



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Heather Peeler and Sally Gardner

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Heather Peeler and Sally Gardner*

Location of Interview:
Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *12/07/2022*

Transcriber: *Bridget Nakamura*

Summary:

Heather Peeler and Sally Gardner reflect on their participation in the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. They both attended the pilgrimage to the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama.

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General	Equity; forgiveness; poverty; diversity racism; desegregation; philanthropy
People	John Porter
Places	Alexandria, Virginia; Montgomery, Alabama; Northern Virginia;

Heather Peeler [00:00:04] Heather Peeler. I'm 53 years old. Today is December 7th, 2022, and we are at the Lloyd House in Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia.

Sally Gardner [00:00:18] Sally Bolger Gardner, my age, is 64. It's December seven, 2022, and we at the Lloyd House in Alexandria, Virginia.

Heather Peeler [00:00:32] Yeah. Well, Sally, I'm so glad we have a chance to sit down together and reflect on our trip to Montgomery, Alabama. But maybe before we get into the details of our trip, I'd love to hear a little bit about why you chose to work at ACT and where this trip fits into kind of your overall experience and work at ACT for Alexandria.

Sally Gardner [00:01:01] Yeah. My family moved back from Northern California in 2016 and having grown up in Alexandria and graduated from T.C. Williams High School, now Alexandria City High School, I grew up in a family that my father insisted that we go to the public school after having been at the Catholic school for eight years. The reason why was because he was such a huge fan of Martin Luther King. We rode our bikes down to the "I Have a Dream" talk at the Lincoln Memorial. It was important for us that racism was not acceptable. The city of Alexandria from 1971 to probably through when I graduated and still is, has been desegregated. That was just very important to our family. I feel as though I was lucky to go to school with people who didn't look like me. From 1972 to 76, it was probably 60-40 and growing to 50-50 in terms of desegregation. That was such a wholesome experience, one that I wanted my children to have, and they weren't having when we lived in California. So that's why we moved back to Virginia, so that my daughter could be in a high school with an amalgam of diversity. It was just very important to me. She was the only Hispanic in her grade school, and we were in a predominantly white county. So that's why we came back to Alexandria. Then I interviewed for the job. A friend of mine was at the Northern Virginia Literacy Council and she said, "Sally, this job just opened. I know John Porter, and they need you in Alexandria." I do know Alexandria. I know a lot of people here and I have a good base. So, it was nice to come back and then to work with ACT, whose mission was to listen to the community, to help diversity the community, to lean into what's needed to rid us of racism. It was very, very important to me. And Heather, when you came on staff in 2018, I started in September of 2017, when you came on staff with a desire to tackle racial inequality and make it a mission, it was so invigorating for me personally because my children are Hispanic. It was important to me, and I greatly thank you for that.

Heather Peeler [00:05:46] Oh, thank you Sally. Yeah, I mean, yeah. So, I've been on board as ACT Now, as you said, since February 2018. And actually, I want to correct you because when I arrived, I didn't have the intention of leading work around racial equity. I didn't actually think that was going to be possible. I didn't think it was going to be my calling, so to speak. And so, it's only through my conversation and my relationships, you know, that began to build with different community leaders and nonprofit leaders that I saw there was an opportunity. So, it's not something that I necessarily brought to do at ACT. It's something that emerged through the relationships and the people who are here. I knew that conversations around racial equity were taking place in communities all over the country, and that philanthropy had a role in supporting those conversations and that work. I wasn't sure that was going to be our role at ACT until I actually got here. And I would say, in response to some of that early feedback, as I was beginning to explore whether or not we would be opening up a can of worms or putting our fingers into old wounds and biting off more than we can chew. There was some discouragement, but I think there were enough people who saw the potential and saw the

need. And I think because I was new to Alexandria, they thought that maybe I, as a fresh voice, could spark conversation and dialogue in a way that we perhaps couldn't before. So anyway, I just wanted to note that it wasn't something that I had originally planned to do, but it was something that emerged because of the people that I met here and the potential and opportunities that I saw.

Sally Gardner [00:08:07] Yeah, I remember those days. We were putting our toes in the water. Yeah, you were new and new to Alexandria. But your voice led the day, I think. And it continues to lead the day within that thread within ACT, within how we hire, with the programs that we do. I think that's why ACT is so important to me, you know.

Heather Peeler [00:09:02] Likewise, I mean, the work at ACT has been really important to me as well, and I think the opportunity to connect with others who are also leading work, like the Office of Historic Alexandria, to know that we're not doing this alone, that there are lots of people who want to change the future by understanding our past. And I think we've talked about that when we've hosted programs at Freedom House or in conversations with Gretchen, that until we really understand our history and fully embraced all of our history, it's going to be challenging for us to move forward as a community. And I think that's why the pilgrimage was so important to me. Typically, our history is something we read about in textbooks, and it doesn't feel real. It's like the past is old stories. So, going to Montgomery and especially being there in community with so many others, it just really brought history to life and made it present and relevant in a way that I think typically isn't. Yeah. So I'm really grateful for that opportunity because I think for me at least, it's given me renewed energy for the work that we have been doing and the work that we will continue to do around racial equity.

Sally Gardner [00:10:39] Yeah, it certainly gave it purpose, I thought. For me, when you asked me, I thought, "Oh my gosh, how...I mean, this year for me has been extraordinary". And it was a gift to have grown up in Alexandria, to realize our past, and then to walk the path of so many others who continue to walk and to have to fight or to enlighten and to really show that equity is going to make us all whole. And I mean, I was thinking last night, you know, when Raphael Warnock won, that brought up a lot of Montgomery as well. For me, this stellar man, I find him so engaging. I would like to sit, you know, go to dinner with him. I mean, to have been so challenged and to have such discipline to continue to fight for the people of Georgia, all of the people of Georgia, you know. So back to Montgomery, though, did you have any reservations about going?

Heather Peeler [00:12:24] I did, yeah. So, I had the opportunity to go to Montgomery with my husband, I think it was in 2019. And I am a huge Bryan Stevenson groupie. I've been following his work for a long time. So, my husband and I went in 2019, and we just did a long weekend where we visited Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, and some civil rights sites in Atlanta. And I knew... It was very emotional at the Legacy Museum. I went with my husband, and I completely broke down because it was just so overwhelming to witness the incredible loss of life and the senselessness of the terror and violence. So, I didn't want to relive that again, to some degree. Also, when I went with my husband, I felt like I could freely be myself. Whereas going with a group, especially in a professional context, I was worried and thinking about how I wanted to show up. If I did break down again, would people see it as being unprofessional? So being aware of my "ACT hat," I did have some reservations about going. But I felt that with others from ACT going and with ACT supporting the trip by providing scholarship funds, it would be a missed opportunity for us not to have a visible and leadership presence. In retrospect, I realized that while my fears were valid, they

didn't really materialize because the group we were with was caring and supportive. The trip offered the opportunity to build deeper relationships with people I had only known superficially, and that was truly meaningful. So yes, I had some reservations, but looking back, I'm so glad I went and grateful for the opportunity.

Sally Gardner [00:15:12] Yeah, I really did have a strange sort of panic attack.

Heather Peeler [00:15:18] Ah, you did?

Sally Gardner [00:15:19] When? Right before. I mean, the week before I thought, you know, it was this sort of. What is what is going to come up for me? Am I am I worthy? You know, as. Will racist tendencies surface? I mean it was very I mean, and my husband said, "Are you kidding?" You know.

Heather Peeler [00:15:49] And I can totally see Gary saying.

Sally Gardner [00:15:51] But I did. I felt quite worried. And then when I got onto the bus and I was late, I mean, I was eight at seven, and there was this wonderful woman sitting in the front seat. And when I sued to travel with my grandmother to New York, we would always sit in the front seat of the bus. And here was her, and she just had this big ole smile, sort of under her mask. And it was just... it was really...it was great. It was great. So I needed 15 hours, actually to process it. I don't know that I need another 15 hours. I know. The running back was brutal. Yeah. But...

Heather Peeler [00:16:55] Yeah. And what were some of the standout moments for you on the trip?

Sally Gardner [00:17:02] You know, the austerity or of the awesomeness of the **EJI**...

Heather Peeler [00:17:12] The memorial or the museum?

Sally Gardner [00:17:13] That was the memorial. The memorial. The hanging pillars. What I found there really depicted the horror that they were intended to depict. And I just felt guilty. And I also think the Legacy Museum was very hard for me. Very. I would say very hard. And there was no relief between the rooms. Yeah. And I really think the time in the prisons, on the phone, oh yeah. Yeah. Because I've been on the other side of that phone with my son in an orange suit, and that brought up a lot of incredible sadness. The next morning, I really needed a break. I needed a break, so... Yeah. And then, I mean, it was just so much. So much that we were ingesting. The terror, the violence, the... I mean, to say that it's well done is... It's not. It's not, I mean, in terms of a museum.

Heather Peeler [00:19:21] Well, it taps -it's very emotion.

Sally Gardner [00:19:23] It very emotional.

Heather Peeler [00:19:24] Well, it taps into your emotions. Yeah. A lot of people think of museums as being, you know, artifacts on pedestals, behind glass. Yeah. And I feel like the Legacy Museum and the Peace and Justice Memorial, it is experiential. There's not... it's... and I feel like it's impossible to adequately describe it now because it's so multi-dimensional in terms of your experience. There's the physical experience, the emotional experience, the learning, like you're taking

in knowledge. I mean, to me, the memorial is the perfect example of what's possible through art. I just keep thinking of the person who created it and how they had a vision for what it could be. And I'm sure it's exceeded that vision. But everything about it, from when you enter and the pillars are at your height, they become like a person, right? You identify them at a human level, like a human dimension. And then they slowly become, I think, representative of that aspect of lynching. And you just feel it, and you just can't avoid... yeah, feeling it. And then the enormity of the names, and I mean... Yeah, it's just so... it's... yeah, it's quiet, I think, a remarkable place. And I also keep thinking about Bryan Stevenson and what it took for him to make something like that happen in a place that I'm sure was very hostile to the concept or the idea. I mean, I just can't imagine going to people and saying, "Hey, I want to create a memorial for lynching." How people would react to that

Sally Gardner [00:21:30] Montgomery, yeah.

Heather Peeler [00:21:31] Yeah. Or anywhere. Can you imagine if somebody said that here in the city of Alexandria? Like, what would we say or do, right? And then it's become this, I think, international phenomenon. Yeah, I just think he's such a unique, special person. You know, a moment that was really influential for me was the Rosa Parks Museum. Did you have a chance to go?

Sally Gardner [00:22:00] I didn't go.

Heather Peeler [00:22:03] I feel like Rosa Parks, I think we all know about her, her story. It's almost become cliché to some degree. But what the museum does is actually show that it wasn't just one moment. The amount of organization that went into the bus boycott, the fact that several other women before Rosa Parks had done something really similar, that it wasn't one thing, but it was this whole interconnected web of people and events that triggered this important moment in our nation's history. And I don't think I fully understood that, and I don't think I fully understood the role of women behind the scenes, the people who made the copies of the flyers about the boycott, who raised money to pay for people who served as cabs and drivers. And just multiply that probably times a million. And that's all the people who are involved in change-making in our country that we just don't see or realize. So, I definitely walked away with some humility related to that, but also thinking, "Okay, that's happening here too, right? And where can we, as ACT, support that work?" It's not always the people who are out in front, but the people behind the scenes. There are just so many connections, I think, between history and present-day that were fostered.

Sally Gardner [00:24:00] Yeah, watching the movie "Boycott" on the bus home was really helpful, and then I watched it again as soon as I got home.

Heather Peeler [00:24:13] I watched it again.

Sally Gardner [00:24:15] I did with my husband and my mother and I, you know, I just thought it was important. Yeah. So, yes, it was the behind the scenes, but the, the, the energy that they had to expend. I mean.

Heather Peeler [00:24:30] I know it must be every day.

Sally Gardner [00:24:32] Every day, yeah.

Heather Peeler [00:24:34] And the sacrifice.

Sally Gardner [00:24:36] The sacrifice and the forgiveness.

Heather Peeler [00:24:39] Yeah. I mean that's...Yeah.

Sally Gardner [00:24:41] What I marvel at that their faith, um, you know, they have faith because it couldn't have been anything else, right? I just, I just marvel and try to, to realize how lucky I have been, I think.

Heather Peeler [00:25:13] You know, something I was thinking about, and I think I even talked to a few people about it. They're like, if you were back in that time, what would you have done? Would you have put your life on the line, walking across the bridge? Would you have potentially sacrificed your job and your family's livelihood by not participating in the boycott? Did you ever think about that? Like, what would you have been prepared to do?

Sally Gardner [00:25:47] No, I know. I haven't thought about it, but it's an avoidance because I don't know. I don't... I mean, people put their lives on the line all the time.

Heather Peeler [00:26:04] All the time. Right. I know. And I don't want to feel guilty that we're not doing that, but it's more about how do we use that as inspiration? When we are weary or tired or frustrated, to remember that others found a way to work through that and get to a better place.

Sally Gardner [00:26:33] It's really so big. And just the fact that I do think that the time that we spend at ACT, that we promote racial equity, that we keep the foot on the pedal, is important. It's hard, yeah. Because life is so convenient. As a 64-year-old, I feel like, you know, it's too hard, you know? And if... and I just came back from two weeks in India, where I had never seen poverty like that before. Our children are from Bolivia. The poverty in India surpasses that, through my lens. So, I keep having to check myself and say, through my lens, I'm judging a situation. And that's kind of the way I felt in Montgomery too, that I was supposed to go with an open mind, with a mind for education, for opening my heart. That was really important to me. And I feel like Montgomery helped me get into that. So, I don't... I just feel like I've had a lot of emotional experiences.

Heather Peeler [00:28:59] Being aware of the blind spots, the biases, the mental maps or whatever that we bring to our day-to-day, the way we look at things, is important because you can't change those until you're aware of them, right? Or when those are challenged. Being aware is really important.

Sally Gardner [00:29:30] Yeah, and the reading that we've done and the allyship workshops that ACT has held have been enlightening for me as a white woman, to have lived through, you know, some of this time. I would never have considered myself racist, but I had a lens that was... We can't help it, but it's good that I was able to walk the path of history. I think that I'm forever grateful to ACT for that.

Heather Peeler [00:30:34] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:30:35] Question: Earlier, you talked about the challenges of doing racial equity or the challenging first phase. What was the work like or what were the challenges that came up during the discussions and reactions when you first started?

Heather Peeler [00:30:54] Yeah. So, at ACT, every other year, we host an Impact Forum. When we were talking about the theme for the Impact Forum in 2019, we began thinking about a theme around racial equity. Before we announced that, we socialized the idea with a few key stakeholders and partners. I don't want to name names, but several people were very discouraging. They thought that we would be opening up old wounds, that this conversation and this work around racial equity was too big to take on, that it was inappropriate for ACT to play this role. Yeah, opening up a can of worms, I remember someone saying that, and I'm like, "But the worms are already here. We can't pretend that they're not here." I remember talking to a leader in this community who couldn't go to school here in Alexandria because of segregation. And that's somebody we know. It's not like this was ancient history. And so, to me, it seemed like, again, until we as a community acknowledge that history and the impact of that and how we're still living with the impact today, we'll never make progress. I also think that, because of my previous work, I understood that any issue we wanted to make progress on, whether it was economic opportunity, housing, access to healthcare, better health outcomes, educational outcomes, all of it has racism at the root. And we can dance on the surface by providing different programs or scholarships or rental assistance, but we're not going to solve the root issue until we grapple with racism and how it has permeated every aspect of our society, policies, and systems. So, I already had that understanding, but I just felt that if we began to have that conversation as a community, at one end, we wouldn't make the kind of progress that we want to make. So, I'm not sure if I had enough. There were enough people who were like, "Yeah, you should do this," to give me the courage to move forward. And then I think it was also a conversation we had as a staff. I don't know if you remember, Sally, when we were talking about our values, and I said, "What are we willing to be punished for?" and you and other members of our team were really challenged but inspired by that. I was like, "Okay, maybe a forum on racial equity is something that we would be willing to be punished for, and we'll deal with those naysayers after the fact."

Sally Gardner [00:34:37] And then it was oversubscribed. Oh, yeah. With 350 people. I mean, it was extraordinary. People were dying to get in.

Heather Peeler [00:34:48] I don't know if I told you this, but at the end of the Impact Forum, a woman came up to me and she said, "I've lived here in Alexandria, and I've never had a conversation like this that acknowledged me and my history. I've never had a productive conversation about racial equity until this forum." And I almost cried because it's like, this is why we did it. Yeah. And in fact, we weren't punished at all for it. We were rewarded. And I think that was rewarded by the comments from individuals who attended and had those kinds of experiences. And that's really fueled our work and our commitment ever since then.

Sally Gardner [00:35:37] Yeah. Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:42] That's right. Question I'm curious, like, what, what, what keeps you from not being weary? You talked about that on the trip.

Heather Peeler [00:35:49] Not being, like... ?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:50] Very weary. Like you.

Sally Gardner [00:35:53] Weary.

Heather Peeler [00:35:54] Weary.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:55] Yeah. What was it like for you?

Sally Gardner [00:36:00] She[Heather] has a lot of energy. She doesn't children.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:36:06] You know, you like you have work. Yeah. Lived experience. And also, your intellectual experience of understanding institutional racism.

Heather Peeler [00:36:17] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:36:19] Having to convince people that are available for you to use.

Heather Peeler [00:36:23] Well, some days it... It was really, really discouraging. Really discouraging. And even, I'll just say so. I'll just share. There were different moments of... What's the word I'm looking for? There were different microaggressions even on that trip that I don't know if I've told you all about them. So just like different comments, things people have said. And so it's really easy to be frustrated and weary because racial equity work is constantly two steps forward, one step back. So you're making progress, but you slide back, but you make a little bit of progress.

Sally Gardner [00:37:17] And overall.

Heather Peeler [00:37:19] Like the arc is still in the right direction. But sometimes when you're taking that step backward, it's super discouraging. So, what has kept me, I guess, energized is when I can see how our work is making a difference. We just did a survey of nonprofit organizations in the city of Alexandria, and more than 25% said that they are on a racial equity journey. I don't know if we would have had that many saying that three years ago. So, seeing that progress gives me energy to move forward. And then learning about the experiences of leaders who have gone before us, like Rosa Parks, rejuvenates me. She faced challenges and had to leave Montgomery, but her life has inspired so much change. I'm hopeful that our work can have similar impact. Moments like that, moments where our work and what we're doing, whether it's through allyship trainings or scholarships for the pilgrimage or the grants we're making, can make a difference. Our choice of community partners, especially African Americans, is also important. And the engagement of our youth council gives me optimism for the future. So, it's those little steps that keep me going.

Sally Gardner [00:39:04] Are the choice of our community partners.

Heather Peeler [00:39:06] Yes, who we choose to work with.

Sally Gardner [00:39:09] African Americans.

Heather Peeler [00:39:10] Exactly. And creating a planning team for strategic planning that includes community members who may not have had a connection to ACT in the past. Those little steps give me optimism. Our youth council, oh my gosh, the young people. Sometimes I get discouraged about the future, but when I think of our youth council-

Sally Gardner [00:39:38] Yes, our specific nine students.

Heather Peeler [00:39:41] Nine high 39 high school students who I mean, they they're just they have so much wisdom and compassion and insight that I'm like, okay, we're in good hands with these young people. So, it's those little things.

Sally Gardner [00:40:00] One of whom was on the trip.

Heather Peeler [00:40:01] Yeah, yeah. Are we at time? Do we need to cut it off? Okay. Yeah. Do we need to say any concluding sentences or anything?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:40:10]: is there anything you want to include?

Heather Peeler [00:40:14] I just want to express gratitude for this community. I'm proud to be with other Alexandrians on the trip, knowing that our community was one of the first in the country to claim our pillars, deliver the soil, and identify family members of the young men who were lynched here in Alexandria. We have a long way to go, but our community is doing amazing work to move forward. I'm really proud to be a part of it.

Sally Gardner [00:40:57] Yeah. And each step from the soil gathering ceremony to the bus ride to being there and then the bus ride home, it was it was it was a total life experience.

Heather Peeler [00:41:14] So thank you for that opportunity. Yeah.

Sally Gardner [00:41:17] Yeah.