

## Interview with Jessie Mae Finley

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Interviewer: Naarah Patton

Patton: This is Naarah Patton interviewing Mrs. Jessie Mae Finley on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003. Right now, she's going to talk about some of her work with desegregation.

Finley: Well, I worked for the state for fifty years. And when I started working for the state, they only had work for our women on the elevator and the washrooms. And they had no jobs for us whatever in the offices, doing things like that. In order to get – me to get a job in an office, I had to go to Joliet, Illinois, and work, during the war at the ammunition plant. There, Employment Services was hiring everybody, so I decided to go up there. But I had to sign to stay up there at least a year, before I could come back here. And so I did all I could up there. And my two children – and my husband was not very well, and I had to come back and forth during the week to see about them. So, I got to the place where I couldn't take it any longer. And one of my friends up there said, "Jessie, even though you promised to stay here a year, you have to let them know about your conditions, and see if there isn't something they can do for you." So, I found that, in talking to them, they were very, very favorable in getting me back to Springfield. So, it was very nice. And they said, "Why didn't you tell

us before, Jessie?” And I said, “Well, I promised to stay for the year, and I’ve been going back and forth, and trying to do it.” But I said, “I can’t do it any longer.” And they said, “We’re going to see if you’ll get transferred back to Springfield.” And this is what they said, “Those river rats will not want you, but they will have to take you.” So, that’s how they felt about our place. So, anyhow, I came down; and first, the man said he did not requisition for another person. I said, “Here’s my paper, transferring me. That’s what I’m doing.” Well, they found out what I had been doing in Joliet: I had set up a filing system, but none of them had done anything with – they had a book on the files, and everything. And I had set up the files for them, and they were so pleased with it up there. So, it was a great thing, because I could show them then, you know, exactly what I could do. And so I came down to Springfield to the Office of Employment, and they asked me, “What did you do?” And I told them about the files. They were in the same condition. They had the manual to go by, but nobody had done anything about it. And when they wanted anything out of the file, they had to go search through, they had to search for it. I set up a separate file, so I could pick up anything they needed, at any time. So, they were pleased with that. That’s breaking down segregation, when you prove to them that you can do this, and you can – you know. And so, and while I was there, I noticed that the – the employment service had to search. This is before I went up there. I

came back down, and I worked for the employment service. I'm trying to get it straightened out in my – Well, anyhow, I was working for the employment service. And there was a lot of segregation there. And they had – we would have to write up the person's history on what – their work, and what they did, and classify them according to their primary classification, and their secondary classification, and another classification. According to the dictionary, the titles, we were taught to do all of that. And I found that when they had to make remarks about the person, what kind of person they were interviewing – for the Afro-Americans, for the Italians, and for the Jewish people, they would put the work 'typical.' Just typical. So, we got together, one of the other girls and I, we all got together, and reported that. And they searched their files, and found that was true, and had them stop it immediately. They had to be stopped. So, they did stop that. And so, right in the employment service also – we had a lot of trouble there. Some people did not want me to help them, you know. And then some of them would – they would put their card on my desk, and they would go and whisper to somebody: I don't want to talk to her. And they would give it to somebody else, you know. So, they did that. And every time they'd do something like that, I would just close my desk up and go home. And they didn't think – I should have stayed, "You have to work it out." I said, "I'm leaving you to work it out. You know what the problem is." So, they asked me there –

something happened there one day, that same kind of thing, and I got up, and I left for home. So, the boss called me in, and he said that I should not do that. I was supposed to stay at my desk, and help them work it out. I said, "I've given you plenty of time to work it out, and I don't need to do that." I said, "I'm going to get up and leave every time," I said, "because they have no right to come take things off my desk. And the person said they don't want to see me." And he said, "Jessie, you're going a little too far with this. You're going to have it let alone. This might lose your job." And told me about a man in Decatur that lost his job because of that. All right. I went and had a – a young man had finished school, and I knew was very smart, helped me write a letter to them. And he wrote a wonderful letter, showing that they had no right to do it, and I was a state employee just like they were. And they had no right to do that, and they – he went on to tell all about how they were mistreating me, and how it was against the law, and so forth and so on. Now, so I took the letter, and showed the boss. And I had said, "You say that you're going to have to report this, and I might lose the job, so under the circumstances, I have a report here showing the explanation of everything that was done. So you can have this letter, and use it for that purpose." And so I was able to break down some prejudices there. But there was still a lot of prejudice, because I would have people call – and they didn't fire me, and they didn't fire me for insubordination, or anything like that, you

know, cause I was going to have a case against them if they did. But, we would take orders from people in town for anything for worker – workers, whatever they might be. We would have to take these orders, and then we'd have to search their files, and see if there was anything at all we could do to help them, you know, to find one. I had a problem with that because so many would say they would not want any of us. And they used the word, “nigger.” One lady would call and say she didn't want a nigger come in her house. And I said, “A nigger?” I said, “What in the world is that?” And she said, “Don't you know what that is?” I said, “Oh, I know. You're talking about colored people.” And she said, “I don't care what you call them, I call them niggers.” And I said, “Well, I think you'd better call and talk with somebody else, because it's impossible to fill this order unless you relinquish your discriminatory specifications.” And so, I referred them to the boss – which we were supposed to do – and the boss – she came back, and she said she talked to me. And she said, “I'll give you my order, and he told me, he said I didn't have to hire them if they came. Just don't hire them.” And I said, “Well, under the circumstances, you have not relinquished your discriminatory specification, so I'll give you back to the boss.” So I gave her back to him. And I said, “Don't you give me another one of them like that. You can handle it yourself.” So, I had several really terrible fights when I was with the employment service. And the thing about is that

we finally got it down to the place where they got onto them, investigating and everything, and made it halfway decent for us to work there. So, I worked there for quite a long time. And then I transferred to the Department of Mental Health. I took some tests. And that's one way I broke down the discrimination and everything: I studied, and I took tests for a lot of different things, that they would not otherwise hire me for. So, I went to the employment service, and they had – actually, I'll go back how I got back to Springfield. I don't know what I did [unclear] back to Springfield. [unclear] they wouldn't even hire me, cause they said they had to – you know, they had been busted – the head man. That goes to show that there were some good people. And not everybody, and you could always make a friend someplace. And they hired me. And so, they – they gave me some good jobs, things to do, and – to help break down discrimination, segregation. And I certainly did write my remarks and things, so that they would be halfway decent, and halfway right. And a lot of times, you had to just do a thing right in order for them to understand. So, they had to hire me. And they took me there. And I found that they had a lot of discrimination there against Jewish people. It was the funniest thing. One time, one Jewish girl was there, and when she left, they said, "Now, we can breathe some fresh air." That's the way they talked about her. Isn't that terrible? Well, it happened anyhow. So anyhow, I got on back working for the state of

Illinois, and I went from mental health. I worked in – no, I – first, when I left the employment service, I took a leave of absence. The doctor told me to. I had had to fight so hard – the discrimination and segregation, and I had to go so far for it. I mean, it was a terrible thing back then. One of the supervisors was he had a class, and was teaching us something about talking to people, and interviewing people, and so forth and so on. And she said plainly, “Don’t let them sit there like a little nigger baby, and get up and go take care of them.” And so, I said: Now, how do I handle this? So, I just looked at her. I stared her down, and stared her down. So, she had to close the class, send them away, and send them home, back to our desks. So I stared her down. She was a very good person, and helped me a lot, it was just a thing that she had her on her mind, and couldn’t help it. So anyhow, those are the things that I had to go through. So I went to the interviewer, and I took these tests – no, no I didn’t take that – I stopped; I took a leave of absence, because I could not, under the circumstances, take the employment service behavior any longer. The doctor asked me to do that. And I got home, and I said, “I know there is no need of giving up. I’m going to have to go back to work, and need some money. So I’m going to go ahead on back. I feel well enough to go back.” So, I went to work for the civil service commission – state civil service commission – and explained my case to them. And she told me she was nothing but a friend – she was a

friend. And she said, “Jessie, I want you to go and try to get you a job. Make some interviews, when you get one I’ll certify you at the same rate of pay that you were getting from the employment service.” I said, “I’ll do that.” So, I was so pleased that she would say that. But you know, I couldn’t get anyone that would hire me. And I tried, and I couldn’t. And I went back to tell her I couldn’t. “I’ll put you in our office. I’m going to let you work until – maybe it’ll be a lower classification, but you’ll work until we get you transferred to something else.” So that’s another friend I had. Really it’s good to have people like that. And so, the supervisors who came didn’t want me, and she did everything she could to prove it. I couldn’t have the job. I wasn’t feeling very well, and I was on a medication, and everything. So, one day, she gave me a stack of grades and everything, to correct and straighten out, and see what was wrong with them. And it was such a big stack, I knew she didn’t really mean it. So, she came and she slammed them on the desk. And so I just made up – I’m going to talk to her. And so, the supervisor found out what had happened. She called the supervisor in. And she said, “I’m going to tell you for the last time now, we’re going to help Jessie get on her feet. And you’re going to help her learn there what it takes, and I don’t want anymore of this at all.” So, she decided she was not going to take it anymore. Thank goodness. Well, then I started taking some tests for the different things. And I started taking tests for the things



that were up from mental health. And I got the job over there. And then I found another friend. She was a secretary to Governor Stevenson, at that time. And I remember that I – at the employment service, I had helped her quite a lot in getting a helper for her mother at home, who was not very well. And she thought of me, and so she came. And she knew what was happening. She said, “Well, the first opening we have over here –” – she was not his secretary at that time; she was working for mental health. She said, “I’m going to hire you.” And so, it happened that way. They said their first opening was – had to go to somebody else, it was already promised. But she said, “Jessie, I’m going to get the next one for you.” So, she did. Hired me, and I started to work for her – mental health. And, so that goes to show you reap what you sow. So, I was reaping what I sowed, because I certainly did try to help her. And she was so pleased. And so, she was another friend that I had. So, I stayed there at the employment service, and as the determination clerk, and it was fairly decent paying – not employment service, at Mental Health. And she – I mean they had – were calling us clerks, and so I had told them I was not really a clerk, I was something else; because what we had to do – and all this work we had to do so far as laws and papers and have to know all about what the laws were, who the people were in the various counties [unclear] that we got to send to for papers and things, and make up our own papers, and all like that. That’s more than a clerk. So, they had a

person come and make a desk review – interview. And they chose me for it. I was so shocked. I didn't know what to do. I guess, because I was bold enough to let them know how I felt about it. And he – he came to my desk and talked to me. And I got to flipping this paper, and this paper, and that permit in what we have to do, and getting up and getting the books for the state rules and regulations and the laws, and everything like that – and how we had to, you know, make up even our own petitions, and everything else, against people to collect for the care of the people in the state hospital. You've got to do all that. And then we'd send them to the county, for the county to take them over and file them for us. And I said, "This is more –" I said, "More than just that." And they wanted to know how in the world I decided all this. I said, "Well, when I was a youngster, we had a little farm. And my father sometimes would let me go to the place where they sold the things like that – farm goods. And he taught me how to show my greens and make them look pretty. And he taught me how to do this, and how to do that." I said, "I worked back then, when I was a kid." And I said, "I learned this, all the way down, it came down – that you have to know how to do it. That was the way." And then I said I married a man, Dr. Kenniebrew, and he believed in education. He believed in doing everything right and proper. And I found, later on in my life, that if you could work with Dr. Kenniebrew, you could work for anybody, because he was a perfectionist, you know. I told

them all of that. And I talked to him quite a long time. He said, “Well, what do you think the title should be then?” I said, “We are some kind of specialist.” He said, “Specialist?” I said, “Yes. You’re calling me a determination clerk. Now, why don’t you call me determination specialist?” And he said, “That’s pretty good.” And so, he got up and made his reports to the officer, and told her that I had made this decision. And she said [unclear], that she did not even – she did not – what did he say – she did not [unclear] – [unclear] – what was the word he used. But, because he said, “I could understand all she’s talking about.” And they absolutely changed the classification to specialist. So, I worked as a specialist. And I had – I took a test for supervising determination specialists. And there was three of us that took this – one that had an excellent, superior rating – there was three of us. They had to hire me, because I had the most seniority. And the other two were very angry. They thought it was terrible that they didn’t get it instead of me. And so, and they had me to talk with them, some of the people, you know, that I might have to interview were unhappy, in my unit. And so they placed the one fellow in my unit, who was – they’d been trying to get rid of for a long time. And he just didn’t want to do the work cause he got fired in the main office, and he had law – and I think he had a law degree, or training in law – whatever it was. And so, he said – I told him; I said, “Now this means you’re going to have to work for me.” I said, “Cause I have to make

reports.” And he said, “Jessie, I’ll do anything for you, but I’m not going to do a damn thing for them.” And I said, “Well, listen. They are bosses, and they’re demanding that I give a report on you. How do you think I’m going to handle this?” He said, “Oh, you’ll handle it. Don’t worry about it.” He said, “I’ve got – trying to get another job anyhow.” And so, he didn’t do any better. And he just wasn’t going to do it better, because he felt he’d been done wrong there. So I said, “Well, you’re going to have to go out and you another job, and quit worrying about this job.” And he said, “Well, I have some people that’s promised me.” I said, “Don’t tell them yet- somebody else new.” And don’t you know, the Lord answered my prayers. He came back and told me he had a job. He would not look for a job because he said he had a job. So, anyhow, I told him that she had demanded that I give a report on him. And we had a showdown, because she was telling me what I had to do, and what I couldn’t do. And I told her that when I knew what I was supposed to do, I would do it – not on what she was telling me. Well, she said, “How can you be so –” – so something – I don’t know what it was now. “And I could have you fired for insubordination.” And I said, “Well, if you could, you should. Get busy.” She said, “Well, how in the world can you be so sure of yourself?” I said, “The Lord Jesus Christ stands right beside me.” I said, “He watches over me, and guides me every day. So that makes me – I don’t fear anybody.” And so, this is some of the things

you had to go through – what I call segregation, and integration problems. So, I said, “I have no fear. So, when I know what this man can do, I’ll give you a report. But I have to know, I’m not going to do it on the basis of what you’re telling me.” So she was standing in the doorway, and still trying to talk to me. And I got up, and I pushed her out of the door, so I could go home. I said: Lord heavens, I know I’m going to get fired now, cause I put my hands on her. So, I had to go that far with her. And then it’s a shame, because she – and she helped me a lot, with the training, and everything I got out of her was very good. But she just had that – they had that idea that they’re going to mess me up because I shouldn’t have that job. And the other two people who didn’t get it wouldn’t speak to me. And I passed by them. I said, “Bless your baby heart.” And I’d go on about my business. “Hello? Bless your baby heart,” and go on right about my business. And so, anyhow, I worked on that for quite a long time, as a supervisor; supervising – the first one to supervise – first one of us to supervise a group of people in an upper income bracket. And it was just really wonderful, and I enjoyed the work so much. And they would pay attention to me in every way. Except one of them, they just caused trouble. And one lady came in one day – one of the supervisors – and she was one of these that thought that she should have had a job. And she said to me, “I’ve got a problem here, Jessie, and I want you to help me out.” And she says, “Because I know

there's a nigger in the woodpile." And so, when she said that I just stared her down. And then I folded up her papers, and handed them to her. You should have seen how she sneaked out of the office, and went on back to her desk. But see, she wanted me to make trouble, and I just stared her down till she had to get up and go. Another time, I was always fighting smoking in the state offices. I fought that very hard. And so, one girl – a friend of mine – came back to my desk, and said, "Jessie, where are your ashtrays?" And I said, "They're in my desk." And she says, "Well, I need one." I said, "Well, I'm going to take one out just for you, but nobody else." I said, "You don't tell anybody else I gave it to you, cause I'm just doing – just mainly for you." And she turned around and went on out, so. Those things, I had to handle it that way, and I don't know how the Lord helped me handle it. I don't know. I really don't know. And so anyhow, I still fought against smoking. And I fought very hard against the smoking. And I thought it was terrible that we had to live in all that smoke. And we had moved out of this office to another office, and they were smoking as hard as they could, and I fought it. Big high fans [unclear] from my office. There was people smoking, and everything else. They did everything. And so, one day, the smoke was so thick in there, I called the fire department. You know, I've never told anybody. [laughs] Cause I could go to jail for it even this late, and that was way back in 1972. [laughs] And, oh, I said, "Listen. I was

in that office down there at the employment service, and the smoke was so thick –” No, I didn’t say the smoke, I said, “The air. It looks like there’s a lot of smoke in there. It’s really thick, I think you ought to come see about it.” And here comes the fire department. So, a friend of mine came to me. She said, “Jessie, I bet you called that fire department.” And I told her; I said, “Listen honey, if I did, do you think I’d be crazy enough to tell you?” [*laughs*] Well, they came and they couldn’t find anything that was wrong except the smoke. And the smoke was that thick. Everybody was smoking. And they didn’t want to stop anybody from smoking, because they said they did more work if they smoked. And I already had tried to get them to give them a special office to go smoke in, and all like that. But no, they didn’t. But it wasn’t long after that before they stopped smoking in the state offices. I never got any credit for that, but they didn’t. They stopped it in time. So I feel like – I actually feel like my actions, although it wasn’t a thing – they couldn’t really do at that time; but I feel like my actions was fair. So, I came along, and I got so tired of fighting discrimination, segregation, smoking, everything else. I wanted to take little trips. So, I took my trip to the Holy Land, and was gone – it was about two weeks, or something like that. And I went to Rome, Israel, Egypt and Greece. And you know, I stopped in New York and visited. And when I came back – when I hit the door, all of this mess hit me in the face. I just couldn’t stand it. So, I went straight to my

boss, and asked him could I retire. And he said, "Well, when do you want to? What date?" I said, "I want to do it today. Get it over with." I said, "I can't take it anymore. I need to retire today." And so, I'd had so many problems. I had another little fight with that little guy [unclear] lot of times. And then the supervisors were trying to test me, and fight with me, and they accused me of doing something that I didn't do. And I told them to just tell him about it. "Don't you say I-" I said, "Honey, it's nothing but a lie." He said, "Well, I can have you fired for insubordination." I said, "Well, get busy." I said, "Get busy." Because if I found – if she was working for me and I found you were insubordinate, I'd be getting busy, so get busy. And they wanted to know how I could be so sure of myself. And I said, "Well, the thing about it is, and the Lord Jesus Christ tells me what to say, and what not to say." And they said, "What would you say? I dare you to say it." Laura was lying so I said, "When you stop lying, I won't have to say it." And so Laura she opened her mouth high and her false teeth fell down. You know, those are terrible things and telling a story like this. So you can just put the thing, his name out and it will be acceptable, because all of them turned out to be friends of mine and they all talk to me now and see me on the street, and they carry on about it and some call me and everything like that. It's because I made friends by standing up for what was right. I think that's the way they were committed. When I came back after retiring,



and I first retired 35 years state service. So when I came back, I still wanted to work and make some money, I needed it. My kids were getting ready to go to college and things like that. So anyhow, I decided that I wanted to go back to work, and so I started working, doing volunteer work for the Retired Senior Citizens volunteer program. I received an award this year, for my 30 years service with them. I was the top person, been there longer than Charley. I am the only charter member of the group still there. They are still honoring me for being the top person. But anyhow, I had to have some money, so they wanted to open up a toll free line in the Lieutenant Governor's office, to have seniors all from the state of Illinois, and they asked me if I would come and help. I said, "Well I can, but I can't volunteer." I said, "I do too much volunteer work in the community, at my church and at the organization, and I've got to have something with money." And I said, "And I have to have something that's not going to bother my pension, because I'm retired and I'm getting a pension." And they said well, "We can give you a certain amount of money and it would not interfere with your pension." I said that's going to be enough though." I said, "Call somebody to do volunteer work and call somebody for all the things that I have to do." And so they took them and put me on contract. They gave me a contract for more money than I had made all of when I you know, worked in my – it was a very, very good contract. So I stayed there 18 years, in the Lieutenant

Governor's office, working with people. I didn't find too much discrimination at that time. It was beginning to work down and I didn't much gripe, too much discrimination. I enjoyed the work there very much. Now they help a lot, a lot of people, all kinds of people. I don't know if I told you about it or not, but a guy called me one day and said he was going to commit suicide. Did I tell you that?

Patton: Yes.

Finley: You don't want to hear that story again do you? Well anyhow, I told him it was not the way to do it. And I had other people like that, because I had worked for and I had so many other things that I had to do. Of course, they were mistreating the senior citizens and we helped a lot of people there. And then I finally retired from that, in 1991 I think it was. That made me 50 years in the state of Illinois service. I think I told you that I had a fight, and I had to go through hell. Columbia, in order to change it but I had to go through hell in the high water. (laughs) But I say hell and high water. I should have started with hell, H-E-L-L. That reminds me of my granddaughter. She was in school recently and they had to read a passage. She was at special or Catholic school, and they had to read a passage of scripture, and there was a passage there where you had to use the word, A-S-S. When she got to that part, she said so and so, an "A-S-S." He said, "That's not A-S-S, that's so and so." She said, "Do you not know

what it is?" If I try to say anything else than A-S-S, my mama would get me. (laughs) That was so funny. She is 17 years old, she said, "My mama would get me if I say anything else but A-S-S." So we were taught a long time ago, some of these words, and I actually had to spell them. The word nigger, we had to spell it if we were going to tell a story about somebody calling me that. The word black we had to spell it, because in those days, even though they mistreated the black people, we had difference in the fact there were people of fairer color and darker color, things like that. My mother was just as white as any white person and my father was as dark as any person, and we had both colors in our family. So way back in those days, we had to spell it. Now, I can hardly spell black and my children are 70 and 72 and they still spell out black, because we did it earlier in our years, and it's just something you don't say and you don't do, and you had to spell those things out. So I haven't spelled those things out here, but you'll cover anything because you know how to cover it, so mess up what I had done. One thing, there was a lot of discrimination when I was a kid and I guess I'd have to go back to my activity through my state service. Do you any questions to ask about that?

Patton: Not really, but I would like you to also tell the story you told me earlier, about Walgreens.

Finley: My children and I were determined that there was not prejudices in eating places and things like that you know. My children had a lot of white friends, went to school with them and then with them to a couple of other places in town. I went to Walgreens every morning for a cup of coffee. There was this one man went back in this place and took everything I used and threw it all away in the sink, broke them up. I went back there and I said, "You shouldn't do that." I said, "A war is going on and everything has to be saved." And I said, "Well give them to me and I'll take them home." The boss told him, and the boss said I saw the whole thing, and then I said, "Well, something has to be done about this." So I went back the next morning and he served me and he said, "I don't know why you keep coming here. They were making fun of me because I served you." He said that you knew good and well that you couldn't own a place like this and I don't know why you come in here and mess my job up. I said listen honey, you couldn't own a place like this if you're going to be back there washing dishes. I said "No you wouldn't", just like that. So then I got together with the ministers of the church here in the town, and it's several, a mixed group of white and colored ministers, and they got behind it right away. So I got a letter from Walgreens saying that it was not their policy and it would not happen again. So they fired him, because I said I would not go back again unless he was fired, and so they fired him. People then could go to the Walgreens and eat. My daughter

went to what's that other place down here, of the same sort, and they didn't want to serve her. She sat there and waited until they had to serve her, just sat there and waited. So anyhow, I wrote to the office of that place and they said that was not their policy and it would never happen again, and that they would come out and take her in there and see that they serve her. That's what they said but they didn't do it, but they at least saw that people could go in and eat. So then my daughter and some of her friends would go, her Girl Scout friends, would go to places to eat and then sit there, just get a cold drink or something. When they would serve Charlotte with a paper cup or something, one of the other girls would take it out and give her a glass, and they'd take the paper cup and tell them they wanted a glass. They helped them break a lot of discrimination in places like that. One time, the Dunlap Hotel. Do you know the Dunlap? That hotel that was down there in downtown? Well anyhow, it's a hotel and they went to eat something. The girls went in and they wouldn't serve them where they were sitting, and so they moved them. There were spots they could serve them you know, and they were just sort of moved on and didn't do anything about it. So Charlotte came home and so I wrote them a letter, telling them what was that about. Somehow or other they started serving kids anyhow. So we had trouble with discrimination and segregation all the time, and we really fought for it. We weren't afraid to fight, even in places like the YWCA. That is a nice place

now but at the time it was segregated. They had a meeting on racial barriers and everything one time at one of the churches, and so they act that up and I said well, how can you have a meeting like you have now and believe in what you're saying, when my daughter could not even get to swim at the YWCA? I scared them to death. So the lady at the YWCA, Sarah, called and said, "Well she didn't have a health certificate." I said, "Oh yes she did." She had a health certificate. You watched them trip over her to change, changing and you wouldn't let her swim. Well now they had all different kinds of reasons. At that time, one of my friends was on the board, and she got up and said, "My daughters are able to swim over there." And I got up and I said, "That's your daughter." I said, "Because you're on the board, they might let your daughter swim, but what about our little daughters and what about my daughter being refused to swim?" She didn't know if they did or not, she didn't know. I couldn't ask her, she wouldn't – believe me, she didn't know anything about that, why. So she called me the next week and she said, I'm going to call and tell you that I found out they really were not accepting students of color. I went in there to swim and she tells me that when she went to swim, the lady near fainted. She said she nearly fainted and couldn't understand why I would be coming there to swim. So we had to fight on that and they kind of straightened that out. Another fight I had was with St. John's Hospital. The Memorial Hospital wouldn't take us at all and St.

John's had a place just for colored people, and it had doors that you'd go to. So when my first husband was sick and we went to the hospital, they put him across, in the regular section. The next time we had to go, they put him behind the doors because they said they thought he would be more comfortable with his people. And I said, I don't know why you would think of that, because when he was practicing, I said 95% was for white people. He had more white people in Jacksonville, Illinois, because in Jacksonville there weren't too many colored people, we had all these white people. So anyhow, they would not move him, and they left him behind the doors. So I said to them, I told them that – I went down and I said, well I have to go downstairs and get a bite to eat, and I went down there. They wouldn't give me anything to eat at the cafeteria at all, and I had to go across the street and get something. Do you want to check that?

Patton: Yes.

**End Tape 2, Side A; Begin Tape 2, Side B**

Finley: So they told me I'd have to go across to the street to the place and get something to eat, and I said, "No, I'm not going over there." I said, "It's late at night and I'm staying here with my husband. I don't expect him to even live and I want to stay right here." So I asked them to – I'm going to sit here and I didn't want to... So anyhow, they started cleaning the place up and I saw they were going to lock me out,

and I finally had to go. There was a priest that came by and he wanted to know what took so long, and I told him. And so about that time I had asked the girl for her name, and I turned around just in time for him to shake his head. I'll never forget it, so I said well now, if a priest is not going to help, what am I going to do? So finally I just didn't have any energy at all. I just went out, got some other food, to be with my husband. I did report this and apparently there was people that were Catholic, to see if they had worked something out, and they said they were able to change that situation about eating in the cafeteria and also, having you come in through the entrance, some things like that. They had how many rooms down here were colored and how many rooms was for white, but they changed that, so I really got that done. My daughter was able to break down discrimination in the Girl Scouts. She was a Girl Scout and she worked very hard in Girl Scouts. She had a lot of good friends. She came home one day and she said, "Mother, they had separate camps, for camping time, for the colored girls and white girls." And then I told them I was not going to a segregated place and they said well, "You can go to our place because we'll give you a job at our place." That's when we moved back to Springfield. She called up saying, do you want a job with us, and you can go with all your friends. So she went back and she told them that she would not go over to be at their camp if they were not going to treat all the girls the same. We made a big to do out



of that, and after she went to college, the secretary had called. Their policy had changed, there would be no discrimination against any of us, that they all wanted to go to the same place and that there would be no discrimination whatever. So please she said, will you write and tell Charlotte because we want her to know. You know? They were good at you know, things like that, and we all worked it out together. They had some trouble I remember, when she was in grade school, because we would go out there so much about having trouble. Alonzo had so many friends and all the white boys, and there didn't seem to be any trouble. So she said – no, the teacher sent for me to come over there and he wanted to know why Charlotte wouldn't sing with us on the songs. And I asked what songs are they? The song, one of the old songs of way back that used the word darkie and different things like that. So I said well, I don't understand. I said, she doesn't have to sing if she doesn't want to and I don't want her to, and I said I don't know why this teacher would select those songs for her to sing, because I said out on the playground, if somebody is out there and they're sitting by a darkie, you'd be ready to give them a whipping wouldn't you? I sure would, I'm not going to have that, and I'm not going to make Charlotte sing. So they quit singing and actually, that's a teacher that was trying to force her to sing, whether she wanted to or not, she selected other songs. So that's the last fight in that school. Now my son went to first, Feitshans School for a year, and then

changed to Springfield High School, both of them did. He came home one day and he asked me he said, when we moved he said, "I don't want to go to Springfield High School." I said, "Why?" So he said well, "I'm on the football team out here at Feitshans" and this, that and the other, and I know they're not going to do that for me at Springfield High School. And I said, "Well, I'll see that they do." I said, just let me handle this now. I'll see that they, if you're good enough, they'll take you. They transferred curriculum. He was an MPAB class. Then when he went to Springfield High School they changed it to a CD class. They said they instituted that because everything was different at Feitshans than it was at Springfield High. I fought so hard about it, that they finally put him in the AB class out there. And I said just give him a chance. You haven't even given him a chance to see what he can do. So I had to fight with that. I know I wasn't going to fight about something else, I seem to do that a lot and I don't want any trouble out here. And so he saw me come in the door and he would say, "Ma, what are you doing here?" And I told him what I was going to do. So he said, "Well you go home, I can handle it now." I said, "Are you sure?" Sure, I can handle it, just let me handle it. So he told me, "Ma go home." Go back and go home. Anyhow, at the school, when he left Feitshans and he went to Springfield High, he came home, almost ran all the way, "Mama, let me tell you what. They have picked me for the team." And I said, "What?" Yes, yes, yes. He said

that sort of reminds me when I said he told me to go out and run for him and after I ran, (laughs) and I told him Alonzo would break his neck you know, to prove he was the kind of person, that he isn't a kid. He felt as though he could outdo everybody, he could jump higher than everybody, so they would have been correct to make sure that he could do it. He said, "Whatever that man is, he told me to go out and run for him." He ran for him and the man gave him a suit. He was just so happy, he didn't know what to do. So Springfield, he said "I'm going to put Springfield on the map" because he did the football and basketball, track, and then later in boxing. So he got on the right track.

After that, he went to Carthage College, and this is not – and Carthage had discrimination, segregation because they had even in town but and not published in school, no longer accepted at school. And he went in and adapted so well, he stayed there. He was deferred to the Army, because he had did all the pre-med work and was in medical school that accepted him. When he got ready to finish he said, "Mama, I'm going to tell you, I'm not going to go to medical school now, I can't apply myself." I could see why he couldn't, because he had put Carthage College on the map with all this athletic business. The fact that the lady who was charge of pre-med at the college, she says, I don't have enough time to spend with him. He's just barely passing some of his grades and she says, "I just don't know what I'm going to do about it." Plus, they keep him so busy with

athletics. So anyhow he said, "I wanted to letter in everything, including boxing and everything else." He said he was going in the service and get his time over with, so he signed up to go and enlisted into the service. And I said, "I don't care what you do when you go to the service. Anything you want to do is all right, but don't you dare do any more boxing." I said, "I don't want you doing no boxing." We had time with our boxing business. I went to one of the matches that they had, what was that, that they had before, before they go out to box? Anyhow, this was at boxing, and I went to see the match, and I saw the man and I said God, Alonzo is going to hurt that man, you know? (laughs) So I went to him and I said, "Alonzo, I want you to win this fight but don't you hurt him, because he's not big enough." He said, "Mama, get away from me, you're going to make me lose this boxing match." So anyhow, I kept up with all of the various things that all my kids were on. So anyhow, he went into the service and when he was coming home, my daughter said to me, "Mama, now that Alonzo's on his way home, I'll tell you that he is the Far East boxing champ heavyweight." He's almost the Far East – he's in other things, they put him in other things too. They put him in the medical corps, they put him in all these activities, where he traveled from place to place. So when he got home he said, "I'm so tired. I don't believe I'll try to get into medical school right now. I'm going to the university in order to get my bachelors-Masters, and then I will go", and while he

was there, Northwestern University scouted him to work in the Immunology Department. He then came, "Mama, I'm so sorry. I'm tired of pinching pennies and I'm going to take the job." So anyhow, he went on and he got a good job at the State of Illinois, in the Research Department up there in Chicago, and while he was there he met a lady that was a nurse. She wanted to open up a nursing home and so he married her and they opened up a nursing home. So he worked there in the nursing homes for quite some time. She stayed with the nursing homes when they had gotten divorced, for some reason I don't know, and he went to work for Aflac Insurance Company. So he's been working for them for quite some time now. They had two girls. The oldest one finished at Notre Dame, got her medical degree and is now in charge of internal medicine at the Loyola University Hospital. The other one has a job with a law firm, she's a computer expert. So all of my kids, I had to come back down to pennies. Well, they all helped me down the line, right down to discrimination and segregation.

Going back to Springfield, the theaters, and there's a special part for us to sit. It was upstairs, right in the corner, so the place you could – the main theater. At some time, I refused to sit up there, something I did. So one night I refused to sit there and I sat in my place, and the guy put the spotlight on me, and he had to take it off and let me sit because it was disturbing everybody. I stayed there, and so I had to

tell him I wasn't going to move, because the last time he made me sit in a special place. I said, I kind of like that other place you got for us to sit, and it's just across the floor. And he said, sit in the other place and I said, I'm not going to move. So I had to fight with them on that. Then I went on a committee here. We went around to various different places. Some of them were white, the members of the committee, to see actually how they were treating us, and who would serve us and who wouldn't serve us and so forth and so on. They found some places that just were not going to do it, and they asked us until they could break it down, but I couldn't ignore that. Of course I'd still go and try. There was one place, it's in business now, they said they would get a lot of just poor service, and you can't even get a glass of water. So they were able to break it down pretty much that way. We were able to break down a lot of places just that way. Then we had – there was discrimination with school systems. They wouldn't hire colored teachers, some. I don't know if there were – they had places where kids were going to school or not, I don't now, but they had a big lawsuit over that. I'm trying to think of what the lawsuit was all about, because I remember it was in the town. Do you know anything about that?

Patton: No, I don't.

Finley: Well, there was a lot of discrimination in public schools, and they won their lawsuit, and they had – it was discontinued. They had to start hiring teachers and giving them the same rights and everything as anybody else. I don't know exactly how that works out. How it worked out, I don't know how it was worked out but I know it changed, so that you had to get teachers into the schools. Let me see, what else can I tell you?

Patton: Did you do any work for women's rights?

Finley: What?

Patton: Work for women's rights in the Springfield community?

Finley: Women? Well I guess I did, because I was busy promoting our women all the time. I was promoting women all the time and I had belonged to a group called Colored Women's Club, and they were promoting black families and women. And I belonged to a group, James Weldon Johnson Study Guild, and that was a women's group, a women's club, and that was over – last time we were out in the state of Illinois, the state women's club and also that national. At that time, I was working for (unintelligible), and I attended their convention and everything and helped women there. I was a member of the – I went into a lot of groups you know, and I told you I became – belonged to different groups to prove that it can be done. So I went into a

women's club in Springfield, an all white group, and I worked with them and promoted women. Then I worked with the women's groups in my church, missionary groups and things like that, to help them. I don't know if I had – I know there was plenty things that I did but right now I'm not thinking clearly. Does that help you any?

Patton: Yes, yes, that was great. So what was your earliest job that you had? Was that your work with Dr. Kenniebrew, or did you do work before that?

Finley: Prior to employment with Dr. Kenniebrew, I just worked on the farm. I had a few other things, I sold things, so I sold books. I sold books by Dubois, it was on the achievements of the colored man in American history. Before I went to work for Dr. Kenniebrew, I had to finish high school. He wanted somebody and I told you that I wrote about him when I was in high school and that I did not know that at the time, that I would ever meet him, work for him. He was my husband and the father of my children, so that's a big surprise. And so then I worked for him and then after I was employed with him, I started my tape service. So I worked with him until I started my tape service, (unintelligible).

Patton: What was the best job you ever thought you had?

Finley: Huh?



Patton: What do you think was the best job you ever had?

Finley: The best job? The best job I ever had was working for Dr. Kenniebrew. I learned so many different things, and anybody that ever worked for him could work for anybody, because he was a tough guy. You had to some things right. You had to have an education and he insisted on learning. He made you do it, you had to do it. If you were going to work with him you had to do it.

Patton: Were you ever a member of a union?

Finley: I belonged to the state, the state union.

Patton: Did you ever have to participate in any strikes?

Finley: In what?

Patton: Strikes.

Finley: No. I had done some work for the government though. In fact, I had done some – I gave some talks before the legislature. Of course the legislature, I had to talk with them several times with regard to senior citizens. I worked with senior citizens all the time and had to talk for them, and I belonged to this union and I participated in whatever they wanted me to do. I had other things other than strikes, but none ever did happen. I did some work for them but no, but I'm going to talk

about different things. I belonged – like I said, I belonged to that group and that's it.

Patton: Where did you go to school at?

Finley: Well I went to grade school in Danville, Illinois, in a little one-room school. It was really exciting. Let's see, I finished eighth grade there and then I went to the Danville High School, where I finished. I had a special class in bookkeeping, and then I went to work Dr. Kenniebrew and I told him that I played the piano. And then he said I just had to continue my piano, so that's when I went to the Illinois Conservatory and I studied there, to get my teachers certificate. I wanted to go on in school but the Illinois state college would not take any – they didn't allow any girls on the front campus, they were not allowed on the campus. They would take some colored women and men but they would not take any colored girls. So the director of the Conservatory pushed me to take two separate – twice the work on the subjects I needed in order to get my teachers certificate. So I finished my teachers certificate there at the Illinois School of Music Conservatory, but I didn't have a chance to go to the campus. Then I took what I did at the conservatory and combined it with the Music Department requirement at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, and so I was there for a short period of time before we left, and then I worked in an office in Springfield. I worked with Dr. Kenniebrew, here in his office in

Springfield. Other than that, I've done a lot of extra and service work too. Let's see. I went to University of Illinois. I had public speaking there and I had other classes there. What's the school in the western end?

Patton: Of Edwardsville?

Finley: It was in the town of Illinois. Well anyhow, I had had some in-service training courses from there and also, I took – and a lot of them, they would send me courses through the mail, international, international human services, and I also (unintelligible). Let's see, concerning the office work, and then of course that was difficult. So I was studying something all the time, so I improved myself in any way I could. Does that help you?

Patton: Yes. Which one of your parents felt that education was more important do you think?

Finley: I can't – it's kind of hard to separate the education and the religion. The religion that we had, we had to be somebody, and we had to know the bible. And they also had attended, both of them, education at all times, that education is the answer. They both, they said we had to be somebody. They were not going to let us just not sit around not doing anything. They insisted that we try and get an education, both of them did.

- Patton: Did you ever have to put aside what you wanted so far as your education or career went, for like a family need?
- Finley: A family need?
- Patton: Mm hmm.
- Finley: No, because my father did everything and my mother did everything they could, so that I could get through high school and grade school. When I got ready to go to high school, it was hard to get there because they had little transportation, urban, urban – there was an urban train that came through and it was a little town, of course we were out in the country. So my father took and mortgaged the pigs and got a new car for me, so I could drive. So that might be said in a side thing, because he – that was more than they could deal with. They had mortgaged the chickens and got enough money to get this car. He taught me to drive the car and I had plenty of room. So I'd drive myself and some other children to school, and that got me through high school. I finished high school. Does that help you?
- Patton: Yes. So how many different places have you lived?
- Finley: Lived? Well let's see, I lived in Danville, Illinois, that's my hometown. Then I lived in Jacksonville, Illinois, and then I went back to Springfield, Illinois. Dr. Kenniebrew, that's when we got married. He wanted to go to Evanston, Illinois, to find out about the hospitals

up there, so he could be of some help. So we want to Evanston, Illinois and both my children were born in Evanston. Then we decided it would be best for us to go back to Springfield, where he was well known, and so we came back to Springfield. Can I tell you about the woman in the state of Illinois? In 1941 I had to go to Aledo, Illinois for that. While I was in Aledo, Illinois, I had to stay for a while in Chicago, with my sister, and trying to get any place to stay was hard. There was an ammunition plant going up, not going here or there. So I got an apartment in town. That was all the places I have stayed.

Patton: How did you meet Dr. Kenniebrew?

Finley: How did I what?

Patton: How did you meet Dr. Kenniebrew?

Finley: Meet him? Dr. Kenniebrew had needed a bookkeeper, and so many of his – the helpers he had, he had they were not able to do the work. They were scouting around for the bookkeeper and he knew a doctor in Danville, Illinois and asked him if he knew of any young girl that would want a job as a bookkeeper. So he wrote to this doctor, this minister, recommended me because I was the only girl there that had finished the course that year. I took the job. I come in and took the job, and I was scared to death. And so my mother had to go to – and

I'm glad that one of my brothers had called her down to Wisconsin, so he was going to get her a set of teeth and so she had to go down there. She didn't know if she should do that or stay and help me get ready to go. So the neighbors in the room, ladies in the community told her they said that they would help and she could go on. So they said they'd be happy to look after me and mama told me if you need anything, I could find it in the garden that I could sell, sell it. Momma told me after that she said, "I'll never turn Jessie Mae in my garden again. I took everything. So I had everything possible so I could go and get a few things you know, and they did – the neighbors made me some slips and a little blouse, and I went to Springfield and he hired me. At that time it would be Jacksonville. He hired me and that's when I met him.

Patton: As a young person, who did you admire the most?

Finley: Huh?

Patton: As a young person, who did you admire the most?

Finley: Who? What's the question?

Patton: Who did you admire the most when you were growing up?

Finley: Of course naturally it was my parents, then I had some very good people I admired in my church, because we had our church reverend

youth group. One time I was secretary of this group and I also admired and was impressed with the district president of our youth group. Then also my music teacher. I had a music teacher. My mother had taught me the organ at the time I was nine years old. We had an old pump organ and I had pump it to operate it. She had – I'd go have some training, this is my Sunday school teacher. My teacher, Mother Gaddie, we would call her Mother Gaddie, and I admired her so much. I was with her from the time I was nine until I was 18, when I went to Jacksonville. That's when I went there, and the Conservatory of Music, they gave me credit for all the time I had spent with her. I thought that was wonderful. I could get that credit on my way to my certificate. Of course I couldn't go out on the campus and put it in this other service, I was supposed to put it. So other than my parents it would have been Mother Gaddie.

Patton: Could you spell that for me? Do you know how to spell that?

Finley: G-A-D-D-I-E.

Patton: Thank you.

Finley: She was originally from Springfield.

Patton: How did you meet Mr. Finley?

Finley: Mr. Who?

Patton: Finley.

Finley: Finley? When Dr. Kenniebrew passed away, I prayed for another good husband, and a good father for my children. I actually prayed for that and God answered my prayer. I met him at church. I'd never seen him before, but he joined the church that Sunday morning and we were standing there talking, and a member of our choir said Mr. Finley, we're so glad to have you, I hope you'll work with our choir. I said, "No, he's working with my choir." And I never saw the man before, I can't even think why I said that. (laughs) So anyhow, when he came to choir rehearsal and he said, "I can't sing, I'm tone deaf." And I said, oh believe me, I said we're going to make you sing. So he came and he wasn't doing much singing. One night, we were having a big rummage sale for our choir, and I asked him to make a sign, have him make a sign to put out front. So I had the cardboard and everything and he made a little sign for us, we've got to have some signs. So he got up and went out and then I said, well I have to get out and see. I'm not having a mess out there. I've got to see what that man – when I got to that man, I saw it was a professional sign. I said Lord have mercy, maybe this is the answer to my prayers. (laughs) So anyhow, he kept looking at me and we were looking at each other. He said he had to marry the whole family to get me. So anyhow, my sister had him out for dinner and they did everything they could. Of course Marie said, man she's so crazy, she's going to let that man get



away, you know, that's what they told me. So one night we had a big concert going on and he wanted to know if he could take me. They were out of the house, everybody left the house and left just the two of us there, and they did this purposely I think. Well anyhow, when we got ready to go and we got to the door, I said this man keeps staring at me and showing that he's kind of hard to get. So when we were at the door I said, "Kiss me!" So I had to let him know that, so he kissed me and from that day on, he was talking about building a home for us and doing all the things, the artistic things he could do and all like that. He built us a lovely home. So that's where I met him.

Patton: Did you have something else?

Finley: Huh?

Patton: What kind of work did he do?

Finley: He was an artist.

Patton: He was an artist?

Finley: And he worked in Chicago, and he did a lot of poster artwork. In fact, when you go to Chicago, you'll see the tall water towers, old some of them, you might see one of the signs that he put on there. He used to do that kind of work. He was in that kind of business for quite a long time, and so he had to come to Springfield because the business where

he was, there wasn't as much work. So he came to Springfield and got to work for the state. He worked for the state and after he worked there for a while, he had a job with Massey Ferguson Company, for a maintenance man, at their place, plus he would do a little editing. So anyhow, in the meanwhile, he did – when building the home, he had his own shop. He did a lot of work in his own shop and also he had built houses. All the houses out in our area, he kept building them. So he was a house builder and artist. I would call him an artist, yes. And she's got the information from the internet-going to tell you about all that. I wanted to mention that. The internet has all the information.

Patton: In the Springfield community, what were some of the major events or activities that your family participated in?

Finley: What was what?

Patton: In the Springfield community, what were some of the activities or events that you remember participating in with your family?

Finley: To tell you the truth, I participated in nearly all of them. I had this singing group you know, and I always had a singing group. One of the first ones I had here was the Lincoln Liberty Chorus, and the Lincoln Liberty Chorus was organized by Jerome Singleton, O. Jerome Singleton. We sang at nearly every function they had, and especially any concerts in Lincoln or anything like that. We sang for those

groups. I had to play for their concerts. That was one of the major activities. Then I'm trying to think of other things. My church had many activities. We had big songfests and many people sang for that. In the Baptist church we had a songfest as well. There was something else I was just thinking... Other than my volunteer work and all of my other activities. And then I had also sang for Billy Graham's crusade.

Patton: Were there any state fair activities that you particularly enjoyed?

Finley: I should remember it. Of course I, for ten years, furnished music for our senior citizens on the fairgrounds, and for ten years I'd have to – they said I could use it and direct them and everything else. I had a good time doing that and they worked with me. That was very good, I enjoyed it. Then I had a man that came out one time and he kept wiggling out of his chair and I said, "Would you like to dance?" I don't remember much of his answer, but I was never much of a dancer, but I cut-up all the time. And he said that yes. So I asked him if he wanted to dance, and then the nurse said, he could hardly get out of his chair this morning he just wants to – can I have a dance? So I finally had to tell them I had enough. He came back and came back the next day, the nurse would bring him back. I don't know, I guess he didn't dance. So that was one of the good things that I did. With the senior citizens I had a kitchen band and a church band. There was something going on all the time at the senior center. That's one of the

greatest things I guess. Then there were some other things too. I sang in various choirs that we had around here. Sometimes they had special choirs to do such things as the Hallelujah Chorus and things like that, and I'd sing in them. I'm trying to think if there were any other. We had a big play for the hundredth at the centennial building for our church, the history of our church. There were other things for the history of our church. So I don't know, I just probably had done everything there was to do. I'm trying to think of some other things but right now, they don't come to me.

Patton: How do you think Springfield has changed over the years?

Finley: Well it's changed a lot, it's changed a lot. There's still a lot to be done but it sure has changed a lot. I don't have this fear of being mistreated or anything like that any more, like I used to have you know, like I don't have to stop and straighten somebody out. I don't have the fear in me walking down the street with my child. I remember walking down the street one day and a little kid said, (unintelligible), talking to my daughter. So I stopped and I went back to the mama and I said, "You had better teach her the right thing, because if you don't, she's going to get hurt when she goes to school." And I said she could get hurt when she goes to school if you don't teach her the right thing. So I don't know any establishment in town that wouldn't serve you and I know that there is no discrimination going on. Another thing I was

active in bringing Ebony Fashion show here, in Springfield. So it's just changed so much, really I'm just so happy. Of all the places I've been, I went back to Springfield and this is not the best place I don't want to live. I think I can handle things here pretty well and I don't want to have to go through all that I have gone through. I don't want to go any other place. They know me here and it's the best place for me. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

Patton: That was good. In what ways would you like to see it become a better place?

Finley: A better place? I don't know, I'd like to see more integration in the churches. We have some white members and most churches do have white members now, but I know people feel free to go to any church that they want to go into. How are they going to make that happen, I don't know, but there's more segregation in the churches. They were fighting yesterday that there's more segregation in the churches. Some of the churches don't make you welcome, so some people just don't feel free to go. I don't think like that. My kids will not – won't leave their church regardless. They want to stay at the church, but there could be some more integration in the church. And that there be more consideration given to the youngsters at school.

**(End of Side Two, Tape Two)**

**(end of interview)**