

Naima Rodriguez
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Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG This is an interview on January 16, 1989 with, let's see if I can get it right, Naine?

NR Naima

MG Naima Wade Rodriguez

NR Right.

MG For the Green Mountain Chronicle Series. Naima, you were involved in the Vermont-New York Youth Project?

NR Yes.

MG Can you give me a description of that involvement, how you became involved?

NR At the time of the project, I was attending Lyndon State College. I was approached by one of the, the professor at the time would I be willing to be one of the counsellors in something that was just being launched by Vermont and New York called the Vermont-New York Youth Project. Since I was very familiar with New York, I'd come to Vermont from the New York-New Jersey area and had already lived in Vermont and it would seem that they thought it would make it a nice transition or I would be helpful if someone black who had already been exposed to Vermont could be sort of like a liaison between Vermonters and New Yorkers participating in the project. And that's how I got involved in it as a student, a college student.

MG You were at Lyndon then?

NR I was at Lyndon State College at that time.

MG At the project, you were in the Lyndon Project?

NR Yes, at the site.

MG What was that site called? Did it have a special name?

NR Lyndon State.

MG Did it have a special focus or emphasis?

NR More around theater arts, you know, sort of all of the cultural kinds of enrichment programs that were going on, but particularly around theater and dance and writing. A lot of the, the young writers out of New York were with us and Vermont poets, young poets were at Lyndon. And they were teenagers, so we had the older, I had the older

group. They were between the ages of thirteen and actually there were some that were even eighteen and nineteen years old that seemed to have gotten slipped into the project from the New York end but nonetheless that was, they wanted to be there. And so we didn't, didn't send them, of course the cut off age was eighteen, but sort of worked them in as assistant counsellors, those that were over the age of eighteen. And now I taught dance and I taught, what was it, dance and writing. I had a creative writing class. And we did a couple of plays. And what we did was we were the talent bank and we work around inter, sort of like confrontational _____ type of theater. And what we do is do some plays, sort of one, two, three act plays and then we go around to the different sites and do the, and perform.

MG So there was interaction among the different sites?

NR Oh yes, there was interaction. I remember travelling quite a bit around the State to, you know, visit the different sites with the participants.

MG There was also a performing arts site in Ripton right?

NR Yes there was, but I never got a chance to visit the Ripton site.

MG When you were first approached about this, what were your thoughts? It would seem to make sense?

NR When I was first approached about it, it was a summer job. (LAUGH) You're in college. It was the summertime, you're looking for work. You have to think about paying your tuition for next year and all your personal expenses so that was an opportunity for work at the first initial response. The second was I get a chance to spend the summer in Vermont which I had already grown very fond of and I also get a chance to do something that I really enjoyed doing which is dance and theater, the arts and I also get a chance to be with my people here in Vermont. I don't have to travel down to New York or New Jersey or even further to see people of color. I can wake up right here in Vermont and have my people right here with me.

MG Okay. What was it like when the project first started, when these black urban kids met these white rural kids?

NR Curiosity was what happened. Curiosity from both sides. From New York, from New York participants, there was showing their culture and also on the other hand, learning of another cultural context being taken out of, just

literally taken and removed out of your cultural context and put into another cultural context that was very different. And on the side of the participants from Vermont, Vermonters, it was the opportunity to be exposed to another cultural context. Like you say you brought the city to the country and the country to the city and they co-existed or they even, they did more than co-exist. I think it was our, the Governor who used the terms, it was a transformation or transforming kind of, of a time or program that happened. I think the contact spurred curiosity and worked emotions that came out to be love, simple love. They got a chance to touch the skins of people of other color and realize that it doesn't rub off, that our hair is, is somewhat sometimes the same and sometimes it's different, but it was having the opportunity each Vermonter and New Yorker having the opportunity to just touch and make contact and ask the questions. And whether they were naive or those who thought they were smart and slick out of the city, thought they were, you know, they found out how naive they were. And so there was, there was, it was an exchange. It was the truest exchange in every sense of the word in terms of cross-cultural exchange and understanding. There was a lot of talent that, like the one of the movies that we were seeing the film on Vermont-New York Project, youth that came out that really didn't, that were able to work on a lot of their academic skills and get a chance to think about what it is that they do have in common rather what they don't, what the things that they don't have in common, common grounds.

MG Do you think that the project had any impact, any ramifications beyond those on the participants?

NR Excuse me, do you mean the...

MG Did it change things? Did it make Vermonters more aware or more open? Did it do anything to New Yorkers?

NR Yes. What happened is I think it made Vermonters, well it made both Vermonters and New Yorkers more aware, culturally aware. It made Vermonters, it gave Vermonters, like I said, I repeat this the opportunity to realize that they may be far removed, but Vermonters somehow had the, the tolerance, the patience and the sense of the healthy attitude that was sort of just was confirmed. There was confirmed by I'm sure New Yorkers, the black youth out of New York and hispanics because they weren't only blacks, there were hispanics, and I think there were a few asian students that were also in the project. I, you know I keep reminded people it was black and white, but there

were a lot of people of color, mixing you know culturally from all different cultures in this project and I think that's important. But back to the point of the change or the difference that the Vermont-New York Youth Project made, I'm still here in Vermont. It certainly made an impact on me as a young adult coming up through a very turbulent time in the '60's and still was at that time, it was still a little reactionary about whites and wondering why I was sentenced to Vermont in a lot of ways. My identity wasn't as clear then as it is now. So the contact that I had as someone that you know whose laid some foundations, that continued to lay some foundations that were already laid by Vermont historically in providing shelter for those searching for freedom. The fact that Vermont knew what freedom meant and watching the Vermont youth show us what freedom meant and the ability to just touch. As you, there, a lot of the problems arose when we started touching, that's what happened. You know the real contact, the encounters. So, and on the New York side for the youth as well, the opportunity, that someone, some place else exists. With people, yes of the same color that you see walking around New York, but with an entirely different attitude that was healthy, you got a chance to grow up in all of those little things that you didn't get a chance to care of as a young inner city, concrete, asphalt jungle person, your eyes feasted on trees, mother nature, or nature in its fineness.

MG Did you encounter any opposition? Did the group, the site, the project, encounter any opposition from local people or anyone?

NR No. There was none.

MG Did you ever experience prior to that or since any, anything that could be considered racist behavior on the part of the people in Vermont?

NR Yes I have experienced from the media (LAUGH) the racial problems that exist in Vermont. I've continued to stay in Vermont so it's, I am, I do read, I do walk out and carry on a life here. But I must say as a person of color, living in Vermont, coming here from a such early age, I have not experienced a real Vermonter, any harsh words, or racial incidents with a Vermonter. They might have been someone who came here from, travelled to Vermont from somewhere else out of the State, but they were not Vermonters. The racial incidents that are happening now in Vermont, just two weeks ago there was a racial incident in Brattleboro area where the, there are inter-racial family moved into a building in Brattleboro and they armed

themselves, the family, so what I saw in the paper the next morning, well I got the phone calls, and what you saw in the paper was very frightened people holding all of these sophisticated guns and the other family shouting racial slurs, and saying that he's killed blacks. Well he didn't say that, he didn't say blacks, he said something really much worse that I'm very careful of using because racism is so much in our language that I refuse to perpetuate it any longer. And it was printed in the newspaper and I got calls as a community person who started a group called Vermont Committee for Racial and Ethnic Harmony trying to work on some, bring about some racial understanding here in Vermont which is ready and really would like to work on that. So though the racial incidents that they do happen yes. This person was not from Vermont who, who wrote Ku Klux Klan all over this man's door and threatened to kill him and pulling out knives and the media put it up as a sensational piece and all of that came here from the South, very deep South and just didn't have the type of awareness that he's going to need to have in order to, to survive in Vermont even because Vermonters don't put up with that type of attitude. They're known for getting rid of the Ku Klux Klan in this State, for any kind of, you know, racial harassment. Standing up for people rights because they stand up for their rights. There is a human, true humanitarian side to Vermonters that does not exist anywhere else in the country.

MG Do you recall any incidents of life in the project that would no telling, not so much in a philosophical or theoretical way, but in terms of a personal day to day way, something that went on, some things that went on, that have stayed with you?

NR Oh yes, a lot went on. (LAUGH) I think I finally, I really didn't do much crying as a inner-city youth until I came to Vermont. I didn't know really, then we learned that tears were really good. I mean, you just got, you got so much pent up anger and fear you know, immaturity that I finally was able to cry and not hide those tears for once and still build the way toward my becoming a teacher, a real, you know, a true teacher, a natural teacher in every sense of the word. But the one incident that stands out in my mind as a counsellor in the Vermont-New York Youth Project and it happened at the UVM site in '69. I had a, one participant, I won't use her name because this might get back to her, but she was sixteen years old. She came up, she had, was in New York and she was a prostitute. And somehow she had gotten into the project and came to Vermont and was in Burlington keeping

her business going. And I was her counsellor. So I was in charge of you know trying to keep up with what was going on with her and everything and she was kind of frightening in the sense that she wore dark glasses all the time. And no one seemed to be able to say much to her. She carried a knife in her, in her shoes or in her boots whatever she had on, she always carried a knife. And at one time, we were doing a play and I didn't find out what her lifestyle was or anything until we did this one play and this was just a rehearsal of a play we called "Vermont-New York Roaches." We did a scene about New York roaches and Vermont roaches. And each, each person took a role of a roach, a Vermont roach, a New York roach and we sang all these songs and we acted out and she was a fantastic, she was a fine actress. And I remember a scene where a, a white youth said something to her, not about her color, it wasn't about her color. It was something about her personal side of her and I just remember her pulling the knife out and where everyone had just finished you know having all of this closeness, she pulling, I remember her pulling this knife out and getting ready to really hurt this one guy. And he looked at her and they had eye contact and this was the first time I saw her without her dark glasses and he told her, I remember him saying to her, "I apologize if I offended your person in any way. It's just that I, I love you. There's something about you that I love and I just don't want you to hurt me and I don't want to hurt you." And for the first time, there was some other, there was something else, he just, there was this eye contact that they both had. She was in the light, he was in the light. She dropped the knife. She dropped the knife and became the sixteen year old girl that she really was and he embraced her and she cried for the first time. It was the learning that you can lean on someone, there was someone there to listen. You didn't have to use the violent, you didn't have to be violent to be heard on either side. And they had contact and that's all it took was the contact and the listening and the understanding that were both human.

MG That's great. Let me turn this over. Okay. I'll just leave this open if there's anything else that you would like to add to what you've said here or what you said out there about the project, it's importance, it's successes, whatever you might not have had a chance to say.

NR Okay. The most important for me, I think that I want to say to Vermonters is that this is a unique State, it's a special place in terms of the world right now because it did make an attempt toward racial understanding at a time that many people, whether black or white refused to make

that step. And there is still like our Governor said, a lot of work to be done, but there is definitely a need for the educational system and the curriculum to reflect and to provide for the young and the old some sense of cultural awareness to prepare you know because we are toward, we already live in a culturally diverse nation. It is not an issue of black and white any longer. We have no choice, there is no choice, but to prepare to live and work in culturally diverse world. The Vermont-New York Youth Project made an effort to prepare a lot of youth and over the years I still have my dreams. I still have dreams of the different youth that were in the project. It made the teachers, it made me one of the best teachers that I could possibly be knowing that I could teach not only black kids, but I can teach white. We both have something to teach each other. We must realize that the melting pot, we may have blacks may have missed the pot years ago, but the pot has been cooking, cooking, it's done. It's time to take it off the burner which is still burning because people like Martin Luther King and others of all creeds and colors have laid the foundations for us a long time ago. And Vermont has a hand in that. And I think that it's time for Vermonters to embrace and give themselves a big hug and pat on the back for all that they have done and I'm sure ready to pick up the work where the Vermont-New York Youth Project left off and continue to bring about the racial understanding and be prepared. That is, that is our future, a culturally diverse world. And I'm here rooting for Vermont to be in the forefront.

MG Great. Thank you.

NR Thank you.