

Transcript – Justine Tyrrell '43

Transcribed by Karen L. Schneider (Class of 2000) in February 1999.

Narrator: Justine Tyrrell Smadbeck Priestley

Interviewer: Barbara Anton

Interview Date: July 30, 1998

Interview Time:

Location: Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

Length: 2 audio files; 1:14:13

Tape 1, Side 1

This is an interview with Justine Tyrrell Smadbeck Priestley (Class of 1943) at her home in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, conducted by Barbara Anton on July 30, 1998.

Barbara Anton: It is July 30, 1998. I am Barbara Anton from the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University, interviewing Justine Tyrrell Smadbeck...

Justine Tyrrell Priestley: Smadbeck.

BA: Smadbeck Priestly.

JTP: It's Justine Tyrrell Smadbeck Priestly.

BA: Class of 1943 at Brown University. The interview is being conducted in her beautiful home on lovely Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. I'd like to start today, Justine, with just a little bit about your family background and how you ended up coming to Brown.

JTP: Well, uh, seventeen members of my family graduated from Brown University. My father was class of 1914 and then I have uncles and cousins and five brothers and sisters and their husbands and wives who also graduated from Brown. And, we've had only one of the grandchildren who graduated from Brown, but I'd have to go back and do a tabulation again.

BA: Did you apply to any other schools?

JTP: Urn, no, because we had - when I was a child, the first, when I was two years old, the first song I ever learned was "We'll Be Ever True to Brown." And, all my life, on Thanksgiving, we'd go to the Brown football game before Thanksgiving dinner. You know, it was very much a family, we adored the university and that, you know, Daddy went to the university so we went. Also, it was during the Depression and he had six of us to send to college and we were able, because we lived in Pawtucket, we were able to live home and go to college. I got a very small scholarship, but, none in the first year and I had a confrontation with Dean Morris about this because I had a straight A average at Pawtucket High School and a pretty good record all the way along, as well as five, we were six children. And, I went to her office and she came out- she was very dignified - "What is it??" And, I said, "Well, Dean Morris, I, my best friend who is not, she only has one brother and doesn't even have as good a record as I do and she got a scholarship. And, my father has six of us to put through, he's going to have three in college now. And, I didn't get a scholarship and I don't understand why. I worked very, very hard. I had straight As"- and I'm telling her all this. She's staring down at me, "I'm very sorry, my young woman. I cannot discuss this now. It's all been decided." And, I went home and I kept thinking that it was because I was a Roman Catholic because in those days those were things and my friend wasn't. And, so, I- God only knows, but I went home and ended up in the backyard, weeping on Daddy's shoulder. And, he said, "Honey, you can go any place you want. I'll see to that." And, I said, "No, Dad, I'm going there and I'm going to show them." The next year I got a scholarship.

BA: Oh, great! Did you have any other contacts with Dean Morris over the years?

JTP: Oh yes, we became very friendly. We became very friendly. I was, I mean, nobody knows why those things happen, it's very horrid. And, it was, again, we were just coming out- I entered in 1939 and I'm sure the university was having troubles too, spreading funds around and attracting people from other locals other than townies. So, there must have been a reason, you know, but in my heart of hearts, as a young lady who would knock herself out and I wanted to please Daddy. But, anyway, we became very good friends and I admired her very much. She did wonderful things for us and inspired us very much.

BA: So, there was never any question about that you would go to college?

JTP: No, there was never any. My father had some golfing friends who suggested to him that he send the daughters - we were four girls and two boys - we should go to secretarial school and work as secretaries. And, my father just looked at him and said - at least, this is the story - said, " I'm sorry, George, but my daughters will be much better mothers with an education." But, Dad was very, he expected the same, he was very, he treated us equally and gave us equal opportunities and had high expectations as well. He wasn't one to hand out a complement if we came in with a B, never mind a C or a D.

BA: And, I bet you never did!

JTP: Well, I did, you know, actually, I did find college- I came home after my first semester with a B and a C, I think- I can't remember- and it was quite a jump from Pawtucket High School to Brown University. And, I went in, tearful again, and Dad, then, said, "Hey, you know you can do better, so just go ahead and do it." But, it's not easy when you're first starting. He was very encouraging, very encouraging.

BA: So, you were what we call a "city girl"?

JTP: Yes.

BA: But, did you spend a lot of time on campus?

JTP: I spent my life on campus. I was very active in the- I should get the book and show you. I was one of those people who, I'm a work-aholic and it has followed me all my life and I was very active on campus. I was dance director at Brown, Brownbrokers, and that kind of thing.

BA: So, you were involved. Did you know what you wanted to study when you came to Brown? Did you have any career goals in mind?

JTP: Actually, I didn't. Then, in, when we went to Brown, there was more of a basic curriculum. You did a basic curriculum in your freshman year and you were expected to give it a try, to explore, to explore intellectually, then, follow your bend. My father graduated in, as an engineer, a combustion electrical engineer and he always said that the education of an engineer, at that time he went, was neglected as far as the liberal arts part of it was concerned. So, he was very much for us taking a broad, I eventually became an English major.

BA: And, what did you do? What was your first job out of Brown?

JTP: Well, it was in the middle of the war. Our college career was greatly disrupted by the war and I really, not till these years at reunion times, I've realized to the extent it was disrupted. So, I went into the Army Security Agency as a crypt analyst in Washington, DC.

BA: They took women because they...

JTP: Because, then, they needed us to do anything. You know, we were Rosie the Riveter in those days. We carried the bags and we did everything.

BA: Did you take the accelerated course?

JTP: No, I didn't because I had a job at Macy's in the junior executive training in New York for the summer of, when they first started the accelerated program, which was in my junior year. And, I didn't want to give up that opportunity. And, there was no need, at that point, for me to accelerate, so- I also needed the money. So, I worked and there were only 38 of us left, I think, when we were marching down the hill.

BA: Now, why do you say that you only recently realized what affect the war years had?

JTP: Because I see other, later classes and earlier classes and the cohesiveness of the alumnae and ours was greatly disrupted. Our extracurricular programs were greatly - I mean, Brown brokers was called off in my senior year. And, it was very serious. I mean, we had classmates who had been killed. And, I was in Brown's John Hay Library, studying on December 7, 1941, when a young man I was dating at that time came in and there was suddenly a hush in the air of the library. And, then, suddenly this - it was like the surf- suddenly coming in and pounding on the people. The noise level when he came to tell us about the bombing of Pearl Harbor and nobody shushed anybody. The library was in an uproar. And, that marked it. And, I didn't graduate till '43, so.

BA: You're the first person I've ever heard tell about that, that incident of December 7th.

JTP: Oh yes, yes. Well, it, for me, permeated my mind. Guys we knew were drafted and gone...

BA: Immediately?

JTP: Yes, they were gone and I had one friend whom I liked very much. And, then, of course, we were told - we worked for the USO, we put on our dancing dress and went down and entertained the men.

BA: In Providence?

JTP: In Providence, and we became kind of- everybody started writing to us and they told us that it was our duty to write back and so I had many young men of correspondence. And, it was really tragic because one of them was in training in Pensacola in Florida and he was killed. And, it *really* affected us, very, very badly.

BA: Very young people.

JTP: Yes, that's right. And, of course, at that time, because the men were giving up so much and sacrificing so much, we hesitated to even discuss the fact that we had rationing and gas rationing. So, you were made to appreciate what they were doing. And, then as the war went on, it got really more serious. And, a lot of these young men asked me if I would send them - one of them wanted my nylon stockings to wear around his neck when he was flying his plane.

BA: For luck?

JTP: That was for luck. And, then, another one wanted my rosary - who was in Guam. He lost it and I got this frantic letter, "Please send another, please, right away. I have to have it." They became talismans, and like, proving to- what was it they use to say? "There are no atheists in foxholes."

BA: That's right.

JTP: I think I just made that up, didn't I? Or is that a cliché that...? [laughs]

BA: No, I've heard that before.

JTP: Oh, of course, I am only joking.

BA: Your friend survived?

JTP: No, he was killed. And, I can remember- this was after I had graduated that he was, that he went through and he was killed in Guam. But, I can remember, there was another Brown classmate who came to my house to visit me - I was then married. And, my husband had gone overseas five weeks after we were married, so he came in and told me about my friend who died and I couldn't believe- I had been very, very close to him. And I remember, I ran in and played, "The Warsaw Concerto" as loud I could play it for like three days. Drove my mother-in-law nuts! [laughs] I think I'm exaggerating slightly, but I did play it for...

BA: Was your husband overseas, too?

JTP: Yes, he was originally with the Army Security Agency - that was where we met and married, actually. And, but he had been Brown, class of '42 with Bob Priestley, to whom I'm married now - they were classmates, class of '42. And, Lou went overseas and was in Birchly Park in England, which was outside of London, doing then, again, code work. That sort of thing. It was quite a wonderful mission that they were on.

BA: Where did you do your code work?

JTP: I was, I just stayed in Washington and I was working on, actually, Chinese Diplomatic code, for some reason or another. And, of course, we are not suppose to talk about it, but it's been printed all over the place, ever since, so.

BA: How long did you have that job?

JTP: About a year and then I married. Then, I moved to New York and lived with his family. For some reason or another, I just felt that I had to be near him and then near his family. I don't think it was, probably, the smartest thing I ever did, but at the same time, it did get me launched on my career which was, eventually, with the Noyes Foundation. And, the people at Brown were very, very helpful to me when I first got started. Charles at the Noyes had been on our board - I was on the board where I worked when I first went to New York which was at the Hechlo Foundation for Children. And, using, at that time, my theater skills which I had had from Brown. And, I worked, we had a children's theater there- a wonderful, exquisite little theater- and I worked there from the Hechlo Foundation. Charles F. Noyes was a very successful real estate man in New York and he was setting up a foundation for scholarships, to give scholarships to college students. Half of whom, in that policy, were black. And, but the basic premise of it all was, that the

grants were based on need. If the colleges would accept the students- we decided not to do interviewing- it's costly, it's very expensive. We felt the colleges, if they were admitted, the colleges had done this. We were selective about the recommendations they had and what they were doing, but need was the primary, was the basic criteria of these scholarships. For that reason, it was, it made more of a level playing field with the blacks and the whites. What was very interesting about it- oh, I had done a study for the Hechlo Foundation for Children, they wanted to get rid of their huge building. They wanted to sell it and use the income from the proceeds to work through all of the ramifications then that were already established doing work in New York. So, I was assigned to do a study of the knocks and gaps in child welfare in New York City- a very small project. At the time, I had, I was not long out of college and I was an English major, but I was extremely verbose- my writing was not *tight*. But, luckily, for me, I had to make, consolidate it for reports at the board meetings. So, by consolidating, it came out crisp and clear and whatever and Mr. Noyes was very impressed with this job that I had done for the foundation and asked me to run, set up and direct the Jessie- McMillus Foundation, which I did for thirteen years, which is how I got into race relations. It was kind of lucky, in a way, the way it happened, because I didn't have- in the first place, the most shocking thing was I hardly didn't know anybody who was black. I was very, an extremely naive young woman. It was amazing how naive I was because I had thought before the war- the Second World War, which turned our lives upside down- to, that there would be no more prejudice. Right!? There wouldn't be any more prejudice, isn't that what we fought that war for? So, what problems were Negroes having, say I? So, a very good friend of mine listened to me and said, "Justine, I want to introduce you to Ken and Mamie Clark." They ran the Northside Development for Child, the Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem. It's right on the edge of Harlem and they were black and they were extremely kind and, believe me, I got an education. And, I got an - and then, Dr. Channing DeBias, who ran the Faulkstone's Fund became a member of our board of the Noyes Foundation and said to me, "Justine, you really have to go back and study some history." So, I went to, I enrolled in Columbia University in American History. I studied with Dumas Malone and- see, here's where the mind betrays- David Donald. I studied with some fabulous professors- Pendium. A famous professor- his favorite word was "quintessential"- I'll think of it. I'll fill it in for you later. But, in any case, I studied with some perfectly marvelous people and I based, I really slanted my program to the study of the history of the Negro in the United States. And, with that basis, I really, really got a good grounding. I felt what I was doing. And, then, gradually, of course, as I got into it, I met the people who were running the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students and the people at John Hechlo and Ford Foundation. We set up a foundation group and, but in the meantime, I had gone back to all the colleges. The first year I spent studying how to do it. That's when I decided that it was a waste of funds to duplicate interviewing, which the colleges had whole departments to do.

BA: These were colleges all over the country?

JTP: Ah, yes, yes. And, they, so that, at one time, Pembroke had a, or Brown, I guess, had a study of how the, how the grants department of the university selected students for scholarships. And, we went and they gave us some, some hypothetical cases to, what we would decide and what we wouldn't who would enter and who wouldn't. And, they had been actual students that had been or had not been and those who had been successful or whatever. And, because of my work with the Noyes Foundation and what I had learned, I was able to do insightful job, shall we say, on these things. And, one of the people there said to me, "Well, how did you know that one particular, one particular student wasn't going to be successful?" She was a young woman who had great flair,

individuality, she was, you know, all the things you would expect. So, I said, well, I just knew she would not be content with the disciplines of the university. And, she wasn't. She might make it today where such disciplines are not as noticeable.

BA: Especially at Brown.

JTP: At Brown, right. And, but, she certainly was not going to be successful then. Where are we? I'm yapping, aren't I?

BA: You're still at Noyes. Now, this is the late '40s, to get a time frame. Was this late '40s?

JTP: Yes, I set up the foundation in 1947. I had worked from '44 or '45 to '47 at the theater, at the Hechlo Foundation for Children. And, then, in 1947, I started this foundation and ran that until 1961 when they changed their program. It was an awful lot of work. We had a board and we had to really, we processed about 1100 applications a year. So, it was a formidable job and it was all done on voluntary basis by the scholarship committee of the Noyes Foundation. And, we had some very fine professionals on that scholarship committee and they worked at it with us. But, it then became something they decided that this kind of an approach, they just didn't want to go- and I think they wanted to change the program into more environmental things, I'm not sure how it's going ahead now.

BA: You mean, students who were studying environmental issues?

JTP: No, they were giving up the scholarship program. They were finished with the students we had.

BA: I see. And take it totally different.

JTP: And take a totally different tact and gradually give grants to the universities for environmental studies or whatever. And, I really haven't followed it since I left then because I immediately went to the Amsterdam News as a reporter.

BA: And, you lived in New York all this time? Did your husband return, then, from the war?

JTP: Yes, he returned in 1945 or six and he was overseas from, yes, he- '45 or six, I think, he got back. And, then, as we were setting up a house and I had four children in that, at the same time.

BA: Oh my!

JTP: So, I was so busy.

BA: I guess so. [laugh] You were very unusual for a woman, for a mother to work, weren't you? In those days?

JTP: Yes, for my time, yes, it was unusual, but I was extremely fortunate, I had a lot of help and I was able to do it. I had, the way I did it was, have the help there when I wasn't and nobody there when I was because I didn't want any, I wanted my children to have to look to me for what they needed. So, all the help I had was part time, but I had enough that everybody was well taken care of. When I look back on it now, I wonder how I did it, you know?

BA: You probably never even thought about being a full-time mother, though?

JTP: I never thought I wasn't.

BA: Oh. [laugh]

JTP: You see, I didn't separate it out. As far as I was concerned, I was a full-time mother. After all, a full time mother has to go to the dentist now and somebody's taking care of -I had the same person, nanny, right from the time my eldest son was five months old.

BA: Weren't you lucky?

JTP: And, she was with us until- she's still part of my family. And, she was with us, even after my youngest - there was only seven years from top to bottom. When my youngest was getting a little bit more independent and going on the school bus by himself, she then took over housekeeping duties and that's how she stayed. But, was always there. So, I was always covered. And, I was able to arrange my schedule so that I could do it both ways. But, I, it did mean that you had to have an awful lot of energy to do it.

BA: Yeah, I bet.

JTP: But, I never did consider I wasn't a full-time mother.

BA: And, your husband worked as an engineer?

JTP: No, no. My husband was in the real estate business. Yes, my father was an engineer.

BA: Oh, right, I'm sorry.

JTP: That's right. I don't expect you to get it. [laughs]

BA: Remember all your stories. We haven't even gotten into your stories-

JTP: My boss use to say, "All right, Gerdy, what's your hell of a story? Everybody's got one." [laughs] We can, I can drone out and I do talk a lot.

BA: Oh, that's great and this is very, very fascinating. We haven't gotten into your really interesting years yet. So, in '61, did you join the Amsterdam News?

JTP: Yes.

BA: Did you apply for the job?

JTP: Well, actually, it was during the time of the Little Rock Nine. And, Daisy Bates was having a problem- Daisy Bates had the newspaper right there- and was supporting Little Rock Nine and all the businesses took their advertising away from her paper. And, there was a group of us and we use to call ourselves the "East Coast Rat Pack." And, we came - one was from the New York Foundation and then there was Jimmy Hicks who was at the Amsterdam News and Ken Clark and I can't remember exactly everybody in the Rat Pack. But, we very quietly raised funds and sent them to Daisy Bates to support her. In fact, I have a ceramic dish that she made for me, signed Daisy, in those years of the Little Rock Nine. And, it was at that time- I hadn't read the Amsterdam News, I was not a reader of the Amsterdam News up to that time, but I got interested with Hicks there and they found him a rather eloquent member of the East Coast Rat Pack and a very good writer, I felt, when I began to read the Amsterdam News. But, as I read the Amsterdam News, I looked at him one day at one of these meetings and I said, "Well, I don't know, Jimmy. You talk about white people being prejudiced and all that kind of stuff. You have no white point of view, whatsoever, in your paper," and I said, "You talk, if you read all your news reports and columns and everything else, you want all white people together. I mean, you can say some white people are so and so and some white people are this way or, but you can't just say, whites are such and such. I mean, that would mean

I'm with Orvis and Wallace and, you know. And, you know very well that that's not what I am. So, you can't, when you say white people are something." So, he looked at me and said, "I'll tell you what. If you feel so strongly about it, why don't you write me a couple columns." So, the challenge, the gauntlet was thrown then, so, I wrote four columns, really, as a joke. And, I put a fake name on them and, actually, the reason I had gotten the name was because I had had a lot of phone calls from students who were very, very anxious to get help and needed to see me. I had four children at home and they would frequently call me at home and I couldn't talk with them because I was so busy with the kids. And, I felt badly about it and they felt put off and so forth. So, I decided if I would be writing, I'd be Gertrude Wilson of the Amsterdam News. I asked my husband, "Give me a nice flatshoe name." When you have a name like Justine Smadbeck and you walk in a room and somebody says, "Ah, come on! What's your name, really??" You know, they think it's a joke- Justine Smadbeck. So, [laughs] I got so tired of sculling it. So, I got to be Gertrude Wilson. And, eventually, as I was writing, I'd be in the newsroom with all the other reporters, you know, assigned to a story and they'd say, "Hey Gerdy, we got any, whatever!" And, I'd, immediately, I responded to either name. It was funny, but I forgot where I was going.

BA: Well, I had asked you if you had applied for the job, but you told me how you got the job.

JTP: Ah, yes, and the next thing I had known, he had printed one of the columns with his heading. I'll show you the- there was a drawing out of something- these people didn't even know me. They didn't have a picture on this one. This has got an editor's note: "The writer of this column is a white, Park Avenue mother with a keen perception of today's world who has the moral courage to voice her reaction to events around her." And, then, they- I've got to show you- because the second column in here is with me calling Louie Lomax a "professional negro." I knocked his head off. And, then, I got a letter from Jackie Robinson, here: "Thank you for your wonderful article. I only hopes it gets the exposure it deserves. It is time someone exposed the professional negro" - we still have plenty of- "regardless of who they may be. Your article, I hope, will set a trend. Too frequently, the negro benefits, personally, by something he does, but the negro, in general, comes out second best. We need to do something about this. I thank you for the start. Sincerely, Jackie Robinson."

BA: Well, so it-

JTP: It was amazing. Then, here's this drawing [laughs] of me by somebody who had never seen me.

BA: Oh.

JTP: Don't I look sharp?

BA: Yeah, so that was it, then. So, one column was published and from then on, he said, "Okay, you've got it!"

JTP: Then, it- I was very brash and as you can see: "Does a negro know what it's like to be white?" I got tired of them saying, you know, "All whites are." Then, there were all these other things here. Then, there were people - "The Negro Problem is Really the White Man's." "Name Your Negro or Who's your White Man": "I was tired of the game played by white politicians. Everyone plays it from John Kennedy to Mayo, Wagner, Eisenhower, Nixon. The game could be called, 'Name Your Negro' or "Who's your White Man.'" Believe me, I got my head knocked off for that one.

BA: Oh, I bet you did. Very provocative. This subject you're talking about.

JTP: This is Anty Gildson- I love this guy: "After reading the July 29th quote unquote "column by Mrs. Gertrude Wilson, I shook my tired negro head" - in quotes- "and said to myself, 'Lord, deliver me, not us, from white, Park Avenue mothers who are self-annointed authorities on the negro.' Although, I've been a negro man and boy for 45 years, I still can't speak with the authority that Mrs. Wilson does." [laughs]

BA: Oh boy, oh.

JTP: I took a, they took shots at me. But, it was good. And, what was interesting was the fan, the mail that began to come in from readers. Here's another one rapping Wilson on the Muslims and the nationalism, so forth.

BA: And is this '61 and '62, here? These years?

JTP: These were the years of '61 and '62. And, then, it got on and I got into expressing myself a little better. My editor printed me exactly as I was. They didn't do, they didn't edit me ail that much, but, ah.

BA: How many columns a week?

JTP: I did one a week.

BA: One a week, okay.

JTP: It was a weekly magazine, I mean, newspaper. It was the largest weekly in the United States at that time.

BA: Oh, really?!

JTP: Yes. In the Sixties, as you know, was a whole other time, spiritually, in every way, it was different.

BA: So, you went from Park Avenue to Harlem to your office. Tell me a little bit about what that was like.

JTP: Well, I think I showed you that piece about riding in the cab going out there. It was, it was an anxiety-ridden kind of thing because I would go up into - it would be hard to get, as I pointed out before, a cab ride without somebody, the drivers, that was black and white, who wouldn't want to go take me up there. But, actually, Alvin Poussaint, who was a - he's still practicing, I think. He's a psychiatrist in Boston, kind of famous psychiatrist, he's black - wrote a very interesting paper on the anxieties and pressures of white women in the Civil Rights movement. And, I could take up all your time explaining some of these things. When I first went up there, I, I went out to write a story and I came back to the office - the office with the City Room was a long room and everybody's desk was along the side and you had to walk down to your editor's, the editor's office was down the back. So, I put, it was my first, I'd start out as a columnist and I could write anything on - this was one of my reporting assignments, and one of the first anyway and I put it on his desk and he looked up at me and said, "Well, listen. What did the man say?" You know, I said, this man was so and so. He said, "Well, what did this guy say about what was said about him?" And, I said, I didn't ask him. He was in a hurry. He looked at me, he was disgusted, he said, "Wilson, I want you to know that when you go out there and you're going to write a story for me, for this paper. You come in here, you treat that like a bowl of jell, a piece of jelly you find on the street and I want you to carry that piece of jelly up here and put it on my desk and I don't want to see one of your fingerprints on it." [laughs] I said, oh. He said, "You ask it." He was yelling at me by this time. And, of course the City Room had gone dead silent. I walked out, had to go down the gamut, past the city editor, past all the other reporters. Of course, some of the women were just going, "Blggghh," behind their hands because I had a few knife wounds in the back. And, so I went and sat down at the desk and I got what the man had to say about it, but I finished the story. I was near tears the whole time because I had to stay there and do it with everybody watching me - how was I going to take it? And, I went home to my husband and "I can't take that," I started yelling, "I'm not, I'm quitting. I don't like to be treated and they hate me and Jimmy was so unfair. He didn't have to yell like that." So, Lou looked at me and said, "Hey, I want you to sit down here a minute." And, he said, "You know, if you're going to be in this take-on this society, what you're doing." He said, "That's business. You have to be able to take it. You have to walk away from it and do what the man says and do the best job you know how and forget the tears. Too bad! You got yelled at and you

put your head up and you go and you do your job." And, he said, "The worst thing you could possibly do right now would be to quit."

BA: They probably didn't have another white reporter.

JTP: Oh, no, they, you know. The Sixties were gamed to this, you know, ideas come into their time and I was just a happenstance. Then, late after me there were a couple more that came in and went out. But, for the, during that long period of time, I was the only one assigned, and they gave me fantastic assignments because, being white, they wanted me to go down and report for the Amsterdam News because they knew I would see and hear things differently than another reporter. But, they just wanted to experiment with me, I guess, I don't know. But, I was given some wicked assignments. But, this is what Alvin Poussaint had said, the anxieties and the stresses of white women under these circumstances. There was one part that I was writing about in here about why I wanted to go downtown. I didn't want to be there anymore because I didn't belong, actually. I was like the only black in a white situation and I found out what it felt like and it doesn't feel well if you're, you know, you stand out. People start judging you in ways that are unfair. What, actually, was done to me over and over again, the man who was publisher of Ebony magazine, John Johnson, I think his name was. We were all down in Washington for the inauguration, one of the inaugurations- I've forgotten which one - and we were, I worked very well, then, with the people at Ebony - Simeon Booka was fantastic to me and there was a woman working with him who was really super. It had been pointed out to me by a very sharp black reporter. He looks at me, we were at senatorial, well, one of the elections, and he looked, he said, "Look up at the stage there"- the senator had lost, the New York senator. Of course, again, I could easily give you the name, but, so much, the brain is cranked. He said, "What do you see up there, Gerdy?" And, I said, "Well, I see him up there. He's making his concession speech and I see his assistants gathering around him and- this was a black guy- and he said, "Well, you see, Gerdy, what I see is there isn't one single black person around him and that's why he lost this election. He didn't bother." And, so he said, "Remember one thing, Gerdy. You look at what I look at, but you don't see what I see." So, down in Washington when, you know, there was the March on Washington and there was a lot of stuff going on, the Poor People's March and all this stuff and I also was interviewing Adam Clayton Powell and so forth and so on. So, I was in Washington quite a bit and it was- I lost my train of thought, again. This is what happens, you know, when you start talking and I'm bringing in two or three different thoughts at one time.

BA: Yeah.

JTP: But, he said, "You look at what I look at, but you don't see what I see." Oh, it was at the Inauguration, I want to tell you why, how they would really give me a hard time. I was working with these reporters and I worked very closely with them. And, so, they're talking about how to get from one meeting, that we were going to, and had to cover and still be dressed for the formal part of the inauguration.

BA: Now, which inauguration are you talking about?

JTP: I'm trying to think which one it was.

BA: Was it a New York State person?

JTP: Oh, no, this was a Presidential.

BA: Oh, a Presidential.

JTP: Inauguration. And, we were talking about what, how we would get dressed and still cover both things. So, I said, speaking out, "Well, you know, you know what I'm going to do. I'm going to get dressed for the evening and I'm just going to go and cover that other event in evening clothes." And, Johnson looks up, the Ebony magazine publisher- and I'll have to be sure to check that name for you- and he said, "Okay, folks, now you listen to this. White folks is talking. So, you pay it a lot of

attention. White folks is talking here and telling you what to do." And, I, immediately, because I'd been in it and I didn't think of myself, I looked over at him and I said, "You know that's entirely uncalled for. How dare you say a thing like that to me! I was just saying what I am going to do. I don't care what anybody else does, particularly, you!" Well, everybody in the room went dead silent. How dared I speak to the Great Man this way! Well, but, luckily, for me, he started laughing.

BA: Okay.

JTP: And, everybody in the room started laughing. And, I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get mad, but that wasn't fair." And, he said, "You want to know something. You're absolutely right!" [laughs]. So, anyway, it's, what I'm trying to do is tell you the whole story of my life and.

BA: Yeah, I think we're going to have to, I was going to ask you to, I mean, you have so many experiences. Are there some that stand out more than others of all your experiences over the years?

JTP: I think the main thing, the main experiences that stand out, because I was in this writing, I wasn't just, I was writing white on white and I was writing about my kids, about the tennis out on Forest Hills, I wrote everything I wanted to -family life. One column was called "The Left-Handed Cake Eater" because my son pointed out something to me about how I didn't pay attention to lefties and I put the cake on the wrong side, but, you know, then, I made the point, it was a point that I made in the column. So, the main thing, you see, that happens with all race relations and all of these events, people like to hear me talking about Malcolm X's funeral which was- well, anyway, the events that went on were all played against world events and this is the kind of thing that we forget. And, of course, the Vietnam War permeated everything during the Sixties, as well. But, it was other events having nothing whatsoever to do with race relations or the Civil Rights march or anything else, so that the, the thing that stood out in my mind mostly, because they were the most painful and discouraging, when you were working, hoping to improve. You know, after all, how many years? Thirteen years with the Noyes Foundation, attempting to help. And, then, all these years in the Amsterdam News thinking that we could straighten out and all Americans would be Americans and there wouldn't be Afro-Americans or Irish-Americans or whatever which, of course, typical of my idealistic thinking. Well, what stood out mostly in my mind because it was so painful, starting with the murder of Emmett Till, who was found in Mississippi in the river, to Medgar Evers and to Malcolm X and John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and it just went on and on and those things, as far as, you thought you had gone someplace and, then, you were drawn back. So, I think, probably, out of that, too, the Massacre of My Lai, killed me and, but, these things were all played against the- I think I put it in here, somewhere. But, I'll show you the list, and then explain it to you afterwards. It's, uh, if I could put my hand on it.

BA: The list of all your, of everything that mattered, the crucial things?

JTP: The stuff that went on during this time. It starts in the first - I don't see it.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1.]

Tape 1, Side 2.

BA: While I'm here, Justine Priestley is looking through the draft of her manuscript because, fortunately, she plans to write a book about all of her experiences which cover so many years.

JTP: Well, what I was looking for was the list- if you read, if I find it, after another break, I will, I may have it up in a place I can put my hand on it, in a desk. It was in a piece, it was going to fit in here somewhere, so there was a time to begin to think about these things and I will get that. There's no point in my carrying on about it because I'm carrying on about something I'm not saying. It's like Seinfeld. This is a

story about nothing. [laughs]. So, anyway, where do we go from here?

BA: Well, do you want to talk about any of these particular events? Or do you?

JTP: Well, you see, in order to talk about news to you and Malcolm X's funeral, for instance, I had gone the night before- the day he was assassinated, I heard about it and Betty Shabazz, I called Betty Shabazz and I said, she said, "Can you come?" And, she was at that time staying at an apartment, which was not her own home because they had a bomb threat, with her children. She was also pregnant. And, so she told me how to get there and where to go, and I got in a cab - again, I ran into a cab that didn't want to do this. I was terrified to tell you the truth.

BA: Can I interrupt here- how did you know the family?

JTP: I had written columns very early on about the Muslims and that's when Langston Hughes wrote me a, a- wait a minute, I'll show you. It was about, uh.

BA: I'll also insert here that Justine Priestley is, has book after book here of all the articles she ever wrote and that's what she's going through to, referring to.

JTP: Well, it's hard not to because- I'm looking. It could have been the, urn- I have a very sketchy outline of some of the stuff in the front of these. They're not all that well organized. But, here it is. I had written this column.

BA: What year?

JTP: This was in 1963. And, it was entitled, "The Guest of the Mooslims." They use to call themselves Mooslims, not Muslims. And, "a few weeks ago I spent the afternoon at Rockman Palace where the Muslims are having a bazaar. I was frankly curious to see what was going on. I met Malcolm X briefly and received a cordial welcome" - do you want to hear this?

BA: Uh-huh.

JTP: Okay, "the fact is I like Malcolm X which means that I suppose I should commit suicide. I'm white, am I not? That makes me the worst enemy of black people by Muslim standards- just because I'm white that is. But, if I were black, I would want to be a Muslim because I could not believe in a white God, any white God. It would have to be a black God for me to believe in him and I would expect my black God not to like the white people who had been so bad to me. I couldn't help it. There are those who equate the Muslims with the people of the White Citizens' Councils which is ridiculous. The motivation is the same- hatred. But, the one, but one is constructed, the other destructive. I don't care what the psychiatrists say about hate always being destructive. I don't agree. But, what I saw at Rockman Palace was a constructive force at work, offering self-respect and dignity, self-reliance and industry. When I spent the afternoon at the Muslim's bazaar, I couldn't refrain from thinking what a far cry those people seemed from the race-haters they are said to be. They were dignified, gracious people, displaying every kind of talent in attractive settings. They had a great bazaar and I had a wonderful time. It was a little strange, I admit, because they were playing records how white people should drop dead just on general principles. And, there I was white, not ready to drop dead at all. I kept trying to think of some way to hide being white. I was sure that everybody resented my walking around alive because all those records, the least, after all those records, the least I could have done was throw a fit and drop dead like the general retribution at their feet. 'I'm a friend, I'm a friend, I'm a friend,' I kept thinking. But, what kind of a friend could I be? There I was, ready to dash back to downtown, at the drop of a hat or eyebrow. The position was just unattainable. But, let's face it- the position is unattainable as long as THINGS (in capital letters) stay the same. You can knock yourself out from here to there and gone to make THINGS different, but it doesn't make a dent. A friend of mine said, 'A whole lot of us must kill a whole lot of us before we get through.' The whole humorous thing is that it will probably be China which will rear up and kill us all-the black, white, olive, and Asian of us will all die by the Chinese sword together, maybe 25, 100 years from now." Now, that's amazing I had forgotten I had written that. That is in 1963 and this is 1998. That is amazing,

but anyway, I did get this letter from Langston Hughes, dated March 28, 1963. And, he writes: "Dear Miss Wilson." He was in a hotel, in the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel in Cleveland, Ohio and it was addressed to Miss Gertrude Wilson, Amsterdam News in New York City. "Dear Miss Wilson, There is, isn't there, a phrase like "sui generis" or "hors de concours" or something which means out of this world? I don't have a spelling dictionary here in the hotel, but I read your column, "Guest of the Muslims" on the train last night, coming over to Cleveland and I think it is the MOST"- and he's got capital letters on "most"- "Which is why this note to tell you so. Sincerely, Langston Hughes." Well, you can imagine, there I was in 1963, I was ecstatic with that letter.

BA: Yes, I can imagine.

JTP: And, I, so that's how I got to know, the, Malcolm and Betty Shabazz. I knew them mostly by the telephone. I wanted to go on one of Malcolm's things in the south and we had talked and we had argued back and forth and all that kind of thing.

BA: About whether a white woman should go?

JTP: No, no, but about various and sundry things because he was picking on Jewish people and he blamed every, all the problems on Jewish people and I remember saying to him at, when we were down on one of the marches on Washington. He was giving a press conference and I was at the edges of it and, then, I edged up to him and I said, "Well, Malcolm, how can you say that three and a half million Jews are responsible for all these things that are happening to over twenty million Blacks" – we didn't say blacks then, we said negroes -but, I said, "How?" He looked down at me and said, like this, "I'll see you later." I was dismissed and I didn't, I just didn't think after that point that there was any reason, to individualize either myself or bring some focus on this question which was academic at best and conjecture at worst. And, so I just let it drop. But, in any case, he, I did defend him many times. I defended him when he said, the chickens had come to roost when John Kennedy was assassinated. People were extraordinarily upset by this, but he was only telling the truth, you see. We had allowed all of these kind of things to go, these kind of fanatics who were allowed to carry weapons and to do these kind of things.

BA: And, still doing it.

JTP: And, they're still doing it and the chickens did come home to roost and that, he was speaking in larger terms, than personal. And, so I asked him, I called him up and I said, "Malcolm, how could you say it?" And, I said, "Are you glad Kennedy is dead?" He said, "I didn't mean that at all. Of course, I'm not glad that our president is dead." But, he said, "The same thing pertains to him as those of us who are killed for other reasons." And, God knows, you and I know that, that that assassination, that dragging that black man in the back of the truck by those two hideous creatures who should have been shot dead on the spot. I remember another passion- well, anyway, so that's how I got to know them. But, I knew them, primarily, from the on the phone, talking back and forth. And, this one time I wanted, he was having a big meeting of the Muslims and somewhere in the South - I can't remember where it was- but, I remember calling him up and asking him, begging him, could I please come?

BA: And, this was all in the name of Amsterdam News?

JTP: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I had no right to go any other way. I carried my press credentials and I was assigned by my editor. I didn't go do it on my own. I mean he, I said, I proposed to him that I would do this. And, he said, "Well, that would be a unique kind of thing if you get to do it." And, so, I called Malcolm and he said, "No way. I'm sorry, there is no way, I couldn't, that would just not work. It wouldn't work. And, I couldn't do that to you." He said, "That would be a terrible thing to do to you. And, you should not do that. You have four children. You have, you know." He was a decent, he really was a decent man and he was a man who was longing to do things right. Actually, because of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, the Urban League, all and the NAACP, were the recipients of funds because most of the people were afraid of the Muslims and they didn't want Malcolm to be - he was an

extremist, there is no question. But, he did them all a favor because they got some very fine contributions from white people wanted them to be stronger. They adored the idea of Martin Luther King's pacifistic - well, what do you call it? Whatever it is, I lose track of my vocabulary when I'm trying to think so hard. But, I remember another column that I was totally impassioned about and I was chastised - I have to find that one, I would love for you to see it.

BA: What was the subject?

JTP: It was about a little girl who was left in Mississippi, I think, or Alabama, I have forgotten. And, she had been injured and they called for an ambulance and they, they, they made a mistake and sent a white ambulance, so.

BA: An ambulance for white people?

JTP: Yeah, and that little child lied by the side of the road, bleeding, until a black ambulance could be summoned. And, I wrote a thing that said.

BA: I didn't realize there were black ambulances and white ambulances.

JTP: Oh yeah, I wish I could find this one. Ah, here it is, I got it! Fifty-five, see my crazy scheme worked a little bit, I think, my index.

BA: Your index, yeah.

JTP: My indices, index here. It's called, "Just Above Your Heart." You want it? "How big is an eight year old? If you are a man, an eight year old will come up to about your waist. If you're woman, an eight year old's head can rest just above your heart. You can span an eight year old's wrist with your thumb and second finger and they'll overlap by inches. You'll notice that an eight year old's arms are a little like sticks. His neck is a fragile thing, holding up a head that is becoming crammed full of ideas about the world around him" - which, I said "him" because of our four sons, I guess - "Which shows us a face, just emerging from babyhood, with a soft, small chin, the real give away of his late babyship. An eight year old is a little person. A tiny scrap of humanity which I guess might be called of no great consequence to the passing world which cuddles and clucks at babies and corrects and crabs about teenagers. But, an eight year old is a wondrous, emerging creature of developing personality and unfolding talents with an ability not only to fill life's vacuums, but also to fill one's whole world. Such an eight year old was struck down by a truck in Montgomery, Alabama, recently. She's a little girl and she was critically injured when the truck hit her. Somebody, naturally, called an ambulance to take the little girl to the hospital. But, that someone goofed. They called a white ambulance and this little girl's skin was brown. So, two white men, members of the supposedly superior race, let that little girl lie on the street while they debated what to do. And, they let her lie there in pain and anguish for fifteen minutes, waiting for a Negro ambulance. How God must weep? Well, I'm up to here with the South and its white people who are dragging us rapidly to ruin their decadent folk ways. I'm sick of their magnolias and mint julips and the flower of their pure, white womanhood. Of their ignorance, their blasphemy, and their outright flouting of the law. I'm fed up with having my tax dollar pay for their segregated housing and their segregated schools. And, I cannot abide the Civil War, which was a war without honor in the South, despite the more than maniacs who insist upon carrying on about their misguided leaders who were defeated, licked, and knocked out by the Union and will never recover. But, what I perhaps hate with venom are seven "men"- in quotes - "who have become so degenerate, so dehumanized, so purely vile that their instincts don't shriek out against the wrongness of the system which could find a tiny child, lying broken and bleeding on the street while they wait for the right color car to come along and pick her up. I cannot coexist with such people. I think that, not only, a federal investigation should take place, or federal troops should move in to protect Negroes from such abuses. Every possible means should be taken by the government of the United States under John F. Kennedy, to see that each and every abuse of the rights of Negroes should be corrected right now, today, by force, if necessary, with guns and ammunition." Man, I was impassioned.

BA: What was, was there any response?

JTP: Oh yeah, I got, there's this response from one person who wrote it on the thing, "I like to see some good honest indignation and even an angry girl" something- "there's truly livid around." What the response that that got that I admired the most was from two policemen, black policemen in Harlem, when they- the fifth, I think it's the fifth precinct. Again, I shouldn't try to identify numbers. But, anyway, they were from the precinct and I knew them and, actually, we were over at Frank's Restaurant, I was over having lunch, and they, all of a sudden, they came and sat down at my table with me. And, they looked at me and they said, "You know, that column got to a lot of people, but, you know" - the ending, he said, "We would have to arrest you." And, he said, "Just remember, we don't solve it with guns and ammunition." And, these were two black policemen who had to remind me to stop getting so hot under the collar. You know, but, it's the closest I came to pure rage, to think because I was, you know, I think there's nothing more vulnerable than a mother at that age or, obviously, with the way I was writing. And, so I- oh, here's one I got from Christopher Booth, Field County Education Center. Now, I don't know what this says, but I'll read it to you. "Dear Justine, Just a quick note to say how much I admired and enjoyed, 'Just Above Your Heart.' This was undoubtedly one of your best efforts yet, as stated in my letter of appreciation to the editor. The most revolting fact of all is the, is that the incident was just casually reported, period, by all the other communication media. Appreciate my subscription more than ever now. See you shortly." And, this was, he was one of the codirectors of this education center. I'd forgotten he wrote me that letter. So, I had a mix reaction.

BA: That kind of an article would draw reaction, though.

JTP: Right, but, you see, the one nice thing about my career at the Amsterdam News is they never, they never told me what to write, I would write - and they'd go and print something like that. And, I think in some ways, occasionally, they liked to see me taking a knock to my head. Well, I don't know, I'm not sure, but, that's unfair, that's unfair. I shouldn't say that. They just wanted, I think they were having fun seeing what would happen. But, it was, I could write anything I wanted and they didn't stop me, unless, of course, my facts were wrong. And, one time I got caught with my, really, I really got caught and my editor bailed me out. I, it was during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and I - in our writing, our columns were due, really, a week before they were printed. And, so I had written at that time, my head was "The Monroe Doctrine is Deader Than a Do-Do." [laughs] And, the paper was going to be printed just as they, Kennedy, they said that the Monroe Doctrine wasn't dead as a do-do and I called my boss- he was up at the Press- and I said, "Hey, Jim." He said, "It's all set. It's up there." And, I said, "You've got to pull my column!! You've got to pull my column." And, he said, "I'll pull your column on one condition. That you're up here with another column within an hour and a half.

BA: Oh boy!

JTP: And, that was, and he was in Upstate New York, I had, that took some driving. But, luckily, for me, I had extra columns- I would write them when I thought of them.

BA: You had a supply.

JTP: So, I had a couple- well, not a supply, but maybe you wrote something- I used to write columns on the back of envelopes on the buses I was riding and I'd be- so I yanked out one of the columns and, oddly enough, the column I think I pulled out was a column on the tenrec. The tenrec were an animal that would go and drown itself in the sea. And, the funniest thing was that when my column came out on the tenrec, it...

[Pause]

BA: This interview was resumed after lunch. Mrs. Priestley's life is so full. And, there are 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 monographs here filled with articles. We cannot do it justice in one session, so we are going to work it out for the future. I just want to end today's interview by her giving us a brief review of her life after the Amsterdam News.

JTP: Urn, when I left the Amsterdam News, I think I was burned out. Actually, I wrote until 1972. I have columns after this one. One of them, actually, was a column I wrote about the Urban League when Vernon Jordan was running it and I castigated the Urban League and, for the overhead there, 28% overhead or something to this affect. And, my boss came to me and said, "Hey Gerdy. Vernon Jordan is serious about that column you wrote. Would you be brave enough to give him your space to respond to it?" So, I said, I don't care, if he wants to. If you think it's alright, so they did. But, it was getting to a point- 1971, '72- the whole mood of the Civil Rights thing was becoming- I think I couldn't deal with it very much anymore. I was exhausted, but, also, at that point, I had joined with the people down at Tougaloo College to join, they had a joint program with Brown University. And, so, what I did- I can remember when I would- I went and worked in Manhattan with Johnny Leadman - he was doing a Brown Development Office there and they gave us space for Tougaloo there, so we did fundraising for Tougaloo out of a Brown office.

BA: In the '70s?

JTP: In the '70s, yeah. And, I, and I did that for about, well, really, three more, two more years, I guess. But, I stayed on the board of Tougaloo and I also got an honorary degree of doctorate of letters from them in 1977 for my work with them and I guess with the Amsterdam News, too. And, at that point, I remarried and moved to Vermont and I decided that I had enough. I was burned out. And, I remember saying to George, one of my black friends said to me, "Oh, it's easy enough for you, Justine, to leave. Now, you're just going to quit." And, I told George, that I was terribly hurt and, yet, I knew that I better not continue because I had not, it had really worn me down. And, George said, "Justine, you've done"- George Jones was president of Tougaloo College, a fabulous man and he said, "You have done more than anyone and you are entitled to take some time off and to get some rest and to get away from it, the terrific tensions that you, obviously, have been under." And, he made me feel a lot better about it. I remarried, I lived in Vermont, then, with Bob Priestley who was class of '42 at Brown and I worked up there in the Development Office for Norwich University and, then, Bob retired in '79 and we came here to the Island to live for fulltime, year round. And, I took a few, for the first time in my life, I didn't work. I became the eggplant queen of Waterly farm. I taught yoga three days a week.

BA: Oh, really!

JTP: I played tennis everyday and, then, I had a bad shoulder injury that kept me from doing anything, so I decided that I, when I felt that I needed a nap everyday, I decided that this was not being very productive for me. So, I went into real estate here on the Island- I was the oldest rookie they had at Harborside Realty. But, I've been in it and out for over fifteen years.

BA: Oh.

JTP: And, I'm in the real estate business, now, with my son. So, that's, as they say, my hell of a story. [laughs]

BA: It certainly is. It certainly is. Well, I want to thank you very, very much. This has been very enjoyable and we will follow up because your life has been, too much for one day.

JTP: And, it's okay, later I take the expletives out, right? [laughs] Only, I don't know how to say that it's that kind of a story without that word. [laughs]

Tape recorder shut off.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2.]