

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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Arkansas Memories Project

Janis Kearney

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

February 27, 2006

Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Double underscores indicate two people talking at the same time.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
 - annotations for clarification and identification; and
 - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.
- All geographic locations mentioned in the transcript are in the state of Arkansas unless otherwise indicated.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed Janis Kearney on February 27, 2006, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Okay, what we're doing today—I—I kinda [kind of] start this way, is we're videotaping—uh—really for two purposes today.

Janis Kearney: Mh-hmm.

SL: One is for the Barbara and David [David and Barbara] Pryor Center—uh—for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

JK: Oh yeah. Mh-hmm.

SL: And so this will get submitted into the Special Collections . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . Department at—um—Mullins Library . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . run by Tom Dillard.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—a great guy.

JK: Yeah.

SL: And—um—we—we will do the same with the videotaping that we do tonight . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . down in Giffels Auditorium.

JK: Okay.

SL: Um—the only—um—down side about all this is that I've only got an hour with you now. [JK laughs] Um—I like to budget about four or five hours to do this stuff.

JK: Right. Right.

SL: And it's pretty exhausting.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: It's kinda of grueling.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

[00:00:47] SL: Um—the other—uh—portion of this—um—effort is to—um—put together a video to be shown at the Silas Hunt Legacy dinner . . .

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: . . . uh—in April.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: And I'm hopeful that you will be there.

JK: I'll be there.

SL: And you'll get to see . . .

JK: Definitely.

SL: . . . some of our craft here. [JK laughs] I hope I don't disappoint you.

JK: I was gonna [going to] say, "Did I actually say that?" [Laughter]

[00:01:12] SL: And you know, in the—in regard to that
production . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . uh—my charge is to try to discover the black history at the
University of Arkansas [Fayetteville].

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: And so I'm tempted to kinda start with that, although what I've
read from your childhood and the emphasis on education that
your parents gave your entire family—um—it's tempting not to
start at the home like I do with everyone else.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: But let's keep in mind that if we do that . . .

JK: Sure.

SL: . . . I may kind of push you over to the university's side of stuff.

JK: That's fine.

SL: But I—I—I am interested in—um—Gould . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . uh—versus Fayetteville.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: And I know that had to be [*JK laughs*] a big difference.

JK: Culture shock.

[00:02:07] SL: Well, then let's go ahead and—let's go ahead and

talk about—um—your—your life as a child. Number one, there are—there were seventeen of you? [Editor's Note: Janis Kearney was born in Gould, Arkansas, on September 29, 1953.]

JK: I grew up with seventeen. There were actually nineteen.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: My mother [Ethel Virginia Curry Kearney] had one, and my father [Thomas James Kearney] had one when they married.

SL: Ah.

JK: But we didn't grow up with them.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: But together they had seventeen.

[00:02:28] SL: Now where did you fall? Where—where did you fall in the . . .

JK: I was number twelve. There were actually, like, three groups of us.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: So I was the oldest of the youngest group.

SL: You were part of the—uh—I guess, the "fall crop."

JK: The fall crop, yeah. [*Laughter*]

SL: That's—that's the way my younger brother and I were . . .

JK: Uh-huh.

SL: . . . referred to.

JK: That's right.

[00:02:50] SL: Um—so, gosh, at—at number twelve, that still kinda puts you kind of in the middle of all that . . .

JK: Kind of in the middle.

SL: . . . middle child. [*Laughs*]

JK: But you know what I tell people? I said, "All of us were middle kids—everybody in the family—because there were so many of us.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: Except the oldest and the youngest. You know, we had a lot of middle children.

[00:03:12] SL: Okay, so paint me a—a picture of Gould.

JK: Gould. Uh—as I was growing up, Gould was cotton. Cotton was everywhere I looked. Uh—our house was, like, in the middle of cotton fields—uh—owned by two different farmers—large farmers. Um—but we lived on the outskirts of Gould. We actually lived in a place that some people called Varner because the road that we lived on was Varner Road. We lived—uh—I tell people—uh—if you're going down Highway 65 and—coming from Pine Bluff and you turn left, you're going to Cummins [Unit] prison farm, and if you turn right you're coming to our house.

SL: Wow.

[00:03:57] JK: So that's where we lived, out in the woods—the boonies of—uh—Gould. Gould itself—the—the town was very small. Uh—there were sixteen hundred population, and that number is still up on the sign. And I'm sure it's not correct, but—uh—we always said there were sixteen hundred people. It was almost—I would say almost equal black and white—uh—made up of—uh—blacks and whites there. And at—of course, at that time Arkansas was not diverse beyond black and white the way it is now. Um—there were—when I grew up in elementary school—uh—there were black schools; there were white schools—um—the way it was in most of Arkansas. And I went to an elementary all-black school, and by middle school, I went to what they called a "freedom of choice"—um—experiment, which was black parents could allow their children to go to the white school. And my parents, you know, because they were so high on education, said, "Okay, we're gonna let you go there—um—in hopes that you'll get a better education." So we were probably typical for very small towns in Arkansas and in the South, where—uh—"separate-but-equal"—all of those things were lawful. Uh—but also unlike what a lot of Northerners—uh—believe, there was—uh—there was a relationship—there were relationships between blacks and whites, and—and things were

not as segregated as I found in some of the Northern cities at the time. Uh—but we definitely—we were going through that era—that—uh—almost civil rights era when I was growing up in Gould.

[00:05:41] SL: So how long had your—I mean, were your—did your parents meet in Gould? Were they . . .

JK: No. My parents met—my mother is from southwest Arkansas.

SL: Mh-hmm.

JK: Magnolia. And my father actually met her—um—at a cousin's house down in that area. Um—and one of the Kearney legacies is that my father met my mother in a dream before they actually met, and that legacy has continued. And—uh—and he says he dreamed about her. He got sick—um—during the Christmas holiday. Then he visited—uh—her cousin right after Christmas. She was visiting, and he went in and saw this woman that he had just seen in her—in his dream a few days ago. He went through the house. He found her coat. He found her shoes. And everything that he had dreamed about was right there. And, you know, it was written that they would get married.

[00:06:44] SL: And this continues in your life?

JK: Yes, yes, yes. My—my child tells the story. All of my siblings' children tell that story. But my father never changed that story,

and my mother never said it wasn't true. She just said, "Yeah, that's what he told me." [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, by all accounts, you had remarkable folks for parents.

JK: They were remarkable.

SL: Exceptional.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:07:12] SL: Um—I would assume—when—when did they meet?
What year was that?

JK: Uh—they were married in 1937, so they met in 1936.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: Uh—they married pretty quickly. I think they dated for three months.

SL: So it was post-Depression.

JK: Mh-hmm. Right. Yeah.

SL: But . . .

JK: Right after.

SL: . . . had probably experienced it as . . .

JK: Sure . . .

SL: . . . as children.

JK: . . . sure. Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—you know, that was such a—a leveler for the country . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . at that time.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: I think—um—I don't know—if somehow or another that may have helped folks in Arkansas see each other as humans.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: Uh—and—uh—the suffering that everyone was having to go through.

[00:08:01] JK: I would think so. I would think so. My father—uh—during that time was traveling all over the country.

SL: Mh-hmm.

JK: He was—my father left home when he was eleven years old, and—uh—from that point up until he was in his early twenties, he just traveled from different places and ended up in Chicago [Illinois] was one of the first places. And one of the things I write about is the stories that he told about Chicago and—and things that were going on there and how he helped—he worked on the railroad there that is, you know, uh—one of the—the large things to see when you go to Chicago . . .

SL: Yeah.

JK: . . . now. Um—and how he worked in restaurants. You know, Chicago is known for its diversity—uh—and he worked in a Greek restaurant when he was there at—very young. So those are the

kinds of things that he grew up experimenting—experiencing.

[00:08:54] SL: So he—uh—he brought a—a well—well-rounded dose of diversity . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . with him to Arkansas.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: He was already—uh—well traveled by the time he'd met your mom.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:07] SL: And what about your mom? Tell me a little bit about her.

JK: My mom was from a—uh—family in southwest Arkansas who had land and they were a little—uh—they were educated. Uh—they were probably what you would call a quasi-middle-class black family.

SL: Mh-hmm.

JK: Not rich or wealthy, but they owned their own land, and—and they even at one point, I understand, had sharecroppers themselves. Uh—so she came from a different background—uh—from my father. And as a matter of fact—uh—they tell the story of how my mother's parents thought she was just really marrying below her standards when she married my father. And

it was a problem. So they ended up getting married, and—and
neither one of their families were there.

SL: Ouch.

JK: Yeah.

[00:09:58] SL: That's strong, though.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: There's no accounting for love, is there?

JK: No, no.

SL: Hmm. Is what it is.

JK: That's right.

[00:10:06] SL: Well, so I—the image I'm getting now is that you
had—uh—a mom that was educated—came from—um—roughly
middle-class upbringing—had some property . . .

JK: And actually, she was not educated. Her family was . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: . . . but she only went to the eighth grade . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: . . . which another—it's, you know, a whole other story. But she
only went to the eighth grade. And back in those days, women
very often—uh—didn't go beyond grammar school because they
had to leave home. Uh—they didn't have a high school that they
could've gone to, so she would've had to leave home to go to

high school, and her parents—uh—didn't let her go.

[00:10:45] SL: Well, you know, also back then by law . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . you didn't have to—kids didn't have to go beyond eighth grade.

JK: That's right.

SL: I mean, they were expected to work . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . as much as go on to high school.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: And—and I know that that—uh—ethic crops up again in—in your family.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: And—um—what an incredible commitment to do both.

JK: Right, right, right.

SL: I mean [*laughs*] . . .

[00:11:10] JK: And they were—they were committed to education for sure.

SL: Hmm.

JK: And—um—but they also had to live, and so my—my mother and father just made this kind of pact. Uh—my mother was so, so bent on making sure that we got our education, um—and my

father, too, but he also knew the real—realism of—of us having to help him with his farm. Uh—so they decided some of us would stay out of school during the fall when cotton-picking season came around. Uh—but my dad would make sure that we didn't fall behind. And the way he did that was to spend his nights after he came from the cotton field, making sure we did our homework—making sure we stayed up—um—you know, didn't fall behind, and it worked. It worked. Most of us ended up going back to school and being at the top of our classes.

[00:12:03] SL: Um—before we get to the school, I wonder if you could—well, first off, one of my questions—talk questions is, can you remember your very first—or can you kinda close your eyes and just remember the first time that you knew you were looking at your mom, and you knew you were looking at your dad or you saw them as mom and dad together. I mean, it doesn't have to be some kind of special event. It could just be . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . on the porch or comin' [coming] up the steps or whatever. I mean, there are—can you remember your . . .

[00:12:44] JK: Um—I—I think probably it was—um—at church. I mean, that's where a lot of my early memories come from

because that was such a big part of our lives, and I just know very early on, I remember seeing my parents together at church. They would, you know, go in together. And my father taught Sunday school lesson, and many times my mother would—would—would—uh—teach Sunday school lesson. So I would—I just remember them being at church together. And, of course, they'd come in with this long row of children behind them. So—um—I think that's it—either sitting in church or us sitting in the—the station wagon with them taking us to church.

SL: That's a load.

JK: [*Laughs*] If—yes [*laughter*] . . .

SL: A dozen in—in the station wagon. Wow.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:13:36] SL: So, okay, take me to the—um—dining table.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: Do you 'member [remember] early, early memories of what dinner was like in the evening?

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: Uh—I'm assuming work is done or . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . maybe y'all went back out after dinner. I . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . but at my house—uh—my mother pretty much cooked a lot.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: And we always had cake or . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . you know. But at dinner . . .

JK: Right.

SL: . . . everyone showed up.

JK: Right. Right. Right.

SL: We only had a family of five but . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . it was still . . .

JK: Yeah.

SL: . . . kind of a free-for-all [*laughs*] . . .

JK: Yes, yes.

SL: . . . you know, you get there, or you miss it.

JK: Uh-huh.

SL: That kind of deal.

[00:14:15] JK: Yeah. One of the first things people told me when I left home was how fast I eat. They couldn't believe how fast I eat. And I said, "Well, you didn't grow up [*laughs*] the way I grew up, with so many siblings. I had to eat fast." I remember dinner—um—because we usually were coming back from a—the

cotton field, either chopping cotton or picking cotton. And I remember, first of all, we would smell dinner, and that would be the first part of it. I remember baked potatoes, or if Mom was frying chicken or—or—um—whatever she was cooking—pork chops, whatever—we would smell it down the road before we got there—greens. Um—and then it would be almost free-for-all. I mean, we all would—after we'd wash our hands and—and make our way to the kitchen—uh—Mom would, of course, serve us the first round, and then [*SL laughs*] you—when she went away and sat down to eat, then it was sort of catch as you can, you know. But it was a—just fun time. Fun time.

[00:15:20] SL: Was it pretty much all business as far as the meal went? I mean, I—I can't imagine—you know, a lot of families use the dinner period to catch up on what everyone's been doing.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: But you all probably knew what you'd been doing.

JK: Yeah, yeah.

SL: And there were so many mouths to feed . . .

JK: Right.

SL: . . . and so many mouths . . .

JK: Right, right. [*Laughs*]

SL: . . . it'd be kinda hard to get a story from everybody and get caught up.

[00:15:39] JK: No, no. I think we—we did talk, but it wasn't, you know, like, "Okay, let's hear what Janis did today" or . . .

SL: Yeah.

JK: No, it wasn't like that.

SL: It was more like . . .

JK: Uh-huh.

SL: . . . "Listen to what Janis did." [*Laughs*]

JK: Yes. Mh-hmm.

SL: "And what I saw."

JK: Mh-hmm. Yeah. [*SL laughs*] Yeah. We didn't—we didn't really take care of business or anything at the table.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: The business was eating . . .

SL: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

JK: . . . so that we could go to work the next day. [*Laughs*]

[00:16:00] SL: Well—um—all right. Let's get back to the school . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . thing now. So elementary schoolwise, you went to a segregated school.

JK: Mh-hmm. Fields Elementary School.

SL: And how was that? I mean, I know—I know—I think I read one interview—you were talking about sometimes y'all didn't even have shoes.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: And that you did get ridiculed and you did get . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . made fun of and . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . sometimes even teachers. Did that—did that happen in the segregated school as well or . . .

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: So . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . that didn't know any—uh—any race . . .

JK: Right.

SL: . . . did it?



[00:16:37] JK: Right, right. Um—I have diverse memories of elementary school. Uh—I loved it. Um—my teachers—some of my teachers I really, really loved, and I remember them now because they were so good at planting those seeds that we needed—um—in us very early. I had some teachers who were very cognizant of the background that we came from, and they

made amends—I mean, they nurtured that need that we had. Um—so I remember those kinds of teachers—um—who care—you know, cared about kind of filling in where there were some—some things missing. And then there were teachers who did not have that kind of compassion and I remember that, too. And—um—as far as children, you expect that, though. You expect, "Janis doesn't have shoes," you know, or "Her dress is not as, you know, nice or contemporary or whatever."

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:17:39] JK: You expect that from students. But sometimes—uh—the teachers would not chime in, but certainly, they would make you know that they noticed the difference in you. Um—but also because my parents had—uh—drilled in us the importance of education and learning, I absolutely loved school. Loved going to classes every day. My parents didn't have to force any of us to go to school—uh—except one—one of my brothers, who decided he didn't like school. But the rest of us loved it and just ate up learning and reading and books and—um—maybe it's because of what we didn't have at home that—that we enjoyed coming to school and just being able to—to excel and do well.

SL: Well, I'm sure it wasn't as physically back breaking either . . .

JK: No, no.

SL: . . . as being out in the fields all day.

JK: No, it wasn't. No, definitely not.

SL: So it—in some ways it was like a recess.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

SL: But—um—gosh, I—it's just remarkable to me that—um—you were able to do both.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: That you could help the family do what had to be done for the family, and at the same time, so many of you—all of—nearly all of you participated at an extraordinary level academically.

[00:18:59] JK: And that was our parents. I mean, we give them credit for that.

SL: Well, now it—I'm sure it was the parents, but it—there had to be some camaraderie there among the children, too.

JK: Sure, sure. Camaraderie and competition. Yeah, it was.

SL: And maybe com—competitive. Yes. Mh-hmm.

JK: And I think that my—our parents probably instilled that in us a little bit—always trying to do the very best, so you end up competing with your siblings to a great extent. And I didn't—I had a sister who was in my class, so that was, like, wow, you know. A lot of competition.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:19:31] SL: Um—you know, there were so many of you, you had—you almost had your own clique.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: Did you have—were you involved with any other, you know, extracurricular activities?

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: Any clubs? Any—I mean, did the civic side of things hit . . .

JK: Well . . .

SL: . . . in elementary or shortly thereafter? When . . .

JK: Probably not until high school.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: Not until high school because during the early years, we weren't really—um—we weren't involved in very much. I mean, we went to school, and we came back home—um—and did whatever needed to be done at home. But around junior high and high school we started getting involved. When we went to the—um—the predominantly white school—what had been the predominantly white school, uh—my brothers became very involved in football and all the different athletics. And I wasn't involved in anything then, but later I became—like, cheerleaders

and 4-H Club and Library Club—all of that, um—which I loved. I always en—enjoyed being involved in different things. But my brothers were, like, star athletes—uh—during their high school years.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:47] SL: Athletes and brains, too.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: What—just for the record, what was the elementary school name and the . . .

JK: Fields. *F-I-E-L-D-S*. Fields Elementary. And then it was Gould High School and Gould Junior High School.

SL: Okay. And, of course, the junior high and high school were together, I assume. Yeah. Okay, so you've made it into a non-segregated school situation. What was the—what—how was that experience compared to the segregated school you came from?

[00:21:30] JK: It was different. Very different. I write about how the first day that I went to a—what I call in the book the "white school," for want of a better word to describe the fact that I had never been around that many white people before. Of course, farmers and people who came, you know, out on Varner Road to check their crops or whatever. But other than that, going to the grocery store, I guess. So it was an amazing thing to get off the

school bus and go on into the school where it was all white students except for a few blacks who, you know, chose to do the freedom of choice thing. So it was, first of all, one of those culture shocks. And then it was two years that, you know, I write, and I say that it was a struggle. It was a challenge for us because we felt that we were not wanted there. That the students were not, you know, mentally or whatever it was—prepared to accept us as students there. And the teachers weren't ready to accept us for the most part. So we felt that, and we experienced that for two years during that freedom of choice experiment. So it wasn't what I call a good experience. It was probably a learning experience, and I'm sure it built character for me and the rest of my siblings, but it was a hard experience.

[00:23:12] SL: Two questions. In the segregated school, were the teachers black and white or were they predominantly black?

JK: All black.

SL: And in the segregated—in the non-segregated school, they were all white, I bet.

JK: All white.

SL: Big difference. And so not only would the approaches have been different probably the curriculum . . .

JK: The curriculum . . .

SL: . . . had a . . .

JK: . . . was different. The expectations were different. All of that was different.

[00:23:36] SL: Now you're doing this—how does this relate to the [President John Fitzgerald] Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. years? What—where are we in the . . .

JK: That—that's right in the middle of it.

SL: . . . what's going on with the rest of the country? Yeah.

JK: That's—1965 was when that happened. And Gould was slowly gettin' into the whole integration thing. This was how they were slowly gettin' into it. So we knew what was happening all over the rest of the country, and we knew that it was gonna eventually happen. And, you know, in the back of my mind, I'm saying, "If this is the way it's gonna be, is it gonna work?" You know, because, you know, it's not working in my mind. But two years after that the school system completely integrated, and I write about that because integration in the South, or certainly in Gould, Arkansas, was not real integration because the schools ended up 95 percent African American, and the white students either went to the county schools, or they went to academies, which were built right outside the city—the town.

[00:24:48] SL: So how far are you from Pine Bluff?

JK: Thirty-two miles.

SL: So, okay, you graduate high school—I'm assuming with honors, if they had that sort of thing then and . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . probably way toward the top of your class, if not the top of your class.

JK: No, not the top of my class. [*Laughs*]

SL: Your sister may have been.

JK: My sister [Jo Ann (deceased)] was—I think we both, you know, graduated about the same toward . . .

SL: Yeah.

JK: . . . toward the top.

[00:25:18] SL: So now you—now it's college that we're lookin' at, and it was not atypical at that time for black high school graduates to go to Pine Bluff or to—I think there was a school over in Oklahoma that was pretty popular and then, of course . . .

JK: Langston [University, Langston, Oklahoma]. Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . in Little Rock there was a—oh, I forget the name of it now.

JK: Oh, Philander [Smith College]. Mh-hmm.

SL: Yes, Philander Smith. And so—but—and Pine Bluff was next

door . . .

JK: Right there.

SL: . . . to you. So what prompted you to go to [the University of Arkansas at] Fayetteville?

JK: Well, the truth is we came because we had brothers [Jack and Jesse] already here. We had two brothers that were already here who had both come on—I think both were—came on football scholarships. So my parents thought that was a good thing, if we could go to a school that—where we had our big brothers to look over us and make sure everything was okay. And that was most of the reason why we ended up coming to Fayetteville.

SL: Wow. So when your brothers got involved with athletics, and they already had the brains anyway comin' into that. Then the athletics side of thing opened the doors for them up here. And it's probably a great—I can understand totally wanting to be next to family.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm. So it was four of us going at the same time.

[00:26:51] SL: And—okay, so now you're coming out of Gould—coming from Pine Bluff area, out of a school that you didn't really feel welcomed at. And so what happens to you your first day in

Fayetteville?

JK: It was such a culture shock because I was—felt like I was on the other side of the world. That was the first thing. I had never been away from home. I had never left Gould for any, you know, any length of time. I'd gone to Pine Bluff to live with family or stay with family for a couple of nights or something. But coming—I was leaving home, and I was coming somewhere that didn't remind me of anything in southeast Arkansas. So it was a—definitely a culture shock. It took me about two weeks to really decide that I wanted to stay here—to feel comfortable enough. I seriously thought about going back for at least a week or so. But I did—I—you know, my brothers talked to me, and you know, they enjoyed it here. They liked it here. So after a while I got used to it.

[00:28:02] SL: So were they livin' in Wilson Sharp House? [Editor's Note: reference to the men's athletics dormitory]

JK: No, they weren't because both of them came up on scholarships, but neither one of them continued to play once they got here. They both lived in dorms—different dorms.

SL: And . . .

JK: I'm trying to—actually, you know, my brothers lived in Pomfret Hall, and Pomfret Hall, at the time, was a co-ed dorm, and my

sister and I ended up living in Pomfret.

SL: It was pretty new then.

JK: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

JK: Yeah.

SL: Well, that's convenient.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: So you got to see each other quite a bit then.

JK: They—they made sure they checked up on us. [*Laughter*] They did.

SL: Well, now, who was checkin' up on them?

JK: [*Laughs*] Nobody, of course.

SL: Nobody. No, they wouldn't listen to you, huh?

JK: No.

SL: No?

JK: Huh-uh.

[00:28:49] SL: Okay, so you're in Pomfret, and is there a contrast, or did you experience the same sort of hesitations and . . .

JK: I think the contrast . . .

SL: . . . misgivings about your . . .



JK: . . . was that—I think people were a lot more open and, you know, more concerned with just gettin' their own stuff done, so

nobody was that concerned about, you know, you because you're black. And, plus, it was quite diverse by the time I got here. There weren't that many African Americans, but there were people from everywhere here when I got here. So it wasn't like a focus on a black person the way it was when I went to the junior high school.

[00:29:37] SL: That's right. Now you're in a much more diverse situation. Although even that population all combined was still pretty small.

JK: Yes, it was. It was. And I'm not—I don't want to make it sound as if there were no racial problems during that time because there were. I mean, we had an organization, Black Americans for Democracy [BAD], I think. That was pretty active, and you know, they were vocal. There were things going on that they would write about and have meetings about, so there was still—you know, there was a challenge. There still was a challenge.

[00:30:19] SL: You were interested in journalism.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: So, let's see, at that time who was the guy over there? It was . . .

JK: You would . . .

SL: [Department of journalism chair Bob] Douglas? Was it . . .

JK: Was it Douglas or—see, I remember [journalist] Ernie Deane.

SL: Ernie Deane.

JK: But Ernie was not the head of it. And I'm not sure Douglas was at the time either. I can't remember the name of the person who was head of it then. But he left, I think, shortly after I did. But I was not as interested in journalism as I was in creative writing. That was my real interest. But they didn't have a creative writing degree at the university when I was here, so I ended up choosing journalism after I'd kinda tried different—different avenues. And I enjoyed it because I found out that I could kinda focus on feature writing, and that was the thing I found that I was best at.

[00:31:23] SL: So you got to—did you take courses under [creative writing program cofounder and writer] Jim Whitehead, and—who was the—oh, I'm trying to think. There were quite a few great writers here at that time.

JK: I didn't take a course.

SL: You didn't?



JK: Uh-uh. I took a course under [creative writing program cofounder and poet] Miller Williams. More than one, actually. And Miller Williams was—I always credit him for kinda giving me the impetus to go on—get a journalism degree and then continue

my writing because I sat in on a couple of his meeting—his classes—and he was complimentary about my writing, and I'd never really had anybody to read my writing before, so he encouraged me.

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:32:11] SL: The other guy was—of some note was [creative writing program cofounder] Bill Harrison, I don't guess . . .

JK: I think I did have Bill Harrison, yes. Mh-hmm.

SL: I was born and raised here, so . . .

JK: Okay, you know everybody. [*Laughter*]

SL: . . . I'm trying to conjure—I'm trying to remember [*JK laughs*] everyone that was in that department at that time. You and I were on this campus . . .

JK: At the same time?

SL: . . . together. Yes.

JK: Okay. Maybe that's where I remember you.

SL: Maybe so. I—you know, you are familiar lookin' to me.

[00:32:47] I'm trying to think. Well, let's talk about what social life was like here. You were here five years?

JK: I was here five years, and I actually got married my s—third year here? My third year here. There were—I guess probably

the social life was like it was just about anywhere. There were separate social, you know, happenings. There were black events, even—they started the black fraternities and sororities while I was here. But also there were events that you could go where everyone went to. Of course, the games. I think everybody was kind of involved in that—the football games. So I had a pretty interesting social life because I came from a very strict home life. So to be able to go to parties and meet people, you know, that I probably never would have met if I'd stayed down in Gould, Arkansas, it was interesting. I had a good first couple of years, and then I got married I think my third year. First of—the first—the summer before my third year here.

[00:34:07] SL: And this was someone you met here?

JK: Someone I met here. Someone who became the father [Darryl W. Lunon] of my child [Darryl W. Lunon II] here. Yeah. Made one of those decisions, so I—we married when I was nineteen and he was twenty.

SL: I got married when I was twenty, so . . .

JK: Okay.

SL: Yeah. I was just as naïve [*laughter*], I believe.

[00:34:35] SL: Well, so did you stay active churchwise once you got up here?

JK: You know what? I did for a while, but after a while, I didn't stay as active. I would go irregularly. There was a church that I went to here for a while that was out in the city, but I didn't go on a regular basis the way I did when I was home.

[00:34:56] SL: Was that—did you go to the black church?

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: That St. James Baptist . . .

JK: St. James.

SL: . . . or Saint . . .

JK: Or there was a Hoover [Theresa Hoover United Methodist Church], wasn't it, too?

SL: Oh, I don't know. Maybe.

JK: Certainly, there was a St. James.

SL: You know, my—my brother is the preacher for St. James [United] Methodist Church.

JK: Okay.

SL: And . . .

JK: Okay.

[00:35:15] SL: But—so what about the instructors here? I'm certain that you probably didn't experience as many—or maybe you did—I don't know. I . . .

JK: I didn't experience any kind of racist attitudes or anything. Not

really. Not really. I pretty much enjoyed most of the instructors that I had. And I took—the first year or so, I really did—I was trying to decide what I was going to major in until journalism kinda just, you know, popped up. So I took, like, education. I took a number of education courses. I took a lot of literature courses because, you know, that was what I loved, so I took a number of those. All of the instructors I really enjoyed. They kind of opened my eyes, and I felt like I was a college student. I mean, they treated us like college students.

[00:36:14] SL: Well, you mentioned Miller. Was there—were there any other instructors that . . .

JK: That just pop out?

SL: Uh-huh.

JK: [Political science professor] Diane [Divers Kincaid] Blair does.

SL: Ah-ha. Of course.

JK: Diane was—I loved her. I really enjoyed her classes. I didn't take a lot of her classes. I think I took a couple of 'em [them].

But I just remembered her even before I knew who she was. I would tell people, "Oh, this wonderful instructor—political science instructor—I just really enjoyed so much." I took [sociology professor] Gordon Morgan and [political science professor] Adolph Reed. I enjoyed both of them. There were

quite a few that I enjoyed. Yeah.

[00:36:54] SL: You know, I got to interview Gordon a few weeks ago. What a fascinating story he has. You know, he didn't even know that he had tenure.

JK: Really?

SL: Mh-hmm. It was something like twelve years . . .

JK: Oh, my goodness!

SL: . . . before he—apparently he was given tenure after the first year that he was here.

JK: [*Laughs*] And he didn't know it? Wow!

SL: Yeah. Strange.

JK: Wow.

SL: Strange.

JK: That is.

SL: It was—you know, of course, he was one of the—I guess he was—I don't know if he was the first.

JK: The first, probably.

[00:37:23] SL: Was he? He may have been the first. I think—I think [French and education professor] Margaret Clark was here ahead of him.

JK: Oh, was she?

SL: But she was not—I don't think she was a professor at that time.

JK: Okay. Okay. Because I think she was here when I was here, too.

SL: Yeah.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:37:40] SL: Yeah, it was like—he said something like they kind of—kinda felt like they brought him in to kinda manage the friction that was developing at the time. This was back when BAD was getting started up.

JK: Right, right.

SL: And, of course, there were—he got here several years ahead of you.

JK: Mh-hmm. He was. He was . . .

SL: So he—he went through some stuff that you didn't . . .

JK: Right, right. That was . . .

SL: . . . go through. Yeah.

JK: Yeah, kinda resolved by the time I got here.

SL: Yeah. Yeah, but at the—at the same time, he says that, you know, there really wasn't anything really dangerous happening here—or really ugly. There was some folks that were immature, but for the most part, he feels like it was not uncharacteristic of other universities across the nation. Maybe a little better here in Arkansas.

JK: Right, right.

[00:38:37] SL: Well, is there—what else can you tell me about—
what about—let's see, was the old Student Union [Editor's Note:
Student Union was located in Memorial Hall] still . . .

JK: Old Student Union.

SL: . . . was still up . . .

JK: Yeah. That was—that was . . .

SL: . . . in [19]72, [19]71 . . .

JK: . . . that was—that was a hangout . . .

SL: Yeah.

JK: . . . for a lot of students in between classes. A lot of the law students, you know, hung out there to study. So—and, you know, there wasn't a huge black population here, so everybody kinda knew each other, unlike now. I think there are so many—there's not so many, but it's more than enough for people to know each other. But at that time we all knew each other. So we would hang out. I mean, everybody would invite everyone else to whatever was going on. It was a camaraderie—it really was at that time. And the old Student Union was one of those places where you would meet up. Mh-hmm.

SL: Yeah, it was great. I loved it. [00:39:36] So how did the university—I mean, you probably didn't have—did you have any

preconceptions of what it was gonna be like here before you got here, and was it totally different? I mean, usually life is . . .

JK: Right.

SL: . . . different [*JK laughs*] than what you think it's going to be thank goodness, but . . .

JK: I think it was probably better than my preconceived notions, and probably I based my preconceived notions on my middle school experiences, and I think I enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I would. My brothers had told us a little bit about it. And, actually, my sister and I had come up with a small group of people to kinda look at the school and talk to some people the year before, when my brothers were here. So we kinda knew a little bit about the surface—at least part of the university. And we liked it. I mean, it was a beautiful campus and a lot of nice people. So I think we were pretty much pleasantly surprised.

[00:40:48] SL: Well, here's really a terrible question. What was the best, and what was the worst here . . .

JK: Hmm.

SL: . . . at University of Arkansas?

JK: I guess the best may have been just the people that I met that I—that are still people that I consider my friends—people that are doing some of all kinds of different things across the country.

But we came up through some of the same experiences. So I like being able to—when we have these reunions every other year and for us to sit down and talk about what everybody's doing—the experiences we've had in life and all that. So I like that, and I—it—that was wonderful—meeting new people and learning that there's people, you know, doing some of everything. I guess the worst—what was the worst? I guess I was growing up then. I—you know, it—you go through some of those growing pains. You find out things that you didn't know about yourself, and you try things that you shouldn't try or—and I guess it just was the growing pains that I went through up here. I talk about how I got married so early, and I—you know, I got pregnant so early and all of that. And I think that was because of—the fact that I came from my restricted background, and I did want to try a lot of things that I hadn't tried before. So just growing up. Growing up.

[00:42:26] SL: You know, that kinda stuff is true for everybody, though. I mean everybody does it wrong till they do it right or makes . . .

JK: Yeah, yeah.

SL: . . . mistakes or does stupid things or just—I guess people have to make their own mistakes.

JK: They do. They do. They do. And you learn from them, and hopefully it doesn't kill you or [*laughter*] maim you or anything.

SL: Or anyone else.

JK: That's right. And you become a better person or a stronger person because of that.

[00:42:56] SL: Well, so if you had to say—to kinda sum up your time here at the University of Arkansas, what—how would you do that?



JK: I would say, all in all, I had a wonderful experience here. I moved from being a very naïve young person to a much wiser married woman before I left here. I learned a lot about culture—about different kinds of people. And I think I probably started being very interested in other people—other cultures here at the University of Arkansas. And that's gotten even stronger now. That's one of the things that I'm very passionate about—about meeting people from all different backgrounds and different cultures and trying to find out a way to make people see our likenesses rather than our differences. I think that probably started here. I enjoyed the aesthetics of Fayetteville. It's just, to me, it was a very beautiful place to be once you got beyond, you know, school and academics and all of that. It was a very beautiful area. So it's a lot of good things about

Fayetteville and the university that I took away, and I still have.

SL: You carry it with you where you go . . .

JK: Yes.

SL: . . . where you are now . . .

JK: Yes.

SL: . . . go now.

JK: Definitely.

[00:44:34] SL: If you had something you wanted to say to the audience that's watching this video or listening to your words, what would you have to say about—to them?



JK: Oh, goodness. I would say college life—the experience of college is such a great experience for young people. And, you know, I hate to think of people who choose not to experience it for whatever reason because it's not just the going to school. It's not just the going to classes. It's to—learning yourself, growing up, meeting other people that will be lifelong friends, learning your strengths and your weaknesses. I think the college experience is something that—anybody who can do it, I think they should do it. I certainly believe I'm a better person because of it. I can't imagine not have going—gone through it, and that's what I told my son, you know, when he was graduating from high school. If nothing else, experience the

whole college experience because it's a wonderful thing. It's something that will stay with you forever.

SL: There is something nurturing about it, isn't there?

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:46:05] SL: Have you got anything—do you kinda—do you keep up with what's going on with the university at all or—a little bit?

JK: To a certain extent.

SL: A little bit.

JK: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

SL: You know, their—the vision that we're working under now is a student-centered research university. And so that's kind of a new path that—or certainly a defining path that we're following now. Is there—and I know that you've been to other universities, and you've been out in the real world [*JK laughs*] and great places to observe the world from. Is there any advice or do you see anything—do you have anything to say about the future for the University of Arkansas? Or what would you tell them? If you—[*JK laughs*] all of your experiences that you've had from childhood to where you are now if you had to give the University of Arkansas some advice, what advice would you give it?

[00:47:15] JK: I think maybe one of the things I would say is that

there are so many diamonds in the rough that are out there in the state of Arkansas, and if the university could find a way to find those people—those young people who don't stand out—who didn't make straight A's or didn't—you know, aren't at the top with their ACT scores. If there's any programs or any scholarships or whatever to, you know, help those kinds of people or to reach those kinds of people, I think that would be wonderful, because I think the university is such a major part of Arkansas, and such a bright light in—for Arkansas, that the larger they open up their arms to all of Arkansas, I think that would only make it better. I was so proud when I could go back down to the Delta and down to southeast Arkansas to say I was a student at the University of Arkansas. And I think that makes the University of Arkansas better when people from all over the state knows that they have reached out to someone who, you know, don't have a wonderful background. But maybe they saw something, one thing in that person, that diamond in the rough, that could contribute to Arkansas and to the country.

[00:48:47] SL: Well, so I guess you just volunteered to head that effort up, huh? [*Laughter*] They'll be calling you. "By the way, we're starting a program."

JK: I'd love to talk to someone about that.

SL: "We're taking your advice." [JK laughs] Well, okay, so how are we on tape?

Franklin Everts [Camera Operator]: We've got fifty minutes in.

SL: Fifteen minutes.

FE: Fifty.

SL: Oh, fifty.

FE: We're fifty in.

SL: Oh, we're fifty in. Okay. So it is after two o'clock. Now I know our date was for an hour.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: What do you have going? Do you wanna [want to] keep going on this, or you wanna break?

JK: What time is—two? Oh, I have a class, don't I?

SL: It's two ten. I don't know. You have a class at two o'clock—three o'clock?

JK: No, it's two. It's around two.

SL: You're late.

JK: Someone's gonna come and take me . . .

SL: And take you away.

JK: . . . to a class. Yeah.

SL: Okay, well, then—so I get to have you until that happens.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: I love that. [*Laughter*] So . . .

FE: You know it's ten past two?

SL: Yeah.

JK: Oh, they're probably standing [*laughs*] out there.

SL: And it looks like we've lost our quiet time, doesn't it?

FE: [*Laughs*] That sounded like it. [*JK laughs*]

SL: Yeah. Well, just—is there anything that [*noise from the hallway*—gosh, I don't know if we can get this now. Looks like we've . . .

JK: They're probably looking at their clock. It's an hour . . .

[00:50:07] SL: Yeah. [*JK laughs*] I always ask folks if there's something they would like to say . . .

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . that has not been said. Is there . . .



JK: Let me see what I'd like to say. I would like to say that I am a true Arkansan. I absolutely love Arkansas, and I will likely be moving back to Arkansas in some time in the future. And I am a ba—ambassador of Arkansas—not only Arkansas but the university. I sing both of their praises wherever I go because I really do think that it has contributed so much to my journey—played a huge role in what I do now and who I am now. So I'm just really, really proud to be invited back, you know, and given

this honor because it really means a lot to me as an Arkansan.

[00:51:08] SL: That was sweet. That was good. Any troubling things you want to say? Any room for improvement here . . .

JK: I'm sure . . .

SL: . . . that we ought to address.

JK: I'm sure there are, and you know, the statistics tell me that there's still, you know, room for improvement as far as the number of minorities that come to school here and the number of professors or whatever. But I do know from talking to people that the university is working on that, and that is something that they believe can be improved on. So that makes me feel good. I commend the university for that, and I understand there is people here that they can work with. So, I just think the university can be the best that it can possibly be if it does decide that we wanna try to touch as many people as we can.

SL: I kinda hope to do that with this program. We intend to go all over the state.

JK: Wonderful.

SL: Get submissions. You should submit names to us.

JK: Okay.

SL: You should.

JK: Wonderful.

[00:52:24] SL: Well, let's see. I'm trying to think where we were in your life story. You end up getting a degree here in journalism.

JK: Mh-hmm.

SL: And then you do what? You go to Chicago? No.

JK: No, no. After I get a degree here—I lived in Arkansas up until [19]93.

SL: Oh, that's right. You . . .

JK: Right. [*Laughs*]

SL: . . . you bought the paper—the [Arkansas State Press] newspaper.

JK: Yeah. Yeah, in 1987 I bought the newspaper from Daisy Bates, who was my mentor and someone I admired very much. I went to work for her—worked for her as managing editor for three months, and she decide she was gonna retire and sell the newspaper, and I asked to sell it to me, which was ridiculous, but I did, and she decided to do that. And I ran the newspaper until I went to Washington, DC.

[00:53:18] SL: And how long was that?

JK: About five and a half years.

SL: And did you lose all your money? [*Laughs*]

JK: Did I lose all my money? It was a definite challenge—financial challenge. But one of the best things I could've done. I felt so

good about doing it. I got a chance to learn Arkansas better. I got—I learned so much about politics that I didn't know. And I felt like I was really contributing to the community, so I was really happy about that.

[00:53:52] SL: Your hours were eighteen hours a day, I'm sure.

JK: Oh, my God, yes.

SL: Barbara and David [Pryor] started a little paper in Camden called the *Ouachita Citizen*, and of course, it was a financial disaster.

JK: It's the hardest work that you could possibly do.

SL: It's—it is unbelievably difficult. And . . .

JK: Mh-hmm. Absolutely. But I loved it.

SL: Yeah, they did, too.

[00:54:11] JK: Mh-hmm. So I did that up until [19]93, and then I went to Washington, DC, to work in the Clinton Administration. And I did that throughout the eight years. In [19]95, I became the president's diarist, and I did that until six months—actually, after he left because they have a transition office after the president leaves, so I worked in that as well.

[00:54:37] SL: You—but you—actually, you worked on the campaign.

JK: I did.

SL: [Nineteen] ninety-two campaign.

JK: I did. Yeah, I did. I worked in the media affairs office, in the press office.

SL: I bet we crossed paths when he came here and spoke in front of Old Main . . .

JK: Yeah.

SL: . . . 'cause [because] I got one of the Secret Service pins.

JK: Okay.

SL: I got to hang out with you guys.

JK: Okay.

SL: The . . .

JK: I'm sure. I'm sure we did.

SL: . . . the pre-rally crew. Helped put it together and all that stuff so. How was it—it had to be exciting to be on the campaign.

[00:55:15] JK: It was exciting. Grueling.

SL: Twenty-hour day.

JK: Yeah, that was hard work. It's for young people—very young people. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

JK: But you have to have some experience there, too. But, definitely, it is hard work. But everybody was, you know, they believed in Bill Clinton. So even though the work was hard, we believed in the person that we were . . .

SL: Many still do.

JK: Yes. Yeah.

SL: I always felt like if he could run again, he'd win.

JK: Mh-hmm.

[00:55:45] SL: So if you had the campaign to do over again would you have changed anything that you—how you did stuff?

JK: No. No, I wouldn't change anything—the way I did things. But I would not do it again because, like I said, I do believe you have to have the stamina of a sixteen-year-old [*laughs*] to work in a campaign. And I really would not have the energy to do it at this point. And you know, I'm one of those people after I do something in life, unless it's like my calling or something, I'm probably not gonna do it again. That's—I did that. I was supposed to be doing it then, but I'm not supposed to be doing it five years from now. So I'm where I am—where I'm supposed to be right now.

[00:56:40] SL: When did you know that y'all were gonna win?

JK: I believed we were gonna win—oh, I don't know. I just—I've always believed in the possibility that he could become president. It probably was in [19]90—sometime in [19]92 I was pretty convinced that we would win.

[00:57:14] SL: Were you with him in New Hampshire?

JK: No, but a lot of people I know were there. Yeah. They were excited about that whole experience.

SL: Yeah. Kind of pulled that . . .

JK: That was kind of a turning point, I think.

SL: Yeah, I think so, too.

JK: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

[00:57:33] SL: So what about James Carville?

JK: [*Laughs*] He's an interesting man. [*Laughter*] Very funny man. Yeah, I—I don't know him that well. I—I've ran into on the campaign, and of course, during the White House years, I saw him quite often—think he's one of those brilliant people who . . .

SL: Strategists.

JK: Yeah, yeah—that is very funny. He's very funny.

[00:58:01] SL: We're gonna have he and Mary [Matalin] . . .

JK: That should be interesting.

SL: . . . as distinguished lecturers here for an event . . .

JK: Oh, that should be great.

SL: . . . in March. What an odd couple.

JK: Yeah, yeah. But entertaining.

SL: I don't get—yeah, entertaining. [*Laughter*] I just don't see how it works, but . . .

FE: I need to change the tape, Scott.

SL: Okay. Well, I say we keep her until they come get her unless you think we're—you think they're hesitant to knock on the door?

JK: Yeah, they may be.

SL: Why don't we—why don't I . . .

JK: Okay.

SL: . . . check and make sure . . .

JK: Okay.

SL: . . . it's okay. I hate to get us in trouble.

[00:58:36 End of interview]

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