

Interview with Bettie Allen
Tape 4, November 21, 2003
Interviewer: Cullom Davis

Davis: This is an oral history interview with Bettie Allen on November 21st, 2003. The interviewer is Cullom Davis. Bettie I want to take up the – kind of the next episode in a way in our life story, and that is your time in Africa. So why don't you start with how that – how that developed and go with the story from there?

Allen: I think I may have said that I spent quite a few summers during the sixties in the south.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: And so one of the summers I spent in Jacksonville, Florida with a YWCA project of college students – and the program director at the Springfield YWCA read about it and made sure that I could go and be a second adult participant rather than having all the college students with just one adult leader.

Davis: I see, OK.

Allen: And so I signed up for that and went to Florida, where I met Jackie Wilkes –

Davis: Yes, right. Yes, you mentioned –

Allen: – who –

Davis: – I'm sorry, you mentioned that –

Allen: – who was in charge of that program. And while – we became friends –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – and after having spent the total summer together really learning about each other and being able to work effectively with the college students that that – when – that project was desegregation of the Florida schools, which really meant that blacks had to make an application or an appeal to transfer to a white school. And that was pretty hard to do –

Davis: Of course.

Allen: – so anyway, the program was planned to have a judge who was working with efforts to desegregate Florida's south – their schools. And so he kept telling

us more and more of the history. Incidentally, there was really – most of the college students – I would say there was one black college student and the rest were white –

Davis: Oh, really?

Allen: – and they were all from the north, mm-hmm.

Davis: Yes, right, yes.

Allen: All from the north. But that project brought Jackie and I together. And then we – after the project closed we spent a week vacationing together –

Davis: Yes?

Allen: – and I said to her, you know, I've always wanted to go to Africa and just didn't know how to do it. And so when you get there, let me come visit you.

Davis: Oh, you knew that she was – actually, you knew –

Allen: Yes.

Davis: – she was already planning to go to Africa. [I see].

Allen: Yes, that was her next assignment –

Davis: I see.

Allen: – from the national YWCA –

Davis: OK, I see.

Allen: – to go to Africa and work with the college students, because it was in an effort to help them develop a program to mesh with the country's freedom efforts –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – and primarily they were students that were going to become teachers.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – and so they – we – they were to work with kids in what they call country building.

Davis: Yes.

- Allen: (inaudible)
- Davis: Nation building? Or –
- Allen: Nation building.
- Davis: Yes, OK. Fine.
- Allen: Nation building. And so she says I'm going to be busy and I'm not going to have any time to have anybody visit. Wait and – let's wait and see and see if there's something I can find for you to do.
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: So after she had been there about three months, she wrote and said that the national Y was willing to pay for a volunteer to come – no money except they'd pay all the –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – paid all the expenses. And then to work – because I had management experience, because I had board experience on the YWCA board and – they decided that the program would revolve around the YWCA's hostels.
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: So I was to train new African staff, I was to work with, like, the bookkeeper to – so – an African, 'cuz it was in a time when there was a transition from European –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – employees in control to African control. And so I took that up.
- Davis: And these were hostels for young people?
- Allen: Yes. You know, mostly.
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: Let me say there were two classes of people – young people. There were people who were in the Peace Corps and they would come from their Peace Corps assignments for R&R, and of course they had very little money, so they did it at the YWCA instead of going to some big hotel.
- Davis: Right.

- Allen: And then there were training classes for rural Africans –
- Davis: Oh.
- Allen: – girls, to become copy typists –
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: – and things that – positions in offices or even stores. The YWCAs were having training programs for that.
- Davis: And so the hostels were a place for them to live [from – for them, OK].
- Allen: That's right, while they were away from home, mm-hmm.
- Davis: And was this in one country that you and Jackie were working, or –
- Allen: Jackie worked in three countries. I worked only in Kenya and my main base was Mombassa –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – which was on the coast –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and that was wonderful because we had the ocean –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – yes. (laughter) And all of that. So –
- Davis: And this – this was in the late sixties?
- Allen: Sixties. '67.
- Davis: [Yes, correct?]. OK.
- Allen: I think I went in '66 and came home in '67 or '67 and '68.
- Davis: Did you live in a hostel or –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: OK.

Allen: Because that was the way I trained. And then after – I really did such a good job – not to pat myself on the back, but –

Davis: No (inaudible)

Allen: – and I was able to do it quickly that I then moved from Mombassa to some hostels in Uganda.

Davis: OK.

Allen: But it was really making that – making the transition for the Africans and, you know, I was the person on site to –

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: – to do all the things.

Davis: How did you handle language challenges?

Allen: Well, the YWCA was very smart as they had sent people into Africa for other training programs and whatnot. They were very smart. They said to us you should not learn Swahili, which was the –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – the language spoken in East Africa – and the reason why you should not learn it is because if you learn you will not train somebody who can train somebody else. And so we prefer that you don't – that you do not learn too much Swahili.

Davis: 'Cuz they need to learn English? Was that –

Allen: Not necessarily, but –

Davis: OK.

Allen: – they wanted to learn English –

Davis: Yes, right.

Allen: – OK? Not necessarily. It was just that you didn't perpetuate your job by doing all things.

Davis: I see.

- Allen: You had to train somebody to do that job so that they could train – for instance, the different positions in the hostel, such as being in charge of meals, being in charge of housekeeping and all of that kind of stuff, the – I was training the executive directors on how – you know, because you know very well that we treat our own – and if we just take our families – we treat our own families worse than we treat –
- Davis: OK, yes.
- Allen: – anyone else.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: And so you had to really – to stress good communication, good feel for people and how to train them so that they wouldn't hate you and you wouldn't hate them –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and all that kind of stuff. So it was very exciting to do that.
- Davis: So you're dealing with skills as well as kind of attitude.
- Allen: Right, right.
- Davis: Yes, OK.
- Allen: Right, right, yes.
- Davis: And were these hostels – the – were they relatively primitive – not – primitive isn't the right word –
- Allen: No.
- Davis: – but Spartan? Let me use that word. I mean, were they pretty limited in the –
- Allen: Well, I lived in them myself.
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: I did not have someplace away –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: – 'cuz I was always on call.

Davis: Right.

Allen: And let me say that having served in the south previous to going –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – they looked really great.

Davis: Is that right?

Allen: Because in the south, we were – outhouses –

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: – bathtub – tin bathtubs and that –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – the people were great and the food was great, the bed was – mmm –

Davis: (laughter) Not so good.

Allen: Not so good. So when we went to – and you have to realize that many of the people who came to the hostel were Europeans or –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – because before the Africans took them over, it was all Europeans, so – we had nice accommodations, there's no doubt about that, no.

Davis: And did Jackie's work include visiting these places occasionally?

Allen: Yes, uh-huh.

Davis: So you were able to see her from time to time.

Allen: Yes.

Davis: Right, OK. But she was stationed –

Allen: She was stationed in Nairobi.

Davis: Oh, OK. OK.

Allen: And I was down – coast.

- Davis: Right.
- Allen: But she would go up to Uganda and over to Tanzania [and so?] –
- Davis: Uh –
- Allen: – and just traveling with her when she was going sometimes was really a treat. (inaudible)
- Davis: Well, of course. [I mean, ‘cuz you?] saw sights you’d never see in –
- Allen: That’s right.
- Davis: – maybe –
- Allen: And then the other thing is that I don’t think people realize that if you don’t know a language and you go into a totally foreign culture, you don’t have the people to talk with.
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: You know, it’s just nice to say – you know, to talk about things that you’re both interested in –
- Davis: Of course.
- Allen: – you know? I read the English papers –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and all of that, but there were very few people –
- Davis: That’s right.
- Allen: – that I worked with that were interested in stuff that was in the paper, so [it’s a?] –
- Davis: How about the Anglican church there? Did you have dealings with them?
- Allen: Well, you see at that time I was not –
- Davis: That’s right.
- Allen: – I was not exposed to the Anglican church. I was really looking for a Baptist church. I really moved in that direction, and then of course moving to someone – to a Baptist church in that particular locale meant that there were

white missionaries and then I found very quickly that the Baptist church was not doing anything toward bringing Africans in. They really were maintaining their own spiritual health as opposed to – you know, trying to bring new believers into the faith. So I quickly moved from going to the Baptist church – I – in – really in Mombassa I probably spent about a month going –

Davis: (inaudible)

Allen: – then there was absolutely a small church close to the hostel.

Davis: Oh.

Allen: So I decided I'd go down there [you know?] –

Davis: And what denomination was that?

Allen: That was Anglican.

Davis: Oh, OK.

Allen: OK? I think you would find that the Presbyterians and the Anglicans were the major Protestant, and then the Catholic Church is very – very large –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – there, so I attended the church – and this was really a beautiful church. Had a pulpit in the center and then on one side sat the Africans and on the other side –

Davis: Oh, really?

Allen: – sat the Europeans. Well, when they came to the songs, they would sing in – I went to the English service – most of the songs I could sing from heart because –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: – I – that – I enjoyed music in church. And the priest who was at the church stopped me when I was going out and he says you're not an African. And I said no. He says I noticed 'cuz you – because you sing and you know the words and Africans don't do that, although I was sitting on the African side, you know. So he said we have a program that we'd like to in this church get going and to do it faster and that is to have the Africans [listening of?] the service. They were working in some parts of the Swahili service, but not

being a reader, not being any of those lay reader and doing those kinds of things. We wonder if you'd help?

Davis: Oh, because you were a good bridge in that sense, yes.

Allen: Yes. So I said oh, sure. No problem. It's just having them, you know, Africans speak like the British and you have the –

Davis: Yes, yes. (laughter)

Allen: – have them read aloud so that they become accustomed and whatnot. So for most of the time that I was there I was training people to read. We started from zip –

Davis: Yep.

Allen: – lay readers and had six people ready when I left.

Davis: Wonderful. Well that was nice.

Allen: I helped with the choir.

Davis: Right.

Allen: And did a few other kinds of things, too, so –

Davis: Were there any special experiences or discoveries you made as an African American interacting with Africans?

Allen: Yes. Actually, I kind of experienced it before I got to Africa. As I left this country, I stopped in Geneva, the international city. (laughter)

Davis: Yes. Yes, right.

Allen: And I came down through Ethiopia and stopped in Uganda –

Davis: Wow.

Allen: – before I got to Kenya. And all of those had sufficient time – either one to two weeks for learning something specific about the YWCA and its operations in Africa. But in Geneva, being a part of the international community, I was the only American and when they start the conversations around the table and how bad the United States was everywhere they – that they were participating, they put it all on my shoulder and I'd say hey, I'm black and, you know, I'm a second class citizen. They said no, you're an American and we want you to go from this place and gain our – there's

another word that they used – to – your first class citizenship. You go and seize it, so to speak.

Davis: OK, all right.

Allen: You are an American and I don't care where you go – once people find out you're American, they're going to tell you how bad –

Davis: Right, and they expect you to understand that and not say, well, I can't help it, I'm second-class – yes.

Allen: Oh, I don't have any –

Davis: Right, yes.

Allen: So I said, OK –

Davis: Interesting.

Allen: OK, I'll do that, you know? And so when I moved to – or we stopped – I stopped in Greece to –

Davis: Boy, what a great trip!

Allen: Well, that was nice because they forgot that I was coming to be trained and so I spent all the time visiting the Bible places –

Davis: Yes, of course, yes.

Allen: – in Greece, yes.

Davis: Wonderful, yes.

Allen: It was the only time I've been homesick.

Davis: Is that right?

Allen: Nothing familiar. No familiar –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – alphabet –

Davis: Right, no – yes.

Allen: They were not at that time heavy on English papers.

Davis: Right.

Allen: So there was nothing to read.

Davis: You were really alone.

Allen: And – that’s right. And when I got on those tour buses trying to move around to see all these places, you know, it really was lonely except that there were people who spoke English –

Davis: Yes, yes.

Allen: – around. So – and when I got to Ethiopia – Ethiopia was a really good choice for me to first experience the African, because they were always – they always saw themselves as different from the rest of Africa –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – you know, they run from almost pure white to pure black.

Davis: Right.

Allen: Beautiful people, all of them.

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: Kinky hair to straight hair.

Davis: Right.

Allen: All of the things – I don’t – the Italians went in there, you know, and all that –

Davis: (laughter) Yes, that’s right, that –

Allen: And they were much more proud. They didn’t really see themselves – I didn’t experience them seeing themselves in terms of tribes.

Davis: OK.

Allen: They were Ethiopians.

Davis: Right.

Allen: OK. But when you got to Africa, you experienced that tribal display, you know? That one tribe was better than the other tribe –

- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – because we come from the hill country or whatever tribe that –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: – whatever it is. And so they really – I mean, every time you encountered anybody in the Ethiopian, they were either bent on showing you how better off they were, even though Haile Selassie was still alive.
- Davis: He was still alive wasn't he?
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: Yes, good old Haile Selassie.
- Allen: Yes. And he was a, you know, despot.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: There's no doubt about that. But you could just feel it, you know?
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: So then when I got down into Uganda – Uganda was a nation where they had several kingdoms, African kingdoms. So there – one of the experiences that I had there was meeting one of the king – queens. I can't – I don't remember what the tribe is. I might ask Jackie what the name of it – and that was a totally different experience, and they were a proud people. They even carried themselves, you know, differently.
- Davis: So they looked down on other –
- Allen: Oh yes, yes.
- Davis: – Africans? OK.
- Allen: Oh yes. But they also –
- Davis: So there was a real class structure within the –
- Allen: Yes. And they also looked down on Americans.
- Davis: Yes, right.

- Allen: And you know the thing that is interesting is in the United States all that I knew about Africans were that they were savages –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and it was a dark continent.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: Of course the darkness meant – was related to skin color.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: OK?
- Davis: But it had another –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: – subtle meaning, oh I know.
- Allen: Right, OK. And then in Africa, all that the Africans knew about Americans – I mean, there were many people – many of those blacks in Africa would look at my brown skin and say you're not an American because they're black. And they are slaves, you know?
- Davis: Isn't that amazing?
- Allen: History. History.
- Davis: So the ignorance about Americans was profound and you were an unusual American because you were African American.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: And did they have – did you have to bear – well, let me ask – did they treat you civilly or were you beneath –
- Allen: Well, no, they –
- Davis: – obviously the queen felt you were –
- Allen: (coughing) They did – Africans did a thing – all Africans, when they had a visitor in their midst they would do several things, and one would be always to feed you and to provide a gift – would be second, and third to provide you with some sort of entertainment that would tell you about their tribe. So there

was always a play going on – you didn't – you know, you couldn't understand –

Davis: No, but –

Allen: – except the actions would tell you what – what was going on –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: – and that was always nice, because no matter where you went – whether you were in the city or you go into the smallest village around, they always had this to offer you.

Davis: Right.

Allen: And so in Uganda, that was the – you know, between the meeting the queen, who was really nice, they had – you know, Uganda had disbanded – the kingdoms – see, all this whole African myth was the result of the Europeans –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – coming and just arbitrarily –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – carving out this will be Uganda.

Davis: Right.

Allen: OK.

Davis: Ignoring old tribal boundaries and [the whole thing?].

Allen: Right, and we're not going to have any tribes –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – we're not going to have any kingdoms, we're all going to come together and have a president and have a flag and I really understand the importance of a flag and a pledge.

Davis: Right.

Allen: It gets people out of those tribal systems –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – and really just tries to bring them together as one. And they certainly needed that, because in most cases that I've found in traveling in Africa, there were three stages of the rebellion that led to their freedom. And one would be that the people in the university setting now – like Uganda had the university – Kenya didn't have any universities, OK, but the people who went to what they call teacher training were the people who started the rebellion by the thought process of freedom. And, you know, you can read all of that in a – academic setting –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: There's all sorts of books –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – from here, there and everywhere else, and of course everybody in Africa was trying to gain their freedom in the sixties because that was the phenomenon –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – for them.

Davis: Right.

Allen: So then it goes to the tribal – gets right down to the tribal thing where the worst tribe in the world – you know, I mean, the ones who are the warriors – comes in, kills off the whites and kills off the –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – Africans that are not going along with the plan.

Davis: Right.

Allen: And then the third stage is when they do get their freedom, there has to be some sort of negotiations as to which of these two – the academics or the warriors – are going to run the government.

Davis: Right.

Allen: And so fortunately for most of those African countries, whoever was the colonizer would pick someone. They had trained – most countries had trained Africans –

Davis: Right.

- Allen: – to assume (inaudible)
- Davis: Civil service jobs of –
- Allen: Right.
- Davis: Yes. Right.
- Allen: Right. And so with that, you got – people could logically accept – OK, so you know – but if you – but let's train some of my tribe, dah-dah-dah-dah-dah. And they went on around – so that's the way most of that business happened. I was really glad to be there, because I'd – not only was in those three countries – four countries – because, you know, at the time I was there, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania was East Africa. They had –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – a central government, central money, central transportation system –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and a communication system and so they – that made for them a sharing(?) which is a – was a wider outreach trying to bring together – but then I was also – I – when I came home I came through the west coast –
- Davis: Oh.
- Allen: – and got into some of those countries that have never had a chance. They're just – they are still where they were –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – because you get the despot and –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: – how was – was Idi Amin in power when you were in Uganda?
- Davis: No, that –
- Davis: [That was later?]?
- Allen: – on one of our trips back he was.
- Davis: OK.

- Allen: On one of our trips back he was and that was a sad state to see –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – the beautiful Uganda just taken down to the nubs, I'm telling you, because they had – they had – a major industry for them was the sugar industry –
- Davis: I see.
- Allen: – they provided sugar for the three countries and probably some others, because – and that went out. They just – they – he just said to everybody who wasn't African – out of the country – or had 'em killed.
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: So that was no good.
- Davis: Well, now, you did say how people in Uganda and elsewhere were puzzled by you.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: You were perhaps the first African American they'd ever seen, possibly, or at least –
- Allen: Well, in a way, be – when I got to the coast I was really surprised at the number of African Americans that were down on the coast, which was probably about 70 percent Muslim. And so there were African American women who had married Muslims and come to –
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: – to Kenya or wherever because of their husbands. And many of those women never did come back. You see, the – Muslims have a – sort of a different attitude about staying in the United States. They like to have that passport that gets them in –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – OK? And out when they want to. Other Africans came and become tied up with education and taking jobs –
- Davis: Right.

- Allen: – and making money and they didn't want to come home – many of the governments, [they come after – we know the?] – what's the guy from Liberia? Not Liberia – was out to the University?
- Davis: Oh, [Nab], Gus Stevens?
- Allen: Gus.
- Davis: Sierra Leone, he was from. Right, yes.
- Allen: Mmm-hmm. He'd – they had to come after him. (laughs)
- Davis: Right. That's right.
- Allen: 'Cuz he didn't want to come home.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: But it was a nice time.
- Davis: Oh, it was a –
- Allen: Because they were discovering themselves. But in those countries where there were tribes, you see, the major tribe or the tribe who had been picked by the British or whoever – selected for the civil service jobs, those were the people who were giving the jobs –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – like in the YWCA, so –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – I had a nice time because of that, because when I was – they realized that I would get tired of just being in that Y.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: So they would take me out to their houses or –
- Davis: Oh.
- Allen: – shambos or – actually, they – you know, as I told you, they were either rich or they were poor –
- Davis: Right.

Allen: – so they had those plantations – mango plantations –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – tomato plantations –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – whatever, they had a big spread. And it was always nice to be included in –

Davis: Of course, yes.

Allen: – in a social kind of activity as well.

Davis: So at that point did you have any long term inclinations of doing this indefinitely or was this just always in your mind a one year kind of experiment?

Allen: No, what happened was Martin Luther King was killed –

Davis: Ah.

Allen: – when I was away.

Davis: April of 1968, yes.

Allen: Mm-hmm. He was killed.

Davis: What a shock.

Allen: But the other thing was I got the message – I was not an African.

Davis: I was going to – yes, that's what I was trying to get at.

Allen: Yes.

Davis: So you felt –

Allen: No.

Davis: – as an outside – you were an outsider.

Allen: Yes.

Davis: And even – did you detect some hostility?

- Allen: No, and what was wonderful was that the people – the young people, the younger Africans – was getting something that I had not even thought about them ever getting, and that was they were getting an example of a single woman in the world and going around the world, hey!
- Davis: Right, right!
- Allen: I never even thought about that.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: And I got it because when I returned on one of my trips down at Mombassa, they had a big party for me. And that was the thing that those girls said that – they saw it was possible to have a single life, because one of the – I'd say tenets, but one of the rules of – Africa is that all women get married –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and we were still looking at a – not monogamy but polygamy.
- Davis: Right, polygamy. Right, right. And arranged marriages too or not?
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: Yes, right.
- Allen: And then the other thing was that if they didn't get married they longed for children because that was the fulfillment that women had. They needed children, so they either was in a polygamous situation or – and most of it was polygamy then, which – at the time that I was there, I said hey, that's pretty good, because everybody knew where they were and we weren't having what we see in this country as children out of wedlock, so –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: But – so it was –
- Davis: That was better than that, yes, yes.
- Allen: But then it also – as I say, the girls down there on the coast could see that they could see other benefits to being single –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: – you know?

- Davis: Kind of a life for yourself, be in control of your life, that – yes.
- Allen: Yes, so –
- Davis: So in that sense you were kind of a role model I guess.
- Allen: Yes, mm-hmm.
- Davis: OK, OK.
- Allen: And I never once had that – never thought about it as something that – you know, some people think about all the things – I let things happen and then go back and say aha!
- Davis: Aha! That was – yes.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: So King's death – I mean, you weren't required by your work to return to the United States –
- Allen: No.
- Davis: – but it so traumatized you, would you say?
- Allen: Yes, anyway, I was there making no money –
- Davis: Right. Leon needed you – (laughter)
- Allen: Making no money – I had a house mortgage and I was renting my house out to some teachers. They did a good job of taking care of the house, but –
- Davis: But still, yes, he –
- Allen: But that meant that, you know, hey, that's my country – go seize that first class citizenship, get with – you know, the continuing struggle.
- Davis: And around that time did Jackie decide to move with you to Springfield or was that later?
- Allen: No, she finished out her term, because she had four – she stayed four years –
- Davis: Oh really?
- Allen: – I only stayed about a year and a few months.

- Davis: OK.
- Allen: And so she did her four years, went to Oregon, her hometown, Portland.
- Davis: Oh.
- Allen: And decided to work on her Master's and decided to go into aging.
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: That was a new field that was opening.
- Davis: I'd forgotten that. That's right. She was with the Department of Aging here, wasn't she?
- Allen: Mm-hmm.
- Davis: Yes, OK.
- Allen: But going back –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – to the church thing, I was really very – very well used by that Anglican Church there.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: And our – Jackie and I became involved with – probably five different women in Kenya to the extent that we were like extended – we were extended family and every time that we would return we would have a place to stay, and their kids grew up knowing us and all that kind of stuff. And that was another good experience, because everybody lived – I mean, we were colliding with maybe about five different settings even though we would consider – most of the women we met were YWCA women – they were leaders in either the national or the international YWCA or – and are locally – one was a farmer – most Africans are farmers –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – but one was a big-time farmer. She and her husband in this transition period bought a tea plantation –
- Davis: Oh, tea plantation.

- Allen: [So that was a – yes?] – so that was the high land, what we call the high land experience, ‘cuz tea and coffee grows high [in the?] –
- Davis: OK. The soil has to drain – yes, OK.
- Allen: And one was – as I told you, the – one was – or she and her husband, the one that had hepatitis –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – she and her husband were city dwellers, Nairobi. And that was a different experience.
- Davis: So these were people kind of on the way up would you say [in their?] –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – on or already there, yes.
- Davis: Yes, OK.
- Allen: They just had different locales.
- Davis: Right, right. Are those people that you then stayed in touch with? After you –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: – returned, yes?
- Allen: Yes, incidentally. Let’s see. Two of the – two of them have died. And the other three – one is down on the coast, down at Mombassa, one is in – still in Nairobi and the other lady is still in the highlands of Mombassa. But this woman in the highlands, she did a – last time we were there, she was into flowers.
- Davis: Oh.
- Allen: I don’t know if you understand what happens in these countries, in these third world – or developing, it’s better to say developing countries. Somebody comes in and they say to you, hey, there’s a market for growing these wonderful flowers, which you can grow all year round.
- Davis: Sure, sure.

- Allen: OK? And – or there's houseplants, a lot of the – there's a lot of houseplants that were there. So they'll tell that to one farmer and then they go to the farm union and about five of them will say oh, yes, we'll get into this. Well, they get into it but it requires them to buy –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – equipment to deal with this or dah-dah-dah.
- Davis: It's a whole new kind of agriculture then, yes.
- Allen: Taking away the jobs that everybody was doing by hand.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: And, you know, it's really –
- Davis: It's a mixed blessing at best, isn't it? Because –
- Allen: Yes. I'm hoping that that gal – she was good. She did the –
- Davis: So she was the tea plantation woman and then she got into exotic flowers?
- Allen: Exotic flowers, took part of that, did exotic flowers. She always did poultry. She – you know. And none of – the Africans don't do – they don't eat the chickens, they don't eat the eggs, they don't drink the milk. It's – you know, they got to send it to the market, 'cuz that's where they make the money.
- Davis: So she became dependent on a world market and –
- Allen: – they were (inaudible)
- Davis: – the capital investment in equipment and so forth –
- Allen: Mm-hmm.
- Davis: – it really made her a capitalist –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: – but at some risk, too.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: And also not – fewer hands, fewer jobs for local Africans.

Allen: Yes, we did something with her that we shared with the national church, the national Episcopal Church. And it was just really strange. Well, anyway. [We had that kind of contact in the country and then the – but those people were basically – were the two tribes that were in power. Along comes a new president.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: In Kenya anyway. And those people lost out. So they were fighting for their lives because this is – the Africans make a rule or a law and say hey you can't have [this if you're?] – just like they're doing in Rhodesia (inaudible)

Davis: Yes, well, what you – yes –

Allen: It's not Rhodesia anymore.

Davis: Not Swaziland – what is it? Rhodesia – isn't that awful? I can't think – what used to be Rhodesia, OK.

Allen: Yes. [The Northern?] –

Davis: We'll have to leave it at that.

Allen: Yes, used to be Northern – no, was it Northern? I thought – but anyway, it's – they'd just take the property from –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – other Africans.

Davis: Right.

Allen: It didn't have to be Europeans or anything like that. It's whoever was in power, and they were as bad as – and that's what happened – that is – I think generally that's what's happened –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – in most African countries.

Davis: Tragic.

Allen: You get a despot and then –

Davis: Yes.

- Allen: – [your – hands change?] – everybody could – win-win if they could see that, but they –
- Davis: It's a vicious cycle, isn't it?
- Allen: Oh, yes.
- Davis: It really is. You – and then you've been back through Africa since, [I think, that's at least?] –
- Allen: Oh, we've been back to Africa about six times since then.
- Davis: Is that right?
- Allen: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.
- Davis: And those are trips you've taken together and so you –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: – and you visited old friends and –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: – seen new places and –
- Allen: Mm-hmm.
- Davis: – so that's been an important part of your life.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: The whole African experience.
- Allen: Yes. In fact, just recently, I would say this year, the friend who married the Jamaican –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – that had the hepatitis, her kids have experienced – (laughter) – and they call themselves half-breeds, see? (laughter) They're not pure –
- Davis: Yes?
- Allen: The unfortunate thing was that their father made them speak English.

- Davis: Really?
- Allen: They never learned Swahili until, oh, about two years or three years before his death.
- Davis: Huh.
- Allen: They couldn't even communicate with the help in their –
- Davis: Oh, that's sad.
- Allen: And then they started learning Swahili. And of course you don't – they had to go off to Europe to school. Everybody got a chance except the youngest, which was the boy, because the father died. But the mother really used everything in her power to keep that farm implement –
- Davis: Of course, yes.
- Allen: – thing going, and to ward off the debts. You know, he left her in fantastic debts – debt. I just couldn't believe he would leave her that much in debt. And what has happened to the kids is the kids have this education, much of which was a European education and not for the, oh, continent of Africa, you know? Their cousins were older, so if one became a lawyer that was OK because they needed lawyers. If one became a doctor, they needed doctors. But these kids picked some of the most – I would call off the wall – [one wanted to become?] a costume designer. And, you know, just saying that – [the clothes that I?] – you know, if – that's not Africa.
- Davis: No, no.
- Allen: You'd have to go someplace else.
- Davis: Right, pretty unrealistic.
- Allen: Right. And it has been difficult for them to find work. Besides that, their mother's tribal line is not in power –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – now, see? So they're half of – being Jamaican, who – he did become a citizen, but – wow. So they see themselves as half-breeds and they want to leave the country. So they have asked us if we would work on helping them get to this country. Well, bingo, we have now all sorts of – we have Ashcroft –
- Davis: Ashcroft? [You're having to deal?] with him? (inaudible)

- Allen: We have Ashcroft – no, no, but we have him now changing the whole idea of immigration. I mean, there’s – you can’t even – immediately, the first thing that they asked for, which was something about which school – ‘cuz we said you have to come as a student –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – you have to work at whatever jobs are available –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – and there are nothing like – except McDonald’s and stuff like that where they change every other hour, those people. But the immigration laws are really fast changing.
- Davis: Oh, I know.
- Allen: They are cutting down the number of people coming from third world countries ‘cuz they can’t have that even though they need a certain cadre of slave labor –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – they don’t need – you know, they’re willing to let the Mexicans come, ‘cuz –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – the Mexicans haven’t done us in yet.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: But – Africans and Arabs, oh, that’s very, very, very difficult.
- Davis: Yes. Very difficult for them.
- Allen: ‘Cuz they –
- Davis: So you’ve tried to help and gotten –
- Allen: Well, what we did – what we said to her – there are two of them want to come – that we couldn’t take care of them. We ourselves. We are on pension now –
- Davis: Right.

- Allen: – and we can't –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – take care of 'em, so you – what you need to say first is if you're willing to do any and everything in terms of work to take care of yourself, we might give you a place to stay, but you've got to have –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – your own money.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: So we don't want to be the – your sponsor.
- Davis: You can't be the sponsors in that sense.
- Allen: That's right.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: And you have to try – we gave them three things to try. [And I'm telling you, they ran up against it]. Almost no door at all.
- Davis: Right. It's pretty overwhelming [right now?].
- Allen: Pretty overwhelming right now. And I see –
- Davis: We have to stop a moment here.

END OF TAPE 4, SIDE A

(long pause)

- Allen: No.
- Davis: OK. This is continuing an oral history interview with Bettie Allen on November 21st. You were talking about your efforts to help some Africans come here and it's not easy and you had to also say that you and Jackie could not really support them financially [and so forth?], yes.
- Allen: Actually, when they were getting ready to go off to college, that would have been the time for them to come –

- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – because then they would get into the opposite – or an alternative system for work possibilities –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: – and that kind of thing.
- Davis: Visas and so forth, yes.
- Allen: Right.
- Davis: I have to ask you a big question about your experience in Africa.
- Allen: Mm, OK.
- Davis: To what extent, if at all, was your desire to be in Africa and return related to any sense of kind of discovering your own identity or – yes, discover the African in you, let's put it that way.
- Allen: All – let me say my desire to go to Africa was really based upon my experiences in this country as a black American. I like the word black –
- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)
- Davis: – excuse me, OK.
- Allen: (laughter) That's OK. And I thought, well, gee, you go and you find out what you don't know about yourself.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: Because in all of this business of trying to reach back – just in this country to your own family it's difficult. And it – you know –
- Davis: I know.
- Allen: – it's such a short period of time for – between my generation and slavery.
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: And so going beyond my grandfather – my grandfather was as far as you could go, so you'd say, oh, well, let's go see –
- Davis: Kind of a dead end, just – yes.

- Allen: But I – but at the moment, as I say, I reached Africa, I realized there was so much difference in my life and the life of the Af– now, they used to taunt me and say, oh, but we’re free – with that kind of statement. But I realized I too was free. I hadn’t felt that before –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – but I realized that, in retrospect, yes, hey, I’m here. What keeps you here, you can’t go there.
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: Those kinds of things that – and they, you know, as I said, whoever was in power, you couldn’t talk about government – that’s – I don’t think Americans really understand this freedom of speech thing too –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – because it’s powerful when you are able to do that and when you compare it against something else. And then it makes you more conscious of how you should use it, you know? There’s so many people just rebelling against – [because it’s the season to?] rebel or – they don’t even know what it’s about.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: But there are some powerful things that we experience, we don’t even think about. You know, for instance, I think about the number of – I spoke a while ago – you’re either rich or you’re poor.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: OK? I would never –
- Davis: In Africa.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: Right, yes.
- Allen: [As I say?], I would never, in Africa, be in this other category –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – you know – the rich.
- Davis: Right, no.

Allen: I wouldn't have been the –

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Allen: That's right – been in the poor. And then the poor is poor.

Davis: Right.

Allen: I mean, there are just so many things that people don't have. But at the same time, I realize they don't need to have –

Davis: True.

Allen: – everything that we have.

Davis: True.

Allen: However, at the same time too I realize that our plentifulness affects them –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – in some way or the other. It's either that we're getting cheap things from them when they can't –

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Allen: Yes. [Those kinds?] –

Davis: So they have a view of you and all of us as – in a way adversaries who've taken advantage of Africans in one way or another I guess, so –

Allen: Mm-hmm. And the other thing – the one experience that I really had was that when our friend's husband died and she needed some money to deal with keeping her company going, I had some very good advice. 'Cuz I was willing to loan her some money. I – of my savings. And one Episcopal priest who came to live in this community said to – when he left Africa, it was better than it is now. I've just come back and you don't know who to trust. And if you're not on the right side of the government, she's just going to have to spend that money and not invest it in her company, because that's the way the government works to get the money from the people that have some.

Davis: That's sad.

Allen: And he said if you're going to do anything, you could spend an initial amount and put conditions on it that it goes to this country [looks like?] they needed equipment. You send the money to the other – the place where they're buying

their equipment and then they'll ship the equipment to 'em, and then that, then, she has to make sure that she puts aside her profit and not keep the coming just going –

Davis: I see.

Allen: – because they have that kind – and that worked for about five years, and after about five years she had spent – she wasn't adding to – she was helping the company because she had to keep herself alive and all that. So I never got that little change back, but the thing is if – you know, you try to – you realize you're – you realize you're – need to help, but sometimes there's – it's not possible to help or it's limited or you see from the get-go –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – that it's not going to work and you say, OK, I'm willing to give this and –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – at least get aside.

Davis: Am I correct then in – from what you said – in inferring that whatever united you with Africans racially was outweighed by what divided you culturally and economically and historically, is that a fair –

Allen: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Davis: OK.

Allen: And it wasn't – it wasn't me looking down –

Davis: No, no, of course not.

Allen: – at all. It was a matter that there are so many differences. And I think the women who married Muslims –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – and came over – I think that the thing that really connected with them was the great love of the religion and the husband and later the family as children came to them. That – which is a different kind of a bond than I would have had.

Davis: Right.

Allen: (inaudible) And I could never – even when African males would show an interest in me, I could never get a – get with that, just – I wasn't – I knew that I wasn't willing to stay in Africa and I knew that –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – I didn't trust the African male.

Davis: So you had to be resistant.

Allen: Mm-hmm.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Allen: – [never really thought about it?].

Davis: That's interesting. Very interesting. Upon returning, you obviously – did you go back and work for Leon some more?

Allen: Yes.

Davis: OK.

Allen: I worked for about – I think I worked full time for about a year –

Davis: OK.

Allen: – be – but what had happened before I left was the – some of my Jewish friends and some other friends spoke to me about working for the city and the human relations –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – commission. And said when you come back, talk to us about that. And I really had gotten a taste of – a wonderful taste of feeling that I could help, feeling that I could do something other than [work hard?]. You know, you get imprisoned by this whole business of years of being told that you have to be qualified, educated, you know, all of that.

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: And you never heard that your life experiences –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – make up the difference.

Davis: Right.

Allen: – for that, and –

Davis: These friends kind of persuaded you gradually that you were qualified.

Allen: Yes, uh-huh.

Davis: Do you want to identify any of them who particularly were – ‘cuz that was an important discovery for you.

Allen: Oh, yes, and I had this one that – well, I want to say Ethel Gingold –

Davis: Ethel Gingold.

Allen: – [was my?] –

Davis: OK.

Allen: – and – oh my, I just lost her name.

Davis: That’s OK, but –

Allen: Yes, but you would remember who she – well, she was one – she was the white executive and I – and she worked until I was able to work to take – I suggested that position.

Davis: So she was with the human relations commission?

Allen: Yes, but it wasn’t Ethel.

Davis: No, it was another one.

Allen: [It was up the street?] it was –

Davis: I may have known her, I don’t know –

Allen: Oh, I think you did. She just died about five years ago. What was her name? She was active in the NAACP and – OK, well, onward –

Davis: Maybe it’ll –

Allen: It’ll come back to me.

Davis: And so the commission – this was the state human relations committee.

Allen: No. Springfield.

Davis: Oh, the city one. So it had a paid staff.

Allen: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Davis: Was this under Mayor Howarth or –

Allen: Mm-hmm.

Davis: – OK. Well, do you want to tell me your opinion of him?

Allen: Oh, I liked him.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: I liked him because it didn't bother him that people didn't like him. He saw himself as a savior. And I got a good flavor for the – I mean, I got a good understanding of the word savior. We all played those parts, you know? Some of us get strung out a little bit more than others.

Davis: Right.

Allen: But – and people don't understand what that really means. They need to look at their lives and see –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – who they're trying to save. Their kids.

Davis: Right.

Allen: You know?

Davis: (laughter)

Allen: The church, whatever.

Davis: Whatever, right.

Allen: Whatever, but it's a savior complex. You just get there and got to reach out and pull somebody in.

Davis: He did reach out to the eastside did he not?

Allen: Mm-hmm. And I suspect that on the social level in the white community, he probably wasn't very high up –

Davis: No.

Allen: – and so it was OK if he – I mean, he had nobody –

Davis: He was considered like kind of a loose cannon I think.

Allen: Yes.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: Yes. But the thing that he and I came to agree upon was – I didn't want him opening doors for me, because I would never be able to tell somebody else how to do that.

Davis: Right.

Allen: So [I only went?] to him – I told him I'm only going to come to you now when I can't see the forest for the trees and you can help me put that in perspective, but I don't want you to – doing things –

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: – [going and telling somebody do?] whatever she wants. That I – no, don't do that.

Davis: You wanted that battle on your own.

Allen: Mm-hmm. But he did introduce me to the contractor association. The – I – there was a president of the A – I'm trying to get it – Associated General Contractors of America. AGC –

Davis: AGC –

Allen: AGCA.

Davis: Right, OK.

Allen: And the Illinois – what's his – who decided that they – you know, because they – it was at this time when everybody was working on affirmative action –

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: – plans and all of that, he decided he'd do his own affirmative action program
–

Davis: Oh.

Allen: – first with his own company and then with the –

Davis: Really?

Allen: – state association. So Howarth said, wow, why don't you go down there and see if the gal I got hired down there to human relations – maybe she can help you. Well, heck, nobody knew what an affirmative action plan was. At that time it was pretty –

Davis: Yes, it was early.

Allen: – new, yes.

Davis: Right.

Allen: So I said, well, I'll tell you what I can do – I think I can do – and I had a – I had two guys in mind. One of them was [on the?] (inaudible) and I said let us select a couple of people and you take care of sending them to school to work on – 'cuz he was – that was a road building contractor association –

Davis: Sure, sure.

Allen: – work on the equipment and become a mechanic. And so he said OK, and we took Arthur and John –

Davis: That's Wilma's son?

Allen: Yes.

Davis: OK, Arthur – all right.

Allen: Arthur and John – I forget what John's last name was – [and then send 'em down to?] St. Louis and set 'em up in an apartment and they went to a mechanical school –

Davis: Good.

Allen: – [for whatever?] – one of the big grill equipment companies. And (inaudible) went to work and he really enjoyed it [and the two of them, they're hanging out like that?]. So then he was going to – he wanted to set up a program to train minorities for other contractors but do it as one big

program. But he says, you know, we can't do that because my people want some poor white guys trained, too. I said no sweat, no problem, you pick up – you select the poor white guys, I'll –

Davis: OK, yes, I'll select the black Americans –

Allen: – I'll select the blacks.

Davis: OK. (laughs)

Allen: And the – and I said you just got to take them away from their environment.

Davis: Right.

Allen: Because you're telling me I have to select people who've never worked – the program is an incentive to fail when you make that kind of –

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: – selection. So I said we'll bring 'em to Springfield, and there was a company here – what's the company?

Davis: [Mount?] Sangamo Electric – or maybe not Sangamo – Construction?

Allen: But the guy who ran Sangamo is the guy that was my president. Al – what's his name? Al –

Davis: I don't know.

Allen: He was a – he's from the old world. But Sangamo Construction was the guy – he was the –

Davis: Was it –

Allen: – president of that.

Davis: OK, OK.

Allen: OK, and so he – so we brought 'em to Springfield, gave 'em lodging, gave 'em – bought an old bus and I ran 'em back and forth to the place where they were studying. And he was good. He was really good. He gave me all – everything that I needed.

Davis: Interesting.

Allen: Everything that – well, let me back up to say I wrote the program. He bought the program. And he went off to look for someone to run the program. I called him up one day, I said (inaudible) I said you have a nerve to have me write a program and never think about me running the program. He said, well, you'd have to quit the human relations. I said no matter. This is something I'd like to do, I mean – so I [told him – I was – I had to put him down?]. I think I'd worked for the city for three years. And so he gave me all – everything that I needed. I mean, you can't take people away from home and not let them relax (inaudible) – but you couldn't 'em enough money for them to get back home. (laughter)

Davis: [Ah, that's right?], of course.

Allen: OK. So he did that, we bought cigarettes. You know, they had a little stipend – that everybody wanted to buy cigarettes [because in fact?] if they smoked too many cigarettes they'd have to sell somebody their meal ticket to the –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – restaurant where we had meal tickets. We provided –

Davis: That's a program!

Allen: – we provided enough money in the program to take 'em to the show. In all of this, I used about ninety percent of the people who were involved with us – for instance, the person who did the meals, I decided those guys needed beans and –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: – collards and –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: – all that other good stuff.

Davis: (laughter)

Allen: And the white guys were saying we ain't going to eat that. And I said, well, then you have to find some way. You have to do something with your meal tickets and if you don't want to eat – finally they came around to eat [that stuff?].

Davis: (laughter)

Allen: And then we had parties, you know –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – and I'd bring in local gals to dance with 'em and all that sort of thing.

Davis: So Al finally did name you to head this up?

Allen: Yes!

Davis: OK.

Allen: He gave me the job.

Davis: After you had to shake him a little bit.

Allen: Gave me the job with the AGC. I had a nice office at the AGC. I had a car and a – what do you call it? Expense account.

Davis: Expense account?

Allen: 'Cuz I drove all over the state.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: 'Cuz after I – we trained them, we placed them.

Davis: OK. So it was a state AGC program –

Allen: Mm-hmm.

Davis: – that hired a lot of local people of course, trained them here –

Allen: Not hired people in different areas –

Davis: OK, OK.

Allen: – where the contractors who were going to take them –

Davis: I'm sorry, OK. And then – but trained them here?

Allen: Yes, mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Davis: OK. And then sent them back.

Allen: [Oh, yes, there's places that are out here?] off of Sixth Street – you know, there's an industrial site out there, but –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – there was a large equipment –

Davis: Oh, the old Fiat Allis plant? No?

Allen: No, no, this was a – well, anyway, I [was picked up?].

Davis: OK, OK.

(coughing)

Davis: Who was this Al guy? I'm trying to think –

Allen: He was the president – he's the president – he was the president of Sangamo. I don't know whether he's still president or not.

Davis: OK. OK, [I should know?].

Allen: I think it was Al, but maybe it wasn't Al –

Davis: Could be right, no –

Allen: I'll think about it, 'cuz I had his name on – I should've [wrote that on?] when I thought about it. And when we graduated – and I'm going to tell you, I was surprised myself that we retained – we had a graduation ceremony –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: – you got a little certificate. We retained – in the first year we retained 80 percent of those guys.

Davis: Wow, that's really good because, you know, it's a high risk –

Allen: Yes.

Davis: – program, of course.

Allen: Probably. And then – (coughs) – the second year it probably dropped down to about 75 percent. And then people –

Davis: (inaudible)

Allen: – were able to see that everybody wasn't lazy, that all those blacks weren't lazy –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – and if you – it sort of fit – they don't pay, you know, real building contractors don't pay at the end of the week. They pay in the middle of the week and it kind of helps you keep people going. The only thing that is – was a problem was – the big problem was understanding the construction industry, how they work. But because these guys were working for contractors at their base operation –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – they had a steady job and we agreed upon the amount of money that they would get, because we were figuring eight hours at such and such and they had to work those eight hours. We had some other rules that – [you know, continue to?] show up and didn't call in and that kind of stuff, yes, you would get – you would be gone or –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – wasn't playing and all of that kind of stuff. So it really was a good program.

Davis: Now how did you select young people for this?

Allen: Well, you know, we've always had organizations such as the Urban League –

Davis: Yes, I was going to ask you about that, OK.

Allen: – in different areas. I – now – only – I never was successful with the Springfield Urban League.

Davis: Oh really?

Allen: Never was. Never – I always have bemoaned the fact that I was never asked to be on their board or I – when I asked them to supply me with – 'cuz they were recruiters –

Davis: Sure.

Allen: – that they –

Davis: But isn't the –

Allen: – Springfield Urban League never recruited for me, but I had recruiters in Rockford and Chicago and East St. Louis, all around. For – but the best –

Davis: Why was that? They –

Allen: I don't know, there was just –

Davis: – did you think they felt you were the –

Allen: – just some – I think –

Davis: – too radical, or –

Allen: – no, I think it was the director, yes.

Davis: That was before Howard, I trust. Howard Veal.

Allen: Not too much before Howard.

Davis: Oh, OK.

Allen: Primarily it was Howard.

Davis: OK.

Allen: And Howard and I called ourselves friends, but anyway –

Davis: Yes.

Allen: – this was –

Davis: Well that's too bad, 'cuz they would have been a natural recruiting –

Allen: Yes.

Davis: – service.

Allen: Well, that's what we used. We used –

Davis: Yes, right.

Allen: – the – when I went to the state – from that job to the state of Illinois, the first thing that I did was to set up a directory of recruiting people, because sometimes it was only one person –

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: – sometime it was an agency. And then I said to [my state we?] use these people as recruiters. Do you want them to be monitors, too? Because you have to monitor the project. Oh no, we're not giving that to them. We'll give you some staff, and that's how I got staff.

Davis: Oh.

Allen: I got staff –

Davis: OK.

Allen: – to cover the state, because they didn't want somebody else monitoring.

Davis: Right. So obviously, that – to get an eighty percent retention rate meant that your recruitment and monitoring had to be really good.

Allen: Yes, mm-hmm.

Davis: OK.

Allen: [You had to stay with it, yes?].

Davis: So you spent maybe a year or so with the AGC?

Allen: Two.

Davis: Two years.

Allen: Mm-hmm.

Davis: But I – that's really interesting. I want to go back, because we didn't really talk about your work with the human relations commission.

Allen: OK, OK.

Davis: First you joined the staff, and then you – after this other woman left, you headed the human relations commission?

Allen: Mm-hmm.

Davis: Am I correct?

Allen: Actually, she left when I came on.

Davis: OK, OK.

Allen: OK?

Davis: So you then [directed with?] –

Allen: And then Ethel was the president.

Davis: Oh, OK.

Allen: See? OK, all right.

Davis: So what the –

Allen: Or the chairperson.

Davis: What kind of work did you do?

Allen: Actually, it was a time when – well, there were two basic things that I can remember doing. And they were both involved with the John Hay Homes –

Davis: OK.

Allen: You know they were – the federal government was allowing what they called a committee that represented the John Hay Homes –

Davis: Yes, OK.

Allen: OK – from – the resident –

Davis: Tenant's committee –

Allen: Resident –

Davis: – or what – yes, OK –

Allen: Yes, resident committee.

Davis: All right.

Allen: And so they decided they needed to have – there were certain kinds of jobs that were coming up with the housing authority and they needed to have input into that. You know the housing authority had for years a maintenance crew –

Davis: Right.

Allen: Pitiful. Pitiful in this sense – they never were adequately trained, and yet they were trying to do electrical carpentry work. Now that's not to say they didn't – they were never adequately trained because nobody tried to train. You just went there and you did whatever. And so the tenants' group said we want to have more opportunity –

Davis: Right.

- Allen: – [to adapt?] because at the time, the – they were doing – they were going to start a renovation project which was first of all painting.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: Well, one of the painting jobs that Mayor Howarth gave me was just make them lines down the street. They started minorities –
- Davis: Oh, OK, painting the street – lane dividers.
- Allen: Lanes.
- Davis: Yes, OK.
- Allen: Yes, OK. But – and so when we came into this place where we were going to paint the whole project, we decided, well, we wanted to try to hook that up with the unions. And the painters union was one of the few unions that was kind of open.
- Davis: Really?
- Allen: Yes, it was kind of open. So we got an apprentice – we got – we asked for a certain percentage, I don't remember what it was, of the work force to be from the housing.
- Davis: Right, OK.
- Allen: OK? And so we got people into that. And they pretty generally stayed in the union. Painting is not a good job –
- Davis: Right. (inaudible)
- Allen: – so – and then they needed to have somebody who would work with them to bring to the housing authority complaints from the residents. And so I was allowed to hire Joe Wright. You remember Joe Wright?
- Davis: Oh yes, yes, I do.
- Allen: So we hired Joe Wright, and I hired Joe Wright primarily 'cuz I couldn't handle tenants. The tenants were – I just – that was not something I could do. I didn't want to hear the complaints. I don't like to hear complaints today. I work in a food pantry. People come with complaints – I don't want to hear complaints. But anyway, so Joe was really an organizer. And he organized a lot of little groups within that housing authority and did an excellent job –
- Davis: Yes.

Allen: – as far as I was concerned.

Davis: I'd forgotten him, yes.

Allen: Yes. And who was the other gentleman (inaudible) oh, we did a couple of – opening up rentals around the city. [I was just?] –

Davis: Yes, fair housing?

Allen: Yes.

Davis: OK.

Allen: So I was a part of it – but I remember [it – just today?] that [their unit?] – did you see in the paper where they sold it –

Davis: Oh, over on Outer Park Drive?

Allen: Yes.

Davis: Yes.

Allen: They sold it – that was one of our first places.

Davis: Was it?

Allen: Yes.

Davis: Try to disperse the black population.

Allen: Mm-hmm.

Davis: Or make it possible, but –

Allen: I really think that that – in Springfield, that's been the – I don't know how much heartache it's been, but you cannot drive around the city and not see –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – blacks.

Davis: Right.

Allen: I think that's been – and I'm not saying that the city did that. I'm saying we had a fair housing law – we opened ourselves and said if you want to come

and complain – here, come here – the mayor was adamant about it and I – it worked. It worked, but it –

Davis: I agree. So you – so the commission, then, would get complaints from people. Did you ever conduct these kind of – not secret but – test to –

Allen: No, I think that was done before I got there.

Davis: OK. OK.

Allen: Yes, I don't –

Davis: Sending people out –

Allen: Yes.

Davis: – to try to rent an apartment, yes.

Allen: I think that was done, I – but what we did, we negotiated so much; we didn't even publicize it. And I think that's another thing that helps. When you don't publicize –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – what's going on –

Davis: You just quietly do it.

Allen: Yes. And that – you know, I don't want to take all the credit. I had a committee and we would do those things.

Davis: Right.

Allen: And we had some influential people on the committee and they'd use their resources whichever way they wanted and we got a lot of – done on that housing thing that was really excellent.

Davis: Right.

Allen: The – but the whole thing of jobs was good because we got jobs outside of John Hay Homes.

Davis: Right.

- Allen: We got the first people into the coal mines again, because it'd been some years since there was any large number – I got my first woman – my first hire I had to the coal mine. The railroads opened up to us –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – there was something else that was some sort of? – was it a gas – no, I guess that's the coalmine that was south of Springfield.
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: But there was some other big facility that was around Springfield that we almost had the, you know, the right to –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – send them up. And I never – now that's one thing I'll tell you I did. I never sent anyone to a job that I – didn't' think – would fail.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: I would not send anybody. They had to be cutting it or I would not send.
- Davis: So you had to develop real skills as a judge of ambition and –
- Allen: Yes, but you know, I'd work for Leon and that –
- Davis: Yes, yes.
- Allen: You know, that old service station where people wanted(?) first jobs. That's – you kind of get used to people. You know – one thing is that – it's good about that is that you – people who've never worked, once they get a regular income, that changes –
- Davis: Right. Suddenly –
- Allen: Yes, I don't know about now – ['cuz I always say I need you?], go work for McDonald's and Hardee's gone because it's a bad work situation?].
- Davis: Oh, terrible.
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: Did – were you also responsible for increasing black employment by the city?

- Allen: What I remember – what I recall – I remember – [would say, really, no?] because at that time there was the street department that had a fair amount of minorities. The police department used to have at least twenty percent.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: The fire department – we had a fire department – fire station. So I never really worried myself –
- Davis: Right. You said he was doing a pretty decent job then.
- Allen: Decent job, mm-hmm.
- Davis: Also City Water, Light and Power, it had a pretty –
- Allen: Yes.
- Davis: OK, OK.
- Allen: Mm-hmm. The unions were already opening up to people like – in electrical and plumbing and heating and carpenter’s union had pretty well –
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: – opened up [on that?] because there were other bigger projects –
- Davis: Right, right.
- Allen: – than just what the city had, because when I went to work for the state, that was more of a problem – not so much in Springfield as it was outside Springfield, outside of Chicago. Chicago was coming around, but boy, like, East St. Louis [and, you know?] –
- Davis: Ooh, it’s tough. Let’s turn to your state employment. And this would probably put you in the – what, mid-seventies maybe? Was –
- Allen: Well, I got twenty years in the state when I retired in ‘91, so it would be seventies, yes.
- Davis: OK, early seventies.
- Allen: Mm-hmm.
- Davis: What – did they approach you to take a position or was there an opening –
- Allen: No.

- Davis: – that you applied – how did it happen?
- Allen: Well, when I was with the – see I went from the city to the AGC –
- Davis: To the AGC, right.
- Allen: – so I got involved with these unions. Well, I had – I had a friend – and I don't even know how Linda and I became friends. But anyway, Linda went to the state human relations commission, and by that time we were having a state law saying you had to involve minorities and women on state projects. OK. So – [oh, now I remember?] – the AGC sent me to the meetings. I represented them –
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: – in setting up the rules and regulations –
- Davis: I get it, OK. OK.
- Allen: – for that. So I – she said to me the big jobs, don't worry about the department of transportation. They're not going to do anything anyway. They'll hire somebody, but they won't get to do anything. There's going to be a new agency created in the state to do the building side of construction.
- Davis: OK, right.
- Allen: And that's going to be better, because you're going to have the universities. And at that time, one of our first projects, one of CDB's first projects was the school of construction program which we were talking about, elementary and –
- Davis: Yes.
- Allen: – high school. And that's going to go on for – they estimated probably six years, it lasted ten probably. OK. So you have the universities, you have – that's a big – that's a big –
- Davis: Big.
- Allen: – job.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: And I think you can handle it, but we need to sit down and we need to think about how to do it. The universities had people on their staff that – they were

minorities, and they were checking out construction projects, but they had no power.

Davis: Right.

Allen: So what happened is that we put all of those people under me. The university paid them, I sat down and I talked – Linda, the human relations commission and I sat down and talked with universities and we laid out how we were going to do this – that they would be on the mailing list and everything [went out?] – the person who was on their staff already would be able to relate to their specific projects. And so for awhile, the only time I had staff was with people who were already on the university staff.

Davis: Yes, right.

Allen: And then we added people to take care of the rest of [the staff?].

Davis: Now let me get this straight. Were you working then for Linda with the – in the human relations commission?

Allen: No, not – I always –

Davis: Or you were working for Capitol Development Board?

Allen: – always worked for Capitol Development Board because they wanted to be in control.

Davis: Right.

Allen: I –

Davis: And you were responsible for minority hiring?

Allen: Minority and female.

Davis: And female hiring, right.

Allen: Mm-hmm. And then we included minority and female enterprises, where they had [to involve?] businesses [in our?] –

Davis: Right, that were substantially owned by minority and female – right.

Allen: Well, we like to think that was the –

Davis: Yes, there was a little bit of game playing on that, but –

Allen: Yes, mm-hmm.

Davis: So let me get a sense of this. How long did you work for the Capitol Development?

Allen: Twenty years.

Davis: Oh, OK. So you spent twenty years with the CDB. Well, why don't you talk about some of your major accomplishments, then I'll talk about some of your major disappointments. But let's start with the accomplishments at the CDB.

Allen: Well, we were given resources – the major accomplishment I think was giving adequate body count in the sections, which was under legal – [it was under?] – as the director – which was under – we would –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – went round in circles. And then we were given enough of – because it was a new agency, we had everything new. You know, we had a unit that wrote programs, wrote computer programs, computerized programs on how we would count and – did all that automatic stuff where we didn't have to do anything like that, you know? We simply took the head counts, shipped it to the computer. They plugged it in, they could tell whether the contractor was – just by numbers –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – could tell whether the contractor was in compliance or not. Then – and it set up a – we said – so we used – now, just to make that story short, we had enough of that kind of resource to take us away from doing counts –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – in terms of the numbers that came in –

Davis: (inaudible)

Allen: Yes. We – and we even set up areas where we'd know what the goals were in – for minorities and females. And all that was just so automatic, we didn't have – we would go out and be able to talk to recruitment people because we – there were people that we recognized as recruiters of minorities and females to the union, 'cuz the union had to have some sort of bridge –

Davis: Right, right.

- Allen: – that they wanted, and we recognized them – like the Urban Leagues and whatnot. We recognized them. We did that all computerized too so that our work was to make sure we could negotiate when we had [an old?] job open, we could go find somebody who had a person, and then take them and make a negotiation to try this person out. So that was – we had enough resources. You know, a lot of times you didn't have the resources. And I had the ear of whoever was my boss, my supervisor.
- Davis: So it was not the director of CDB, but he was your immediate supervisor –
- Allen: Mm-hmm.
- Davis: – or she. Did the quality of those supervisors change over –
- Allen: Oh yes.
- Davis: OK. Some were better than others.
- Allen: Yes. The legal people were always more open.
- Davis: More open?
- Allen: More open –
- Davis: Oh, OK.
- Allen: – to what we were trying to do.
- Davis: OK.
- Allen: To – because they felt it – they felt it necessary to be in compliance with the law.
- Davis: Yes, right.
- Allen: OK? The people who were – one time I was under the director of project managers who write the programs and implement them, and they didn't want affirmative action stopping their programs –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – or causing (inaudible) it to cost more money, bah-bah-bah. But because we had a spot in there, we also had a spot in the whole development of the program, and I – something I didn't even know, you see, because then you could – you – as the program is being written, about what is necessary, we had an advanced shot at seeing the possibilities for using minority and female

enterprises for businesses. And we could put goals in that and we could do lots of things because we had that input in it. And that never changed no matter who the boss was after we got out of that –

Davis: OK.

Allen: – that became an established part of my job, which – you know, for probably half of those ten years, I was really an office manager.

Davis: OK.

Allen: And then the other ten I worked – I did field work and office work.

Davis: OK. So you were often visiting construction sites?

Allen: Yes. I – and in fact, that's the way – one of the ways that I evaluated my staff, how well they were doing.

Davis: Did you develop then – some own beliefs about your favorite contractors statewide and your least favorite or not?

Allen: Yes. Some – and my favorite contractors were people who really helped me understand their trade, because that's important. If –

Davis: Of course.

Allen: – I can't – we can't do a good job –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – if we don't understand what the trade is all about.

Davis: Right, right.

Allen: And I liked – always liked when I was introducing someone – if I was a part of that team, I wanted them to see the full cycle of what would happen to them –

Davis: Right.

Allen: – in this field, you know, because I didn't realize that when they put in air conditioning and whatnot – actually, the – you know, their company shop has a machine, you learn how to operate this machine –

Davis: Make the ductwork and all?

- Allen: Make all the ductwork and they just have a thingy-bob, you know? And when you get good you can run that machine.
- Davis: Wow.
- Allen: And there was one guy up in Chicago that – you – he told my boss she's got to come up here and stay with me two weeks so she can understand I don't want none of that crap she wants to do. And when I left there, I had a good sense of what that trade was all about.
- Davis: I bet you did.
- Allen: How the apprentice – where the apprentice – and I – you know, I'd tell everybody who was an apprentice you are a gofer.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: You are a gofer for two years.
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: So, you know – but I learned so much. Some contractors –
- Davis: You could have been a – become a contractor yourself, couldn't you?
- Allen: Yes, I think I could've.
- Davis: Yes, yes.
- Allen: Yes. Just having the savvy, understanding the words –
- Davis: Right.
- Allen: – 'cuz the [words are all?]. Yes. Well, anyway –
- Davis: You know what I find fascinating? In a way, the most unusual thing about your childhood and early adult years was this auto mechanic's work you did for Leon Stewart. And yet that turned out to be a wonderful preparation for what became your career for over twenty years.
- Allen: Mm-hmm, yes.
- Davis: Both the city and the state and the AGC, overseeing people in blue collar jobs, selecting them or – so forth. That's – to me, that's kind of interesting.

Allen: Yes. No, I think there's a good tie-in. As I say, I never was one – I never was a planner, so – if God [hadn't been there to pitch in?], you know, you wonder how you get led, what causes you to be there at that time. And certainly I was at the right time at the right time.

Davis: I understand that. Now you must have had some really continuing disappointments or frustrations with the pace of change when you were with CDB or with the bureaucracy or –

Allen: The only – the one bitter thing was I finally got the transfer to the guy who ran the – what shall I call it? The bookkeeping or account–

End - Bettie Allen Interview - Tape 4