

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Nell Cochrane Taylor, Class of 1951*

Interviewed by  
Sarah Dunn, Class of 2011

May 19, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Nell Cochrane Taylor discusses her experiences living in Lawrence House, her various roles of leadership on campus, issues of race and class, campus reactions to the Vietnam War, her position on the Board of Counselors and Board of Trustees, her experience receiving the John M. Greene award, her work with the Committee on African-American Studies, and her life after Smith.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Taylor, Nell Cochrane. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Video recording, May 19, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Nell Cochrane Taylor, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 19, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Taylor, Nell Cochrane. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Transcript of video recording, May 19, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Nell Cochrane Taylor, interview by Sarah Dunn, transcript of video recording, May 19, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 19, 2011, with:

NELL COCHRANE TAYLOR

by: SARAH DUNN  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DUNN: This is Sarah Dunn and I'm conducting an interview with Nell Cochrane Taylor on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History project. Yes, can I have you spell your name (laughs).

TAYLOR: Yes, Nell is N-E-L-L, was originally Nelly but I've been known as Nell for lo these many years. Cochrane is C-O-C-H-R-A-N-E. And my last name's Taylor, T-A-Y-L-O-R.

DUNN: Thank you again for agreeing to be a part of this project.

TAYLOR: I'm delighted to be here.

DUNN: We're going to start out with a little bit of before you came to Smith and why you decided to come to Smith, so how did you hear about Smith College?

TAYLOR: My mother had a friend who had two daughters who had gone to Smith and Mount Holyoke respectively, both of them were doctors. My sister was 18 months younger than I. We wound up in the same college class — it's a story too lengthy to tell here — but she trailed me all the way through school then skipped a grade and there was no opening in another grade when she switched schools, so she wound up, and I graduated in February, she graduated in June, we wound up in the same college class. So when deciding where to go to school, we were very close, we thought we'd go together, to the same place. And we applied to five schools together and two that were different. And those were Smith and Holyoke. And after much discussion and rumination and thinking about it, we decided it would be very good if we went to separate schools, had different sets of friends, had different experiences, and because I was interested in English and she in medicine, Mount Holyoke had that reputation and Smith had reputation for wonderful English department. So when we had to make our choices, we got into all of our schools and when we had to make our choices, we said let's go to the two schools that are closest together so we can see each other. And we did, on weekends, sometimes once a month, sometimes couple of times a month, got to know each other's friends. And we — she

raved about Mount Holyoke all her life. Sadly she's passed away recently. Not that recently, about 15 years ago. And certainly I raved about Smith. So it was mutually beneficial for us to have made that decision.

DUNN: Were you the first woman in your family to go to college?

TAYLOR: No.

GEIS: You just looked at the sandwich.

TAYLOR: Oh, sorry (laughs).

DUNN: That's OK.

TAYLOR: No, no, my mother went to Atlanta University, and she did graduate work in University of Chicago and at Columbia. My father did not go to college. He was one of ten children and his two older brothers had gone to war. And he was left to support the family, when he died actually the year before he was supposed to go to college. And he had been accepted at Brown, which was very unusual for a black man in those days. But he had been a published poet. He had some of his poems published. A little later he wrote a book, a wonderful Victorian novel which he never published either, but I still have it. But he was a very bright man, a very sensitive person. But he took on the responsibility of getting his family, keeping his family together when his father died. And it happened as I said right before he entered college, so he didn't go. And when his brothers, his two older brothers came back from the First World War, they all sat down to decide who was going to go to school. And they didn't have enough money to send several of them who would've been eligible to go in terms of age and inclination. But my father, very self-[abnegating?] man. And he said, they wanted him to go, because obviously he'd already been accepted at a school, a very good school. And he said no. His next youngest brother should go. Because he wanted him to have that opportunity. And his next youngest brother had a glorious career in social work. He was head of several Y's in New York and in Atlanta and actually was a mentor to many of the people in the civil rights, young people in the civil rights movement in Atlanta, Georgia. But to go back to your question about colleges, my grandparents went to college in the South. We're from a (laughs) family at least on that, on my mother's side where everyone went to college and some of her brothers had PhDs, were lawyers, et cetera, in professional fields. And so it was something we, my sister and I always expected to do (laughs). We were certainly looking towards that.

DUNN: And you came from Brooklyn?

TAYLOR: We were born in Brooklyn and raised there, yeah.

DUNN: How would you describe the campus atmosphere at Smith during that time, while you were here?

TAYLOR: Oh, pleasant, beautiful, beautiful campus. Gloria and I used to have discussions as to which was more beautiful. Actually then, Mount Holyoke was, but I wouldn't admit it. Now I think Smith could vie with almost any campus, it is so beautiful. But a lot of specimen trees here hadn't grown to their full beauty at that point in time. So I think they won the prize in 1947 (laughs). But to get back, what was your question again?

DUNN: The campus atmosphere.

TAYLOR: Oh, the atmosphere. Well, Lawrence House was absolutely marvelous, absolutely wonderful. We were all there on scholarship. I had a full music scholarship, and part of my, rest of my room and board taken care of. And everybody in the house did, and we all had jobs. And we all bonded very early on. And we admired the seniors, juniors so much, and I can remember living on the third floor and listening to their music, which was glorious but loud (laughs). Mostly classical. But it was a fun house to be in. And I didn't know too many people when I was a freshman or during freshman year in the quad, but I don't, I think that Lawrence House girls felt that they were a little, I don't want to use the word snobbish, but not as down-to-earth as we were (laughs). So but no, the atmosphere was quiet and calm unlike a few decades later, yes. And that doesn't mean that there was a lack of interest in — or in the intellectual life I think that was vibrant from the beginning absolutely. And certainly in Lawrence House it was, everybody studied, hard (laughs).

DUNN: Still.

TAYLOR: Do they?

DUNN: (laughing) Yes. You held a lot of leadership roles on campus during your four years here. What I really want to talk about a lot of that, what did that mean to you while you were here and after. What did you learn from your leadership roles at Smith?

TAYLOR: Well I think I probably was well-prepared for it (laughs).

DUNN: Yes, sounds like.

TAYLOR: From family example and from the fact that I was very active in high school. I'd gone to an all-girls high school too. Now I adored that school almost as much as Smith, maybe the same. It was Hunter

College High School in New York City, and it was a school for gifted girls. Now it's co-ed but then it was all girls. And a very stimulating atmosphere. When I finally left, I went back there to teach a few years after I graduated from here and from Yale where I did graduate work. But it was absolutely marvelous working with people who had been my teachers and who were now my colleagues because they were inspirational in both connections, in both ways, both roles. Wonderful, wonderful people, and when I finally left New York, which was after I was married and after I had children, I moved out of the city. One of the great regrets I had was leaving that school, and the stimulation of my colleagues and of the students. Because the students were for the most part brilliant, and I was teaching college-level courses at that point and also was the college advisor. The role I played in the high school as an undergraduate was that I was the Vice President of the Student Government, and I worked on the magazine in the art section, the art department of the local magazine. I was voted senior superlative when I graduated, and again just inspiring group of friends and people surrounding you, marvelous role models. It was a great school, absolutely great school. It was the model school for Hunter College, laboratory school for them. And it had an elementary school. I'd actually started in junior high school there, started leaving Brooklyn, traveling by subway to Hunter, staying late for extracurricular activities, had a long day actually from the time I left home on the subway.

DUNN: Good preparation for when you arrived here (laughs).

TAYLOR: Absolutely, absolutely. And then my children do not believe this, but my sister and I literally had five hours of homework every night at Hunter. They say, Oh you must be making that up Mom. I said, "No," they said, When did you do it? I said, "We got home about 6:00 or 7:00, sort of had to unwind with our, my mother," my father worked nights. He didn't come in till about 2:00 in the morning. And have some supper and then we'd start on our homework about 8:00 or 9:00 and we worked till 1:00 or 2:00 every single (laughs) night. And my father, we would pretend we were asleep when he came home because he would come into our bedrooms to give us a kiss goodnight, and for years we thought we were fooling him. We had just gone, he was like clockwork, so he (laughs) we could time when he would come into the house. We could hear the heavy door opening when he put his key in the lock. We could hear when he walked down from the second floor where he came in to the first floor where the kitchen was, because my mother had always left him a snack. And we could hear when he came back up again, and that's when we turned off our lights (laughs) pack the book, we had the books under the covers by that time. And he'd come over and he'd give us our kiss, kisses to one to Gloria, one to me, and then go back into his and my mother's room. And years later, I think I was a grown woman, he said, "I knew you both were awake." (laughs) He said, "But I knew you wanted, had to study, so," and I guess we were healthy kids so he

didn't worry too much. But yeah, that was our routine, and the reason we stayed at school so late was extracurricular stuff.

DUNN: So that prepared you a lot—

TAYLOR: Oh yes, yeah.

DUNN: To come in here, and then you held many roles on campus.

TAYLOR: Well I started, I was Secretary of the freshman class. And our team had during Float Night a beautiful float was first time I was scared to death (laughs) because I don't know how to swim. I still haven't learned how to swim, and there we were out on the pond. But our team won, which was amazing, because apparently the freshmen hadn't won if ever, I can't remember now whether they'd never won or whether it had been a long, long time when they had won. And we got these little iron whales, and it started me on a whale collection. And I have a vast whale collection now. Every time a relative or one of my sons or grandchildren goes to any place near water, Cape Cod — or when I do — Cape Cod or Hawaii, any place with water, they will bring me back a — I'm running out of space (laughs) especially since I moved out of the house, don't have enough ledges to put these on. But I do have whales under glass, I have whales on the wall. Used to have whales on the windowsills. But all sizes and shapes, beginning [heat?] chains and statuettes. So it was a wonderful, every time I see them, reminds me of that wonderful experience freshman year here.

DUNN: And then after freshman, you were also judicial board freshman year?

TAYLOR: You know, I don't recall exactly what year that was, but I was on the judicial board yeah.

DUNN: Honor board, and then senior year as our Student Council President.

TAYLOR: Student Council President, yeah.

DUNN: How was that?

TAYLOR: Exciting (laughs). No that was wonderful. It was busy, busy. I remember it being a very frenetic year, very, so much happening and I think perhaps my most challenging experience was the first time I addressed an audience in John M. Greene (laughs). Maybe that wasn't, I think probably the most challenging one I was sent, I believe it was that senior year to be, to represent youth at a conference in Hunter College, at the Hunter College little theatre, auditorium. And I was representing youth and there were very distinguished people, Madame [Pandit Nehru?] the sister of the Nehru that we all know of, was one of the speakers, and John Mason Brown I think was there. And one of our

representatives to a smaller country, I don't recall his name right now, but anyway I was one of four or five rather distinguished people, except for myself, I was a student (laughs). But that was fun, exciting too. But working with students was really great. I mean the people who get involved in student government are usually very enthusiastic, very anxious to uphold the name of the college. And so they work hard and they enjoy it when they do it.

DUNN: So what was changing during that year? You mentioned some changes.

TAYLOR: You know, I don't remember so many changes then. The changes were really later in the — when I was coming back to campus as first of all on the Board of Counselors. President Mendenhall asked me to — back off a little bit, those were the times when more women stayed at home than really worked professionally. And I was at home, for 18 years with raising my kids, but I was very involved in community activities and ran for political office actually during that time. Lot of other things that were — and I did some part-time work, some part-time teaching and some research, and I did some writing. But mainly I was at home with my kids. And I came up to Smith for a Board of Counselors meeting, and President Mendenhall calls me into his office and he says, "A number of the colleges are starting departments of African-American studies, Afro-American studies, and we're considering doing it here. And I want you to work with a group of faculty members to begin to set up a department." And they included Tom Durr (sp?) and Larry Finke, Lawrence Finke, Daniel Aaron (sp?), and I think there was a fourth one and I, slips my mind who it is. And we all got together, but I said, "Oh I don't know Tom, not sure I can do this. I have five little kids at home (laughs) and it's very hard for me to get away. And my husband's an attorney and he's got a very busy schedule. It's really not easy." He said, "Oh Nell, if you can't come to Northampton we'll come to you in Westchester." I said, "I'm not sure that'll work." "And if you can't come up for a meeting that we have to have up here, you can send your husband." (laughs) Now today, who would say you could send your husband to a meeting if — (laughing) I've never forgotten that, because the times they did change after that. But in the '60s when we started, when we sat together and talked about how we would do this, we recalled very vividly that Tom had said, if we set up such a department, I want it to be, he, Tom, wanted it to be the best in the country. And so we had that goal and that aspiration. And we did some do it and we even selected a temporary Chair and he was supplanted by another person later. But it worked. Now, what happened was I was up here every two months (laughs). And we were meeting with the students because during that period of, there was a lot of friction, even on this campus. I had to take my hat off to Tom because he kept the lid on really, but I think our committee helped him keep the lid on (laughs). Because we were meeting with students so regularly. One of the persons I had asked to join that committee was Percy Sutton who was



the Borough President of Manhattan at the time. And he had a daughter in the freshman class. And my husband happened to know him because my husband for a brief time was involved in politics in New York, very brief time, but he did get to know some of these folks. And so, and I didn't know Percy that well, but my husband did. So I called him up just out of the blue. I said, "Percy, you've got a daughter here at Smith. And I'm setting a committee and I'm working with the students, and I would like very much for you to join my committee because I think it would mean a great deal to the students to have somebody of your stature work with us or at least come to as many meetings as you can." And to my amazement, he immediately said, "Of course," which was very gracious of him. So he did come up with me primarily to meet with students. And they had a chance to vent and to get out of their systems a lot of what they needed to get out. They were picketing a little bit. And they had even threatened to picket Tom's office. But I don't, they didn't as I recall.

DUNN: Were they picketing for a specific—

TAYLOR: They wanted more black faculty. They wanted some courses in African-American, in African study, African and African-American studies. And they just wanted more, I think there'd been a few incidents on campus and they wanted that quelled. Some of the, most of the demands were pretty legitimate and reasonable. But they were just, students all over the country were angry (laughs). And of course after that they were angry about the Vietnam War (laughs) and then with the assassinations. I mean there was a period when there was a lot of unrest on college campuses. Here at Smith, really it was peaceful compared to places like Columbia for example. And I had, as I look back on it and I certainly thought of the time in large part it was because of the fact that we were repeating regularly with the students. So that was an interesting, interesting period.

DUNN: Did you vote with some of the issues on campus while you were here around class, race, religion, sexuality, did you feel any—

TAYLOR: There wasn't that much about sexuality. I think that became an overt issue a little bit later. I mean some, but not much. Class, as I said, I think in the '50s and in the '40s, that was a prominent issue. Race became an issue as the numbers of black students increased on the campus. And you know, it's such a long time ago, I don't remember specific instances, I just remember kids being very alarmed over some of the things that were said to them. And whether there were any burnings of posters and banners on the walls which I think happened later, or on somebody's dorm door, I don't recall.

DUNN: Did you ever feel, did you ever experience anything personally or did you feel like it was pretty OK?

TAYLOR: I never did. And I think my children, younger generation experienced more overt discrimination than I— They went to the Chappaqua Schools, you know Chappaqua is the town where Bill Clinton and Hillary wound up. But we lived there and they were in the Chappaqua schools. And almost single-handedly my family, my five boys integrated those schools. And I think they felt some, not from their fellow students, they were all very popular kids. And they wound up with one of them being captain of the football and basketball team, and one, three of them were Class President — no two were Class Presidents and the third one was a Vice President, Class Vice President, senior class. So they were all very popular kids. It was the parents that would say things and really some very insulting things. And that was difficult for them. But no, I can honestly say, and it may be that I sort of for the better part of my life have lived in two worlds (laughs) which converge often. And I think are pretty integrated in me at this point in time (laughs) through all these years. But in high school, virtually all my friends were white. There were very few black students at Hunter at the time. And they were close friends, some of them friends to this day. And in my parents had a fairly active social life and the children of their friends were our friends. And my sister and I joined a little girls club, when our mothers played cards and took us to while their bridge games and we played Wist (sp?) which of course dates me. But (laughs) some of those gals became members of a club that a friend of mine and I started after we got out of college. We hadn't seen each other in four years. And we said, Have you seen so-and-so, have you seen, we hadn't seen anybody of our close childhood and teenage friends. And so we said, Well let's get together. And that club is now 55 years old. We have been friends, it started as 15 women who were all just out of college, and later as we got married, the men didn't like us going off on a Saturday evening and leaving (laughs). So we added the husbands. So there were 30 people initially in the club. But I've always said, and I felt it particularly after my sister passed away, it was like having 14 sisters, 14 additional sisters. So it's been a wonderful, wonderful connection all these years. And they were mostly black. It was some of them had married white men, but it was predominantly black group of women.

DUNN: That's great. So you felt like pretty comfortable here arriving and—

TAYLOR: I never felt any discomfort here. But you know, I was one of five black students here. And I think some of the others did. Maybe it was because I was in Lawrence House (laughs) and we were all in the same boat. We all were there on scholarship.

DUNN: I mean it's amazing have you elected, you were elected by the student body as their Student Council President so that says a lot I feel like right there.

TAYLOR: Thank you.

DUNN: What kind of pressures did you feel as a woman in the 1950s, being a Smithie and when you were leaving Smith?

TAYLOR: Well I didn't feel the pressure these poor kids are about not getting a job (laughs). I went to graduate school. So that was the intermediate step. But when I finished that, I got a job right away (laughs). And it involved a lot of traveling, I was working for a scholarship service agency that supplemented scholarships for minority students, who had already gotten a scholarship from a particular institution, but needed a little more to be able to go. So I traveled, my territory was New England and New York and Pennsylvania. And I traveled all over, went to virtually every college campus and many of the private prep school campuses, telling them about this program. So that was fun, and then after I did that, when the travel (laughs) became a little onerous, I went to teach at Hunter High School, my alma mater. And so that was a very comfortable environment, and very happy one. So you know, transition was not difficult into the '50s. I was there for seven years until my oldest son was ready to come out (laughs). In fact, again, tells you so much about changing worries and changing times, he was born in August, and of course the school year was over in New York in June. And I don't remember what month I began to show, but they obviously knew I was pregnant. And the custom was when you began to show, you had to leave. So I was the first person they allowed to stay till the end of the semester, yeah (laughs). That was interesting. But now of course in fact I guess soon thereafter that was not the case anymore, fortunately. Pregnant women certainly can still teach.

DUNN: So you started on a Smith Board of Counselors in do you remember what year?

TAYLOR: Ah. That's why I should've checked my dates, yeah, right, right.

DUNN: We can check it later. But you were there for the '60s.

TAYLOR: I was there for ten years yeah.

DUNN: And then you, you came to the Board—

TAYLOR: Trustees after that, yeah, mmm hmm.

DUNN: What were some of the major controversies or conflicts that you found at the Board on that time, that was amazing time to be—

TAYLOR: Money (laughs).

DUNN: —on the Board of Trustees.

- TAYLOR: I think it was money. Yeah, yeah, as I recall, primarily that.
- DUNN: Were you the first African-American to sit on the Board of Trustees?
- TAYLOR: No, no, the same woman, remember I told you that a friend of my mother's daughter had gone to Smith, and her younger daughter had gone to Mount Holyoke. She was on the Board. About ten years before I was.
- DUNN: As an alumna? Because she came to Smith.
- TAYLOR: Yes, yes.
- DUNN: I tried to cross-reference, it's must've missed. I wasn't sure wanted to ask.
- TAYLOR: So there may have been others as well, I don't know. Not many.
- DUNN: So how was it on the Board, to be a Trustee?
- TAYLOR: Oh, marvelous. Again, a group of stimulating interesting people, very devoted to the college. Yes, and it was interesting being under two different presidents too, because Jill was here, Jill Conway. And then Mary Dunn. And then there was a period where there were I think four or five of us from the class of '51 were on the Board (laughs) yeah. So we felt very well-represented that Board.
- DUNN: Do you remember any conflict coming up about coeducation at that time, was that—
- TAYLOR: It was an issue very briefly because there was the young man who had come as a transfer student, and he applied to the courts I guess to be able to get his degree here. And turned down. We were going to remain a single-sex institution. Yeah, but it wasn't, I don't recall that it was, it was a strong issue. It was an important issue. But I don't think there was too much controversy (laughs) about it on the Board. I think we were all pretty, maybe not everybody, but we were firm in our belief that it should remain a single-sex college for women. Definitely.
- DUNN: Any other—
- TAYLOR: No, during that period—
- DUNN: During that time that you remember at all. '79 to '89.
- TAYLOR: '89 yeah, oh that's how we can figure out the dates of the counselors, because it was the ten years before that.

DUNN: Oh OK, so then '69 to '79? Yeah. Was it very different working with Mendenhall versus working with Jill Conway?

TAYLOR: Oh they were all different (laughs). Yeah, one of Tom's great qualities I think was his open-door policy. He always was very welcoming to students and to faculty and anybody. He was very open to hearing differing points of view. Jill was perfect for her time, absolutely perfect for her time. Because her outreach to other institutions, her getting Smith in the news, because of her service on many corporate boards, certainly the fiscal picture she was excellent with that. She was outstanding. And Mary, well she was this totally different from Jill in many ways. But exactly what the college needed at that point because she was so involved with students and so concerned about them and just so warm with everybody, and such a good friend to so many. Interesting contrast in personalities and perfect for the time (laughs) in each case, yeah. One of my sons came back here for a while, did you know that?

DUNN: No I didn't.

TAYLOR: My fourth son Scott Taylor was a Mendenhall Scholar here, this was years after I had left. And then was on the faculty and the Government Department. And it was at a point where there was no tenure line available. [Walter Morris-Hale?] was still here I believe. So he was on a non-tenure line. And it wasn't clear when a tenure line would open up. So he was here I can't recall how many years exactly. But he filled out his own contract and then said, "Well, I want to protect my future by being on a tenure line." And they kept assuring him one was going to open up very shortly. He said, "I'm just going to apply to one place," (laughs) "If I get it then I'll consider moving." He loved Smith because he didn't really want to leave. But if I don't get it, then I'll stay and take my chances as to getting it at Smith. So he applied to Georgetown School of Foreign Service and they told, he knew, had a friend there who was on the faculty, and the friend said that probably an inside person was going to get the job. So he said, "Oh, that's fine, I'll stay at Smith." And as it turned out, they called him to his surprise, he was told he had the job and he accepted the job, told the government, head of the Government Department, who was President when he was here? Well, he told everybody he needed to tell. And they said, well, we really don't want to lose — oh he happened to have his teaching evaluation, head of the Government Department was going to come in and evaluate him the next day or two days later. And it was presumably such an outstanding presentation (laughs) they said, We've got to find a way to keep you. And they did. I mean, he didn't stay because he felt committed to Georgetown. But they offered him a position. And he said, "Sorry, but you know I really feel I've committed myself." And so they have moved, which is very nice for me now, because he's there, three sons

now in Maryland when I moved to Maryland. Has made it very lovely for Mom to have three of her five sons (laughs).

DUNN: I agree. That they're sad that they couldn't be born women in a way to be able to come here.

TAYLOR: Yes, really.

DUNN: But the five sons.

TAYLOR: Five sons, yes.

DUNN: What difference has a Smith education meant to you, and would you make the same choice if you had to do it again?

TAYLOR: Yes, definitely. The one thing that I would consider, but considering the schools that I went to on secondary level and college level, it would be very hard for me to choose. But I do think it's beneficial to be in a coed environment for one of those experiences, either secondary school or college. I mean the first time I had men in my classroom was when I went to Yale for (laughing) graduate school, since sixth grade. And so you know, that's a long stretch. So that's the only reservation I had. But no, I always was very happy to have come here. It was really the best choice for me. It gave me just what I wanted in my field. And the associations have been lifelong friendships. And I just love this place. And I've always said that you know I came from a background where my parents were not that well, my mother did go back to teaching when we started going to New York to school. But my father was a post office employee and didn't make that much money. We lived very comfortably and never lacked for anything. But I couldn't give the kind of money, and even over the years, especially with a big family, that some of my very well-to-do classmates could. And I would give it, I would give as much as I could, which I have done over the years. But I would also give it back in service. And that's what I've tried to do as an alum as well.

DUNN: You were awarded for that in '94.

TAYLOR: Yes, the John M. Greene Award, which really touched me very much.

DUNN: Were you expecting that or was it a complete surprise?

TAYLOR: No, they called me, they invited me up for, to give a speech, the kind of mentoring speech, encourage (laughs) young women to go on with their education and to get involved in community activities. So it was the middle of winter, it was a storm like this one we had last year, at least I guess you had it worse than we did in DC.

DUNN: Yeah, a little bit intense up here (laughs).

TAYLOR: Yes, my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party got messed up (laughs) in DC, or in Maryland. But it was a really bad storm and I was planning to make this speech and I was going to make it come hell or high water. And I took Amtrak and Amtrak stopped (laughs) couldn't go any further. And I wound up someplace, they put me on another train and I wound up someplace in western New York, you know across the border someplace. And I called and I said, and then it stopped completely and they didn't know when the trains were going to be running again. And I called up (laughs) whoever had invited me. And I said, "I just can't, I can't get there. There's nothing moving." So they said, "We'll send a car for you. I said, "Oh don't do that. The roads are terrible." I didn't know that all this — the roads are terrible, I'll just have to stay here until I can go back home. They said, No, no, no, you've got to come. There are students waiting and there are (laughs) faculty waiting. It was over at Wright Hall. We have a whole group of people expecting you to be here. So I said, "Well fine, if you want to do it, just worry about the driver." So they sent the driver and we got there, and the place was packed, absolutely packed. Now, a lot of my friends and classmates had planned to come, but they were snowed out. They couldn't — but I went through my speech, you know presentation. And they came up with this award (laughs). So I was stunned, I really was. I said, "Oh well, I can see why you wanted me to come." But it was a fun way to do it, except for the snow storm.

DUNN: Yeah, wow, amazing. See, how much have we got, I think ten minutes? I'd like to actually go back a little bit to the Committee on African-American Studies and your work at the Smith Board of Counselors. Because of the time period that it was in and the need for it. Can you like maybe walk us through the process of some of that, of like how you became involved and worked through some of the issues that were around starting African-American studies program here. Was it challenging to start, seemed pretty quick. And then I think the student strike of 1970 was around that time as well.

TAYLOR: During that period, yeah, yeah, yeah. Well I think the department was in place at that point, believe it was. And it started off pretty well. I don't think we had any major hurdles. I think the hardest thing was finding someone to lead it initially. He was a young man. I think he was not long out of graduate school. He was good. But it was supposed to be a temporary — as I recall it was supposed to be a temporary appointment, which was. And you know, it was a [solo?] department. I think it was integrated pretty quickly into the whole of the university, the college. No, in terms of working with the students, it was largely hearing them and reflecting back to them what they were saying and how it might be received, in a sense training, training them a little bit. I can recall Percy Sutton saying to them once, some of the girls were not

doing very well in college. I mean their grades had dropped. They had been higher, in the six month period or something like that had dropped. And we were sort of keeping track of, or I was keeping track of them. And in his very forthright way, at one point he said to one young woman who was one of the most outspoken of the group, but who was not doing as well as she should've been doing in academics, he said, "Why did you come to Smith?" And she said, "Well for the education. It's a wonderful institution. It has excellent reputation." And he said, "And how much time are you spending on your work?" Very direct. And then he proceeded to, she said, "I'm spending a fair amount of time, not as much as I did because I'm very involved in this." And so he said, "You're here to get an education. Your prime goal is to get an education." He said, "I've been involved in civil rights issues the better part of my life, and I more than most people am concerned about these issues and certainly have put my money where my mouth was. But if you're here to get an education at a fine place like this, that's your first goal. Your second goal may be your," (laughing) "activism, and you should not sacrifice the one for the other." But he said it much starker way than I did, than I just expressed it. And they all sat back. They were a little taken aback by what, how he was saying it. But he meant it and it struck home. So as far as we could tell, they paid attention to that, and that was a really important lesson to learn. You're here to learn. And if you don't get out of this place, you can't do what you're doing now in the outside world. Yeah, so that was primarily it, working with some of them on more of a one-to-one basis. I did a fair amount of just personal mentoring myself, but I've done that all my life (laughs). And it's wonderful when you know a person who's younger than you and who has gone on to do some really wonderful things comes back and says, You were one of my most important mentors. Phoebe Norcross who I think has been on the Board since is one of those in that period said that to me. It meant so much to me because she's a wonderful person.

DUNN: So on the Board, you mentioned too about sexuality started to become an issue later on.

TAYLOR: Later on I think. Not so much while I was active, mmm hmm.

DUNN: But was it coming up when you were on the Board, were there things—

TAYLOR: I can't recall any time when actually came up as an issue on the Board. No I don't think so.

DUNN: OK one more, and I'm going to put it in, where is it, it was, oh yeah do you have any advice for current or future Smithies to leave?

TAYLOR: Well, first of all, enjoy the place. It is wonderful. It is beautiful. It is stimulating. It's an environment that's not the same as the great outside



world. It's more rarified. But you can learn a lot of lessons here that can be applicable in every part of your later life. And the friendships that are established are extremely meaningful. Things that you learn of course are important and will — and more important the methods of study and just learning how to learn, how to be in a process of continual learning on your own, whether or not you're actually connected with the graduate institution. But all of those good things. It's a wonderful place.

DUNN: Thank you.

TAYLOR: Thank you.

DUNN: Thank you so much for coming in. We really appreciate it. Yeah great.

TAYLOR: She asked some very good questions.

GEIS: I just have one just general question of, when you look back at your life now, in looking at Smith and its role in your life and the value, and how important education is to your family, can you look at the big picture and just talk a little bit about what would the expectations you have for yourself, and where you are now and how do you feel about your journey, your path?

TAYLOR: Oh that's a good question (laughs).

GEIS: You can (inaudible) your answer—

TAYLOR: Well, this is interesting, because partly because of my own background, and partly because of my experiences, I figured I could go out as most Smith women do, and conquer the world right. And I didn't know exactly in what way, but I had that feeling and motivation probably too. Then I had five children (laughs). And as I told you, I pretty much stayed at home for the better part of their childhood, the whole childhood for the older ones. And I never completely felt that with five boys two years apart, in each case, two years plus two months or minus two months in each case, that there was any mother surrogate that would do the kind of job with my five that I wanted to do with them. So I worked around their schedules and their lives, and managed to get a lot of fulfillment in what I did, community work and even a little of my own field, teaching, and some writing, I mean some things that I could do at home too. But I certainly was not out in the workforce full time. So around the age of 42 or so, I went to take a course at the University of Connecticut, it was one of these extra courses that they offered on what to do when the children are older. And the professor there, there were two professors actually, said one of the assignments was to go home and really think, where did you want to be when you were 65. And he said, "Don't think about this casually. Go home and really

concentrate on it. Think about it for hours," which I did. And I thought to myself, Well, I always thought that I'd be a corporate vice president or something in 65. But they had cautioned you, then work back and say where would you have to be at 63. Where would you have to be at 60. Where would you have to be at 50. Where would you have to be a year from now. And I worked that process all the way back. And a year from then, if I were a woman having to catch up with the male world out in the corporate world, I would have to be at work ten hours a day, bring work home, work on the weekends. I had five kids at home still, said, I'm not willing to do that. Well this is the first time I had thought about it that way. So they had said, Well, do you want to be rich at 65. Do you want to be the head of something at 65. Do you want to just have satisfaction in your work and then retire at 65. Do you want to have just enough money to get through (laughs) at 65, whatever. Where do you place yourself on this continuum. And I said, I'd like to have led a good life and have had some fairly significant accomplishments. But I'm not willing to sacrifice what I would have to do now for my children to be what I want them to be, you know, beginning next year, or continuing from this present year. And I was perfectly happy, I mean I had made a conscious decision. I was completely happy. I had never regretted. I have the most marvelous children. They're all professionals. They're all beautiful men, in spirit as well as they're (laughs) handsome too, very tall (laughs). But they really are my proudest accomplishment. And at the same time I've had maybe not the career I could've had, but I've had a lot of very interesting and I think responsible and important jobs along the way. So it's been a good life as I look back on it. And I've been perfectly happy. But thank you for the question, because it was a good question.

GEIS: (inaudible) listen to you.

TAYLOR: Thank you.

DUNN: Yes it was. Thank you so much.

TAYLOR: Well, you're welcome, it's my pleasure. Now I—

DUNN: It was an honor—

TAYLOR: Oh.

END OF INTERVIEW