

TAPE ONE SIDE ONE

Vivienne Felix: Today is June 8th, 2002, and we are in Skillman Library. I am pleased to have you as a participant of Lafayette College's Oral History Project.

Kim Owens: Thank you.

VF: My first question to you is to please tell me about your family and where you grew up.

KO: Okay. I grew up in Philadelphia. I was born in Cambridge, Maryland. I am one of two children. Actually, the only one living. My younger... I had a brother, and he was two years younger, and he died in 1999. I grew up in Philadelphia. I went to the local neighborhood schools there and in high school I went to the Philadelphia High School for Girls. I met my husband who I've been married to since 1981 here at Lafayette College, and we moved to his hometown which is Mt. Vernon, New York, and we live there now.

VF: How do you feel that your high school prepared you for an education or a career at Lafayette?

KO: I think that one of the biggest things my high school prepared me for was being around different kind of people. And my local school would not have been able to do that, local high school, because it probably would not have been as diversified in terms of

the different kinds of people. Now I did go to all girls' school so there were no males there, but there were people of different races and ethnicities. And I think that prepared me more than anything else or as well as, I should say, academically, because it was a very academically challenging place and that helped also. So I think just the social environment and the academic environment helped me.

VF: What was your family's attitude toward higher education in general and especially for females?

KO: I can remember for just about as long as I have memory that I was going to college and that was... my mother was the most vocal one, but my father agreed with her that you were going someplace. You were going to college. Not just someplace, but if it wasn't college, it was going to be a trade school, and she used to say to my brother, you know, "You're going to college, and if you can't manage to do what you need to do to successfully get into college then you'll go to the army." But... the idea was that there was a step after high school and from the very beginning that was important to my parents, and they wanted to see that happen.

VF: What was your opinion concerning coeducation?

KO: Coeducation for undergrads or for high school or just in general?

VF: In general.

KO: Well, I suppose in middle school, you know, that was a wonderful thing to be in school with boys and girls. But I did look forward to my high school experience, and I have to say it was a wonderful experience. I would repeat it over again, being in a single sex school. But I do believe that coeducation can and does work. And I was happy to come to Lafayette and be in a coeducational environment even though at that point we were in the fourth class of graduating girls so there were more men than girls or women but... You know, I think it can be successful and was successful for me for college although as I said, I would not trade my high school experience, which was different.

VF: Why did you choose Lafayette?

KO: I chose Lafayette because it was close to home, because it was a small environment. Another woman who was going to Lafayette, rather who went to my high school was coming to Lafayette to visit, and we happened to be in the library area where you could look at the college directories at the same time. And she mentioned it to me, you know, she said, "Look this is a school that seems interesting." And I was impressed by what I read and what I saw. And the other places that I was thinking of attending were more family schools, schools where people in my family had gone to school. And I think this was sort of an opportunity for me to choose a different place.

VF: What other schools did you apply to?

KO: I applied to University of Pittsburgh,¹ and I applied to Morgan State².

VF: What were your expectations of Lafayette?

KO: Well, I was not sure because as a matter of fact, my high school counselor told me that she thought that that my choice of Lafayette was wrong. That I would not do well here, and I would not be comfortable, and I think that gave me even more drive to come here. I'm not sure I answered your question.

VF: That's fine. Prior to your arrival, what was your image of college life?

KO: You know, I really didn't have an idea. I think, I, even though I had first cousins who went to college, my mother had only gone to two years to college, and my father had gone to a trade school, and I really didn't have a sense of what college was like. And it was a very scary experience for me because I didn't have a, you know, I didn't have an older brother or sister or even a cousin that I had gone to visit. We did visit, but like we went to a football game or something like that and maybe went by the person's dorm. And I really didn't have a sense of what day-to-day life would be. So I, really I wasn't prepared for what to expect. I had been away to camp, sleep-away, and I had done some things with the Girl Scouts,³ but that's probably the extent of going away. And I was the first in my family to really do this type of thing, so it was a pretty scary kind of experience, and I really don't know that I had any idea exactly what it was going to be

¹ University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

² Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³ A service organization for females between the ages of five and seventeen.

except that I had everybody rooting for me and behind me, you know, my parents and my church and... that I was going to do well.

VF: Describe your first day at Lafayette.

KO: Well, it was, I guess sort of bittersweet. At least, that's one description, and full of anxiety. My parents had brought me up. We didn't really know exactly what to bring or how much to bring so we really had a lot of... a lot of... clothes and, you know, just all kinds of things. I was rooming, going to room with, in a suite, with two upperclassmen. One had a single, and I was going to share the double. So that was really a good experience for me and when I came, you know, they sort of paved the way. So it wasn't like I moved in with a freshman. I had come to Lafayette to one of the, I don't know, visitation weekends that they had for black students, and so that made it sort of a welcoming experience for me because or rather it made my first day not so bad cuz I had been on campus, and I had spent some time, and then I think someone wrote to me. And my roommate actually wrote to me and asked me if I would go in with them. So I felt like somebody was looking for me, you know, and I sort of knew them... I had met them. So that was my first day.

VF: What was the role of college administration in assimilating the new female students?

KO: You know I don't remember that there was a whole lot of anything and that may just be because my memory is not good. But I don't remember that there was any particular reaching out to female students. There may have been, but I may just have been oblivious to that because as, you know, as well as being a female student I was also in a minority as a black student. And I think I may have felt that more strongly that being a female... you know, the difference of being female in a, in a mostly male environment.

VF: Were there divisions among the women in terms of race, class, religion, cliques or otherwise?

KO: Yes... And some were self-perpetuated, I guess that's the right word. And it... this is always a difficult kind of thing because people go to where they're most comfortable and where they feel that people understand them and where and in an environment where you're just coming in to school, unless you know someone who is of a different race or religion, you're going to flock with those people who you feel most comfortable with. And even though you may not know them well, they're probably going to be people who look like you. And in my case I had come here, and I was invited by the Black Student Union and their special programs so I felt like I had a connection. So that, that was the group that I hung out with, but I made good friends on my dorm of people who didn't look like me. So I guess I want to say that they were self-imposed. I, I don't remember anything that was definitely you can't go there because you're not part of that group kind of thing. It was more like, you know, who was my group and, and

connecting with those people and then making moves around the campus, going places and whatever that way. So that's, that's my recollection of that.

VF: Was there anything you were unhappy with at Lafayette in terms of living spaces, eating, and social life?

KO: Well the social life was a little bit narrow in some ways. It didn't feel like there was a lot to do at times or that it was limited. They had a lot of band parties. There were a lot band keg parties and frat kind of activities. So if you didn't like doing that, you're in trouble on the weekends. There were some people who packed their bags and went home or someplace every weekend. I was mostly here and... I think there was a lot of that initially when I first came here. A lot of the sort of the band party kind of things, and it didn't tend to be the kind of music that I liked. So at times then, we had the Black House then, the Association of Black Collegians, we would have parties, and they would be fun. I guess that was the piece about the social life. The food was campus food, you know, there was a lot of Italian, rigatoni and manicotti and stuff that I hadn't really grown up with. I'm more familiar with it now, but I wouldn't say it was the worst food ever. I mean, I managed. And it felt... sometimes it felt very isolating on campus. I felt that it was an isolated experience or isolating experience because if there weren't a party, then I didn't get the sense there was a lot else to do, and I'm not sure that that was because I was not looking into other kinds of things like a... an art exhibit or a presentation. I believe that there were those kinds of things, but they didn't interest me initially, and so there were some times when it felt like it was really dead here.

VF: Did your social life change over your four years at Lafayette, and if it did how and why?

KO: It did change. I think I grew up, and I came more to know who I was and what I wanted from this environment. I wasn't as anxious and nervous about doing well because after my first year I realized that I could do well. Sort of learned the ropes. I made very lasting friendships, and I met my husband here so I guess that was a significant thing. So my social life did change, and I would say that it was overall a positive experience.

VF: What did you major in, and why did you choose that major?

KO: I majored in psychology because I wanted to... I've always been a people person. I've always been fascinated with the way people act, what drives us, and I thought that would be a way to help people. And I believe that's my calling.

VF: How would you characterize, in terms of academics, your time at Lafayette?

KO: It was very challenging, rewarding, and exciting. I remember ... especially after I sort of figured out, you know, this is how things are done, and this is how you do it, and I began to feel confident, and I felt... I enjoyed myself. I really did. I had to struggle from my first year, but I think that that had to do with the transition of coming here and not

knowing exactly what to do and finals was really a very scary time for me because I wasn't sure what was expected of me. And I think I tended to be an anxious person. But after that first year I think I took off, academically, and so I would it was a very challenging experience and rewarding.

VF: Would you say that you had any mentors in the faculty or administration?

KO: Yes, and I didn't write that on my initial form but actually there were a few people. Howard Gallup⁴ and then Professor Lammers⁵. Is he still around?

VF: I'm not sure.

KO: Okay. Those are the people who come to mind. My roommate who I ended up rooming with, let me see, one, two, two out of four years was the person who invited me to join the suite. I would say that she was a mentor of sorts also. She was. She was an older student... she was a year or two years ahead of me, so I mean older in that sense, and so I saw how she operated, and she did well, and she was a role model. So I think those are the three people. I'm sure I'm missing someone. But those are the three people.

VF: Did you find that male professors treated you differently than male students?

⁴ Howard F. Gallup, Department of Psychology.

⁵ Stephen E. Lammers, Department of Religion.

KO: I was really not aware of that, and if you notice, two of the three people I mentioned are male professors. And I felt that they treated me well. To be honest, I would probably have thought there was more a racial thing than a sexual situation. And I can't even be specific about that, but I just think that that was my mindset, you know, at that time. And to be truthful, there was something positive in being in the minority in terms of sex. I don't know if that's the case in a class necessarily... and it's not even like I had a lot of boyfriends or anything, so it's not even in terms of that. But there was something that today, you know, my feelings are more positive towards the fact that it was definitely lopsided. You know, there were more men than women. Maybe the men were just so happy to see women on campus, I don't know, but they were kind to us. Except for the fact that there were a lot of male sports, male dominated sports, and the fraternities which were all male, and the social dorms I think which were all male at that time. But that didn't bother me so much, you know, because as I said, I had my little group of people, and we made our own social group. In fact, we joined a social dorm to for meals, and they accepted us very well.

VF: What was that social dorm?

KO: One of the ones that wasn't highly thought of. Oh God. I wish my friend were here because she... it was her idea. I want to say Cro. It's not there anymore. You'll have to ask me again, maybe it'll come to mind, my mind. I remember they had a black cook, and it was.... Alpha Chi Rho? I think it might have been Alpha Chi Rho. That's a guess. My, my memory's going. (*Laughter*) But we enjoyed it. You know, we were

there for I think we just had meals and there were people we became friendly with. I remember one guy that we met who ate there, and I was in touch with him for a while, you know, after we graduated. I was in Philadelphia. He was in Philadelphia also. So that wasn't a bad thing. They sort of accepted this little group of black girls.

VF: Was there a support system for black students?

KO: I think there was, and I think it was out of necessity that the black students sort of band together. We did self-segregate. I know that that's true, and there were people that we felt we would could go to talk to in the administration.

VF: How were race relations on the campus during your four years at Lafayette?

KO: I know there were issues. Time has a way of smoothing over things. I don't think they were intense issues. I can remember a situation however, this is hearsay, this is like two or three people over, but a sociology professor supposedly said in a class, "That black people reminded white people of excrement," and this person was up in arms about it, as were the other people who were in the class and they, you know, so they made a big thing about it. So from time to time there were those kinds of issues. And I think, you know, for the most part, the college reflected the larger environment racially. But I don't remember there being any obvious kind of race problems.

VF: As a college student, what were your major frustrations with the school?

KO: With school or just in general?

VF: With the school, school life for students or anything like that.

KO: Some of them were social really. Well, that's a hard question for me to answer. What were my major frustrations? I think just trying to, you know, get my work done, and... I don't remember there being difficulties except just trying to keep ahead.

VF: What was your involvement with the Association of Black Collegians?

KO: I was very involved. I thought that it was a good organization. It made me have a sense of belonging where in some other ways I did feel different. I felt different economically cause I didn't come from a family that was well off economically, and I had that sense that I was different that way. I also had the sense that many of the students who went to school here were not familiar with my kind of person and so sometimes that was uncomfortable. But the ABC was a great place to go. It was a place where I felt people accepted me and everybody had a common bond. There were, I guess, frictions but for the most part people, people got along so that wasn't a problem there. But I guess I'm just trying to paint it as a safe haven, you know, it wasn't like there were no issues within, but it was still a safe haven. I guess that's the right way to put it.

VF: What was the role of the ABC?

KO: Well, it was a place where people could feel comfortable. It was a place where we could plan to do things for black students or that would be of interest to black students and other students on campus. It was a place to be yourself, to feel comfortable, to feel safe. I mean, I felt it was all of those kinds of places. All of that rather. It represented all of that for me here.

VF: Did the ABC represent all of the black students on campus?

KO: I think there were some who chose not to allow it to represent them. There were some students who stayed away who were obviously, at least they seemed to me to be black, but who didn't have any parts of going and being involved in anything the ABC was doing. So I think as an organization the ABC tried to represent all black students, but, and I think it was a very small minority, there were students who were definitely not involved, you know, with the ABC and maybe not with other black students at all.

VF: What kind of activities were you involved in?

KO: I was involved in... Well, with the ABC I was involved in Black Children Can⁶, which was an organization that someone started. Later on, I started... I was a psych intern, so I stayed here over one summer, and I worked on the Easton Hospital

⁶ A community service project founded by the ABC to motivate black youth in the Easton community.

Psychiatric Ward. I also did some volunteer work with Planned Parenthood,⁷ and I can't remember what that was, how that was connected. I did babysitting actually and worked with Professor Lammers' children. After I took a couple of courses with him then I started babysitting. But I think that was good for me because that got me in the community in a different kind of way. I can't remember what else I did. I may have worked in the library here. I'm sure there are other things, but I was not an athlete, so I didn't do anything like that.

VF: Were you very interested in political and social movements?

KO: Marginally so. I wasn't, you know, one of those people on the front lines. I was interested in some of the political things going on at that time. I'm trying to think what they were though. My memory is bad.

VF: Were you ever discriminated against in any form on this campus?

KO: I think there were times when I thought that that was the case. I can't say specifically, but I think there were times when I thought that it happened. But, you know, I think it may not have been direct, but it may have been a sense of being invisible sometimes. You know, not that anybody said, "You know, you can't come" or "You're not welcome" or "I'm not speaking to you," but just a sense that, you know, people didn't recognize my difference or include me. And I can't be more specific than that. And it may have been because they didn't know how to, so then you're sort of there but not

⁷ A voluntary reproductive health care organization.

there. So I think it was more a sense of that at times. People like Professor Lammers made you feel like you were an individual and whatever you had to offer was good. And I had, I want to say Dr. Pope⁸ or Reverend Pope, he was in the Religion Department too, and a couple of other psychology majors, psychology professors were good. I had good experiences in the English Department also. I took comparative literature courses and that kind of thing. But I think, rather than say it was a direct experience of discrimination it was more having that sense of sort of being an invisible person. Almost the kind of thing where people might say something like, "Oh, you know, when I see you, I don't see you as a black person." Or something like that which they say they don't mean to put you down, but can be really demeaning because well that's who I am so if you don't see that then you're missing something. So that kind of thing, but I think these people were trying to figure out how to relate to blacks, and I believe that I experienced that more than any direct discriminatory actions.

VF: Do you remember any distinct changes in the way female students were treated from your first semester to your last semester?

KO: Yes, by the last semester, there were sororities. Women were more involved with student government. There may have been a Pepper Prize⁹ winner. Is there still a Pepper Prize?

VF: Yes.

⁸ Earl A. Pope, Department of Religion.

⁹ Lafayette College's award for the most ideal student.

KO: There may have been a female Pepper Prize winner. Women were definitely more visible in the goings and comings of the college. So that I can remember did change.

VF: How would you characterize the social and political issues being dealt with Lafayette today in comparison with those being dealt with when you were here?

KO: Being dealt with at Lafayette?

VF: Yes.

KO: I really don't know if I can answer that question very well. I do hear about some of the things that the black students are involved in, but I'm not involved enough to compare, I don't think.

VF: Did you live on campus for the four years?

KO: I lived on campus for three out of four years. I lived off campus one year, and then one year, I think it was my junior year, I lived, I stayed over during the summer, so I lived off campus that year, and my senior year I lived off campus.

VF: Did moving off campus affect your Lafayette experience?

KO: In a positive way because it just made me feel like I had... Well I was more independent and I was now at a point where I didn't have to be right on the quad, or in the hub-hub and still belong. So I thought it was a positive thing. I looked at it that way, and it was a positive experience overall.

VF: Looking back, would you change anything about your experience at Lafayette?

KO: I think that my first year I was sort of intimidated and shy and didn't get as involved as I might have, and then my next years I thought I came out pretty well. But I guess looking back, you know, I'm thinking well, probably could have done even more.

VF: What did you like best about Lafayette?

KO: I liked how I felt. It was small, and I felt, especially toward the end that it was an active learning experience like I could be recognized, and I could say what I felt. And even though there may have been some classes where I wasn't sure that I wasn't invisible I could work, you know, I could work on that, or work against that and sort of be involved. That it was small enough environment that people got to know you to the extent that you got involved, that you put yourself out there, and that was good for me.

TAPE ONE SIDE TWO

VF: Describe your best and worst experiences at Lafayette.

KO: My worst experiences... I slammed my own thumb in my desk drawer where my typewriter was. That tells you something about how long ago I went to school because I'm sure you have computers and all of that. And I got a blister. It's this thumb, and to this day it's, it grew back differently, and I had to go down to the medical building, which was not up here then. It was a hike down the hill, like where the tennis courts are, and everybody talked really badly about the doctor, you know, that he was a whatever. And I just was hurting. I did it one day, and I think I didn't do anything about it, and then I had an abscess, and was in a lot of pain, and I went there, and it was just miserable just to be there and be uncomfortable and be under his care and not really be that happy with, you know, having done this to myself. So that was one of the worst experiences. What was the best experience? I think probably that year that I stayed as a junior and I worked. That was really great because I stayed with two women that, one was a very good friend, the other one was a friend also, and it was very enjoyable. Just working and being on our own and doing things together. It was just a very nice experience. And the work that I did was, you know, part of this summer internship, so I think I got credits or whatever for it. So that was, that was nice.

VF: How do you feel that Lafayette prepared you for life after college?

KO: I think that it prepared me very well academically and socially just because, again, I got to see all different kinds of people and certainly a group of people who I wouldn't have had the opportunity coming from where I was coming from to live with, and sort of

get to know who they are in general and what their view of the world is. So I got a sense of that and maybe it was skewed a little, I don't know, but I did get a sense of that.

VF: What are some of the jobs you've held or education you received after Lafayette?

KO: I am a masters level social worker, and I'm also a certified addictions counselor.

And, let's see. What have I done since Lafayette? I've worked as a case manager for the Office of Mental Health and Mental Retardation in Philadelphia, and I've worked as a social worker for several different agencies doing a little bit of everything: working in a school, working in a hospital, being an outreach worker, working with young people to twenty-one, working with some adults. I've worked part time as an EAP¹⁰ counselor (employee assistance), working with employees of Fortune 500 companies and their families. I worked as a student assistance counselor, which is an early intervention alcohol and drug prevention program in a high school, and now I'm working in an elementary school. I also worked in a preschool, and I'm connected with a couple of boards now. I'm still working in an elementary school, and I'm also working as consultant to the Health Department in New York, Westchester County, doing work with early intervention...something that's called family training. Sometimes it's called social work, but it's basically going into homes of families that have children from birth to age three with developmental challenges or disabilities.

¹⁰ An Employee Assistance Program is voluntary, professional, and confidential counseling for personal, familial and work-related problems.

VF: What was the emphasis for post-college initiatives at Lafayette? For example, in your opinion, were women expected to find a husband as opposed to seeking employment or continuing their education?

KO: What I recall as I'm talking about it is that there was a lot of push, a sense of a push for engineers. And if you were a female engineer then, you know, I think you were included. But I don't remember that there was a big push for women in particular or men over women. I just remember that there seemed to be more emphasis in the Engineering Department, you know, if you were an engineer major. And I'm not sure if that's a skewed memory or not, but that's what I recall.

VF: After you graduated, what was your relationship with the college?

KO: Actually, I was pretty involved with the college after I graduated. There was an alumni ABC at one point that I was very involved with for a while and would come back up to the college. I came back for reunions. I was involved with, and of course right now, I can't remember... alumni, I want to say AARP¹¹, but that's the group for retirement. But it was an alumni relations group that interviewed prospective students from local areas. So I did that for a while. So they would send me a packet of prospective students from Mt. Vernon, but sometimes in White Plains, and I would interview the child, talk about my own experiences. And then I was on an alumni

¹¹ American Association of Retired Persons is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving the needs of persons aged fifty or more.

committee, and, of course, I can't remember which one it was. So in the beginning I was very involved with the college that way.

VF: Do you feel that Lafayette failed you in any way?

KO: I think we sort of got what we needed or I got what I needed sort of through the ABC. I guess the answer to your question is no, I don't know that I've been failed, but if there were something different that I think the college might do for black students it would be to reach out and to maybe connect black students with a mentor, you know, a student mentor, or something like that. I don't know. That might help, especially students who are struggling in the beginning.

VF: Looking back do you think that Lafayette was the ideal place to foster your growth process both academically and socially?

KO: Yes. I wouldn't change it.

VF: What advice would you give to an incoming student?

KO: I think I would first ask that incoming student to look back at what their successes have been and why they came, and I would want that incoming student to first of all feel comfortable with who they are and that they can achieve. And then I would suggest that that student find someone that they could connect with either on the faculty or another

student. That's not always easy when you're coming in new, but maybe through admissions or through college counseling to do that, and to ask for help if you need it academically or socially or whatever.

VF: Is there anything that you would like to add that I did not touch upon?

KO: No.

VF: Thank you.