

*Civil Rights History Project*  
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Interviewee: Marilyn Hildreth  
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Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 33:16

John Bishop: Now we're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: This is Tuesday, the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, with filmmaker, uh, John Bishop, and we are here for the joint project of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, a national oral history series called – [speaking to unidentified person] no problem – called the Civil Rights History Project.

Marilyn Hildreth: [Speaking to unidentified person] See you. Thank you.

Unidentified Female: All right, you're welcome.

MH: I'm sorry.

JM: No trouble at all. And we're just, um, easing into the first of what will be, uh, two sessions this afternoon, one with Ms. Marilyn Hildreth. Uh, her surname at birth, of course, is

Luper, and then her brother Calvin Luper. Uh, Ms. Hildreth, thank you so much for welcoming us to Oklahoma City. It's a real honor and pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

MH: Thank you for coming.

JM: Um, we're interested, obviously, to, um, hear really about your – to begin – about your mother. Um, of course, we'll want to hear much from you about your own experience directly, as you were right in the middle of all of what happened in the late '50s, early '60s, here in Oklahoma City. But could I ask you just to talk a little bit, to begin, about your mother?

MH: I would love to. That's a good starting point. My mother has been an educator most of her life. She had the opportunity to teach at Dunjee High School, which is in Spencer, Oklahoma – some of us call the country – young people that have never, ever had any opportunities to see anything but their immediate environments. Mom wrote a play called “Brother President,” the story of Martin Luther King, and the young people of Dunjee were able – she wrote it, and they produced the play. A guy by the name of Herbert Wright with the NAACP was here in Oklahoma City and saw the play and invited the group of young people to the NAACP National Convention to produce “Brother President.” Oh, everyone was so excited! But, by her being a history teacher, she decided to give us a lesson in history.

Before “Brother President,” if you could walk with me through the streets of Oklahoma City, during that period of time, we could go down, in downtown Oklahoma City and shop in any store. But you could not try on a hat. You could not try on shoes. When my grandmother went to buy me shoes, she had to take some thread and tie a knot in it to determine the size shoe that she would buy for me to wear. You could not eat in any restaurant. You would have to go to the back of the restaurants and they would pass you a brown bag.

Come on and keep walking with me in Oklahoma City. There – we could not live across N.E. 7<sup>th</sup> Street in Oklahoma City. We could not use the same telephone booths. One was earmarked “White” and the other “Colored.” We could not even drink out of the same water fountains. And I could continue on and on, but I just wanted you to feel where we were coming from in this period of time.

So, the advisors and the young people that were involved in “Brother President” got together and said, “Okay.” Mom said, “I’m a tell you what I’m going to do. We’re going to go the northern route and we’re going to come back the southern route.” Everybody was so excited! And when that trip started and we started to New York City, something happened. For the first time in our lives, we were able to go and sit down and drink a Coke in a restaurant! We were able to go in the same restaurant as everybody else and eat a hamburger! We were even able to drink out of the same water fountain as other folks!

Oh, we’d never seen anything like this, because a hundred percent of the people on that trip, the young people, had never been out of Oklahoma. So, we thought that that’s the way it was supposed to be in Oklahoma and the United States [0:05:00] of America. Oh, we went to New York and we had a wonderful time, the experiences and being able to tour all the great historical monuments there.

JM: You were about eleven years old, I think.

MH: No, I was younger. I was younger. So, what happened was, on our way back, we came back the southern route and faced the *age-old* discrimination – the same thing that we thought that we had to go through and found out that we didn’t, we were slapped in the face with it again.

They used to tell us, they said, “A little bit of freedom is a dangerous thing.” So, when we came back to Oklahoma City, we were all gung-ho and ready to go, because we had had that taste of freedom. And we started negotiating with the restaurants here in Oklahoma City, and they told us that they didn’t want to deal with us. And it kept going on and on, and it seemed like forever to me.

And one Monday night at our house at 1819 N.E. Park [Street], we were having an NAACP Youth Council meeting, and I was eight years old at that time. That’s how I can remember that I was not ten years old. [Laughs] And I – we were talking about our experiences and our negotiation – and I suggested, made a motion that we would go down to Katz Drug Store and just sit, just sit and sit until they served us.

Needless to say, a lot of people were not happy about it. And, as a matter of fact, they were actually – some of them were really mean to us. They would spit on us. They would kick us. They would call us names. They would tell [us], “Nigger, go home!”

But they didn’t deter us. And most of the young people – the thirteen original sit-inners were young people, and we didn’t know fear as fear like we know now. We thought we were on a job and on a mission and something that we had to do. So, we continued to go back and we continued to sit in. And, as you know, we went from restaurant to restaurant to restaurant until the walls of segregation started falling down in Oklahoma City. Oh, many interesting things happened.

JM: I want to ask you, um, for example, Katz’s –

MH: Katz.

JM: Katz, excuse me. Katz desegregates its lunch counter in a couple of days.

MH: Yes.

JM: A couple other businesses do the same.

MH: Yes.

JM: In fairly quick order.

MH: Yes.

JM: How did that feel? And what – what did that suggest to you about your activism and its prospects?

MH: That the walls came tumbling down. We were on a mission. And the mission would not be complete – it was like a strategy during a war. That mission would not be complete until every restaurant in Oklahoma City would allow people of color and would not discriminate because of the fact that they were black.

JM: Your mother, as a leader of this group, I think the – what was the approximate age range of those thirteen children that first night at Katz?

MH: Six to about sixteen.

JM: Six to about sixteen, yeah. Um, your mother would become such a focal point and such a leader across the next six years in all of the protest activity, uh, all the direct action. And, um, I'm interested, too, in your thoughts about her as a woman in that role of leadership, because, of course, most of the local hierarchy of every other sort would have been male.

MH: At that particular time, I did not look at it like that. My mother came from a very interesting family. Her father was a dreamer, and my mother was a dreamer. My mother was a reader, an educator, and she believed that we, as a race of people, could not advance unless we were educationally equipped. That's – I laugh, because a lot of kids would get a lot of toys for Christmas. We would get books. It is something she believed in. And when she believed in something strong enough, she would go to the end of the world for it.

And I often wondered [0:10:00] – I often wondered where she got her strength from. Because for me to sit here and tell you it was easy for her – they tried to fire her from the school system. People in the white community hated her. People in the black community did not want to be associated with her. It was not easy during that time.

JM: How *did* she hang on to her job?

MH: God.

JM: Um-hmm.

MH: As a matter of fact, [clears throat] [I'll] tell you something you don't know. They had come to a teacher in the Dunjee School System to promote him to be principal, and he could become principal. The only job he had to do was fire Clara Luper. That's the only thing he had to do in order to become principal. He did not do it.

JM: Interesting. Hm.

MH: And as the history – you look back over the time, the road that she's come – it's – it was hard. It was difficult. But one thing about her that I just love to death: You could knock her down, but you could not keep her down. And she would tell the kids – and she would prepare us to participate in the sit-in movement by teaching us the nonviolent movement. Social change – what could happen if we would do this and we would do that. We could not win with violence.

Every morning we had the same lesson. She would tell us, "If you not tough enough go to the hardware store and buy you some Tuf-Skin and get tough, because life is not fair. You must be prepared and you must continue to fight." That's what she taught us. She taught us about Gandhi and the nonviolent movement. We had to learn the steps. We had to learn how to be free.

JM: Let me ask you another thing about your mother. This is so interesting. In *Behold These Walls*, your mother's memoir and autobiography about that era, um, she says at one point – I was very struck by this – she says at one point that she – she alludes to, you know, in essence, that she wasn't really a person to feel too much fear.

MH: Um-hmm.

JM: And yet, she encountered so many situations, and many of them were full of all kinds of risks and dangers and aggressive, hostile people. I'm just wondering if you can talk a little bit about your mother's – kind of who she was organically and how that related to the role that she played as an activist.

MH: My mother came from –

JM: And leader.

MH: – a place called Hoffman, Oklahoma, in Okfuskee County. She would always say that she top in her class, she was in the top five of her class, but it was only five students in her class. She did not have the same textbooks in Hoffman as they had in other schools. They had the leftover books. So, she would tell me when they would start reading a story and get to page nine, it might not – the pages would start again at page twenty-one.

And for years and years, I asked myself, "Where did my mom get that toughness? How could she keep on ticking?" No matter what – I've seen her and the adversity she's been through. But then I started thinking, really thinking. I thought about her father. I thought about her mother. I thought about her brother that died because he was not allowed to be treated in the hospital only because that he was black. I think that that was the basic foundation, and a strong belief in God, that gave her that added strength. Because what – she would say, "What happened

to my brother, no child deserves that.” So, she continued and she fought with injustice as long as she could. And she’s still fighting. She’s still hanging on.

But I’m going to tell you something. I think that during this whole crisis, I’ve only seen my mother face fear once that I can remember. I know there must have been many times, but the time that impacted me the most, we were coming home from a freedom rally. And we had old raggedy cars, you know. Because all the kids were in our car, and you could just look out and see the ground a lot of times, but we rode anyway, a whole car full of people all the time. And we were coming home from this rally. And we noticed that a group of white guys, men, were behind us in an old pickup truck. And I thought that they were just going to pass us, or whatever. [0:15:00] But they didn’t. And the closer that we would get to home, our destination, the closer they would follow us.

So, the spokesperson for the NAACP Youth Council is a young lady who’s now a professor at a university down in Georgia by the name of Barbara Posey. And her father was a *big* man, and when I say big, he was a big man. And Mom said, told us, told Calvin and I, said, “These people are following us, and this is what I want you to do. When I turn this corner on N.E. 14<sup>th</sup> [Street], I’ll be blowing my horn and I want you to run up to the Poseys’ and knock on their door as hard as you can! I don’t know what these guys want, but whatever they want is not right. Now, do you understand me? Don’t say anything, but do exactly what I tell you to do. Open that door. I’m a drive up there as close to the steps as I can get. And run and knock that door down!” And that’s what we did.

But when we did that, and they let us in that house, my mother drove away. I think that that’s one of the greatest fears that I’ve ever had, because my thought was, “Will I see my mama

again? [Sounds tearful] Is it worth it that my mother would not come back to us?" Every time I think about that, I –

JM: Yeah.

MH: I just say, "Thank you, God, for the experience, and thank you for letting my mom come back home to us."

JM: I want to ask about – I want to ask about your mom's relationship with a couple of different, um – a couple of different, um, sets of folks. One is the, um – your family – you were members of which church?

MH: Fifth Street Baptist.

JM: Exactly. And can you talk a little bit about your mother's relationship with your pastor and the community of, uh, the network of black pastors in the city?

MH: She was loved by some, she was feared by some, and disliked by some. That's just the way it was.

JM: And the reasons were –?

MH: Fear. We met – in the churches that we would meet in, many of them were threatened. Some of the other congregations didn't want us there, because they were scared that their church would be bombed. But then those are the people that stood up, stood up with us. So, as you know, by being a historian that you are, that the Civil Rights Movement here was based on the small people, the have-nots, the maids, the garbage workers. We did not have a lot of the professional black people involved because of the fear of losing their jobs.

And even – my grandmother was a maid. And my grandmother, in order to educate my mother and her two other siblings, moved into the servant quarters in Nichols Hills to nurse somebody else's kids in order to educate my mom. And during the Civil Rights Movement, my

mother – my grandmother was still a maid [pause], with the nickels and dimes and the sweat and tears.

But then, those that were committed to the Movement were committed. We used to sing a song, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around,” and that’s what we did. And some of them had to write notes, and they would put it under our door, the strategy, because they didn’t want to physically be seen becoming involved in it. But somebody had to stand up.

JM: Let me ask you, too, about –

JB: Let’s pause just a sec to, um –

JM: Okay. Yep.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We’re back on after a short pause. Um, I want to ask, too, about your mother and the youth councils and all this sort of – the whole community of folks who took action – the relationship of that community to the police department. We touched on this before we began our filming today. I’m really interested in the role of law enforcement in all of those many, many, many, many protest moments when [0:20:00] – because Oklahoma City, on balance, was relatively free of heavy violence.

MH: Um-hmm. We had some small incidents of violence.

JM: Yeah.

MH: But I think that Oklahoma City consciously made a decision that we did not want to become the focus point of America through the violent aspects of it. And we had a good relationship with the police department. Mom was only arrested twenty-six times! She was not beaten up. You know, *we* were arrested.

But I think that somewhere along the line that Oklahoma City leadership knew that they was doing a great injustice to all of its residents. And that's why, I think, that we did not have any violence, because the good people decided, "Okay, let them protest. I don't know what will happen, but we're not going to be a part of it."

But, then, you had some other people who were kinda mean. A guy threw a chimpanzee on me!

JM: Just – I'm going to ask you just to say that again and explain it in a little bit more detail, because someone hearing this later might actually not understand what – that you're being literally truthful about that.

MH: No, no, I'm being truthful.

JM: Yeah.

MH: We were protesting, picketing, "I Want My Freedom." Walking around, and a man threw a chimpanzee on me. You know, a chimpanzee – [makes sound effect] I was very small then – I'm a little heavier now, but I was very small then, and the chimpanzee was almost as big as I was. And that was not a good day. That was not a good day.

JM: I want to ask a couple of more things about your mother, and then I want to ask you about some of your – what you – you were a child, really, a young child, a relatively young child, moving through all of this. Um, uh, where do you think, ultimately, your mother's, um, political savvy came from? And she seemed to be a very skillful manager of all of the issues that needed to be managed to move forward in a successful way. Did she have innate skills in that area? Did she have – do you think it was part of what she had studied? She was a historian. Um, do you think, um – do you think she had key allies who helped her debate those issues and come up with good strategies? I'm interested in your perspective on that.

MH: I think it was all of the above. Her hobby was to read Congressional Records.

[Laughter] Now, who reads Congressional Records everyday? I mean, that's what she did. We have thousands of Congressional Records where she's underlined the high points. She knew everybody, *everybody*, here in Oklahoma, people that could make a difference and people that could not. She knew, and she was like the voice of the people. When they had problems, when their problems became struggles, when their hope was lost, they came to her. Nothing just happens. I think that she was *groomed* in history for her day.

JM: Can you talk a little about your dad and his relation to all of this?

MH: Well, my mother and dad got divorced at an early age, right in the midst of it. It was a lot for him to handle. He was an electrician. He was a fun loving, crazy – you would love to be around him, because he was always laughing and joking. But I think that the real pressure, that he couldn't handle. That's what I really think. We never discussed it. He died a few years ago. But it was just, I think, too much for him to deal with.

JM: Tell me about, um, when you think back through those – all of those protests, all of those long, repeated difficult protests, for *years*, um, what do you – what are some of the things that stand out in your memory as the most important things to tell someone about all of that, so that they understand [0:25:00] kind of the essence of – if it can be explained in any shorthand way. I'm not sure it can.

MH: It can be. Every Saturday of my young life [laughs] was spent protesting. We did not have the joys of going to amusement parks, because they were not open to us. And even after they became open, most of the young people that participated in the sit-ins did not have the money to even attend the amusement parks. The closeness of the young people that participated in the Movement, throughout not just Oklahoma, but throughout this nation, is one that you can't

really understand unless you were there. We celebrated our fifty-year anniversary here, and young people came from all over the United States to be a part, standing room only.

JM: They must have loved that.

MH: Oh, yeah! And they started telling about their experiences and what they remember. We made recordings, anything that we can, because I'm *so glad* that we sat down here in Oklahoma City, because if we had not sat down here in Oklahoma City, young people throughout this nation would not have stood up. And when we think about it, it's like a whirlwind effect. And we did not realize the importance of what we were doing. We just wanted to make the social changes here. But little did we know it would have the whirlwind effect and change American history.

JM: Let me ask about, um, one last major theme. In 1972, your mother ran for the United States Senate.

MH: Um-hmm.

JM: Now, let's see, by '72 you were about how old?

MH: Oh, I don't know! [Laughter] Older than I was!

JM: [Laughing] Older than you had been!

MH: [Laughing] Yeah!

JM: Tell us about your – that's no small undertaking, and, um, I'm interested to have your recollections about that effort.

MH: I thought my mom had gone crazy. [Laughter] But it was a lot of fun, and I enjoyed joining her on the political campaign, because you can't out-debate Mom, because you're not going to out-read Mom, and she's going to be totally focused, whatever she's discussing, whether it's the governmental system – and if you start talking about government,

she's been studying government for the last fifty years, or the educational system, because she taught for forty years. I mean, she was – it was just well versed in all the issues. And she would go to little bitty small towns, I mean, towns that are as big as this couch, no black folks, and would say the same thing as she traveled throughout the state. And people of all races and creeds and colors were surprised that she was doing that, but they supported her. And I think that if she had just a little bit longer, or a little bit more time, or the year was different in history, that she would have, if elected, she would have made the greatest change that Oklahoma would have ever seen.

JM: Do you remember primary day?

MH: Oh, yeah. We lost, but that's okay. Like she said, "That's okay. We tried."

JM: Do you remember what she polled? What percent of the vote? Do you remember?

MH: No, I sure don't. But, surprisingly, it was more than people thought that she would throughout the state of Oklahoma. But I really, in all honesty, I can't remember right now. There's been a lot of water under the bridge since that time.

JM: Did she ever consider taking another run at public office?

MH: No. And I can't answer why. That was her decision.

JM: John, let's pause for just a second.

JB: Okay. Could we just – before we pause, I'd like everyone to be quiet. I want to get about thirty seconds of room tone. [15-second pause] [0:30:00]

JB: Okay, that's the sound of room tone. Guha, you're going to need that.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Good thing to talk about.

JB: Okay, we're rolling.

JM: We're back on after a short break. And, uh, to conclude today, um, we're going to talk a little bit about the sanitation workers' strike in the city, um, in I think summer of '68.

MH: Um-hmm.

JM: And, um, your mother served as spokesperson. And can you share some recollections about that episode?

MH: The sanitation workers represented a segment of our community. They were overworked and underpaid. I often wondered why she was selected as a spokesperson and I asked some of the sanitation workers why she was selected. And I was told that she understood the problem, she would be honest, and she was a woman of integrity, and if she said something she would stand by it and fight to the end. And many times in the sanitation strike, I think they thought the end was coming, too! Because on that Black Friday, Oklahoma City has never seen anything like it did that day. But it helped change the city. It helped change us because I think that somewhere we – *somewhere* we started to understand that so goes one of us, so goes all of us. And if you fail, I fail. And if I fail, you fail. We're all in this spot together.

The [clears throat] other thing is that I think that Mom represented people that just couldn't represent themselves. You ask me if she – was she afraid? Not that I know of. And she taught me this, and she would say it to me every day. First of all, she would say – when she would wake me up in the mornings, she would say, "Do you want to continue your education today?" That's number one. And in the evening she would say, when we would complain about anything, she would always – and made us learn this: To believe in the rain when the rain didn't fall, and to believe in the sun when the sun didn't shine, and to believe in a God that you've never seen. That's who Clara Luper is.

JM: Ms. Hildreth, thank you so much for sharing part of your afternoon with us today and welcoming us to Oklahoma City. We're very, very pleased to have talked to you about, um, your mother and yourself and your family in this context. Thank you.

MH: You're welcome.

[Recording ends at 0:33.16]

END OF INTERVIEW

Sally Council

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