

Gail Peck
January 17, 1989

Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG It's January 17, 1989. This is Mark Greenberg conducting an interview for the Green Mountain Chronicle Series, Vermont Historical Society interview with Gail Peck in Montpelier, Vermont. And we're going to talk about the Vermont-New York Youth Project and you were a youth, is that right?

GP Yes.

MG What year were you in the project Gail?

GP In 1969.

MG That was the second year?

GP Yup.

MG And which site were you at?

GP Windham College in Putney.

MG Okay. Why don't you tell me how you became involved in the project?

GP Well, the very beginning of even finding out it existed happened when I stayed overnight at a friend's house who went the year before and we were looking through her photographs and I didn't know where she got all these photographs of all these black and white people together. And she told me all about it and I just took, took the reins. It really excited me. I was at an age where I needed to do something different in my life. Um, and like many people, we, I probably thought I could turn the world around. But, I did it. I pulled all the paperwork together and found out all the information and my parents had never let me out of the house barely, but they had faith because I had pulled it together.

MG How old were you?

GP I had just turned fourteen.

MG And where were you living at the time?

GP In, right outside of Waterbury, Vermont.

MG Were you born in Vermont?

GP In Montpelier, just through the woods, Heaton House.

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MG Tell me about how much exposure you had had to black people prior to that?

GP Hardly any. I probably could count on one hand how many black people I had met in my lifetime. So nothing, basically none and I led a very isolated life. You know, I lived in, around Waterbury, went to Harwood Union, you know real typical rural Vermont life. Sold vegetables in the summer, you know, that was it.

MG Yet, you must have been aware of a racial problem in the United States?

GP Yea, yea, I was and had, at that time, I think my sense of community started to stir inside of me and I didn't understand why there was unrest. I just, I couldn't imagine it. And that really helped me to do something about it, as far as my own values went.

MG Your friend who showed you the photographs, was she from Waterbury also?

GP No, Montpelier, Karen Ballantine.

MG Oh. And she had been there in '68?

GP Yes, yea. At a different site, but.

MG Yea, I think she was at the Ripton site?

GP Yea, that's.

MG How did you end up at the Windham site?

GP I can't remember if we picked or if they just picked for us. My guess would be that they just picked for us.

MG What was the nature of the program at the Windham site?

GP They had, um, dairy activities. They had cultural awareness classes. We all read Black Voices. It was a poetry, basic poetry book. Dances, different art classes, um, pottery and my biggest thing I remember is just sitting around talking. You know, we were all teenagers and we all wanted to light the world on fire. But having, ending up with a real deep understanding of each other and more questions. You know, we really left with more questions. It changed my life. It was, made a major impact on me.

MG Can you expand on that a little and _____?

- GP Well, I remember before I left, one of the reasons for wanting to go was being very unhappy with my friendships in that I was not in control of anything, that my friends were, had really manipulated me and I needed to deal with that and, and that leaving really helped me gain a lot of self esteem.
- MG What about your feelings or your perspective, your understanding of American Society, racial relations, that kind of thing?
- GP As far as seeing any conflict when we were on the campus with anybody, I didn't see or even feel any tensions. I'm sure it was different for the kids from the city because they had to go back to the city. The youths in Vermont, we got to really keep a lot of what we had learned that summer and had felt. We didn't have to go back into stressful situations. I can't say that, I became aware of other cultural, certainly different ways of dressing. (LAUGH) And of being, you know, I hadn't seen some of the comradeship that went on with women in our dorm. That really helped me to open up.
- MG Can you recall what it was like when you first got there, when the, I don't know whether you got there first or the New York kids got there first, but those first impressions would be very interesting to hear?
- GP I can remember what I was wearing. I had a big orange T-shirt on that, it was a football T-Shirt or something. It had 44 written on it and a guy named Johnny looked at me and he said, 44! and here I was you know all of 110 pounds. Yea. Being scared was definitely and shy is what, how I felt, but we all were feeling that way and it was, you know, by the time you were through your first meal you had met a few people you could talk with. It really didn't take very long at all to get to be friends.
- MG Did you get there before the black kids arrived do you remember?
- GP I can't remember, no.
- MG So that process of getting to know each other, again if you could describe it a little bit?
- GP Well you spent your days together, your entire days. You ate together, you slept together, you had roommates, you planned, planned things. I don't remember ever really being alone unless I chose to be, but really you couldn't be alone. I mean there were all those, I forget how many

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were on the one, were on our campus, but it was quite a few of us, you know, at least 100 of us. I, I'm sure that we had some kind of musical event that the staff programs to get us together. I don't remember difficulty. All I remember is that we were always together. There wasn't a lot of barriers to break as far as being able to talk back and forth. At least, on, you know, friendly easy basis.

MG As well as you're able to tell, was there any distrust or suspicion on the part of the black kids coming into this really _____ different world?

GP I had wondered in the town, you know the town was really small, Putney. We used to get a _____, every week we got \$5.00 or something and it was gold. I mean that's all the money any of us had and we would all run downtown and I, I wondered today as I was trying to reflect back, if, how the community, how that all affected the community. As far as distrust with each other, I don't, I don't remember hearing of anything, you know, of any incidents or anybody saying you know lock your guitar up or something, I don't remember that.

MG The talks that you would have. Were they, would they be about personal things, would they be about living conditions in New York or living conditions in Vermont or racial treatment?

GP Often personal. Um, you know, everybody at that age, we probably, most of us were fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, so we were really trying to find our identify at that point. But, but I do remember hearing you know if you, if you came to my house, you know, it wouldn't be like this or you wouldn't be able to walk out in the road like that. We did take a trip to Montreal and that was for me, you know, the biggest thing I had been in. And I hung really close to my black friends because I was so afraid, (LAUGH) of getting hit. But I, that was it. If we did talk about our environments, the biggest thing I remember is just the whole safety issue.

MG Who were the counsellors or teachers, what were they like, did you know any of them beforehand?

GP I didn't know any of them beforehand. I remember really looking up to them as being, you know, like an older brother where you know you did go to them for help and they were really very respectful to us. I don't recall any kind of talking down to us because we were younger or at least they seemed to me to be mature. We had a sit in

once because we wanted our curfew to be lifted. It didn't get lifted. Or maybe it did on Saturday night or something, but they let all of that happen. Nobody was real authoritarian. I think you know for not having a structure around us, we handled it pretty good, for me and I'm sure for most everybody it was the first time we didn't have a lot of structure, at least for Vermont kids.

MG It sounds from what you've been saying that it was really just a structureless camp, that is, that it wasn't a program where everything was focused on race relations or political action?

GP No, you had choices. There were a lot of other, they did have their cultural awareness classes and there was dance, African Dance classes, but that wasn't only it. There were a lot of arts and crafts classes and daily. I mean they had things, and that was scheduled. I don't recall attending a lot of them, but I must have attended a few of them. I would tend to go to maybe, maybe the African Dance Class or something that might be more philosophical back then. (LAUGH)

MG Were there any particularly Vermonty things that were taught?

GP I don't remember. Yea.

MG Did you make any lasting friendships?

GP For a few years. That one person Johnny and I stayed in contact for a few years. And there was a girl named Kathy. I don't remember her last name now, but she ended up, she was older than me. She was like the big sister in the dorm, everybody would go to her. She must have known everything about everybody. She ended up working for the telephone company and called a lot of us. (LAUGH)

MG That's convenient.

GP Yea.

MG Was this your first time away from home?

GP Other than going to a relatives house for a part of the summer, yea. The first time away from home without any parent or that kind of authority figure.

MG Let's go back to your parents reaction when you came home and told them that you wanted to do this.

GP I, I don't remember their first reaction. I think I had probably pulled so much information together that I always plan things when I approached my parents and had a good package. And you know, I probably for a week softened them up before I talked to them about it. I think that they didn't hassle me a lot. Um, I think they were probably nervous for me but I was the third child and the youngest. They'd been through my brothers sort of paved the road for me. If I'd been the first child, it might not have been like that. But at least at that point, they realized that different things happen when you're, when you're at that age that you do need some independence. They needed a break from me too. I had been really in my rebelling stage. So, it cleaned it right up.

MG Was there any interaction between your sight in Windham and any of the other sites that summer?

GP Yea. And I can't remember what site it was, but we did, we went over and stayed overnight a couple of nights at one site and they had a dance and Ken Dean, do you know him? He was at that other site and we went to high school together. So that was fun to run into each other because we didn't know the other was participating. It happened fast. I think I applied in May and we left in June. So it was quick.

MG What's your feeling as you look back on the value of the program you spoke about in personal terms, but what about in somewhat larger terms, social terms?

GP Well, I think, I'm sure that it gave me an awareness of definitely of other cultures you know, other people do exist. There are more than one way, there's more than one way of doing something. Any qualities exist and you know I probably didn't believe that. But, I'm a real optimist. (LAUGH) And even to this day still don't understand why, you know why there is inequality. I can't say that, I think that it helped me treat anybody around me with a lot more respect no matter what. And that's something that if you learn that when you're fourteen, that's major I think.

MG Were you at all aware of what the structure of the program was, that is Governor Hoff's role or other political or elite, or educational leaders role in putting it altogether?

GP No. I only knew that it was something that Governor Hoff had pushed for.

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MG Did he come and speak to the group or did he have any contact?

GP It's possible, I don't remember that.

MG Did you have any feeling at the time that you can recall of being involved in something that was, if not necessarily revolutionary, at least ground breaking?

GP Sure. Yea, we were sure we were going to change things. Yea, of course. I mean so many things were happening back then. I knew it was a unique experience that a lot of my friends certainly hadn't experienced something like that. You know, in some respects, it was you know you went away to camp, for your weeks, but what went on was definitely different than music camp. I don't know if I can you know clearly say what I came away with. I think that because at that age I was really searching for my identity I'd had major issues with the friendships I had been having with the people around me and I came back really transformed I think I've, I think I was.

MG Did you become involved in any kind of social or political activity after _____?

GP Well at the, yea, and I started to realize, to talk about the Vietnam War. There were different moratoriums, candle lighting services in the town and I did go to all of those. We dropped our dress code at school and did a sit in and marched to school, eight miles up Duxbury Hill, that's quite a march. Um, I think that was in protest of Vietnam. So I was involved in those, those things.

MG How did your friends or neighbors or classmates look upon this experience that you had? Did they think it was peculiar or did they admire your, your doing it?

GP They didn't think it was peculiar. My classmates really I think switched when I came back. The people that I had been friends with were still my friends, but not tight. So that my new friends didn't have anything, they might not have had a lot of knowledge of it really. I think it was a very, more of a personal experience for me than, than a social experience. Although what I learned has helped me personally, socially. (LAUGH) You know, I haven't, I'm not on the Board of Education or anything like that, but a lot of what I learned then has helped me to form my values, my adult values. I do, I do recall my friend Johnny coming to visit me. He was Puerto Rican and walking through town and the police stopped and I think it was the next summer he came to visit. And you know, "What

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are you doing walking down the street?" And he was looking for my house. And that was weird. You know, and that surprised me because that I hadn't seen that and that probably set me back a little bit.

MG Had you planned to go the next summer if the program had continued?

GP Yea, yea.

MG What, what were you told about its reason for discontinuing?

GP Now I tried to remember, did somebody, was there some kind of a money issue that went on with somebody? Did somebody run away with some of the money? Did something like that happen?

MG This is the first I'm hearing of that, it's possible, I don't know.

GP Or maybe it's just Putney College in general that I'm remembering, something funny like that went on. But money, funds is a, the reason.

MG You say there were no incidents at your site that were, I don't know, any disorder or violence, a disagreement or anything like that?

GP No. A few people left and some of them were due to illness. You know, some people got sick in the beginning and just had to go home and they were sick for two weeks and the medical staff sent them home by that time. I think it was, what were we there, six or seven weeks. I can't remember any outbursts. You know, I wouldn't doubt if there were a few scuffles.

MG The reason I ask partly is that the second of the two films that were shown yesterday, "We are Not Afraid," the One." That, I was, what we saw yesterday were just excerpts. And I was watching the whole thing today and actually what the film is about are problems within the program at various sites. The sites aren't identified, but, vandalism and fighting and just difficulty getting along between some of the kids, a rather different picture than what was painted yesterday. Certainly a different picture than what was painted by the first film, the Loren Greene one.

GP Uh huh.

MG And not knowing which sites these incidents took place at or what the context really for them was, I was just curious to see whether, what the reality of the program was, not in order to question it's value, but just to know for the record what really went on at the sites.

GP I don't remember any outbursts. And if there were any around me, I might tend to just get out quick. You know, I'm not at all comfortable around that kind of a situation. So I'm not remembering any.

MG Were there group meetings, any kind of governing body that the kids and/or counsellors participated in?

GP I think so, yea, yea, I think there were.

MG A long time ago.

GP Yea, it is. But there must have been one person on each floor in charge of the floor you know if you have issues, go to her. The dorms weren't co-ed. We might have tried to get that changed, but (LAUGH).

MG Great. Anything else that you can think of that you think is a relevance here?

GP I did have a comparison that Project Harmony is probably something that I'm sure stimulates that same emotion in the kids that do that. And I only hope you know that more and more kids get involved in that.

MG Who were the other Vermont kids? They were strangers to you at first right?

GP Yea.

MG But can you recall where they came from, what their backgrounds were like? Let me ask you about your background a little bit, your family background. What did your father do?

GP Um, well he did a few things. He sold insurance, but his biggest trade was a kitchen designer. And my mother worked at the State Hospital. They you know are pretty middle class, working middle class background. My parents weren't from Vermont, but and I said I was the youngest. I was the only girl, real princess in the family.

MG And what about the other kids? Were they, were there farms kids, did they tend to be from larger _____?

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GP I think I think a real mix. I know there were kids from the boon docks you know from my standpoint. (LAUGH) They're from the boon docks. Get me a map and show me where Irasburg is, or you know, really way up there. Burlington, I did make a few friends in Burlington. We kept out friendships for awhile, but you know it faded out. Sixteen, seventeen you start to you know think about other things. Basically all over, some were right from Brattleboro which was nearby.

MG Did you go to New York at all?

GP No, I never did. No.

MG Okay. Well I think, I think that pretty much covers it. There's only one...