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## Smith, Germaine Oral History Interview (African-American): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

Donna M. Rottier

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Interview with  
Germaine Smith

Conducted August 15, 1994  
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project  
The African-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: This is Donna Rottier. The date is August 15, 1994, and I am interviewing Germaine Smith in her home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

GS: Germaine [Lynn?] Pellebon-Smith.

DR: Thank you. Your current address?

GS: 601 Douglas Avenue, Holland, Michigan, 49424.

DR: And your date and place of birth?

GS: Chicago, Illinois, [date removed], 1950.

DR: When did you first move into Holland, Michigan?

GS: June 1975.

DR: I'm going to begin with a really broad question. Could you describe a bit about where you grew and where you lived, and what you did before you moved here?

GS: When I got here, I was twenty-five, so I didn't do much before then. We came to Holland because my husband took a job with a company here. I grew up in Chicago. I guess one claim to fame now, I went to the University of Illinois, which at that time was the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, with now the infamous Corrine [Mosley?] Brown who is in the U.S. Senate. We were classmates. Apparently, she was going on to Washington and I was coming to Holland.

For many people I guess the transition to Holland can be a cultural shock. It was in some way for me, but probably not as tremendous as a lot of people because I grew up in I guess what we

would call multi-racial schools now, which is a South-African term really. But basically, I grew up in schools that were integrating. I lived in areas of Chicago that were changing, which is basically when blacks move in, whites move out. But there's a process by which it happens; people don't move out overnight. Other than that, I think if one grows up in an exclusively ethnic community, to make a big leap can be quite traumatic. In 1975, I think almost every black person in Holland knew everybody else, which is interesting. Now there are lots of folks and you say, "Oh my God, who are these people?"

My kids, because I have four children, one was born in Holland at Holland Hospital. When we moved up here, my nineteen year-old was three weeks old. I came to Holland with a five year-old, a two-and-a-half year-old, and a baby. I didn't drive, because I never needed to drive in the city. I took driver's education, but I didn't need to drive, so I didn't. There weren't the bicycle paths and sidewalks to walk on if you didn't live in the city limits. And, I had never heard of the Reformed Church. Strangely enough, now, when I go to the city, there are a lot of churches that were Reformed Churches that I'm now aware of that I probably just never paid any attention. Because when you live in a big metro area, the Reformed Church isn't a big denomination. You hear about the "big guys," the Baptists, the Catholics.

DR: What was your religious background?

GS: I was baptized and confirmed Episcopal. I came from what I call a mixed religious background. My father was Catholic and my mother was Baptist. I was born in 1950. In those days it was quite an extreme. My mother, in order for the children of the marriage to be legal birth, she had to go through classes to marry a Catholic. Otherwise I would be what is fondly referred to as a "bastard." But because my mother went through these classes, I am legal--both the law as well as the church.

But I sense there was a lot of strain there and a lot of resentment. We could talk about different ethnic backgrounds and diversity, but one of the biggest problems to overcome is one's religious background. Even though both of these people were considered Christian, there's a vast difference, at least at that time, between Catholics and Baptists, and their ideas on how to raise children. I started off in Catholic school because my father was Catholic. The world was still very male-dominated, so whatever the father decided. I think that's why sometimes in Jewish families when Jewish daughters marry outside their religion, it's very difficult because they've been brought up in a male-dominated society, and yet Judaism says that you follow the religion of the mother and that determines who you are. I imagine that creates quite a few problems. It does with other people, too, it's just that we don't center on it as much and it hasn't gotten much attention.

I've been married most of my adult life. This is the second marriage for me. I was married the first time, I was seventeen. By twenty-one I was divorced, and remarried. I've probably done things a little faster. They say the age that you feel stressed for marriage is between eighteen and twenty-five. Well, having married at seventeen, I missed the urge. Instead of going to UCLA, which was what I was intending to do, I got married to someone who was nine years older than I. There again, there was another shock. It wasn't a "shotgun" wedding, as they used to refer to it; it was a choice. Unfortunately, a bad choice, but nonetheless a choice. A choice that the family didn't agree with, but legally went along with because at that time, I think they still do, you have to have someone sign for you if you're not eighteen. My mother's response to that was, "If I sign for you to get married, then you'll be that much closer to divorce, it won't take you as many years." It was a big wedding, and there again my mother had said that big church weddings don't last. So, this time I've been married twenty-two years and it wasn't a formal church wedding!

So, I suppose all the elements that make one right for coming to Holland, Michigan. I grew up in the sixties. I was at university in the sixties. Because I was in Chicago, I interfaced with people like Fred Hampton and a lot of the names that we hear now. I was on protest lines with Jesse Jackson. Malcolm was a

little ahead of my time. In a sense I was Martin Luther King, although I was not a Martin Luther King follower. I was far more progressive. The reason I say that is that most people don't realize that SCLC was a Southern movement. For the most part, Martin Luther King did not speak for northern blacks. Malcolm really spoke more for northern blacks, because he understood the northern condition. I, along with many others, celebrate Martin's birthday, but Martin was truly a champion for Southerners because the problems he addressed were southern problems. There's a lot more violence in the North. In the twenties when the unions were all together, what they were doing, in fact they have documentation. They had a special on PBS where, when they wanted to break up the unions, they would kill people. When blacks would be killed, when whites would come to the funeral, they would go and kill specifically whites and not blacks. So that after a while, as a white comrade, you say, "I'm not going to this black funeral." Where there wasn't racism, racism was created. There was fear, and of course, the union was a whole economic issue. The problems in the North have been markedly different than lunch counter, who to live next door to. Northerners tend to love ethnic enclaves. This is an Italian neighborhood, well, of course Italians live here. Why would you want to live with Italians? Polish live with Polish. I'm not sure there's a lot wrong with that, that one should be able to live in a diverse community, but

if you don't want to, that's okay, too. I think that's what most people object to--the feeling that you're being forced to do something. For many of us who come to Holland, Michigan, it's been force, because there isn't a standing black community.

DR: Do you know how many African-Americans lived here when you first moved here?

GS: When I first got here, I know there was less than 1,000 in the county, and the county at that time was about 150,000, so a real fraction.

DR: How much did you know about Holland before you got here?

GS: Nothing. I hadn't heard of the Tulip Festival. The realtor comes and they show you. A lot of one's willingness to relocate to the community is not only just the corporation and what they were saying they would do. But, of course, the realtor is your first entree to people in the community. I think at that time, there again, there were so few blacks, you didn't have what I call "ethnic resistance." When we say, "Oh, hispanics," or now, "Oh, Asians," they brought in so many Asians at one time that they created a problem by sheer numbers. At that time there weren't that many black people, so you didn't have that resistance. Although, you try to point out to people when they say things like, "Well, we don't have a problem with black people, we just don't like Mexicans." Oops, that's a problem! You may not notice



it, but that's a problem. You realize that there are problems, things that you have to deal with.

There are a lot more subtle things that happened, at least in 1975 until I say, 1990, with African-Americans. For instance in banking, if you go to the bank to get a loan, you have all your little dots in order, and yet you get denied it real easily. We had an experience, this was when my husband was in graduate school. Our house, if it was over twenty-five years old, you could get a loan to remodel. At that time I think we needed some new plumbing. The guy came out, he walked around the house and said, "There's nothing wrong; you should be happy living here." Most people think, "You could have sued." Well, the burden of proof is, well suing, I applaud people who get that far because I've investigated some things where I've looked for a job and someone has said to me, "Oh, you're over-qualified, and our people are not used to working with blacks. Therefore, I really want to give you the job but. . ." My God! I think the rest of the world thinks, "Oh, well, you're here and you've gotten all of these things because you're black." Recently someone said to my son that he had gotten into--he went to Dartmouth--he got into Dartmouth because he was black. So I guess he stayed there because he was black, he's now on Wall Street because he's black. He said, "God, I'm glad I'm black because I wouldn't want to be

anything else because I've got a college degree and a job, and if it's all because I'm black, then I'm glad to be black."

There are things that do happen. For instance, I sit on the Holland Police Commission. Years ago they talked about nothing but the big basketball game they were going to have between the community and the police department. Now there are real issues. There were always real issues, but Holland decided they didn't have to address those issues. I think sometimes if we're not as quick for resolution, it's because we don't like to identify problems, instead of saying there's a problem, there's a solution.

DR: Do you think Holland's getting better about that, about actually identifying problems and doing something about it?

GS: Yes, because you've got people who've been here for a while that are willing to address it, but you have new people who come in, too, sometimes with more energy. After a while I think you get kind of beat down, the same old thing. We often, I say "we" because there's a core group that have been here for a while, listen to new people come in. Some of them are the same old complaints, and some of them are new perspectives to some things that we've been here for so long we don't see or it doesn't happen to us. It's like I went to the Post Office and the guy at the Post Office said, "I didn't notice it was you, you didn't have on your hat." There's a certain amount of community, family-ness, when you've been here for a while. If you've done anything that

marks you different from the normal resident--and many of us in our own little ways are local celebrities. I can go to the mall and "Oh, you're back from South Africa." That's different from someone who just got here, and it's "Let's check your I.D." Since the mall has opened, I have never had someone ask me for another piece of I.D., because nine times out of ten, there's someone in that store that knows me. But somebody else who comes in new, it's like let's check. Now they've got the mall so people come from Grand Rapids and South Haven, and the dreaded Muskegon. Therefore it is different.

I think it's hard sometimes if you talk to the black people who've been here for a while and if they're living in a certain economic level, they say, "Well, life's okay for me, I don't have any of those problems," but that doesn't mean they don't exist. For instance if we talk about discrimination in the schools, I could tell you some horror stories. Now, all my kids have been successful and people say, "I can't believe it, your kids go to university." That doesn't mean they haven't happened; that means that I had to be a vigil parent. And I haven't had an NAACP or an urban league to march up and down the street with. I've had a spouse, and so you have to handle things differently.

DR: What sorts of things have happened with them in schools?

GS: In fact, my nineteen year-old, Gamal, interestingly enough, has probably had some of the more dramatic problems. For instance,

when he was in middle school, this kid spit on him. Now, I was taught the worst thing you could do as a child or anyone could ever do to you is spit or bite, and that was long before AIDS. I get called to the school and they were very upset because they said the way Gamal attacked this kid--interestingly enough, there was not one there when the guy spit on him, so they don't know the vigor in which Gamal attacked him. All they know that when they got to Gamal and this kid, they were on the floor fighting and Gamal was, I assume, trying to choke him. I said to Gamal I was very disappointed he hadn't killed him. I said spitting is the worst thing you can do. But yet, the vice-principal at that time was very willing to say, well Gamal was the problem. This kid, I think two weeks later, dropped out of school. He was very old for middle school because here he was a sixteen year-old in middle school. He had a juvenile history. There clearly, Gamal and I both felt that race had a lot to do with it, because this was a white kid who was a problem and you're now saying to me that my black child is a potential criminal because he has defended himself.

My kids have been strong academic students, for instance, Gamal was a National Merit finalist. Yet in the yearbook at West Ottawa High School, he's not mentioned. When he came home and asked what happened, I said, "You were so many other things--you were president of the student senate and you did this, that, and

the other--so that means someone deliberately did it, as opposed to saying there was an error." I pointed out to Gamal that unfortunately, that is how life is still today in America, and pretty much reflective of the world, and although it is not fair, how do *you* live through what is wrong that is done to you? He doesn't need to slit his wrists, but you would think, I can't believe it's the last thing we can do to you.

When Lea went to Notre Dame, my eldest, her grade point average got changed just before school started. I said, "What?" "Well, there was an error made so we feel obligated to let Notre Dame know." Well, all these schools calculate the GPA's themselves. They don't look at the school. They look at the classes and they count this, that, and the other. So, her admission was not based on West Ottawa saying her GPA was one thing and then dropping it. But there again, the response, and the way we were responded to. If this affects her life, well, if Notre Dame would just say, well, her GPA has dropped several points, because they're supposed to look at more than just your grades, more than just your test scores. There's supposed to be a number of things these schools look at. I certainly would have sued Notre Dame, but the fact that I was approached in that manner, and it wasn't delicately done. We got the impression that they were hoping they could affect. I mean, it was just a few points. They had to send the transcripts anyway. I'm thinking,

if this is what's happening to your students who are winning all kinds of accolades, what is happening with your average and your below-average students? And they know that these students come from a family where the parents, like I always say, we're sixties kids, so hey, when's the next protest happening? What happens when it's a single parent family and the mother is working all the time and she doesn't have the energy nor wherewithal to go up and challenge the school and what they're doing?

This area, unlike many, like we lived in Jersey for four years, they don't do heavy tracking. For instance, in New Jersey, even though the school system was the same size, you had more than one chemistry class. Generally, we say, if you're taking chemistry, you're college-bound. They had honors English and A.P. history. Now the A.P. system is all over the country, so I can understand that, but they fine-tune everything, and that was one of the ways to keep mixed students out of the class. They're a little more subtle with the way they do things here. But I've been with a number of parents--not so much at West Ottawa because we don't have the numbers in terms of African-Americans--but Holland. In fact, if you ask them at Holland High, have they ever sent an African-American to Hope for a dual enrollment program, I bet you they can't say that they have, which I think is interesting.

My daughter, well all my kids. Julius will now go, and I think he's going to take a history class and be dual enrolled. And we knew other West Ottawa students, but I said, who from Holland? If I look at some of the complaints, because recently I've been working with a group of Holland High student and parents and I said, wow, that's that same old grind the student down. Because if you constantly tell them what you're not capable of doing, failure is inevitable, because you've laid all of the components out. It's not necessary. I can understand the competitiveness in a large community where everybody's trying to get their own nitch, everybody wants a job. It's not like, "I don't like you because you, or whatever, but I just want to get to that next level." So you do wonder the motivation, dealing with those kinds of things. Like I said, there are people who haven't seen, I have one friend, she has three kids who went to West Ottawa. They've now graduated from Eastern, Western, and Stanford. She said, "I've never had a problem." Well, we have. I'm hoping that some of this has been documented so that when the next parent comes along with a problem, they can't say this hasn't happened.

DR: How have you reacted to that or what do you do about, or how have you taught your kids to react to that kind of thing?

GS: If it's a school problem, first of all, anybody who is under the age of eighteen is not an adult, and that is what you have parents

for to deal with those problems. You can't sit in the classroom with them, but we have a standard thing--you get out, you go and make a collect call, you call home. If you feel that this is a crisis for you--now I may not feel it's a crisis--but if you feel it's a crisis for you, then you pick up that phone and you call and you say, "I got a crisis, you need to come and deal with it." I don't think that children, and specifically students, should confront teachers or confront the authorities. You teach them how to deal with things a little differently and that's what parents are there for, which is unfortunately, when you have a situation where you've got a kid who knows, well, Mom's working at Donnelly, she can't take off, and my crisis may not be her crisis.

DR: What do you think about kids who don't have a parent they can call--whether that parent is working or their family situation doesn't warrant that?

GS: I think that's what community is there for. We talk about--I hate this term diversity--it's always talk about diversity. There's a woman who does some training about diversity and I think it's interesting that she does that. First of all, she's white and middle class. I don't know what it's like to be white and middle class because I'm black, and decidedly middle class. I've had experiences that she won't be able to afford. In terms of class structure, I'm above that. If I don't know what your experience is, you don't know what my experience is. For someone to say,



"We've got so-and-so, they *like*." Liking, and being able to deal with a crisis is a different circle. If you had people in the schools. For instance Hope College, if you ask, how many professors of color, how many African-Americans do you have? "Well, we're getting ready to have one guy, and then we have a happy little volunteer, Germaine Pellebon-Smith." Two people cannot do everything.

One of the problems the students face, it's the same thing. For instance, a black kid coming from West Ottawa, I would never say go to Hope, because he's not changed anything. Yet, he may have to work somewhere outside this community and face the real world. How do you face that real world when you have to come into real situations? I thought what they did to Gamal stunk, but that's reality. Saying to Gamal, "Hey, now you understand that." He took a class at Hope College and I'm still very upset at this instructor. He got a midterm grade of a "C." I called to say there's a problem, this is an "A" student. She starts telling me, well he plays football, he's president of the student senate, he's on this commission. I said, excuse me, you're not making a determination. Thank God he's not pregnant, you might have an abortion for him and say, "I don't think you need to have this baby."

There again, we have these situations where other people, and when I inquired, because I didn't know the professor, someone

said, "She's nice." Then I got upset. The people who lynched on Saturday were nice people. On Sunday morning they say, "Hey, Bob, how you doing? You know, that guy got a little crispy." These are nice people. Jeffrey Dahmer probably was a nice guy, he's just the "munch king." Nice doesn't mean that we don't do things that are horrendous. There again, the other professor who said this one was nice was not willing to evaluate the circumstances. Hope has a policy, especially for high students who are dual-enrolled. None of the procedures were followed. For you to say this person was "nice," drunk drivers are nice, but when you've taken too much alcohol and you get behind that car, there's a problem that can be created and often times happens. But like I said, you look at each circumstance. Some circumstances require losing your temper over others.

Like I said, my crisis may not be your crisis, and vice versa. This kid may come home and he has a crisis, so as a parent you have to look at that and say, "Okay, if it's a crisis for you." My major was psychology. My favorite class out of fifty hours of psychology was perception. That basically says, if you perceive it so, it's so. If you perceive this as a crisis for you, then I need to go into a crisis mode and how do we deal with you in your crisis, instead of wanting to evaluate whether I think it's a crisis or not.

I think oftentimes that's the difference between those of color dealing with students of color because you have run into those situations more often. It's very difficult for, I think we talked earlier, for me to understand someone who lives in this community and says, "Well, I'm not Dutch, I'm Swedish, and people don't accept me." Trying to understand that conception, "What do you mean you're not accepted, you're another white person to me." But they're saying they're not Dutch and their feeling is--whether it's true or not, if they perceive that they're not being accepted because they're not Dutch then you try and deal with that. But it's very difficult if you don't understand that. Because for me, I don't understand what you mean, you're blond, what do you mean? Can't you just tell them you're Dutch then?

So vice versa, it's just as difficult without seeing some of those experiences. And the people who work, for instance in South Africa, I know this guy who speaks [Xhosa??] and he has worked with the black community for eons. He has seen enough experiences and been there when it's happened that it doesn't have to be happening to him, because he's had enough experience. There are people that can better interpret it. Like I said to a friend, there was a professor who went to South Africa and everyone said to me, "So-and-so went to South Africa, you should talk to that person." Well, first of all, they've not spent the time I've spent and they were not in the township and they weren't black. I

said, if I were in Northern Ireland for thirty years, I'd always be black, and so people would respond to me differently. I could watch how they responded to you being Catholic or Protestant, but they would respond to me differently anyway. The time sometimes doesn't make a difference, but certainly the time and the place. You're saying this person was at a university, I was in the township, well, that's a whole different experience. Plus the fact that one of us is white and one of us is black. It doesn't mean that people who immerse themselves in those circumstances don't see enough crisis to understand it, and can be effective. I'm not saying that in every school system in Holland it has to have a 100,000 black professionals. But if you don't have people who've *never* worked with the situation, then you're not going to come to a solution, and that's what we see happening too often.

DR: Obviously you're very involved in a lot of community work and volunteer work. Could you describe some of that work?

GS: Where do I start? I think, there again, one of the nice things about Holland, people joke and say there's a church on every corner, but one of the quickest ways to become socialized in the community is through church. There again, I think it's very difficult for those people who for whatever reason say, "I'm not interested in going to church." I always look at it this way, you're lucky, generally it's an hour, hour and fifteen minutes, and it's a way to get out. It's a way for other than just the job

because if you come in because a corporation brought you in and therefore you have employment, well if the wife gets employment, that's great, too, so you have two separate little places. And most people do believe in something. I'm not sure that I'm a Christian, but I've had too many experiences with people in other major religions who aren't who I feel believed in God just as strongly if not stronger. They were willing to get out there and die for the cause; I say, God's going to come protect me. There again, that sense of community, so church is one component.

DR: What church do you go to?

GS: I'm at Hope Reformed. The reason I say that hesitantly is that I know Hope Reformed has a reputation of being the odd Reformed church in Holland. They think they're pretty diverse. They aren't. Because you've got a lot of people who are, I wouldn't say "I-centered," but certainly very strong individuals, so what you have is a community full of individuals at a particular church. That's not diverse. They think it's diverse, but it isn't. Diverse is when you've got some people who just sit there forever in that little pew. But if you look, if you did a census of the Hope Church members, for instance, we've got Jessie Dalman, Paul Hillegonds, Elsie Lamb, the Brooks, and Haworth. You could go on and on. Each of these individuals, and as couples, have distinguished themselves with different things in the community. In the case of Hillegonds and Dalman, politics. As parents,

pretty much, too, there again. Where is the diversity when everybody just has their own little thing? My thing at this point in time is helping the students at Hope College, and South Africa. But it's no different than Elsie, who's involved in the peace thing, or Haworth involved in giving his money away at this point, some of it to Hope College.

For me, there again, there's more support because you've got lots of other people doing other community things. For instance, I mentioned I was on the Holland Police Commission. In the last few years there's been a lot of near-crisis going on, which is something that we haven't had to deal with before. I believe in preventive medicine. That's the reason you give kids the shots, to keep them from becoming ill. But in order to do that, you have to have a vaccine that you're going to give them and you have to identify that there is an illness that you're going to prevent. I think that's one of the things, that Holland as a community is in the process of identifying the potential illness, getting that vaccine in there, and then getting it into the people who need it, because not everybody needs it.

They were having a thing on drugs, and identifying whether your kid's on drugs and knowing your kid's friends and stuff like that. They say, "This is scary." It's scary because those of us who don't feel, and I've been fortunate enough that I'd know if I had a kid that was involved in drugs. One of the things, too, if

your kids play athletics, then they always get physicals. There are little things you encourage the kids to do as another check and balance system. But what if there were a situation where you weren't quite sure what the kid was doing? I don't think most parents think about that. If their kids get on drugs, it's because the parents haven't thought about that, which is hence the advertising--these are the signs to look for, do you know who your kid's going out with, what kind of timing.

Holland now has a curfew. I'm all for a curfew. I grew up in a city where we had a curfew. In fact, during the summer there the big thing was, "It's 10:30, do you know where your child is?" and 11:30 on the weekend. Chicago is a major metro city, and yet people say, "Kids in Holland, they don't need a curfew." A fifteen year-old shouldn't be out at 2:00 in the morning. It's hard for parents. It was easier for my parents. They say it's hard parenting these days, well, that's because there were laws that were being enforced that made parenting a little bit easier. Your mom could say, "You be home at so-and-so time." My son's curfew is 12:00 because the school dances get out at 12:00. Community has changed. When I was a kid, you would never have a high school dance to midnight. No way! When community changes, parenting changes. If someone says, "You've got more freedom than I had," it's because that very individual allowed those changes to happen, or didn't protest them. I think that's what Holland with

a curfew now is saying, "We have got to put a handle on this," because it's okay to say. Still, personally, I think 2:00 your kid should be in. I think a curfew law gives a parent a tool to work with.

DR: What other things is Holland doing right now?

GS: The Youth for Christ Center will help some of the kids, but there again, at that point in time, you're really kind of pushing a religious twist. One of the things that I've learned is that while that may be where I am, that doesn't mean that everybody is. What you have now in this community that you didn't before, you may have had a lot of people who didn't want to go to church, but they went. Now you have people who come in and say, "Hey, I don't have to. I paid \$300,000 for this home, I don't have to." That's another thing that is upsetting to a lot of people because you don't think a person in a \$300,000 house is unchurched. We look at success and church together, and those quote "values" and all of those things. We wrap our Christian values up in materialism often. That's why it's easy to say, "Poor people are on drugs, look, they don't have anything, they're poor, they can't have religion."

I think that's one of the things as blacks that we've learned. The difference that I sense between African-American experience and other Africans in the diaspora is that we've come through slavery, which was a different system. We were stripped



of everything. Now we are for generations trying to rebuild. You can never go home again, especially when I don't know where home is. Therefore, the concept of what blackness is, is very diverse among African-Americans. We are using the term "African-American" again, but then we were "Negroes," and "Blacks," and thank God my mother named me Germaine. Obviously, you can look around and I have a very Afro-centric household, but most African-Americans are not so very connected to Africa. I've been there six or seven times. Most poor people can't get out of the ghetto, so they certainly can't get on a plane to go to Africa. Of course my experience has to be different because I've had opportunities. We were talking earlier and we were talking about the need to speak German. Well, I've been to Germany--not in the military.

The more you're out, the more religion is important to you. You talk to a lot of these corporate people who've had the corporate experience. Okay, they were on the plane and it was bumpy. Some people say, "I don't need to have God in my life as long as my checking account balances." We say, "Wow!" because we assume, we take for granted. I think the Youth for Christ Center will help *some* of the youth, but what happens to the others whose parents would be offended. The tendency is when you work with children, first let's take the little toddler. For instance, Calvin Christian Reformed Church over there right there on Lakewood, when we first moved here, they were some of our first

visitors. We moved in June, so the summer, and they had a Bible study program. They came over, and my oldest could go to the Bible study. I think they even took my two-and-a-half year-old because they said, "Well, he wanted to go and he seems pretty mature." Suppose I was a parent that didn't feel my children needed the church experience. That would be another opportunity to socialize. And by me being African-American, if I felt that way, then those people would say, "You see, those black people don't believe in God." Now, whether one has a church experience or not doesn't mean that you believe in God or not. There again as a parent, how do you teach your children about that experience? That's where Sunday School and church is important. Otherwise you have to do, the idea of home school, you have to do everything yourself. Maybe schools and churches are a cop-out because then we don't have to do all of the jobs, but there again, that's another way to be acclimated into community.

Now there isn't a standing black organization. There are a number of different groups now trying to get started and maybe that would ease some of that, but I think the expectation that all the black people in Holland will belong to one group is kind of crazy. People say, "Well, the hispanics have. . ." right, a lot of different groups and not everybody even belongs to those. The Asians, they're so fragmented. You've talked to a number of Asians, I'm sure. My mind was boggled when I found out that they

have Koreans over here, Vietnamese here, Cambodians. Some of them who only speak French. We're talking about bilingual programs, we have no bilingual French programs in the schools. My son Gamal tutored a number of Vietnamese who only spoke French when they first got here, because he had taken a number of years of French. Everybody that doesn't know about these problems thinks everything's fine, everything's just going along.

We recently in the last year or so heard about the gambling parties that are being robbed. Younger Asians, I think once they said there was like \$125,000 that these little gang school youngsters who come in--would be gangsters I would say because of course, \$125,000 is a lot of money--and rob these people. We say, "Wait a minute, these cute little people are gambling at that level?" We associate gambling as a high vice, and we say, "No, but our church has sponsored these people. It's not possible!" There again, I think it's community.

There's a woman I talked to who's Vietnamese and involved in the Martin Luther King service at Hope every year. I had wanted to last year, but I just didn't have time because I was in South Africa. I've been there quite a bit in the last year. One of the last things he spoke out against was the Vietnam War. Many people say that's why he was shot, because he spoke out against the Vietnam War. What do people in the Vietnamese community feel? Somebody says, "I would think they would be offended that he spoke

out against the war because we've done so much for them." It's interesting, this was a Dutchman who said that. I've not spoken to one Vietnamese person who echoed that sentiment. They said they agreed with Martin that we should not have been there. The French shouldn't have been there. I think that sometimes we figure if we feed someone, then they are obligated to go along with our politics.

Many of us feel that we're kind of being shoved, we've become invisible. They used to use the term "marginalized," where blacks were in the margins. Now we're off the page. Does one have to have a riot in order to address the problems that are ongoing? People say, "Well, now the Asians are the big problem or the so-and-so's are the big problem." We're all people, and then how do we use the diversity. I've got a friend of mine who was over at Hope, Al Gonzales, and when his kids come over they say, "We like coming over, it's like a museum." We don't all have to have the same decorations. We don't all have to cook the same food. The nice thing about having a gathering where everybody brings a dish is that what you really want to say is can you bring a diverse dish, let's not all bring the same salad. We have several times at Hope Church where we'll have an international breakfast or lunch, so people know that they're expected to bring their favorite other-than-American dish. That's where we are as individuals.

Even the idea of being American. There is no blanket concept of American. We all bring our diversity with us. That's where you say, "I like so-and-so because they're different from me." Otherwise there would be no need to have any dialogue, I could just talk to myself. I always use this phrase that one does not have to demean another person to celebrate oneself. I think too often we say, "If I'm celebrating, this is your day to be less-than." No. "It's your day and we're honoring you today and whatever you're bringing to the party today. Tomorrow it's my day and my party."

I love diversity in food, because then I don't get bored. The one thing I hated, it seemed like my mother cooked the same stuff over and over and over and over again. I don't cook any of those things, so now, when I go to her house, hey, it's a new experience again. There's nothing wrong with, as they say, variety's the spice of life. My grandfather always said to me that too many spices will kill you. That's what choice is. You can limit what you want to do.

DR: You mentioned that you go to South Africa a lot. What do you do when you go there?

GS: I was first invited, like I said, I'm a member of the Reformed Church, so a Reformed Church in South Africa had invited me to assist them in identifying students for scholarship. Fortunately or unfortunately, there's been lots of changes. Fortunately, the

changes in South Africa will be bringing about the concept of freedom, because I'm not real sure what freedom is either, myself, I'm still moving toward that.

[End of Side One]

GS: As I had said to you earlier, I was invited by [Alanda??] Reformed Church in Soweto to help them identify students for scholarship. Four of Hope's graduates have come from that congregation. Two have completed graduate school. In fact one was in journalism at the University of Michigan. The other one did social work at Grand Valley, and then there's a student now in Cleveland that's doing graduate work. I think the other graduate went home. We currently have five South African students. We have a student also at Calvin. Now the grand idea, which isn't essentially my idea, but the grand idea is to coordinate all six of the Reformed schools, because even though South Africans got the vote on the 27th of April, problems don't just disappear like that. Black South Africans have been disenfranchised the most. They're not the only ones, because co-eds and Indians have suffered somewhat.

My son, I mentioned earlier, traveled with me to South Africa. We had this brilliant idea. We had a professor who was here from Ghana who said, "No, no, he should come to Ghana because Ghana would be great, the school year is the same." We got to Ghana, hated Ghana. I normally don't, it wasn't that he decided that he didn't want to be in Ghana. We decided that Ghana was

counter-productive for him after I discovered a few things. Brought him to South Africa, which was much like the U.S. I guess, having never been there before, I listened to other people kind of use scare tactics I feel in terms of saying, "Well, you don't want him to come to South Africa." Well, South Africa was the perfect place for him, because South Africa is very industrialized. Bathing out a bucket wasn't all that, but hey, it was an experience, because township life, of course, was somewhat different from home to home. You could be in a home that has no electricity and next door there would be electricity. You'd be bathing out of the bucket one place and have a tub somewhere else. After a while you begin to think that having electricity and having indoor plumbing is *the* thing. All these other things--whether you have a stereo or color t.v. set--no. I just want to be able to switch on the light and get in a warm tub. That's me.

Like I said, the idea is to coordinate all six Reformed schools. Central College in Pella has had a number of South Africans.

DR: What are the six schools?

GS: For the Reformed Church in America, it's Hope, Central, and Northwestern. For the Christian Reformed, it's Calvin, Trinity, and [Dordt?]. There's six. Calvin being the largest, and then Hope after that. Hope has been more proactive in terms of

sponsoring South African students and working out a program. John Jacobson, when the program looked like it may have been coming to a closure, stepped in and said, "No." That's why we currently have five students. Two of our current students are not just South Africans. They have five to six members in their family that are in the new government, and that is Nontsikelelo and Mlungisi Sisulu. Now, most people know about Nelson Mandela. In fact, on this poster, if you notice, there's Nelson and there's Walter Sisulu. Walter and Albertina Sisulu have been very active in the movement. In fact, there were a number people who went to jail with Mandela. They called them the Rivonia trialists.

We as Americans, for the most part, don't know Walter Sisulu. The rest of the world does. It's interesting how much more information the rest of the world has about South Africa than we get, especially in what I call, I call the Midwest the *hinterland*. Stuff doesn't filter so much out here. The reason we have the two Sisulu grandchildren, in fact we have the eldest of the grandchildren, which is Mlungi, and I think Nontsike is third down. Their four children from the Sisulus have been very active in the movement. Right now, Albertina, which is Walter's wife, is in parliament, and so is Max and [Lindewe??] Sisulu. Walter's eighty-two, Mandela's seventy-five, so there's a bit of an age difference between the two of them. Some of these other people who you'll probably know in the future would be Govan Mbeki. His



son is the first vice-president, Thabo. I'm trying to think of anyone else who's currently in the government. I'd have to look at the list, because some of these people I'm not really that familiar with either. In fact I didn't know that Govan Mbeki was, like I said, for the most part we don't get a lot of information on South Africa unless you do a lot of reading, and that can be so boring. If I'm bored with it, I expect the rest of the world is, too. I don't say that we should be kicked in the head because we don't know a lot of these things, but when we do get a chance to have the information.

Like I said, we do have two of the Sisulu grandchildren. Mandela I think has four children still living. I think two died from his first marriage. He's got a daughter that teaches at [Vitz??] University, and then a son, I think, who is in law school. Then the two by Winnie that we know very well because they've had a lot of press because Winnie had a lot of press. Recently the Sisulus celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. So, which is typical of Holland style, I say Holland style because you know how we think about everything in terms of community, Hope had done a production called images, this spring in April. I was in South Africa at the time, so I had asked a friend of mine to videotape it. We made a copy. We had to transfer from NTSC, which is what we record on in this country, to PAL, which is what they use in Europe and Africa. So we sent a

copy of the videotape because Nontsike was in that, and then I did some photos around campus of Mlungi and Nontsike, because I said what do you give people who have been married for fifty years and who the rest of the world is trying to impress? You give them what they don't have--those two grandchildren. We sent a cute little letter that was basically from Hope College. I felt the reason it was important to include Hope is because without the events, then the granddaughter couldn't have been involved with that, and it's another way to advertise.

I think that when people say to me, "You're busy with South African students, well, what about African-American students?" You can only do so much. There are only twenty-four hours in a day. I was reading an article recently and it said, "What can we teach the South Africans and what can we learn from the South Africans?" There's a lot to be learned and in terms of struggle, we talk about the mirrored image between the South African struggle and the U.S. struggle. Of course, having a Nelson Mandela as president means that they're quantum leaps ahead, but they've had numbers that we didn't have. There's some solutions, though, to some common problems that hopefully either we come up with together or one or the other does and the other says, okay, you've got the solution, I'll take it as well. There's a lot to be learned. Often when we think about Third World countries, we think about Rwandas and Somalias where there's babies dying and we

don't think about what we can learn from that experience except for let's not have a war where we get food cut off. South Africa is a very industrialized nation, so there are lots of things that we can learn from South Africa because it's pretty close to what we're used to.

But we can't be receptive to that unless someone opens that avenue up. South Africans use the term Africans in the diaspora. In fact, someone was saying to me, "Oh, that's a Jewish term." Well, I'm pretty sure the word diaspora's not Jewish, it's not Hebrew, but I know oftentimes they refer to Jews in the diaspora. I think that's a way to say, instead of saying there are African-Americans and African-Caribbeans and Afro-Europeans, these are Africans away from Africa, so they're all Africans in the diaspora.

I think that's one way of bringing people closer together, because you don't make those fine distinctions and so therefore you think, well, first of all I'm an African. Then we can branch from there, because I'm lots of other things, too, but if I've already identified with that part of me, then it's easier. I think one of the problems, when people say, "There are so many African-Americans in Holland, Michigan, why don't they. . .?" Well, you've got, for instance, I'm one-third Native American, so then should we have a twist on Cherokee and Choctaw? There's somebody else who I met recently whose one parent was Vietnamese.

The only thing we do have in common is that common thread of Africa, not to mention the Irish, the Dutch, and all those other things that crop up in African-Americans or any other African in the diaspora. They generally are not remaining pure African once they are out there, for whatever the reasons.

Therefore, like I said, doing things that bring people together in terms of community. Everybody celebrates Tulip Time, and there's nothing wrong with that. Well, there are other times, and other groups. We have always, whether you're Irish or not, St. Patty's Day you live for. I think many of us forget that we're talking about Catholic Irish. Forget about the Orangemen, but there again, and you as a history major would know, most people don't know that much about history. The Protestant Irish do *not* celebrate St. Patrick's Day. It's not an *Irish* thing, it's more specifically a *Catholic Irish* thing. Some of the things that we've taken for granted and we've uplifted, we need to kind of look at. When I was in New Jersey, where you have a number of Irish, but you have Irish Protestants as well, on St. Patrick's Day, the Orangemen, that's how they came dressed, in orange. It's like, oops, guess we won't be having green beer. I don't drink beer, so it's not a problem. But it was kind of interesting to sit down and talk to a number of Irish Protestants, because too often we've really taken up the cause of the Catholics, without being Catholic or even caring about Catholicism.

It's too often in communities when we say, "Okay, well what do African-Americans want?" "Well, Germaine wants. . ." Well, Germaine is not reflective of the entire community. And there are other ethnic considerations as well. I'm just now starting to get into my Native American thing. I've been quote "black" for too long. I can't be Indian, I've got too many other problems! My husband's grandmother came from a reservation. Yet, the Native American, unless he's talking about fishing rights or gambling rights, we just ignore that they exist. Yet, in many backgrounds, especially African-Americans, you get a lot of Native American. In fact, there's traces of African.

I'm fortunate because my grandfather came from Capetown. Actually, I found out that he came from Umtata. He was coming from the Cape when he came to the Americas. Well, most African-Americans haven't the slightest idea which of these countries they're from. I just happen to be lucky, I think, depending on what day it is. You have to have someone else tell you, well, then you're a hybrid, you're a mixed person. Someone says you look like a West African, but there's several generations of lots of other things, so you may not be West African at all. Depending on who you talk to. I talked to an Egyptian friend the other. He asked, "When you going to get to Egypt?" My Egyptian friend said, "You look like you're Egyptian." So, in other words, I'm an African in the diaspora. I think that's more aptly put than

anything else because then you don't have to have allegiance to a particular group, especially since, for the most part, people aren't aware of it. A tall Dutchman, if you put color to him, could look like he's from Kenya. It's kind of hard to say who looks like what and where, and the migration. Truly, when you look in South Africa, you can see that the West Africans migrated, because there are people who look distinctively West African. One of the biggest things there you can tell is color. West Africans tend to be much darker than Southern Africans.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland as long as you have?

GS: In fact, I did move, I went to Jersey for a while. Moved back. We seemed like we were brilliant because we never sold the house. Generally people stay where they find their level of comfort. If I didn't live in Holland, Michigan, I can guarantee you I would not have been in South Africa four times. It's a safe enough community. When I say safe, I can leave, well, of course I don't have any real treasures, they're my treasures. I think when you think about going away for a while--is my house going to be there when I get back? I think in that sense you can say Holland's safe enough that I figure I can go two or three months and the cobwebs would be there but things will be back.

It's a place for me that I've been able to explore who I am and my diversity. People use the term acceptance. That's kind of iffy. What do you mean by acceptance? I think when we say how

comfortable do other people make us feel? That doesn't mean that, I mean, I'm always battling with Hope College and I'm always volunteering for things at Hope College. I think if there was just a brick wall you would say, I'm not going to fight something I can't win. We take on battles because we think, I'm seeing a little light here. I have a couple battles now I'm getting ready to take on. I need a computer at home so my students can e-mail me. Now I have to go into campus to get my messages. Just simple things that you say, okay, I do see that there's a possibility.

A friend asked me last week, "What do you do to relax?" What do I do to relax? Part of volunteering is what I do to relax. I think most people who think they know something, they need a form by which they can give that to other people. We decided that one of the reasons people have children is because they think they're so great--"I gotta make another one like me." You feel, I'm giving some of myself, but it's really in a sense an ego trip, because I've got so much to give, I'm willing to give it to you. Mainly giving time, rather than working, because you can then design your time a lot better, and you can work on some other things. When you get locked into a job, because for the most part it takes a while for a career to happen, then that cuts off your time. That can be good, like I was just saying, I want to get a job, then I don't have to some things. I can say I can't do it because I'm working.

But, like I said, feeling comfortable. I think people stay in communities where they feel comfortable. Sometimes people don't, they say they're not comfortable. My question is, if you're at a church and you're not comfortable, there are other churches, in a community that you're not comfortable in, there are other communities. The world is not so narrowly focused that there's not somewhere that you can't go that you can feel comfortable. I had a couple who just recently went to South Africa. The wife said to me, "I can't understand why you're just not living there." They lived in Israel for six years and they liked that, well why aren't you there? They're planning to move to South Africa. Fine. From June to June, I spent six months in South Africa. I divided my time, that's enough for me. Because I'm not *un-comfortable* where I am. Generally you move because you're not comfortable, there's something you're still looking for. But planting your roots, I don't think if I were here all the time I would be comfortable. But I wouldn't be comfortable anywhere all the time. Like I said, Holland is, for me, and for my family, because my kids were saying, "Oh yeah, this is going to be our vacation house and we can chill out." Especially I'm thinking my son who works in New York now will be dying to get home where he can just be nothing but look out. This isn't a palace, but the surroundings aren't bad.



The same things that makes most people stay in a community is the level of comfort, not just what's inside your house, but the community. It does feel good, you walk into the Post Office and, "I haven't seen you for a while and you're not wearing so-and-so," that someone notices what you normally wear and you're not doing that today. That's another way of comfort. I expose to some acceptance. We use that term acceptance, lack of, or acceptance very broadly. I think if you say the two, comfort, acceptance, they're equal. Because some people want to be left alone. If you leave them alone, then they're comfortable, and that's acceptance for them because you've not imposed on them. Writers when they come to write, they don't want the phone ringing all the time. I think that's the reason I would say I've been here, and most people stay in a community.

Then sometimes there are things that you want that the community doesn't have; hence, you get on a flight and you go. Whether that's doing a particular thing, like I had a friend say to me recently, "We should go to Rwanda." I said, "Not me." I don't knowingly go into battlegrounds, although from 1990 until now South Africa has been a bit iffy. But I haven't put myself on the firing line. There were people going from South Africa to Rwanda and they had just killed sixty people, a number of them were the press. I wrote an article, too, for the *Sentinel*, but I'm not getting paid to get shot at, I'm not a military person.

There again, that's that level of comfort. I think being dead would be a little uncomfortable, or getting to the process of being dead would be uncomfortable. I don't know, I haven't been dead, so it may be a comfortable spot, but getting to dead would be uncomfortable. Is there anything else? Have I answered sufficiently?

DR: I think you've pretty much covered what I wanted to know.

GS: Everything you wanted to know, and then some.

DR: Thanks a lot for taking the time to talk to me. I appreciate it.

GS: Okay, no problem.

Note regarding interview with Germaine Smith on August 15, 1994:

As was the procedure with all of the interviews conducted, a copy of this transcript was sent to Ms. Smith for editing. Partially because Ms. Smith is so involved in many activities and keeps very busy with them all, she did not return an edited transcript. I followed up with Ms. Smith by phone, once with a reminder letter in January of 1995, and finally this summer with another copy of the transcript and a final letter urging her to make any clarifications or edits she feels necessary for the overall clarity and accuracy of the interview. It is my hope that Ms. Smith will return an edited transcript, but until that time, this is the version as transcribed to the best of my ability directly from the tape-recorded interview. Any information which I could not completely decipher is denoted by brackets.

dmr  
08/23/95