

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

ANNIE CHEATHAM

Interviewed by

CLAIRE WILSON

November 13, 2008
Conway, Massachusetts

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Narrator

Annie Cheatham (b. 1944) grew up in North Carolina, and got both her Bachelor's degree in Religion and her Master's of Teaching and English from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She completed graduate work at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte and at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Cheatham occupied many different roles throughout the course of her professional career. She spent some time in 1966 and 1967 working with Church Women United in New York City, and then began work in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, where she played an active role in the desegregation debates. After two years there, she became an administrator in the Model Cities Program in Charlotte, where she worked on urban development and education. Between 1971 and 1974, she worked as a teacher and counselor at the Taipei American School in Taipei, Taiwan. While living abroad, she traveled in Asia, South Africa, Russia, Greece and Turkey. After returning to the United States, she moved to Washington D.C., where she founded the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future with Representative Charlie Rose and became its executive director. After nearly seven years in this role, she became the co-director of the Institute for Women and the Future in Northampton, MA. She and her co-director Mary Clare Powell conducted research throughout the United States and Canada for the "Future is Female" project, interviewing over 1,000 women in all professions and eventually compiling the research into a book, *This Way Daybreak Comes: Women's Values and the Future*, published by New Society Publishers in 1986. After this, she spent several years as research assistant for the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) in Amherst, MA, and then proceeded to found Annie's Garden and Gift Store, which continues to be one of the most successful independent garden centers in the region. Finally, between 2001 and 2008, she worked as the executive director of Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, Inc. (CISA), which links farmers and communities to promote and strengthen agriculture in Western Massachusetts.

Interviewer

Claire Wilson (b. 1986) is an undergraduate major in Spanish and the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College.

Abstract

In this oral history, Annie Cheatham describes growing up in a small town in North Carolina, focusing especially on her awareness of racial injustice and her gradual understanding of her own sexuality. The interview centers on her education, her relationship to both North Carolina and New England, her teaching experiences, her work on the "Future is Female" project, her identity as a social activist and networker, her passion for gardening, her work with CISA and her thoughts on the future. Cheatham's story details a rich and varied life that defies easy categorization, and demonstrates the ways in which she has been able to have a positive impact on organizations, social movements and countless individual lives.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Two 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Claire Wilson. Edited for clarity by Claire Wilson.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Cheatham, Annie. Interview by Claire Wilson. Video recording, November 13, 2008. Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Annie Cheatham interview by Claire Wilson, video recording, November 13, 2008, Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Cheatham, Annie. Interview by Claire Wilson. Transcript of video recording, November 13, 2008. Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Annie Cheatham, interview by Claire Wilson, transcript of video recording, November 13, 2008, Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 11-12.

Women's Activism and Oral History Project
History 372, Fall 2008
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted November 13, 2008 with:

ANNIE CHEATHAM
Conway, Massachusetts

By: Claire Wilson

CHEATHAM: Testing one two three, testing one two three.

WILSON: (laughs) Ok. There we —

BREAK IN TAPE

CHEATHAM: Why don't we do a few minutes and then you can check it.

WILSON: Ok, that sounds good. (laughs)

CHEATHAM: Then you won't be worried.

WILSON: Then I won't be — That sounds perfect. So, ok. So I'm going to just start by kind of like introd-

CHEATHAM: Here's something you can hold in your lap, if you want a desk-

WILSON: Oh ok, perfect.

CHEATHAM: -so that you — But if you don't want to use it, that's fine.

WILSON: Thank you.

CHEATHAM: (sighs)

WILSON: Ok. So I am here with Annie Cheatham in her home, in Conway, Massachusetts on November 13th, 2008 for History 372's Women's Activism and Oral History Project. So I guess we can get started. So I understand you grew up in North Carolina. Is that right?

CHEATHAM: That's correct.

WILSON: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about that, about some of your memories

and what that was like?

CHEATHAM: Well, this election has certainly brought my upbringing into a lot of consciousness for me. I grew up in a small town [in] North Carolina, outside of Raleigh, Nor — the capitol. But Raleigh at that time was only about 50,000 people, quite — about the size of Northampton. And very segregated — I was born in 1944 — very segregated community, all, you know, colored signs, and white signs, and no — I never went to school in 12 years with any blacks, even in college. My first two years I went to a junior college in Raleigh, North Carolina, an Episcopal school; no blacks there. I went to University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, my last two years joined a sorority, no blacks allowed there, so it was very segregated even up through 1966 when I graduated from college.

And it was a — Smithfield, North Carolina, a rural town, a farming town, farming community mostly, now it's a bedroom community for Raleigh, sort of a — not as much farming going on. But it was very close, and everybody knew everybody, and there were about 4,000 people in the town, and uh, we were middle class, upper middle class family, so very privileged, in — in a way. We weren't wealthy, but we had status, I guess, some sort of class status. And so I was — you know, my friends were the kids in the school that were the children of doctors and lawyers and teachers and professionals. I didn't hang out with farming kids and, you know, kids that lived in the country so much. I mean, they were in our class, but — There were only 88 in my graduating class in high school. I was second in the class, so it wasn't — you know, academics were easy for me — but it also wasn't really rigorous.

So it was a quiet — in a way — town. I mean, there were, um, probably lynchings in my lifetime in that town. I didn't know of any, but I would imagine there were. And we all—my friends and my family—had black servants. [There was] a woman that came in our house once a week and cleaned or, when I was small, came every day and looked after me. My mother was a schoolteacher, third grade. My father worked for the American Tobacco Company, he was an administrator and buyer for that company, and travelled around to follow the tobacco markets.

So it was a kind of a safe place — it was a good place in that everybody knew me and so I was — I had an identity, I wasn't unknown, I wasn't anonymous. And in the school everybody knew everybody, and your parents would hear about the stuff that you did that wasn't right, and so you — there was a certain limit to how much you could misbehave and so on.

So — [it was] conservative, politically. I was always very confused because of the racial world. The people that were the kindest to me, and the warmest, were the blacks in my upbringing. And my grandmother had a woman who worked for her for forty years, and she lived in Raleigh, and you know, I mean, Martha was — these were the

people that were family, and yet they had to sit in the back seat of the car when you take them home, or they — I remember my mother saying to me once when I was a teenager and I said, “I saw a black lady,” you know, or “Negro lady,” or whatever I was saying at the time. And my mother said, “Don’t say lady, they’re not ladies, they can’t be ladies.” It was like, Why? You know, I didn’t — I didn’t — I never could figure it out, and I never — I never felt comfortable, it was always a — a layer of confusion, and things weren’t what they seemed.

And very early, I was a tomboy, and attracted to girls, and, you know, I remember in seventh grade my mother saying, “You’re not normal,” and so feeling — And I made my debut, in North Carolina and came out as a debutante, and, you know, it was in that world, and I was lesbian, and I didn’t really come out until I was in my 30s. It was something that I just tried to bury, and to — I knew it wasn’t right, or wasn’t normal. And so I never felt safe there. I had friends, and—older friends too, one woman, ten years younger than my mother, and a friend of my mother’s, was like another mother to me, and she was very loving and accepting of me, and there were a few other adults like that. My mother was pretty critical and my father was kind of emotionally absent.

So, it was a place where I was known, and I was protected. I could be myself. I think it’s part of where I got my confidence in being in the world, because I was not afraid to be out. Mmm — at least, express myself, verbally. Expressing myself emotionally was another question, I couldn’t do that. But then all this stuff about being gay, and being — not understanding why the racial situation was what it was, made it a challenging place to grow up. And I always — very early, when I was ten years old, I went to New York City to visit my aunt and uncle, and I stood in Brooklyn, on the promenade, overlooking Manhattan. I thought — I was ten years old — I looked across that water, I said to myself, I’m going to live here, I’m going to go to St. Mary’s College, and I’m going to Carolina, and then I’m coming to New York City. And that’s what I did. And so I got out of that environment by the time I was 20, 21 — your age — I was gone, I just left. And I did go back, for a short period, but I really basically left that situation. So anyway, that’s where I came from.

WILSON: So, how did you start kind of being able to articulate what felt problematic about the racial situation, or what felt different about your sexuality? Was there anything that lead you to be able to begin to articulate that to yourself, or to think about it differently, or — it was just always kind of an awareness that —

CHEATHAM: A discomfort. I mean, I remember my mother, you know, taking our maid home, and her having to ride in the backseat, and [I’d] ask why, you know, when we had delivered her to her house, and we were [driving] home — why did she have to sit in the backseat? Why does she have to come to the back door? You know, why is this? Well, it’s just because that’s the

way it is, was the answer. So I was asking questions. But I wasn't around people — well, my mother was in favor of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and she taught third grade, and that ruling was going to affect her immediately. I mean, they were going to desegregate the elementary schools first, and she was in favor of that. And so I was hearing — and that was — I was 10 — so I was hearing her, anyway, and maybe some of her friends, talking a lot (clock chimes half hour) about this. And she said, “We've got to do this.” And I remember when they desegregated, and she had black kids in her class, and she'd come home and talk about them, and so on.

So, I wasn't isolated. I mean people — race was being discussed, whether it was in a denigrating way, or, We've got to just do this. And you know, even, I remember my friend's — one of my friend's, black maid was saying, “I don't want this, I don't want to send — I don't want my children to go to school with you all, you know, I — we just need to leave things as they are, things are just fine the way they are.” So I remember hearing that. It's like, it didn't make me wonder, you know. I really, from pretty early on, knew that what we were living in was terribly unjust and, not right, and didn't make any sense, and shouldn't be that way.

Not to say that I didn't grow up, or don't carry still, prejudice and racist thoughts occasionally, so that language and stereotypes that you hear from day one are hard to break, which is, you know — Amazing, the power of this election, and seeing Barack and Michelle and their children on that stage on Tuesday night. I mean, I was just weeping. I was like, I finally get to atone for this world that I grew up in. And my great grandmother was a slaveholder, so — and I know about her, I don't know about others in my family. But I'm a descendent of slave owners, and how to atone for that, how to, mm, be redeemed. So this election [is] very important. (tears)

My sexuality was almost more complicated. I didn't — it was really more scary because I really felt alone. And I was alone in that. I never talked to anybody about it growing up, and uh—I was very afraid. I mean, there, there was nobody who I could see would be an advocate if I came out. And so I didn't, even to myself. I just said, Well this is just temporary, or an attraction that, you know — because in college I was with guys, and dating, and out of college I had guys I lived with, and had relationships with men, so it was like, I'm ok, it's not me.

And there wasn't a world out there that even was talking about it. I mean there was Del Martin and, and Phyllis Lyon. I don't know. And I didn't want to go there, I didn't want to get near them, I didn't even want to hear about them, or read that stuff, even if I could find it. So it really wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties and I lived in Washington and I was with a woman — and I used to say, “I'm not gay, I'm Annie.” And we were going to a therapist and — couple's therapy — and the therapist, who was straight, said, “I'm seeing another couple that you should meet.”

And she told us who they were and we looked them up. And we met them, and they were very out and very comfortable and happy in their sexuality. And we went to a Holly Near concert, and I was in this room with all these women that loved each other, and it was unbelievable, it was like the second coming. I mean it was like I was home, I was not alone, I was — people were happy, it was — there was no fear, it was just amazing. So — I was 33 — it was like, finally I made peace with that part of myself and found a place to be that I could find comfort.

Not that I didn't continue to be afraid, and not that I don't continue now to be afraid, if I'm somewhere other than Northampton, and Anne and I are holding hands. So I — that fear is very deep and came from those early years growing up. (telephone) So that one was harder than the race one for me personally, actually, because I wasn't black, so — Mmmm.

WILSON: Yeah.

CHEATHAM: You want to check your —?

WILSON: Maybe I'll check this really fast.

BREAK IN TAPE

WILSON: -North Carolina, but first you went to school there, to your undergraduate and a little bit of your graduate experience.

CHEATHAM: (two voices) Yes, I went to — after I graduated my senior year, I went to New York City and worked in various jobs for a year and then went back to North Carolina and then went back to graduate school. So I took a year off and then went back to graduate school at Carolina in the English Department, and the School of Education, and got an MAT. And that's when I was — I started teaching after—it was a practicum, so I had a teaching year as part of the practicum in Charlotte, North Carolina, and that was right at the beginning of the (clears throat) Charlotte-Mecklenburg school sy—the Supreme Court Case about busing. And so I was in the middle of that whole thing, and that was [the] big Vietnam period, and I really wasn't very active in the Vietnam protests. I was really engaged fully in the desegregation process. Went to volunteer to teach at an all black school my second year in Charlotte. They were asking teachers to go to schools where they were in the minority, to begin the process. So I did that, and then the third year, I ran Model Cities Programs for mostly black kids who were going to be bused to white schools and who needed help with reading or math or something, in order to be up to grade level or whatever. And so I was in Charlotte three years, and then I left North Carolina and haven't lived there since.

WILSON: Are there things about it that you miss? Do you still feel connected to it in any way, or does this feel like —?

CHEATHAM: I have a lot of family there still and this year I went down and spent the month of February, and it was wonderful to be back there. I hadn't really spent that much time there except short visits since I left Charlotte, and I really loved being so close to my family. And we don't agree a lot politically, and so I don't have a whole lot in common with them for values and things. I don't — some of — my brother won't recycle and he voted for McCain and you know, it's — they're conservatives. But some of them are more moderate. But it was wonderful to be with family, and so I got a taste of what that feels like. And you're far away from your family, so you know what some of that feels like.

I think while I was down there I was reading in the paper a story about a hate crime against a gay man in Wilmington, and I — it would still be a hard culture for me to live in, because I still am afraid of that violence towards gay people, that — and the violence in the South, there's an undercurrent just below the surface, a violent thing. That's why those Palin rallies — it's so easy to get that hate going, and you—it's easy, you could do it in Springfield, or Amherst, or Northampton, but you wouldn't have as many people in the audience. There's a lot of people in North Carolina, and in the South, who have a lot of anger. And I'm afraid of that environment.

But, you know, if — I said to my niece, "Well I don't have any kids, so Anne and I, you know, we have to — we don't know who to look after us." She said, "I'll look after you," and I — she would, and I started thinking, Well, what would it be like to move here, and live here again, and be looked after by this wonderful niece. So that didn't seem like the worst thing in the world. And there are a lot of people have moved down there from here, and it's changed, the culture, that's why North Carolina went for Obama, and why Virginia went for Obama. The demographics are shifting, the culture is moderating. But that's what matters to me, is that cultural tone. I miss barbecue, and I miss so many black people that are so available. I mean, you know, here I don't see black people very often, and, you know, up here in Franklin County, it's — I don't know what percent of the population — but anyway. So I miss that multicultural life, and some of the food, and it's awfully nice in the winter time when it's freezing here but.

WILSON: So how did you come to this region?

CHEATHAM: This place?

WILSON: Yeah.

CHEATHAM: Well I really ended up here — well, when I lived in New York City, my roommate — who actually was my lover at the time — was from up here, and she had a friend in New Hampshire. And in October, probably Columbus Day weekend, we went up to Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire, and I was just blown away by how beautiful it was. And I just liked it. It just was so special. And so when I came back from Taiwan, after three years of teaching in school there, I had a friend who had a house in Maine, on Cranberry Island, and I got a car, and I drove, very — a little convertible — and I drove up the coast, stopping off and staying with people that I'd met in Taiwan, or relatives, or something, and — to get to Maine, and all the way through New England, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Massachusetts, I was on back roads and little towns. I never went on an interstate, went about 45 miles an hour. And I had to — I was by myself, and when you travel alone, you have to rely on people, and so I was always having to stop and say, “Where am I?” and “Help me find—,” “Where should I eat?” and “Where could I spend the night?” and so on. And I really was impressed by people in Massachusetts and Vermont and New Hampshire and Maine. I — which way I went — I didn't go to Boston, so I must have come out this way, and they were just friendly and nice and open, and I thought then, I could live with these people.

And I also had an aunt — who I loved a lot, and who was the one I visited in New York — who went to Smith. And I had lots of aunts and uncles — I think seven on my mother's side and six on my father's side — and she was the only one that kind of escaped the South and came to Northampton, Massachusetts. And there were pictures of her in the snow, and I — she was quite a special person to me [in] my young days. And so that was part of it, I had a relative who'd been here, and lived here. So anyway. That's why. It just seemed like nice people and a beautiful place.

WILSON: Sorry to backtrack a little bit, but you mentioned your three years in Taiwan. So how did you come to be doing that?

CHEATHAM: Oh, and I should follow up, too, with how I ended up coming back here. But I went to Taiwan — when I was getting my graduate degree, my MAT degree, in Charlotte, I had a friend who was also in that program, who's married to a Filipino. And we talked together in Charlotte, we did our practicum together, same school, we volunteered to go the black school together when [they] asked for that, and so we were quite close, and we saw each other a lot after school — we lived in the same apartment building — and after two years in Charlotte they decided to go overseas and they went to Taiwan to teach. He had met her teaching overseas and she was from the Philippines so they wanted to go back to Asia. So they went off, and went to Taiwan, [to the] Taipei American School. And we kept writing back and forth all year. And I don't know, sometime in January or so that year, he said, “You should apply to come work here,

and, you know, our superintendent's going to be doing interviews, and — check it out.” And so I did. I got an interview, and I got — I was offered a job, so I went because of them.

And so that was [a] wonderful experience, and it was great. I was in a familiar world, and I was in an American school, and teaching an English curriculum, and an American curriculum, but I was in a foreign country. And so I had a kind of home base that was familiar to me. As a small town girl from North Carolina, I wasn't a bit city person, big world person, so having that small — it's like living in Tyler [House at Smith College] you know. You have a small house that feels safe, and then you can venture out into this bigger world. I needed that, and I've always needed that, wherever I've been.

But to finish how I came here, so I had this early — these other experiences of being attracted to New England and then when Mary Clare Powell and I wrote *This Way Daybreak Comes*, we also — well, let me see. Anne Gibson, my partner (coughs) is really probably why I'm here now. (coughs) She — we met in Washington when I was working in the Congress and I was still with Mary Clare and Mary Clare and I even did the [“Future is Female”] project, our book project, while Anne and I had already fallen in love with each other. Mary Clare knew about that. We were all three working on this a lot because I loved them both very much and I didn't want to lose either one of them and so I was kind of holding them both for a long, long time.

But Anne had gone to Smith, and she had been in school. I met her in Washington when I was working on the Clearinghouse on the Future. The member of Congress she works for was on the board. And we got to be good friends and so on. So when she left Washington she went to Nova Scotia, to get her BFA [at the] Nova Scotia School of Art and Design. And then — I don't remember what I was doing then — but anyway, then she came back to Florence, and moved into Florence, because Northampton was quite up and coming. And so when Mary Clare and I started on this project, we — she was our base. So as we were traveling and people wanted to reach us, they called her. And we talked to her twice a week and that's how we stayed in touch. And people wanted to write us they wrote to a P.O. box in Florence. So she was really our, our key, our holder, the string as we flew off in a kite.

So anyway she stayed here. Mary Clare and I did the project, we wrote the book. Eventually we shared a house with a group of eight in Northampton, me and Mary Clare, and then finally I moved out, bought a house in Sunderland. Anne lived in Hatfield. Mary Clare ended up moving to Cohasset to get some space, and Anne and I finally moved in together about seven years later. She moved to Sunderland. So, you know, we were long — we had a distance relationship for ten, 23 years, before we moved in together but it's really, I was following her, but pre-disposed to like the place — area — but yeah.

WILSON: And so you're talking about *This Way Daybreak Comes*, so how did you and Mary Clare meet and how did you kind of develop the idea for "The Future is Female" project?

CHEATHAM: Well there were two threads. One was Mary Clare was an artist, and doing a lot of feminist art and photography and poetry and writing and getting in some shows around D.C., and very involved in the D.C. world, art world, women's art. And I was running this thing in the [Congressional] Clearinghouse [on the Future], and one of the things that started happening in the early '70s was — probably before that too — but anyway, lots of writings on Marilyn Ferguson, who just died, [and] the Aquarian Conspiracy, a lot of New Age literature out about the feminine, and — is it the right brain? The right brain or is it the left — but the right brain being sort of female side, the sort of intuitive, compassionate — you know, all that stuff. And even — there were men writing about how we needed to shift our culture, or our culture was shifting, the Age of Aquarius, we were moving to [a] less linear way of the thinking, the — the internet wasn't there yet, but computers were coming along, and, I mean they can be pretty linear but they do connect everybody. Marshall McLuhan was talking to Governor Jerry Brown and Jerry Brown was saying, "Who is the crew in Spaceship Earth?" McLuhan was saying, "We're living on Spaceship Earth," and Brown says, "Who're the passengers and who's the crew?" and McLuhan says, "There are no passengers, there are no crew; everybody's crew on Spaceship Earth." So that was a new way of thinking.

And so Mary Clare and I were — and I was running this Clearinghouse and having these people come and talk to members of Congress who were writing these kinds of things, and I was involved with these people who were doing this kind of thinking. And so I would come home and we would talk about it and I think one day she said, "I know, let's quit our jobs, sell our house, or, yeah (unclear) sell our house, and go around the country and meet women who are part of this new future, this new world, and talk to feminist artists and see how they're visualizing this new world through their artwork, and how they're living it in their lives. Where are the models for this new feminine future, this new female, this new age?" And so that's how (laughs) it happened. [It was] just an urge to see examples of this concept (coughs) to touch it in reality. What did it look like?

And so we put out a news release to 600 publications. We sent out 600 — this was before email, you know, we were mailing — 600 letters to 600 publications around the country, saying we were going to do this "The Future is Female" project and we were looking for examples of New Age living, thinking, being, and we were looking for feminist artists, if you know of anybody or anything let us know, and here's our P.O. Box in Florence, Massachusetts. And we — mail started coming in and we ended up with index cards, two boxes [of] index cards, you know, of people who

would— Anyway, it was quite a project. And names and addresses and phone numbers, and then I went around to all the offices in the Congress and the House, got maps of all these states where we decided we'd — we sort of charted our course on the big U.S. and Canadian map. I went around and picked up state maps, and then we — you know, that's, that's how we did it.

WILSON: Was it — it must have been — was it scary, to kind of just pick up and leave in a van and — ?

CHEATHAM: That kind of thing hasn't ever scared me much, you know. I've done all that a lot. You know, I picked up and left Charlotte, and went to Asia, and if I get onto something, if I got my bead on something that's across the river, I can figure out how to get across the river, it doesn't — that doesn't seem to bother me. It's part of that self-confidence that I got growing up in that little town with — you know, being around people that helped me know I was a pretty good person and smart enough to figure things out. So I wasn't — no, didn't have any fears about doing that.

WILSON: Are there any memories that particularly stand out? I know it was a long trip and that you met a lot of people —

CHEATHAM: Well I — one of the things I particularly learned from Mary Clare — and it was kind of an oral history project like this one you're doing — is that if you waited long enough, if you put the tape recorder on and you waited and you kept talking to people and you waited long enough, you really did get to the real person, and you really — there was a meeting could happen, a real sharing. I was just listening a lot lately to Studs Terkel on — you know, his story, as he's just died, and he — that's what he understood, you know. He said, he told a story about interviewing somebody and he learned early — he'd set his tape recorder up on the table and he said, "Now tell me about yourself," and the woman started telling about herself, and then she stopped and she looked at him and she said, "Mr. Terkel, you didn't turn that tape recorder on yet." And how important it is for people to know the tape recorder's on and that they've got something to tell you. And I think that's the power of oral history, that everybody has something to say and everybody's story has meaning and it's a very special thing when somebody comes along and says, "I want to hear, I want to listen to it." And so we gave that gift to a lot of women, and that's — you know, the name of the book, *This Way Daybreak Comes* and that poem that we took it from, which is in the book — it's like, this is the place of birth, of light, of the stories.

There were — there's no one woman that stands out so strongly. We interviewed over 1,000 women and I think there're 200 or so in the book, so we left a lot out. And we — our process when we finished and a woman named Charlotte Birch, who was big in the feminist movement in

New York, loaned us her house on the Shenandoah River in Virginia outside of Front Royal. And we went there and we decided we would start in silence, and so Mary Clare and I — we had separate rooms, bedrooms — we spent two weeks in silence. We didn't talk to each other (clock chimes 4:00 p.m.) and I guess we had to go out occasionally and do some shopping, but it was a very secluded place so we didn't see people much. And we took walks, sometimes together, sometimes by ourselves; we meditated, we read, and we just tried to let it settle, because we'd been listening to women talking to us for two years, and what we said we wanted to do by the end of that two weeks was we wanted to make a list of the women who'd made the most impression on us. Not that they were better than the other women, or — we knew we couldn't write about any women that hadn't moved us. They had to have touched us somewhere in us, in who we were. And (clears throat) so, we each kept a list as those two weeks went along. And I think we even fasted some of that time too, so we were really cleansing. I mean it wasn't extreme, but it was just different, we wanted to do something different so that the voices of the women would have room to come to us. And so at the end of the two weeks we sat down and shared our lists with each other, and there were lots of similarities. There were — I had some that she didn't have and she had some I didn't have, but there weren't many. And it was amazing. You know, we really had been moved by a lot of the same people.

And so then we set about, after that, figuring out how we were going to structure the book. And we really started looking at what were the key points of the stories, [what] were the key points we wanted to make. And then what was that about, housing or relationships or environment or what were the sort of issues that were kind of common to that little cluster of women. Well no, what were the issues the women were working on or were experiencing or were making explicit, and then those became the chapters of the book. So. Anyway.

WILSON: Were there any qualities that the women in your lists that moved you shared? Was there anything — did they have anything — can you identify anything that made these women particularly — or these meetings, these encounters — particularly moving or inspiring?

CHEATHAM: I think — well they were all passionate, you know, about what they were doing, articulate — I'm trying to think, were all the women very verbal, you know, maybe there were women that were quieter or shyer, less articulate, who moved us. They were honest. They weren't pretending to be something they weren't, or seemed to have integrity. Weren't afraid to have their failings, or their dark sides. Not that in a two hour interview we got to dark sides, but you know, you can feel that. I started to say they weren't angry, but at that time there was a lot of anger in the women's movement. You know, there was a lot of passion and, we weren't just looking for feminists. I mean a lot of these women were not all defining

themselves as feminists. We were looking for women who were really actualized, you know, living lives of honesty and integrity and commitment.

And I think another learning was that they were everywhere, you know, it wasn't — the West Coast and the East Coast, yeah, you know, there were maybe more of them, but they were everywhere. And actually the West Coast and the East Coast women were so busy it was harder to get interviews with them than it was with women in Kansas or Tennessee and uh — um — I wish I could be more articulate. Probably in the introduction of that book would be the answers to those questions which we were trying to articulate in that introduction of how this — And the power of women's ideas, and the power — courage of women to live these lives that were, in some ways, testing new ground. And trying to articulate new values and, you know, create a new culture. A lot of courage there, and bravery, and wisdom.

WILSON: Did you come away from the experience with new ideas about women's role in the future? Or did you find it personally transformative in any way?

CHEATHAM: That's a good question. Growing up I never was happy being a girl. I always wanted — you know, the story was back [then], you kissed your elbow, you could turn into a boy. So I was always trying to kiss my elbow. I never was comfortable being a — probably would be transgendered and — if I were a teenager now I'd probably go that route. But so I hadn't — I was mixed about being a girl. I liked boys, I liked what boys did and could do and the power they had, you know. I just — they had abettor life. And so I — probably that project helped me appreciate women in a way that deepened my understanding of what women — who women are. I mean, I still get frustrated by women's processes, and needing to talk about everything all the time, and [am] still pretty direct and testosterone-driven, you know: Let's get this done and, you know, let's just not process it all the time and, well, how do you feel— So I still have that sort of prejudice against women, or frustration with those styles, but this project certainly gave me a glimpse of all the depth of women, and how different they are, and how rich and varied the experience is.

I don't know about other learnings and things. I think one was to say that the process of it, and the writing of the book — I mean Mary Clare and I were doing this while we were breaking up (telephone), so it was very stressful time in our relationship, and a real testament to that relationship, which is still very alive, by the way, we're still very close. She lives in Greenfield and we see each other, talk to each other, frequently, daily. But we — our relationship was changing, and so just to kind of get through it in the middle of that emotional change was quite a testament to our capacity to finish a project.

I learned a lot too from her about feminist theory, which I — she's quite a scholar, teaches at Leslie University now, in Cambridge, got her doctorate after the project. But she would read and read and read. You know, she would hand me a draft — she would write the first draft of the chapter — and it would be this many pages, and, you know, 50-, 60-, 70-page chapter and it had to end up being no more than 15. She'd do a 100-page chapter. And it'd be full of all this stuff from all the feminist theory stuff she read. And so I learned a lot, not reading the official, you know, the original documents, but reading her pieces of them, and she taught me a lot about that.

WILSON: So how did the fact that you and Mary Clare were in the process of breaking up, like, how did that play out, and how did that affect the project, or did it affect the project?

CHEATHAM: Well I think the project was powerful enough that it really didn't affect the project. I think the women, and trying to figure out a way to tell the stories of them, was — we knew we had — that was our mission, and we really stayed on that mission, and carried that through the best we could at the time. We did the very best job we could do to get — condense and relate what we had learned on that trip and all those meetings, to convey to the reader what was out there, what was happening, in the women's lives that we met. And we really — our — that really was bigger than our struggles. And our commitment to that project was — we were able to, to make that the priority. Amazing. Because it was a very painful and difficult time, but the women carried us through it; the stories carried us through so we could be each other's best friends today. I don't know if we'd been working on a project about something else if it would have had the same effect, but all those women and weaving together in that book caught us — we got caught in that fabric and we're still friends.

WILSON: So amazing.

CHEATHAM: (laughs) It is.

WILSON: And so you mentioned that not all of the women you talked to would define themselves as feminists.

CHEATHAM: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: Um, at that point did you define yourself as a feminist, or do you now define yourself as a feminist?

CHEATHAM: Yeah. Um, did I then? I don't know. I'm not a — I'm moderate person. I'm not a — the other day I got an exit poll at the election and it said, Are you liberal, conservative or moderate? and I checked moderate, and I

asked Anne, “What did you check?” And she said, “Liberal.” But I’m not, you know, I’m more moderate, and I’m not an ideologue, so I’m very pragmatic. I’m curi — I’m interested in what works, getting things done. So, you know, I’d probably sell out, or sell short probably, on some things that maybe a stronger feminist would never sell out on. I don’t know what those would be but — So I don’t attach myself to movements about ideas. Or I guess feminism’s not really an idea thing, so about rights and justice and — but I don’t know, I — so I don’t — may not — yes I would call myself a feminist, but I don’t know that I know what that means exactly.

WILSON: I guess I was going to ask you, do you have a definition that you — that you — what does-

CHEATHAM: What it means to-

WILSON: -it mean to you, even if, I don’t know.

CHEATHAM: Well I think more about issues, you know, like equal pay for equal work or — I haven’t felt discriminated against as a woman in my life. I have just been so sure of myself that I haven’t — and I’ve been around a lot of powerful men in Congress and running a business and Chamber of Commerce meetings and running a non-profit. I’ve never felt less-than, you know, I’ve just got enough testosterone in me to just say — I’ve just never — I don’t even think about it, I just don’t feel like I’m less, or like I’m under something. And this is where I get — anyway.

What does it mean? So (pause) I think probably what it mostly means is being aware of the issues where women are discriminated against and there is injustice and inequality and fighting to right those wrongs. I don’t feel like I know much about those inequalities and injustices except what I read in the paper. It’s not something I’ve experienced. I don’t doubt them but I haven’t felt them personally that I’m aware of. They may have been going on. I haven’t hit a glass ceiling, I’ve been able to do whatever I wanted to do. I haven’t tried to be president of a university, I haven’t tried to be the first women to get into the school, so I haven’t had to break down walls like that. I’ve chosen arenas where I could go to the top of what the top meant for me. So anyway. I don’t know if that answers your question but.

WILSON: Would you ambivalently describe yourself as a feminist?

CHEATHAM: Yeah, I would. I would not want to not be — I wouldn’t — I would never think of myself as not being a feminist. I mean I am in favor of women’s rights, to be equal and to have opportunity and to be able to do whatever they’re capable of being and doing. Any barrier to that is unright, is unjust, is wrong. I’m so impressed always by the stories I read in the *Smith Quarterly* and I just love there’s this women’s school, you know,

and that they've — you've held to that. And I mean I know there — men go there from various places. I was — I still am — I'm not an active, but I still am a co-member of Catholic nuns' group, the Sisters of Loretto, headquartered in um Denver, and they are so wonderful, to be in an environment where women are running everything and, you know, be it Smith and the women are the president of the class and they're running things, and it's great and I love that. Anyway, I love seeing that, I love being in that environment.

WILSON: I'm so sorry, this is doing a funny thing so I just want to check it out really fast. I'm not sure if it means that-

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

WILSON: So we were just kind of talking about feminism and about whether or not you would define yourself as a feminist. So I'm wondering if there are any — what other ways, what other words you might use to define yourself or to describe yourself?

CHEATHAM: Huh, that's a good question. I (pause) I don't know that I would use the words that are like — I don't know how to explain this. I think—I've been a writer, for example, but I really don't think a writer is a description of anybody. I would never — or a poet. I mean, you write poems. I don't know how to describe this. It's like, what interests me is what do you do. Now, I suppose someone like Stephen King who just writes all day — I don't know. What was the question?

WILSON: (laughs) Um-

CHEATHAM: How would I describe myself?

WILSON: What other words or what other-

CHEATHAM: I think a social activist, a social change agent, a networker — one of my favorite things to do is connect people with other people or places. I mean, when you tell me you're from Portland, I immediately go to who I knew there or met there, who I know lives there now, and do you know them, and — or now that we've spent this time together and I've — I don't know much about you — but as I'm reading *The New Yorker* I might see articles, an article that I wanted to share, [that] I would send you, or I would email you and say, "Did you see that story in the Sunday *New York Times*?" I'm like a clipping service. I love that. That has been part of my work. It was part of *This Way Daybreak Comes*, it was part of the Clearinghouse on the Future, it was part of CISA, it was part of my store. I mean, it's really connecting people with somebody else or themselves or — well, all of that. If I've read an article that I wanted you to read, or I thought you might like, it would be because I saw a connection in that article that would help you, that may make it possible for you to grow a little bit or up and up a little bit more or learn something new or meet somebody who could take you somewhere else, or, or move you along. I'm like a mother hen, you know, that kind of putting people together, ideas together with people. I don't know what you call that, but that is really the heart of what I've done. And it isn't around feminism or liberalism or conservatism or any of those isms. It's about wanting to know who you are a little bit to know and — so that I can plug stuff in, I can hole stuff up for you to see that might make it possible for you to be even more of who you are.

At Annie's I came upon this idea to give away poems, because I never was totally comfortable with the whole exchange of selling people something that they probably didn't need. I mean, plants are one thing but I mean (clock chimes the half hour) something else, a piece of pottery or something, you know — I mean, nobody needs really anything that anybody's buying in retail. I mean, not that anybody's buying any right now, but I — it's kind of a empty way to live, to just buy stuff, and sell stuff, and I never could — spiritually it just — ok, so I'm smart enough to go to a New York gift show and find things that are interesting and bring them back here and say, You'll me twice what I paid for them, and I get to buy some more stuff with the extra money.

But so I said, I've got do something, I want to give people something, and so I came up with the idea of I want to give poems away. And so I was big onto Mary Oliver at the time — who's so accessible and wonderful and writes about gardening and plants and animals and lots of content that is very appropriate in a garden store — and then I, of course, knew other poems and other people and have lots of books on poems and stuff. And so I started collecting these poems, and they would be seasonal, so there would be summer poems and spring poems and fall poems and winter poems and [I'd] put three up on an eight-and-a-half by eleven piece of paper and cut them, like a little brochure size, and on the back—I'm a very good marketer—so I'd always have a map and show where Annie's was and our hours of operation and, you know, everything. And also, good marketing person that I am, I knew the people, if they liked the poem, would take it home and put in on their refrigerator and so there would be Annie's Garden Store, you know, and they would remember Annie's.

All of which is to get back to this idea, so when people would come to the store — I knew people because I'm very intuitive so I can figure people out fairly quickly and I'm interested in people, you know, all people and so I get to know people and who they're children [are] and when they're going on vacation and you know — well, I'd ask another gardening store. So I'd have this little stack of poems and a person would come in who I knew and I'd say, "I've got just the right poem for you." Now I didn't always do this, sometimes I'd just take the one on the top, but there were times when I would just know just the right one, or if we were talking and they were saying, "This is how it means to me," and blah blah blah, and I would go through my little pile and I would find just the one. And there were times when I cried with customers across the counter, you know, reading mostly Mary Oliver poems, and they would stand there and read it silently and tear up and I would tear up with them, you know, because of — and they would look at me after they finished the poem and say, "Oh, that was just what I needed."

That is — I have a gift for that. I have a gift for knowing what will open you up or what will help you see a little bigger and that's who I — that's how I would describe myself. And I don't know what that's called

but it isn't a feminist, it isn't a political thing, it isn't a theoretical thing, it doesn't have a label that's part of any movement. It's more of a ministerial thing, it's more of a — parish priest would play this kind of role. And I used to talk about Annie's as my church and I'd have the sign and I would be changing the sign and talking to all the people driving by all the time and, you know, at best, my best work has been ministry. It really has been ministry. [I was a] Religion major back at Carolina and you know (laughs) it's just — I don't know, I think that's been my work, so I guess maybe I should call myself a minister. (laughs)

WILSON: Did you ever think about being a minister?

CHEATHAM: Well, yeah I — when I was coming along, women couldn't be ministers, couldn't be ordained in the Episcopal Church which is my home church. So I went and I majored in Religion at Chapel Hill with the idea that I wanted to work in the church, and when I graduated I went to see the bishop of the diocese in North Carolina and he was very smart and he said — I said, "I want a job in the church," and he said, "Why don't you go get a job in the world for a year and after that come back and see me," and of course I never went back. But he was smart, he could see that I probably needed a bigger world or something.

But there was no place for me to be a minister at that time, and I don't know that that would have been the best use of me anyway, but — I'm probably not patient enough for that, and I'm not interested in — I'm really afraid of intimacy, so a retail situation or a situation where I just know you slightly, but deeply, but infrequently, is my best — I'm at my best in that situation. I'm not afraid. When I'm in a — you know, [in] my relationship with Anne I see myself shutting down and closing off my heart, who — she's a absolutely precious person, warm and wonderful, kind human being, perfect for me and nobody to be afraid of, but I am afraid of really close relationships. So I get afraid in them, but I don't in this other situation where I see people infrequently or slightly but I can know them well and [for a] short time. So ministry would require you not to be afraid, it really — [you] need to sink down with people and stay there and I'm better when I can sort of touch and — feelingly and meaningfully and mean it, but not have the demand continue, you know, every day for seven days a week. I think that would be a difficult environment for me, emotionally.

WILSON: One of the things that I was reminded of as you were kind of talking about this form of ministry that you have done is the metaphor you've used about kind of enriching the soil-

CHEATHAM: Yeah.

WILSON: -everywhere you go. So I kind of wanted to take that on a very literal level and ask you a little bit about how gardening has played a role in your life.

CHEATHAM: Mmm. Well, it's central. My father was a big gardener and some of my happiest days were in the garden with him. He was a wonderful teacher, taught me things, showed me how to do things, was not condescending in any way, patronizing. Probably one of the reasons I felt confident as a girl, a woman, is he — he was not a healthy man, particularly, strong emotionally, but he was kind and he was a wonderful teacher and he knew how to do everything. And he passed that on to me, he told me how the world worked, or how things worked. So he was a big gardener and [I] hung around with him and [he] taught me a lot. And also we spent — we were very self-sufficient in our food production, so we canned and froze and handled a lot of our own food and my father raised chickens and we had our own meat, some of it, and so we lived off the land in a — we were in a country town and so everybody lived that way, it's what everybody did. So I was, you know, [it] was sustenance I could — I was eating what we were growing and was growing up eating locally. [There] was no other way that we lived and so I carried that forward. I had gardens always, I — there were times when I didn't, but I always loved markets and I've always liked preparing food from scratch and haven't ever eaten a lot of processed food. And it was a real easy step for me to take to start a garden store. It was like sharing what I know and what I love. Sometimes I think I should have been born in the last century or — 1800s, you know, where [they] really were required to be — I loved *Little House on the Prairie* and, you know, that whole life of being self-sufficient and I liked the challenge of that. I think I would have been good in that world, resourceful and smart.

So yes, very, very central and I just really believe in the whole system of the cycles of seasons, and composting is my — is where I really experience resurrection and all the spiritual truths of transformation and rebirth and it comes — you know, it's just (pause) so explicit in the composting process to me. It's just my favorite activity in the world, over anything, is building a compost pile, adding to it, turning it, watching the magic of what happens to orange peels and avocado pits, you know, over time. I — it's just a miracle, it is a miracle what goes on and it — there it is, before your eyes: there is no death, there is no separation. (tears) Very meaningful process for me.

I read a story in the *Recorder* yesterday. Some students in Sunderland started a worm composting pile in the first grade or kindergarten. There was a picture of these little children's hands holding all these worms in a compost — you know, for children to start seeing this, being part of that — and I don't remember my father doing a lot of composting. I don't know when I fell in love with composting, but I just — it really carries for me all the Buddhist teachings and all the Christian

teachings and Jewish teach — it's just all there in that process of — you put one thing in and it doesn't go away; it just changes form and comes back as something that's so precious to put on the garden. And you can't manufacture such a nutritious thing to put back in the garden as happens in the natural process.

So it just reminds me of — you know, there's no fear, there is no anger there, there's no politics there, it's just goodness and it's not a — it's what love is I suppose, although I don't ever — I don't think about it like that. I do love that part of it. And I love enriching — and then putting that back in the soil and making that — whatever that space of garden is, as big as this rug, you know, or an acre, just — I can't help but want to make it — and I don't even want make it better, I just do make it better, because I want to compost and I want things to go back in and come back out, because I'm taking from it with the food I'm growing and so — how to replenish it.

Wendell Berry's got a wonderful poem and — I forget which one it is — but he ends up, "what is profit," and topsoil and compost and leaf mold, I think, some list like that, wonderful things, and that's what I — we get all upset about the economy and money and the most important thing we have is our soil and—I don't know. So yes it's very (dog barks) central to my — it's just a metaphor or experience of how I can touch what I think is really essential in all the religious teachings of the world

And I don't—I'm afraid a lot, so I don't — mmm — I haven't internalized it all yet. I still think death is the end. I still think I'm different from you, there's a separation, I'm me and you're you. I don't understand what the Buddhists (dog barks) get to when they understand there's no difference and we're all one, that whole thing that I see in the compost. So I haven't internalized that yet, I still haven't reached nirvana, but I have the teacher I need. I haven't learned the lesson, except I can see the story but I haven't internalized the story.

WILSON: Did your passion for gardening lead you at all — was it connected to your involvement with CISA?

CHEATHAM: Yeah. I was on the board. I was running Annie's and they approached me and asked me would I get on the board. Actually when CISA was first formed, I was — because I had Annie's — I was invited to participate in some visioning sessions about what this new organization would be, so I was there at the beginning of the organization and that way — but then they came asked me to be on the board, because I was running Annie's and so I was related to agriculture. That was why I was asked. And so that connection — I was doing horticulture and mostly CISA's agriculture, but there — anyway. So yeah, that was — and I'm very — I grew up around farmers, and grew up in a rural place, so I really like farmers, I know how to talk to farmers, I know what they worry about, you know, I know — and I had a lot of relationships with farmers from Annie's,

because I bought locally, grown plants and stuff and I even carried produce for a while. So it was a nice fit for me.

So I was on the board three years and then I was winding down. I burned out from — I usually burn out — I burned out from running Annie's and had — I like starting things, I like sort of making things new, or starting up, or fixing something that's not running very well, which was CISA's situation. But once they're up and going, running, I'm not the greatest manager. I don't like all the tedium of personnel and paperwork and bookkeeping and, you know, all that stuff you've got to do when you got a bigger system. So I had reached the end of where I was enjoying myself at Annie's. So the directorship at CISA was — [the] director was let go and we really didn't have a strong organization to advertise and so I said I would do an interim directorship at CISA for a couple months and I was there seven years (laughs) Anyway. It was a good fit for me. I enjoyed it a lot. It was fun.

WILSON: You talk about gardening being a very fun, I imagine, but also very spiritual, practice. Does it at all enter into the realm of politics for you, in terms of the eating locally movement or-

CHEATHAM: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: -sustainable-

CHEATHAM: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: - growing, and that kind of thing?

CHEATHAM: Yep. Yeah, I'm reading Michael Palin and I hope President Obama plants a five-acre garden on his south lawn of the White House and I hope he hires a White House farmer to manage it and Michael Palin's idea, which he proposed in his last *New York Times* article — I think that would be fantastic. I think, the way we eat and the way our food system works is pretty broken and our politics around food are not fair to most of us and they really — yeah, I really am involved in the politics of food and the food industry. It's — we have industrialized something that does produce a lot of product but at a cost to us and at a cost to our soil and our resources and our health. And so I'm finding that I want to stay in agriculture and food issues now that I've left CISA and have some — I'm working on three projects at the moment that are all related on food systems or — it's [a] very, very important issues.

WILSON: How do you see it as being broken?

CHEATHAM: Well we've got this system that's really based on fossil fuel inputs and we're running out of them and they're more and more expensive. We're

trucking food long distances. We're keeping animals in the most inhumane environments, feeding them unnatural diets as a way to produce cheap meat. We're rewarding large corporations that can — and [we have] practices that reward — that produce this quantity of food. We have a — in America anyway — a very heavy meat diet, that is exceedingly hard to sustain. And unfortunately populations in Asia and other places are getting more onto the meat diet, so it's even more demanding on our resources. You know the corn syrup story of why there's so much obesity. This is cause there's cheap corn, although it's more expensive now cause of ethanol, but now we've got farmers, you know, they're growing fuel and not food, chasing the dollar there.

We're doing all this at the expense of local farmers and regional food production, and we're undermining farmers in other countries of — a good example, I went to Cuba few years ago with an agriculture tour. And the U.S. dumps chicken wings — well, sells chicken wings to Cuba from all the breasts. You know, every restaurant has chicken breasts something-or-other and every — you know, you go to a Burger King and you want a chicken sandwich and it's a breast. So the birds are grown in this country just for the breasts so the legs and the wings are just — nobody wants them. So they are offered on the international market to places like Cuba for three cents a pound. Well, they buy them in Cuba because they can't grow chicken for three cents a pound and they need protein. So the poultry farmers in Cuba go out of business because they can't compete with three cents a pound chicken, and so you lose the farmers in Cuba who used to know how to do poultry. [They] quit and go to town and try to get a job sweeping the streets or something or whatever.

So our policies not only undermine farmers in western Massachusetts who have to compete in this global market but they undermine people around the globe, farmers around the globe, because we have all this product that we can sell cheap, because we're raising chickens for breast meat so we can all have those chicken filets at Zen Restaurant, wherever we're eating.

But so those kinds of things, and all that is unknown or — you know, people don't know all those stories and don't make all those connections and — but anyway. How to energize the local regional food system so that it can meet more demand, that's really what my focus has been, and I don't know enough about the industrial food system to go too far down that road. I mean, I'm not an activist in the food system anymore than I was an activist in the feminist — women's — feminist movement. My focus is on how can we connect the consumer to the farmer so that the consumer understands more about what this relationship means and how they can benefit if it works better, and the farmers get the support of the local consumers so they get to stay in business and make a profit and so it's attractive for young people to go into it. And so I'm really focused on what works and what's positive and how to, again, connect those groups together that need to connect in order for it to work,

more than I'm focused on changing agricultural policy. I'm not a policy wonk or expert. I don't — that is at the root of the problem. It's not my area of expertise or the place I would end up, [or where] I think I would spend much time, but I appreciate that it's — and there're are people that do that very well and my, again, my focus is going be on that relationship and how to help people understand each other and build the system, make the system stronger that way, than to go out and lobby for shutting down, you know, animal CAFOs—Confined Animal Farming Operations.

WILSON: So I see just such a strong thread through everything of connections and kind of facilitating connections-

CHEATHAM: Mm-hmm.

WILSON: -between people. What other kinds of threads, if any, do you see in kind of the long list of things you've done?

CHEATHAM: Well I've said, one time I feel like I've been an educator all these years, teacher, but I've more than — I've mostly been trusting that there would be — if I could — if the connection could happen, people would learn. I remember when I taught seventh grade, my philosophy about teaching was you can't teach anybody anything. You can teach people how to learn. They'll teach themselves if they know how to learn. And so what I try to do is listen to what you want to know, what are you interested in, and then, as I'm reading *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times* or something, reading anything, seeing a movie, than I think, Ah, Claire is curious about this thing, Something about this. And so I'll send her that. So it's the same with food and people. People want good food and people — it's pretty fundamental — people want — that's what's nice about it, one of the nicest things about it. It's not an idea, it's an essential thing. And people want to eat well and eat good food and they want to do the right thing if they can, if they can understand what that can be. And so it's helping people make that connection around food is fun and really easy, even for poor people who don't have money, because they like good food. Everybody likes good food and fresh food and they like — and farmers are nice people to know, so if you can get people — I'm thinking of farmers markets — you know, if you can get even people that use food stamps to go to farmer's markets and start those relationships, that would improve the diet of that low-income person.

So I don't think I'm answering your question, but the connections, making the connections, educating, but not really teaching as much as showing, here's—I thought of you when I read this or saw this and I'm putting something in your way that, that may help you think more about whatever it is you're thinking about.

WILSON: Another thread that I kind of see is you've done a lot of work that has dealt with the future in a variety of different ways. So this is kind of — I mean all historical moments are interesting, but this is kind of an interesting historical moment too. So I was wondering how, how do you feel about the future right now? Does it feel different than it did when you were working on "The Future is Female" project or when you were working in Congress?

CHEATHAM: I feel about the same, which is pretty hopeful mostly and that — it is because of you and young people and the power of thinking, I can, I can make a difference. And that doesn't die. That is such a power — a strong force that young people have and feel and that's always coming, it's just — there's always a new wave of young people who see something and [say], We'll figure this out, we'll, you know, we're going to fix this, or we're going make this better. And so there are always people that will — (dog barks) I think there are forces, you know, the end of peak oil, the climate change, I mean there's certainly some major, um, environmental forces that are daunting and really scary. And will the human race survive this? I mean, you could have all the young people saying yes we can forever and still, you know, the sea levels rise four or five feet.

So I think we're in for some hard future in the environmental side, and all that that will create in society and cultures and everything, economies and everything. I think — I knew Bucky, Buckminster Fuller when I was working in Congress, and I had the very great privilege of once of introducing him to — it wasn't the National Press Coverage Club, but it was something like that. And I had, I interviewed him a little bit before I wrote the introduction and one of the things that I said [was], "What do you think about the future, Bucky?" He said — this was about 1978, '79 I guess — he said, "I think we got about fifty years, you know, if we can turn it around, maybe, we've got — we've really got to change some things." And of course we've squandered 25 of those, but, you know, now hopefully we'll (dog barks) get things going in a different direction.

So I don't think it'll be — I think we'll still have wars and aggression and terrible misunderstandings and I don't see world peace being achievable, you know, unless we can deal with this sort of male — that testosterone aggression. That female — that feminine dominance isn't with us. Whether it will ever become dominant, I don't know. It hasn't been dominant in the world. I'm — I certainly am afraid, deeply afraid (dog barks) for Obama's life and I — today I was walking around and I was thinking, Can we stand this much good? Will the world allow — I mean, it didn't allow Jesus, it didn't allow Martin Luther King, didn't allow Gandhi, didn't allow (dog barks) you know, Bobby Kennedy, didn't allow Abraham Lincoln. I mean, the world doesn't want this kind of goodness and so I'm really terrified, you know, we're going to lose him. (dog barks) And this is how we felt in the '60s when Kennedy was

elected, this hopefulness, this joy, this — um, I would just — I can't — it's hard to even — I'm — just to think we've got — we would have to go through that kind of trauma and lose him. So I'm really afraid for that and all of us that've lived through this Kennedy experience, this is a repeat of that, the feeling of elation. This is very similar. But, you know, so is — can good exist? It keeps coming back, it does keep coming (dog barks) up and reasserting itself so — the Dalai Lama's certainly been with us a long time and (dog barks) and so hopefully we'll have the gift of this man and his family for a while, as long as he can be there for us.

But, you know, it is — people are — anyway, so I think even if we lost him we would go on and we would have had this experience of this great joy and this great hope. And the Dalai Lama says never lose hope, and I think maybe we had almost, and so this is why this feels so good. It reminds us that maybe we should never lose hope, (dog barks) that we'll have this again. So I don't think it's going to be easy, but when is it ever? And I do think the goodness will keep coming up and keep coming back (dog barks) and people's commitment to finding answers and making the connections and learning and growing and that compost, it will transform into some new life, and that it's all alive, you know, even the (dog barks) terror, even the fear of death or assassination or the moment of joy. It's all there in the compost pile, it's just all there and it's all alive and it's all good and the future (dog barks) will be made up of all those parts and it will — it'll go on. (dog barks)

WILSON: Is there anything else you (dog barks) would like to talk about? I know we're kind of coming to the end of our time. It's been so nice.

CHEATHAM: (dog barks) No, I think that's all I need to say. Any other questions you have or — (dog barks) let me just let her in and-

WILSON: Ok.

CHEATHAM: -it won't be distracting by that. (gets up, indistinct speech, door opening, whistling, calling, door slams, indistinct speech, clears throat) So when I can keep my focus on the compost pile I'm not afraid.

WILSON: Um-

CHEATHAM: She's trying to get over to her bed and she doesn't want to go through the tripod. (laughter)

WILSON: Do you have a proudest accomplishment?

CHEATHAM: I guess overall I'm pleased with the choices I've made. I haven't amassed a lot of money, I didn't stay in one place so I have no retirement anywhere (laughs) so at this point my life is sort — I'm in a sort of place that's scary

because I don't have the security, because of the choices I made. But I really followed my heart. I followed my passion, and I did good work in all that I touched and a lot of what I've done lives on and continues. So I'm pleased with how I've done things, and that I wasn't afraid to sell my house and get in a car and ride all over Canada and the U.S. talking to women, and I wasn't afraid to go to Taiwan and teach school. I've needed to have a small, secure base to do those things from. I haven't been — I didn't get on a backpack and just travel all over the world by myself for two years, you know, I needed a home, a nest, so I'm — but anyway, I haven't been afraid to jump. I didn't know anything about retail but I wasn't afraid to start a garden store because I knew about gardening and I knew I could figure out what people wanted and I could get it for them. It wasn't rocket science to start a retail business. So I think that's — and I, I've been successful, just to pay everything. So things turned out pretty good. It wasn't all easy but I feel like I have contributed to the compost. I mean, we all do, whether what we do is successful or not, it — my time hasn't been — my time has been fruitful on the earth. And I've been lucky, you know. I was privileged, white, I knew how to work the system, wasn't afraid of power, people with power or influence. Had good teachers along the way [who] encouraged me. Made the most of what I had. I, you know, [you] can always do more, but I didn't take too many easy ways out. But I wasn't even thinking, Do the hard thing. It was like, just follow my heart, you know, what do I want to do, where is my passion. And I'm in a place right now where I don't know and I've been in that place before. I mean, before I started Annie's I was floundering around, I didn't know what to do, was going back to school to UMass to get my doctorate and I was — I didn't know what to do. When I was getting ready to leave Annie's, and I was tired of doing Annie's, I didn't know what I was going to do. CISA wasn't there. So I'm in one of those times and so I've had those times. They're scarier, really, than doing something, and I'm in one of them now, so — but I've — something's come up, you know, something's clicked and when it clicks then I go right for it and do it passionately and well.

WILSON: Is there anything else?

CHEATHAM: That's it.

WILSON: Ok.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Claire Wilson, December 2008

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