and I understand that sentiment, I mean of—but when you really think about it um, you know, there were three broadcast networks. The people telling you the news were three middle-aged White males, straight um. And everybody in that newsroom— in those newsrooms were White, probably middle aged males, straight, or at least, you know, um presenting that.

01:03:51:19

ANDERSON COOPER:

And... same in magazines and same in newspapers and so the idea that it was this golden age of news, in reality it was a very narrow group of people, bandwidth of people who were telling the rest of the world and the country what was happening, and they were—the people they were reporting on was a pretty narrow bandwidth of people they were reporting on and the way they saw things was through a pretty narrow lens. And so for, you know, Gordon to be able to, you know, through just sheer talent, you know, open

that up and be able to not only, you know, get that job but, you know, be the person he was and the talent that he was and is.

01:04:47:04

ANDERSON COOPER:

And to be able to widen up the space for others is just—I mean it's a herculean task and it's hard to even fathom what that must have been like. But, you know, newsrooms; I mean it was—you know, it was a old boys club in—you know, it was a White male boys club and I can't even imagine what it took to- to go into that office everyday and how one—how people would look at him and what they would think. And—but then, you know, then there's the work. And also suddenly he's able to tell stories that other people are not able to tell. He's able to take—you know, he's able to be in that room and he's able to be places and see people that other people didn't see and I think that's—I mean, that's what reporting is all about.

Gordon Parks photographs

01:05:48:21

ANDERSON COOPER:

The—you know, pictures with Muhammad Ali, the—there were Nation of Islam photos. Yeah, the whole Nation of Islam series I thought was extraordinary and the—as I remember the gang's series, I can't remember if it was on a particular gang or if it was on a particular person, I remember the

photographs of a guy sort of in a window or with a gun maybe um, but it was the—it was—I mean his work was just so human, you know? And it wasn't—you know, when you hear somebody is taking pictures of somebody who's in a gang, instantly when you say the word gang, it implies—you know, it comes with all sorts of baggage and people imagine what the photographs would look like. And yet those pictures were incredibly vulnerable and human.

01:06:38:15

ANDERSON COOPER:

And it was just—there was an intimacy to it, which I think was extraordinary—extraordinary because A: to get access in that way on a shoot like that is very difficult and it takes time and trust and um—but- but I can—I mean, I can imagine Gordon, you know, spending all day you know, following around somebody he's photographing in whatever circumstance. And then, you know, having something else at night that he's going out to do in a completely different world and sort of being able to do—fit in both places and live in both places.

01:07:17:04

ANDERSON COOPER:

Yeah, that's the shot. Yeah, I love this. I mean, it's uh—yeah, I love this picture. It's—you know, it's so—it's—you know, is he... is he scared of somebody? Is he, you know-- if he's, you know, thinking of breaking the law? Is he casing a

place? Is he running—you know, scared of somebody, police, somebody else in a gang? Is he just looking out the window smoking a cigarette? You know? Um. There's not—it's just very human. It's just—it could be any of us standing there doing that and—but it's so evocative of—I mean the broken window and the cigarette, it's great.

Gloria Vanderbilt and Gordon Parks' relationship

01:08:11:09

ANDERSON COOPER:

My mom had a really fascinating number of relationships throughout her life and some of them are very short relationships, some of them may have only been a day or night. Um, but I remember, like, as a kid watching like uh um Robinhood with Errol Flynn and saying to my mom like, I must have been eleven. I was like, "Oh did you ever—did you know Errol Flynn?" And she'd be like, "Oh yes." And she'd sort of drift away. So, there was always that sense with her relationship with Gordon. Like, I always knew there was more to their relationship than he was just the family friend who would come by um... or spend weekends out on Long Island with us and stuff. Um, I always knew he was a close friend of my mom's and I'm sure—I assume they had a, you know, an intimate relationship and I think it was pretty ongoing throughout most of their lives um.

01:09:01:21

ANDERSON COOPER:

Gordon, you know, was... from what I understood was kind of a ladies man and there were many—he had many admirers and certainly my mom was one of them. Um, but they also had—I think they had a real connection, which was—which was great, 'cause I mean I got to spend time with him and it was—that was uh— that was incredibly important to me.

01:09:26:12

ANDERSON COOPER:

I don't think there was any jealousy whatsoever. I mean like my dad loved Gordon and as far as I know, I mean as far as I remember. I mean, Gordon was around when my dad was around. My dad was around till I was ten and I—my—I'm sure my dad was aware of, you know—you know, it was the 70's I guess. But so—but you know, there was never—I know there was certainly never, as far as I know as a kid, I didn't perceive any tension whatsoever.

01:09:55:10

ANDERSON COOPER:

Um, you know, Gordon was at dinners and my dad was there and my mom was there and we were there, and Gordon was part of the family and um... I don't think that there was—I don't know on Gordon's end about, you know, other relationships he had, how anybody felt but um, certainly not—I don't think on my mom's end. I think—I think she—what they had was real. It wasn't you know, they weren't hooking up. I mean this was a— this was, you

know, incredibly deep... um, earned friendship over time and showing up for each other in- in, you know, in the— in the broken places and in the broken times.

01:10:40:03

ANDERSON COOPER:

I don't think my mom was expecting something from Gordon that- that you know, he wasn't willing to give and I don't know that he was expecting something from her. Um, they kind of met in the middle and it— and it lasted through a lot of other relationships in, I'm sure, both of their lives. Yeah, my mom was—would not—you know, my mom had a dream of having like a house with a white picket fence and you know, kids and stuff like that but when she had it, she— it wasn't enough and she would blow it up. And so, you know, my mom was not one to sort of stand on ceremony or be, you know, influenced by what other people thought or what other people thought she should be doing, and so I don't think she viewed herself as limited by rules in terms of—well, yeah I think she felt this is somebody I love and who—we have a real friendship and it takes this form and there's nothing wrong with that.

Their creative relationship

01:11:48:16

ANDERSON COOPER:

Yeah, look, I mean Gordon was—I think, you know, my mom was pulled in a lot of different directions as an artist. I mean she wanted—she had things she wanted to express and achieve and so it took many different forms, and I think that’s one of the extraordinary things about Gordon, is just he... he was so talented in so many different realms and just fearless in his plunging headfirst into them and, you know, composing and writing poetry and obviously writing and photography and directing. Um...And not just—it’s not just extraordinary that he had all of this incredible range, but obviously in the time that he started doing it, um, to be able to succeed in all these different realms was even more extraordinary.

01:12:40:23

ANDERSON COOPER:

And so I think—I think they did connect as artists. Um, you know, obviously there was an attraction between them, a physical attraction, an emotional attraction. Um, I also think that they had a connection based on also on loss and on grief and, you know, Gordon uh losing a child, my mom’s—my brother died by suicide in front of my mom and Gordon was one of those people who understood that pain. Um, and it’s, you know, as everyone knows, you know, the pain of a parent losing a child is a particular kind of pain; to lose a child in a violent way, a plane crash or a suicide is also a um particular kind of pain.

01:13:25:11

ANDERSON COOPER:

And when you're—I remember when my brother died, you know, there are some people who my mom and I thought would—both my mom and I felt like we were on a life raft, and there were some people who we thought would be able to get on the life raft and to kind of help us paddle along and those people, some people we thought would be able to help weren't able to help at all. And some people we didn't really know would be able to help were completely able to help.

01:13:51:00

ANDERSON COOPER:

But Gordon was one of those people who um... I knew would be a great help to my mom and- and- and he was and I think they—you know, they—I think they had like a weekly meet up for a while and um she loved him. I mean, she absolutely loved him from the early times when she first met him to um— to the day she died.

01:14:17:12

ANDERSON COOPER:

I think they both spoke the language of loss and, you know, it's a particular language that you can only learn unfortunately um by—you know, by losing somebody and by losing many things. And I think the losses—you know, I mean the struggle of somebody—you know, of a kid pulling himself out of the circumstances he is born into and being able to not—not be sucked under by

them and not be, you know—but to be able to kind of move forward is an extraordinary thing, it takes extraordinary power.

01:14:59:06

ANDERSON COOPER:

And- and um, I certainly think Gordon obviously had that. And my mom—completely diff—I mean, you couldn't have more polar different circumstances. She grew up obviously surrounded by great wealth and—but had no real family, had no idea what a family was. You know, had a lot of issues and I think they saw it in each other that they were both survivors.

01:15:27:20

ANDERSON COOPER:

What's remarkable about the way—about them both being survivors is that they both remained completely open and able to be hurt again and able to be vulnerable again. Most—survivors usually implies that somebody is like, they're just tough as nails and, you know, I'm still here, damnit. And you know, it's my way or the highway. And my mom was the most vulnerable person, to the day she died, I've ever met and the most optimistic. And I think, you know, I think that's a particular strength, to be—to survive through things and not have those things change who you are to the extent that it shuts down who you are. They blossomed uh in their survival.

A letter from Gloria Vanderbilt to Gordon Parks

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01:16:22:04

ANDERSON COOPER:

Gordon Parks, 860 United Nations Plaza. This is from June 1980—17th of June, 1986. '86, ok. "Dearest Gordon, surely you are involved with someone." Ah. "Dearest Gordon, surely you are involved with someone. I certainly hope so. Me too. But I have a longing for us to spend some time together. Maybe a long weekend drive somewhere in a car, somewhere pretty. What do you think? Love, G."

01:16:48:22

ANDERSON COOPER:

Umm. Let me see. June 1986. Yeah, I wasn't around. I was gone for the summer, I was working. That's interesting. "Surely you are involved with someone, I certainly hope so. Me too." I don't think she was involved with somebody actually at that point, but I think it's cool, I love it.

END TC: 01:17:09:23