

Professor John Krugler (hereafter Krugler) : We're here in the Marquette University technology room at Raynor Memorial Libraries. We have a very special guest today. Vel Phillips is one who was instrumental in bringing about great change in the city of Milwaukee and in the state of Wisconsin. Her career has been long and very interesting. And she has very graciously consented to make an opening statement about her career and some of her activities. And then she will open the discussion up for questioning, so by all means have your questions ready. Mrs. Phillips, the stage is yours.

Phillips : Thank you very much. Can you hear me? Your professor, teacher, gave me these two pages of things I might touch. And if I followed this sheet we would be here at least eight hours, no less. He really laid it on [laughter]. I'll start with, let's see, the beginning. Harvey Pager was my law professor [and] was well known at the University of Wisconsin for his little jokes. He didn't like the textbook that we used, and he would always say: "It doesn't start at the beginning and go to the end. It doesn't even start at the end and go backward. It starts in the middle and spreads both ways." So that's what I'll do. I'll start in the middle.

I was a graduate of North Division High School. N

mother disapproved of and didn't want me to associate with]. So she had the list, [but] all the people that she put on the list became my dear friends, of course. That was so funny.

So I had a wonderful father and mother. And I sort of always believed that later on in life that because I had a loving mother and father [I was able to do the things, and have the success I did]. Mother, who was a homemaker, never worked or anything like that, just took care of the children. I just sort of thought that we were expected to go to college. How should I put it? [I felt] that making a difference in the world, that's all I really wanted, to make a small difference. It was expected [of us]. It was easy [for us]. It's the people who lived in the projects, and who didn't have a mother and a father, that I admired tremendously for what they had done [because they didn't have the advantage that I did of the support of both parents].

But anyway my first experience with real prejudice was at North Division when I decided to enter an oratorical contest. The Forensic Contest was a big deal at North Division. There were four divisions, I'll break it down very quickly. There were four divisions: Extemporaneous, which I was not interested in, Oratorical, which I was, and Serious Declaration and Humorous Declaration. And Thelma Sievert (sp?), you know I meant to call Thelma, she would have come with me today. Because we reminiscence about [that time when we were in high school]. I said to her, they call her Tiebe, I said to Tiebe, "I think I'll enter that contest." I had been thinking about entering the Oratorical Contest which is a national contest, and I thought I could get a little practice by doing our high school thing. So I get going to Miss Moolenslater who was in charge [of the Forensic Contest]. She was very racist. [There were speeches that were already written and you were supposed to memorize them.] They had a whole slew of them. So you [were supposed to ] just say, "I want the oration, any oration." [But when I asked for the orations] she said to me, "All the orations are out." [This was strange because] if you took them out you could keep them for a certain amount of days, three or four days. Then you had to bring them back so other students could have them. So I kept [going back to ask for an oration]. I must have gone two or three weeks, at least, asking her for this oratorical. And she would always say, "We don't have it." So my sister said to me, "You know, Miss Moolenslater is very prejudice and she probably doesn't want you to be in the contest." My sister did little after school chores for the English teacher, Miss Roberts. Miss Roberts was the opposite of Miss Moolenslater. So every time I would go in there, [Miss Moolenslater said the oration was out.] Finally, she said to me, "We have [a] humorous declaration. Your people are all comedians.

final four in each of the divisions would be in the semifinals. Then the final two in each of the divisions [would perform again] and when you did the final two to decide who would be the first in each of the four, you gave your speech in front of the whole school. When I came [to check the results] after I gave my little thing, the next day I looked on the bulletin board and I was eliminated, I wasn't in it. My sister said to me, "Vel, something is going on at this school. Do you know what it is? I haven't found out but I keep hearing them say your name. What's going on? Have you done something?" I said, "No I haven't done anything." She said, "Well, how did the contest turn out?" I said, "Well I didn't make it, you know." She said, "I think that's what they're talking about."

Well, to make a long story short, the students thought that I gave the best speech and that I should not be eliminated. So they passed around this petition saying that Vel, not Vel Philips because I was Velvlea Rogers, was the best one and she was eliminated, and that was not right, and this and that. And to show you just how much it affected the school, Jacquelyn Peoples, who was my sister's best friend, was with my sister when she said that to me, and she said "Vel, Why are you letting that happen? You know that there aren't many of us here and there's just about five or six in the whole school and you're causing all kinds of trouble." Well I didn't know what to do, I was very shy.

When I was in the assembly I was summoned to the principal's office. Now today you get someone to the principal's office and they may go in and strike the principal.

or something, be the judges. I had forgotten that this is Marquette, and we got these two [Marquette] people to do it.

So when we get there, Ellis Urban, he [later]

must remain a sweet girl..." And then I finished it, I said, "...until I graduate." She said, "Nope. Until you marry, you must remain a sweet girl." Now if I told this story before. Did I tell this before? I told you but I didn't tell the kids. So I had no idea. You know, I was a virgin so I said, "Fine."

So now I march off to school. And it was only after I got there that I realized it was embarrassing, when I'd say, when they had drinks in the dorm, and I'd say, "Well, no thank you." And then someone would say, "Well, Vel never drinks." Then I'd be embarrassed, you know. They'd say, "Why won't you drink?" I said, "Because I promised my parents." "She's a thousand miles away, for God's sake Vel, you know. She'll never know!" I said, "But I'll know!"

And I said to my first boyfriend who I [thought] I'd later on eventually marry. I said, "I have to remain a sweet girl until I marry." He said, "Cool." But it wasn't all that cool. Because he went to the service, he was fine until he went to the service and came back to visit me after [he was in the service]. He was working on his master's degree, his PhD in chemistry. He was at least six years older than me. He was working on his PhD. He has graduated from Howard, [and had] gotten his master's. He was older. So when he had to go to the World War II, I called my mother, and I said, "We want to get married." No, no, she wanted me not to get married and she had this and that [reason]. And so we decided then to wait.

He was very cool. But when he came back from the service and came to visit me, as soon as my mother and father went to bed... We'd be out in the yard, he would start making demands. I said, "Well you promised me that I could remain a sweet girl until we marry." He said, "Well that was before I went to [the]service," [and he had been

only woman there. And it was kind of fun [to be the only women] because if it was raining. We had to go between buildings, and they were always fighting over who was going to carry the umbrella for me.

When I was in law school, my husband and I would be together. And they'd say to him, "Oh, aren't you lucky? You've got a built-



thing that I don't have is we don't have any money."





But I do think they broke into my house. Because at one time, when my house was burglarized, the only thing that was taken... There were two things taken: a gun. I wasn't even sorry that was gone because I was afraid of it. I said to my husband that I don't believe in any kind of weapon like that. Because I think that if you have a gun, you might use it. And so I wasn't worried about the gun. But the gun was stolen. Well, maybe three things. The liquor cabinet was gone into and the refrigerator was absolutely raided. They made sandwiches and ate and all like that. But nothing else was gone. All the money was laying around and stuff. No money was touched. Nothing! The gun was gone [and] the beer and liquor was invaded, and the food was really invaded. So it just didn't seem to me that those were the regular kind of burglars, you know. It just didn't add up. So my husband and I decided that it was some of the Commandos that had been there.

I said to them, "You know, my husband has gotten a gun," because I was always threatened. As a

cigarettes." So I waited and I waited and I waited. And then finally I called my mother to ask if she would come over so I could go march for the first time. And so she said, "Oh, Dale didn't tell you?" She loved my husband so much, at first she was not too fond [of him,] she thought he was kind of street-wise. But then later on she learned to love him a lot. So she said, "He's on his way over here," that's when she said, "because he doesn't think you should march with Groppi" And I said "Mom!" and she said "and I agreed with him. I think it's very unladylike running up and down the street shouting and screaming." I said, "Mom, I won't be doing that, I'll be marching for my housing bill." So I missed that first night as I explained to you last week, and thereafter I never missed one night. It was the most beautiful, beautiful thing. I'll say this [indecipherable].

I have served on the legislative branch when I was on the Council, in the judicial branch when I was a judge, and in the executive branch when I was the Secretary of State. So I served in [all three branches of government]. The thing I enjoyed the most, without a doubt, was the City Council because I felt close to the people, and that kind of thing, although it was very interesting to be on the bench. I remember this one little guy. He was about eight years old. Oh, recently it was in the paper, where the seven-year-old took the car and drove and ruined his grandmother's car. Did you see it in the paper?

Audience : No.

Phillips : Oh, yes, it was on television, and his grandmother said, "I'm gonna whip his behind if I can find him." Did you read? Right on television, "I'm gonna whip his behind. That's what I'd like to do is whip his behind."

Because one of the cases I remember was this little boy, he was a genius. He would go to the salvage places, and he and his friend put together an old car. He was about seven maybe eight. Put together this old car and drove it off of the [yard], after it was there, and drove it away. His feet could not reach the pedals so while he was driving, the friend worked the pedals. So then they'd drive in[to] the [filling] station and said, "Fill her up!" And the man knew there was something wrong, here's a seven-year-old driving into the filling station. So he called the police, which of course what he should have done, and he came to me in the courtroom. His father sat in the back, angry because he a) missed work. He said, "I'm missing my job." And b) he said, "He won't go to school. He's so dumb, he won't go to school." And I said, "Listen, your son is a genius and you're calling him dumb," things like that.

Then I had a ten-year-old recovering alcoholic. So there were a lot of interesting cases that I had to deal with. And the man who is over the corrections, he had the nerve to say that "S



And anyway, I would say things like, "Don't try to summon me anymore. I'm not going to be summoned because you got your area, [and] I got my area. You worry about your electorate. What I'm doing for fair housing is going [to] benefit the whole city."

But the other thing is the other that was so funny when I think about it now, [is] my first time [on television]. The council members had a show that came on once a week, and different aldermen would talk about the affair[s] of the city, what was going on. So the first time I was on television...

Professor : Vel, I'm going to interrupt once more. I'm going to move this microphone.

[rustling.]

Phillips : And so I was on with Alderman Schreiber, Marty Schreiber's father who was President of the Common Council [now], and Alderman Mortier, who was on the first ward. And of course I was the only woman and the first woman. I'll never forget because I was very excited to be on television. It was the first time I'd been on television. So I said to my mother, she kept my baby. My husband was at the office, our law office, and I wasn't going to see him 'til later. So when I came to pick up Dale, I said to my mom, "Did you have a chance to..." "Oh yes." "How was it?" "Oh, you were beautiful. You were so beautiful. Your hair was just right," and she was going on and on. So I said, "Well Mom, I'm not so concerned with what I looked liked. How did I sound?" [indecipherable] "Oh you were the smartest one. You knew all the answers. You were just [so], I was so proud. I am so sorry that your father couldn't have heard so and so part because he was working or something." So I was feeling pretty good.

Now fast-forward when my husband came home. I said, "Did you chance to watch the show, me on television?" And he said, "Oh yes, I saw it," because he had television in the office. So I said, "Well how was it?" And he said, "Get your pencil and paper." I said, "Why?" He said, "Just get your notebook." I didn't have a good feeling, as soon as he said that. So he said, "It was terrible." I said, "Why?" "You talked more than anybody. You talked much more than you should have. You interrupted Alderman Schreiber three times. You interrupted Alderman Mortier two times." I just sunk down. "Oh honey was it that bad?" "It was. It was worse," he said. Now this is the thing that really got me, he said, "because what you did really that was not good was you took advantage in a way of being a female." I said, "How?" He said, "Well because you were the first woman and the only woman, the first black and the only black. They didn't know how to handle you without appearing to be picking on women." Like Hillary [Clinton] said she had [been picked on]. "And then of course it was an all white council, they didn't want to appear to be racist. And so they didn't quite know how to handle you and you took advantage of it. It was not the Vel Phillips show!"

And even though it hurt at the time, it taught me. I never [forgot] from there on in, I waited my turn. I didn't interrupt anyone. It was a good learning [experience]. It's good to have someone in your corner who will tell you the truth. My mother [just said] "You were the smartest, the prettiest, the loveliest." She would tell us that when we were growing up. "Yvonne you have the best smile. Vel you have the prettiest eyes," [and] this and that. My mother was wonderful.

Benson: Vel, Can I ask you a question? Your first open housing bill in '62, was it different than the bill that actually passed in '68?

Phillips : No.

Benson : It was the same bill?

Phillips : Mmhmm.

Benson : Who helped you craft that?

Phillips : Bill Curly, his name is Bill Curly. He was a \_\_\_\_\_ writer. He worked for the \_\_\_\_\_ and he quit the \_\_\_\_\_ and was our clerk. And that was his job was to help craft an ordinance.

And did I tell you about my husband and the Aldermen's Wives Club? Did I tell you about that? The Aldermen's wives met and they felt that because I was woman, [even though] I was an Alderman, I was the only [woman alderman]. [The felt] I should join the Aldermen's wives club. So I went about three times maybe. But it was horrible, I just couldn't take it. They talked about little silly things, you know, baby formula and stuff. That was not..you buy the baby formula.., way before I found out there may be something in plastic, I wanted bottles, I didn't trust plastic.

Benson :

Benson : I'm Clayborn Benson.

Phillips : Oh shut up. [laughter]

Benson : I have a question.

Professor : Well, why don't we let the students ask a question? We'll let you have the last one. How's that? Bridgette, you want to ask one of those questions about the aftermath or follow-up or would you rather defer to someone else?

Interviewer : We interviewed some of the Commandos and the other people involved in the Open Housing marches. They were part of the NAACP Youth Council.

Phillips : Yes?

Interviewer : And a lot of them said that they felt that the turning point with all the marches was the Sixteenth Street viaduct march? Would you agree with that? What was the big turning point for you?

Phillips : Well, the Sixteenth Street. They didn't just do Sixteenth Street one day that went on and on. I thought that going across Sixteenth Street bridge was always so [bad]. I mean, they threw rotten eggs, they threw urine, [and] feces. You just come home, [and] you had to take off your clothes and wash everything. And I got a lot of hate mail. And I got to know quite a few of the policemen that were assigned to march with us. Actually, the marches cost a lot of money, because they had to have assigned policemen and stuff. But I was always threatened. My children, I never talked about them. I



say this and that, and Frank Ziedler, it was his last turn and he was a wonderful person. [So we instructed our workers this way] first of all, the doors are locked, [so] they're locked in. Now wait until you're close to the polls, and then you say, "Now for alderman..."

Now I had seen a little three by five card—like that. [A] three by five index card, that was my literature, and it was red, white, and blue, but the woman had folded it so it was only about that [big]. So I wasn't really sure [it was my campaign literature]. I just thought I saw red, white, and blue. So now we're close to the polls, [and] my husband said, "Now for alderman..." The woman popped up right away and said, "You don't have [to tell] us about the alderman, we know who to vote for, for alderman and we'd rather not discuss that." So my husband sort of stopped short, and then the man said, "Yes, we're voting for Vel Phillips." And I turned around to say thank you very much. I think he sat in back of me because he let in his wife in first. Before I could say it, the man said, "We think he is a very good candidate. He's a lawyer, he belongs to this." I was just struck. But my husband never skipped a beat, "Oh great, we think he is too."

And so the next day when I won, that was the woman who called me to say, "Didn't you take us to the polls?" And I said, "Yes." "Well why didn't you tell us you were Vel Phillips?" I said, "Because you thought I was a man and I certainly wasn't going to disturb that."

The other thing I was going to tell you was about five years ago, or maybe more, I called City Hall for something. And this Judy answered the phone, and she was there. She came on [to the payroll] as [an] eighteen years old, right out of high school, when I was there. She was blonde and very pretty and very nice. I said "hi" and [that] I was looking for whoever I was looking for. She said, "Is this Alderman Phillips?" She was calling me Alderman Phillips. I said, "Yes." And she said, you will enjoy this, Clayborn, I said, "Are you still there Judy? My God, you've been working [how many years]." She said, "This is my last week."

Phillips : It means I talk a lot.

Interviewer : We did some research about the school desegregation and Lloyd Barbee. And I was just wondering what was your level of involvement?

Phillips : Oh, I did all the food. He had a school right there at St. Matthew's and I did all the lunches. I would call different restaurants and stuff and ask if they would [give food]. You know, people that could afford it, [if they would donate some food]. And I'd tell them how many students approximately, and I'd get the food. I was in charge of that for MUSIC, and it was wonderful. He was very cooperative with me and I was very cooperative with him, and he was very bright. We're hoping to get the Milwaukee Schools, the old West Division, which is now the Milwaukee School of the Arts, we're trying to get that named after Lloyd Barbee. It'd still be the School of the Arts, but instead of Milwaukee School of the Arts, it would be the Lloyd Augustus Barbee School of the Arts. And that's what we're working on now, [just] brainstorming. Did you have a question Barbara?

Interviewer : Yes, I was wondering about your involvement with the Youth Council? There's lots of pictures in the display and elsewhere with the Youth Council members usually with Groppi but I was wondering what your level of involvement was?

Phillips : I would come home from City Hall, and it was just like going to a job. My husband would be helping with the getting of the meal. I would always have it all planned, and I did have a housekeeper, and I'd have things all laid out. And then we'd have dinner, and then I'd head right for the church. I remember once this white fellow said to me, we were getting ready to go on the march, he said, "You know this marching is just tearing this city apart. What is it that you people want? What is it?" He had no idea that 'you people' is a phrase that black people do not like. It's a segregating kind of thing, and the average black would right off be ready to shoot fire with this 'you people' business. So he said, "What is it that you people want?" But I could tell that he had no idea that this was an insulting thing to us. I said, "My dear, nothing but our share of the pie. Same things that you want, good schools, an opportunity to get a job and to keep it and to move forward, a quiet neighborhood, place for our children to play in. Just everything! Just the American Dream! The things that you take for granted and that we don't have." And he said, "Is that it? That's all?" He was just kind of stunned. I could have gotten very upset but I could tell that he was sincere in his questioning and didn't have any idea that things were not equal. And I think about that.

Did any of you hear the Reverend [Jeremiah] Wright last night? Yeah, that's very interesting. Because my first thought was 'Why doesn't he just go away?' Because I'm an [Barack] Obama Mama, and I just very kind of upset. But he, first of all, is extremely intelligent, you can tell. [He is] very well read. [He] served in the Marines. You know, [George W.] Bush got out of the service, all of these people don't serve and he was a Marine. Spent six years as a part... And I think he helped operate on Lyndon Johnson, his team. So he is not what Hillary [Clinton], and I've always been a Hillary [Clinton] fan. A friend of mine said, "Vel, you're not for Hillary [Clinton], you always were?" And I said, "That was BBO." So she said, "What does that mean?" "Before Barack Obama." So I really think that it's just kind of interesting. I've always liked her because she's a woman and I'm a woman, and I know how it feels. Because it was much harder, as I said last week, it was much harder getting over the woman thing than getting over the race thing.

Now Budzien, on the last day, I was gonna tell you that then I'll answer another question. The last day he passed my desk and then he came back and he said, "You know Mrs. Phill he said, "s hat%og

against me, and I just want you to know that I wouldn't mind having you as a neighbor at all. That would be fine with me." And I just couldn't take it anymore. So I said, "Well, what makes you think that I would want you as a neighbor?" I said, "I wouldn't want you to be my neighbor." Did I tell you guys this? I said, "Because neighbors are someone that you can depend on to help you in a crisis. And I wouldn't want to be in a foxhole with you or anywhere near you. I wouldn't feel that if I ran out of sugar, [I wouldn't want]to come over. So you wouldn't be my neighbor, and I wouldn't want you to be my neighbor."

Interviewer : May I ask you a question that kind of follows up on that. 1967 were the confrontations. Milwaukee was really torn apart, and the next year, you got the fair housing bill passed. Was there any relationship between the fact that the Council finally moved on it and what had happened the previous year?

Phillips : Yes there was. Let me just finish telling you [what happened with Budzien]. After Budzien made that statement, he sat down at his desk. And then after about five minutes he got up and came back over. He said, "You know, I'd like to apologize." Because he realized, he had enough brains [that what he said was insulting and wrong], some of the Aldermen just didn't have it, but he realized that that was very condescending, and he said that he wanted to apologize. And I said, "Apology accepted."

In answer to your question, I don't think they would have passed it in '68 had it not been for the Federal Law. The Federal Law passed it just before we did. Then they knew, Milwaukee was a part of the United States of America so they might as well go along. That's a good point.

Interviewer : I know we all need to get going. But can you just sort of conclude by giving your perspective on how Milwaukee has changed since 1967? We're 41 years down the road. Are we a more humane area? Are we a better off for all of this having happened?

Phillips : Well, people ask me that a lot especially during Martin Luther King's [Day?]. I happened to know Martin Luther King. You knew he was very special. But you didn't really know [him]. I think his being assassinated really put him in a particular category, a stamp, a holiday, all those wonderful things that have happened to [honor] him. But he was, in many ways, just as, shall I say, strong as this Reverend [Jeremiah] Wright. He didn't use the same language. He didn't say "God damn [America]" or anything. But he was very [strong]. People forget how really strong he was. But he was a peace person so that softened everything. I don't believe in any violence [either].

But I would leave him hanging on the phone. He'd call me and say, "Well, we're gonna be here. Can you come? Can you tell Groppi to come?" And sometimes I'd say, "Well, where are you, [I'll call you back]?" And he'd say, "Vel, you're not gonna call me back. And I'll stay on the phone," and stuff like that. And I'd just leave him hanging while I did whatever maybe the children were acting up or something. I think about it now, the people I kept hanging, [like] John F. Kennedy. Once he called me, I was trying to clean the refrigerator and it was all open. And Michael was trying to get into that open [space], that space just seemed to drive him nuts. So he couldn't get in, he went and got his little stool, and then got in sort of butt first. Then when he started trying to close the door, I said to JFK, I called him JFK, I said, "Michael's been trying to get into the refrigerator and now that he's in, he's trying to close the door." He said, "Vel, stop right now and go and get him, because you can't close the door while you're in the refrigerator. "

But I've had the good luck of having to meet a lot of wonderful people. [Like] LBJ [President Lyndon B. Johnson], I knew well. JFK I knew even better. [I knew] Martin Luther King [and] Eleanor Roosevelt. I had to introduce her at a meeting, I'll never forget her. Also, Fannie Lou Hamer was a worker in the

South for Civil Rights and she worked in cotton fields. I'll never forget looking at both of them. Eleanor Roosevelt had the most beautiful fingers. You could tell they had never touched any dishwater at all, and she had gorgeous rings and stuff. And Fannie Lou Hamer, her little hands were like, she couldn't close them all the way from picking cotton. Really, just looking at their hands gave you some idea as to kind of lifestyle they had lived. Their lifestyle[s were very different].

But the federal bill was the thing.

Professor : Okay. We've taken advantage of your time.

Phillips : No you haven't. We've got five more minutes.

Professor : Anybody want to ask any more questions?

Interviewer : Well, just do you think Milwaukee is better today than it was?

Phillips : Well, yes I think it is better today. But it has its [problems]. The fat lady, they say it ain't over until the fat lady sings, she's standing up but she hasn't opened her mouth yet. I will say this, I have noticed, there are one, two, three, four, five women. So there are only two males in the class. Do you think, is that the way [it is] proportioned in the school, more females than male?

Interviewer : It's slightly more.

Phillips : Why is that?

Professor : Well, I think that is a difficult question to ask, and you're starting to interview us now. The situation is in a lot of ways [difficult to explain]. I think females are far more interested in their education and they see the advantages to it, and sometimes maybe the males don't. Do you have any ideas? It's way out of my baliwick.

Interviewer : There's more of them.

Phillips : That is true, there's more girls born than boys. The other thing I was going to say, though, what is your major? You're majoring in what? You're taking this course but what is your major?

Interviewer : I'm a history.

Phillips : That's very fascinating.

Interviewer : Social welfare.

Phillips : Oh, social welfare.

Interviewer : And history minor.

Interviewer : I'm getting my masters in history.

Interviewer : I'm also getting my masters in history.

Interviewer : I'm an English and history major.

Phillips : Well, I've learned lately that English is a really good background for anything and especially for law school, because you learn how to do briefs and all. History was one of my favorite subjects. I absolutely enjoyed history.

Professor : Well, you've added to the historical record today, that's really great. On behalf of the people, left thank you.

[Applause]