

Black Archives of Mid-America / Kansas City Public Library Oral History Collection (AC12)

Interview #14: Collins, Joanne
Interviewer: Milton Smith
Date: 08/21/1976
Length: Part 1, 64:28; Part 2, 48:28

Summary:

00:00 – 03:08: Discussion of Ms. Collins' family background and early schooling. Ms. Collins was born August 29, 1935, in the Rosedale area of Kansas City, Kansas, to William and Mary Frances Mitchell. She is one of three children. Her father, a laborer in the Argentine area, was part of the Mitchell / McCaleb family that migrated from Holiday, Kansas, to Kansas City, Kansas. Ms. Collins attended Attucks School in Kansas City, Kansas.

03:08 – 05:22: Discussion of Ms. Collins' education at Attucks School. Education was a high priority in the Mitchell family. Ms. Collins attended Attucks School from kindergarten through sixth grade. She also discusses discipline at the school.

05:23 – 07:15: Ms. Collins discusses her education in elementary school. She was an above average student and therefore spent a lot of time running errands for teachers and managing the classroom when a teacher stepped out. Although Ms. Collins feels she received a good education, her lack of actual class time and her ability to complete assignments with little or no help left her feeling unchallenged.

07:15 – 08:38: Discussion of Ms. Collins' attendance at Northeast Junior High School in Kansas City, Kansas. She had to be bussed to school. The bus stopped in five places to pick up students from various economic backgrounds before dropping them off at school. Ms. Collins entered high school in 1949.

08:39 – 12:28: Ms. Collins discusses her education at Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas. The school divided the students academically, and Ms. Collins was placed with the top one-third of the students. She mentions some of the faculty at the school. Two teachers in particular – Rebecca Bloodworth and E. Taylor – helped Ms. Collins become a better student. They taught Ms. Collins that she needed to go beyond the course work to succeed.

12:29 – 14:20: Ms. Collins discusses her extracurricular activities, including participation in dramas and plays. She received small roles in many of the school and church productions.

- 14:20 – 17:08: Discussion of Ms. Collins' academic pursuits in college. Her mother encouraged her to attend nursing school. She rejected scholarships to historically black colleges, including Spelman, Howard, and Tuskegee, in favor of the University of Kansas. Ms. Collins decided she did not want to become a nurse and chose to pursue a liberal arts education for the first two years. During her second year in college, Ms. Collins felt a need to travel outside of the Kansas City area.
- 17:09 – 21:50: Ms. Collins discusses her experience working at Hull House in Chicago, Illinois, in the summer of 1955. This was Ms. Collins' first experience working with individuals who felt they were not a part of the society. The students at the house were from low economic backgrounds, some were Spanish speakers and some were black. The experience sparked Ms. Collins' interest in pursuing Sociology as a major in college. She mentions a previous experience in a Sociology course where a teacher misrepresented Africans, and she chose not to stay in the course.
- 21:50 – 26:31: Ms. Collins discusses feeling a difference between her and others. Ms. Collins notes that, as a child, her interactions with whites were limited. She went to a segregated school, she could not go outside her block to play with other children, and she spent three evenings a week, plus Saturday and Sunday, in church.
- 26:31 – 30:36: Discussion of Ms. Collins' work experience after college. Ms. Collins attended the University of Kansas from 1953 to 1955, but she did not graduate. She earned money working at the campus library. Ms. Collins took a position with the Tschudy family as a part-time babysitter. She traveled with the Tschudy family to their resort home on Mackinac Island in Michigan. Once there, Ms. Collins was responsible for the children and scheduling family activities. She notes this as her first experience in politics, meaning she had to delegate responsibility to others much older than herself in order to make sure the needs of her employer and children were met while balancing the schedules of others.
- 30:36 – 31:21: Ms. Collins discusses the effects of coming from a background of limited economic mobility to working in the home of the Tschudy family. Ms. Collins notes that while the Tschudys had money, they also had problems.
- 31:22: End of side one.
- 31:23 – 34:00: Ms. Collins continues to discuss life with the Tschudys. Ms. Collins notes that in her church, members worked three or four jobs and gave a significant portion of effort and money to the church. The Tschudys, on the other hand, would send money but not attend the church. Within a year, Ms. Collins was able to see the spectrum of lifestyles that were possible in America.
- 34:00 – 37:12: Discussion of the Tschudy family's interactions with African Americans. The Tschudys owned three cotton mills in the Arkansas area. They would hire hundreds of blacks but pay little. If employees wanted more money, the Tschudys would move the cotton mills to other locations in order to keep wages low.

Although Mr. Tschudy would call the employees “niggers,” he would refer to the blacks in the Kansas City area by their names. Ms. Collins said this affected her negatively because she did not know why he would refer to her and the people she knew differently than blacks in another area.

37:12 – 39:13: Ms. Collins discusses the long term impact working for the Tschudys had on her.

39:13 – 41:01: Discussion of what pushed Ms. Collins to seek a seat on the city council. Ms. Collins points to her religion and notes that all things are given as part of God’s plan.

41:01 – 46:40: Ms. Collins discusses her courtship and marriage to her first husband, Gerald Spence. She met Mr. Spence, a native of Jamaica, while working for the Tschudy family in Michigan. Ms. Collins decided to leave school after her marriage because she wanted to travel the world with Mr. Spence.

46:40 – 52:27: Ms. Collins discusses her marriage to Gerald Spence. Mr. Spence liked to cook and clean but did not have respect for economics in America. After initially living in the Rosedale area, the couple moved to Kansas City, Missouri. Ms. Collins had her first child almost three years into the marriage. Mr. Spence left the family because the child was not a boy. Ms. Collins divorced Mr. Spence, against the wishes of her mother, who did not believe in divorce. Mr. Spence returned in about five months, and the couple remarried. He opened a restaurant in Kansas City, Kansas, and Ms. Collins worked in real estate. When Mr. Spence neglected to pay his taxes on the business, Ms. Collins divorced him again. To earn a living, Ms. Collins sold real estate for Robert Hughes and Company and worked for the post office.

52:27 – 58:27: Discussion of what made Ms. Collins run for city council. Her mother stressed to her father the importance of voting on Election Day. Ms. Collins discusses her difficulties in getting a ballot from local black and white election judges to vote for a Republican nominee in an election soon after she moved to Kansas City, Missouri. Ms. Collins believed that African Americans in Kansas City felt disenfranchised and did not actively participate in the two-party system. Ms. Collins made a conscious effort engage in activities that would enable others to realize there were ways to get involved in political activity.

58:28 – 62:09: Ms. Collins discusses her Republican political identity. She notes the difficulty of being a black Republican in Kansas City, Missouri. Ms. Collins says she could be accepted as a woman, as a Methodist, as a person of intelligence, but not as a Republican.

62:09 – 64:28: Discussion of the major tenants of the Republican Party. Ms. Collins notes the importance of the two-party system. She believes that African Americans have forgotten how to exercise roles in both political parties.

64:28: End of side two.

- 00:00 – 02:24: Ms. Collins discusses campaigning in the primary election. Ms. Collins spent the majority of her time in the black community because she had to convince the community that voting for a black person who represents them from the Republican Party does not mean they are supporting the Republican Party as a whole.
- 02:24 – 05:38: Discussion of changing political tactics. In the 1960s, the black community advanced due to the leadership and sensitivity of national and local leaders. In the 1970s, argues Ms. Collins, negotiating at the table among the parties involved is necessary to meet the needs of all the people.
- 05:38 – 09:05: Discussion of the Missouri Sunshine Law.
- 09:05 – 13:47: Discussion of the impact of the Watergate hearings on Republicans at a local level. Ms. Collins maintains that Watergate made government more honest and gives checks and balances more credence. It also shows that one individual cannot destroy the political system.
- 13:47 – 15:19: Ms. Collins discusses her voting habits. While she generally supports Republicans locally and in general elections, Ms. Collins votes for the best candidate who she believes represents the people.
- 15:19 – 23:54: Ms. Collins discusses her political experience. Her participation in the League of Women Voters laid the groundwork for her political campaigns. Ms. Collins was elected to the Missouri Republican Committee and served as secretary for the Jackson County Republican Committee. She went to Washington D.C. to lobby for women's issues and human rights. Ms. Collins was also appointed to the state advisory committee for the United States Commission of Civil Rights.
- 23:54 – 31:28: Discussion of Ms. Collins' campaign for city council. Ms. Collins was appointed to the city council in 1975 [?] when councilman Tolbert resigned. When she ran for the seat, Ms. Collins faced political opposition from Freedom, Inc. Her opponent, Mamie Hughes, was supported by Freedom, Inc.
- 31:28 – 34:44: Ms. Collins discusses her method of appealing to individuals for the vote. She discusses the "smear campaign" against her by Freedom, Inc.
- 34:44 – 37:23: Discussion of violence against Ms. Collins. Ms. Collins brought individuals to protect her in the event of danger. She also discusses speaking in churches.
- 37:23 – 40:20: Discussion of Ms. Collins upcoming election for a seat in the United States House of Representatives. Ms. Collins is running against incumbent Richard Bolling. Ms. Collins discusses campaign financing and how she and her team are running a professional campaign with limited funds.
- 40:21 – 43:00: Ms. Collins talks about her family and politics. Ms. Collins also discusses her involvement in various organizations. Ms. Collins mentions that she does not

have a political base but rather utilizes members from each organization to assist her in her political campaigns. Her family supports her political activities.

43:00 – 48:28: Ms. Collins discusses the importance of getting people involved in the political process. She also discusses fundraising and vetting funds. Ms. Collins says she does not make promises she cannot deliver on.

48:28: End of tape two.

Index Terms:

Attucks School [Kansas City, Kansas]
 Bloodworth, Rebecca L.
 Bolling, Richard W.
 Chicago, Illinois
 City Council [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Collins, Joanne
 Elections
 Freedom, Inc.
 Hughes, Mamie
 Kansas City, Kansas
 Kansas City, Missouri
 Northeast Junior High School [Kansas City, Kansas]
 Politics
 Politicians
 Republican Party
 Rosedale Neighborhood [Kansas City, Kansas]
 Sumner High School [Kansas City, Kansas]
 University of Kansas [Lawrence, Kansas]

Summary compiled by Donald Ramirez, May 2014. Edited by Michael Sweeney, Collection Librarian, May 2014.