Mrs. Montgomery was interviewed during her first six months as the first Black woman to be elected to Saint Paul's City Council. She talks about being raised by her grandparents and their service at the Union Depot as redcap and matron. She talks of her neighborhood and continuing to live within a few blocks of her childhood home and maintaining these lifelong friendships. She shares the importance of the church in the community and how children would attend the various bible camps throughout the community as a way to gain spiritual guidance and be with friends in the summer.

Debbie talks about being a tomboy, loving athletics and challenging the boys with her abilities. These skills and her ability to easily relate to males take her on to be the first woman to pass the test and attend the same academy as men in the Saint Paul Police Department, where she served as a police officer for twenty-eight years.

Debbie talks about the diversity in her neighborhood and attending a primarily White elementary school. She shares experiences of discrimination and how she early on became interested in civil rights causes and found support in addressing them through the NAACP, becoming the first youth elected to the national board.

Debbie goes on the share how she has continued to see and address racial issues in raising her children and professionally throughout her life.

This is a transcript of taped interviews, edited slightly for clarity. A signed release is on file from Mrs. Montgomery.
Deborah Montgomery

C. 1991
KHC: It is Monday, May 24th, 2004. We’re sitting in Hand in Hand’s offices, and can you introduce yourself to me?

DGM: My name is Debbie Montgomery, and I am a native-born Minnesota resident, born in the Summit-University area on April the 17th, 1946. [Laughs] I was born to Gloria Gilbreath Wilson and Antonia Pedro Garcia, who were not married at the time, and I was adopted by my grandparents, Isabella Gertrude Gilbreath, [who I called Mama] and Elbert Gilbreath, [who was my Dad]. Elbert was from Lubock, Texas, and Mama was from Starksville, Kentucky, and they

Elbert and Isabelle Gilbreath
At 978 Saint Anthony

1 Deborah Louise Gilbreath Montgomery was born April 17, 1946.
2 Gloria Ellen Gilbreath Wilson was born August 7, 1925.
3 Antonia Pedro Garcia was born June 27, 1921, and passed March 8, 1998.
4 Grandmother Isabella Starks Gilbreath was born in August 11, 1894, and passed January 5, 1981.
5 Grandfather Elbert Gilbreath was born October 18, 1889 and passed January 18, 1961. In World War I he was a corporal in Company 13 of the 366 Infantry, 92 Division. He was the head redcap at the Saint Paul Union Depot.
came up following the railroad. My Dad was the captain of the porters\(^6\) down at the Saint Paul Union Depot, and Mama was the matron in the bathroom at the Saint Paul Union Depot. So I know all of the nooks and crannies of the Saint Paul Union Depot! [laughs]

KHC: What did your Mama do as the matron?

DGM: She cleaned the bathroom up, cleaned the toilets, cleaned the washroom and the sinks and made sure that there were towels and mopped the floor and those kinds of duties.

And my Dad was the captain of the porters, so when people had to have their bags carried and stuff, he kind of assigned people to go carry people’s bags to the train and made sure they got to the appropriate trains in a timely fashion. So he was a redcap. Yes!

KHC: Where did you live?

DGM: I grew up at 978 Saint Anthony, which is on the corner of Saint Anthony and Chatsworth. It is no longer there. It is now where the walk bridge is over I-94. I lived in the heart of the Rondo neighborhood that was taken with the development of the I-94 freeway that came through the Rondo neighborhood.

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\(^6\) Redcap Porters worked at the Saint Paul Union Depot. The uniform included a red cap, so as to be easily identifiable by passengers. Redcaps’ salaries were minimal and they supported their families mostly through tips. Responsibilities included carrying baggage for travelers, mopping floors, polishing brass, parking cars, and cleaning offices.
Baby Debbie and Big Mother, her great grandmother. Picture is marked: *My first picture and my first pair of shoes*

Mama with Debbie
The Chatsworth Inn,7 which was the beer tavern behind my house—my Mama would always send me on Fridays when my Dad got paid to make sure that I got his check home, [laughs] because most of the redcaps and the people that ran on the road would go there and drink and tell their stories of what happened at the station, at the depot, on the train, and if the porters were porters and things like that.

7 Chatsworth Inn was located 979 Rondo at Chatsworth.
KHC: Grandpa liked to go and party!

DGM: Yeah, he’d go down on paydays and drink some beer. Otherwise, I’ve got some pictures of him where he sat on the back stoop with his hat on and had a can of beer in his hand. He didn’t get to do that regularly, but like most of the time when they socialized, it usually happened in the Chatsworth Inn.

KHC: What was it like being raised by your grandparents?

DGM: It was a really wholesome environment. I got a lot of love and a lot of care. I was a first born of four children that my mother had. My mother, from what I have been informed, was an alcoholic and so she—when I was born, right in the

Gloria and Isabelle Gilbreath with an unidentified woman on the right.
hospital, she gave me to my Mama and then my Dad. So I came home and a year later, my brother Dwayne\textsuperscript{8} was born and he came home with my grandmother/Mama. And a year after that, I had another brother, Daryl, who was born. At that time, my Dad decided that they weren’t going to take any more children, and they put him up for adoption. And I’ve never really actually met him. I know he lives in Minneapolis, they tell me. And there are some people—in fact, one lady that knew who he was and which family had him. She since passed, but I don’t know anything about him. I never saw him. Maybe I did, but I don’t remember him. We weren’t raised together.

And then five years between me and my youngest brother Dale.\textsuperscript{9} When he was born, my grandmother/Mama fought with my Dad and brought him home. So my brother Dwayne, who’s a year younger than me, and Dale, who’s five years younger than me, all of us were raised by our grandparents. And we lived and grew up at 978 Saint Anthony.

KHC: How common was this for grandparents to support their children in taking them in and raising them if their child wasn’t in a place to be able to do it?

DGM: Pretty common. You know, Sue Compton, she was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Compton. There were quite a few of us. In those days, families took care of the kids and I know that we were always told when we were growing up—in our household, you couldn’t talk about illegitimate kids and so I never growing up realized that I may have been an illegitimate kid. I had all the love in the world by my grandparents. I never wanted for anything. I mean

\textsuperscript{8} Dwayne Cortney Gilbreath was born July 27, 1947,

\textsuperscript{9} Dale Carlyle Gilbreath was born April 30, 1951 and passed July 17, 1969.
obviously as I shared with you, I was raised on tips. That’s what fed us, that’s what paid our house payment. We lived on three city lots, had apple trees, plum trees, rhubarb, had the old stall horse barn behind our house next to the Chatsworth Inn. Had the Schaffer Grocery Store. Mr. Schafer, across the street from the Chatsworth Inn, and he was the White guy that ran the grocery store in our half of the neighborhood.

Shaffer’s Market

And my best girlfriend growing up was Gayle Gayleth. I haven’t seen her in a while, but she still lives in one of the suburbs here, and her brother Greg. And Marvin Robert Anderson [and his brother Archie Anderson], lived across the street in the apartment buildings, the row houses. Margaret Brewin, Irvin Brewin, Pam and Karen Brewin, Daryl Brewin, they all lived across the street. Irvin Johnson—[aka] Butchie, he lived across the street with his grandmother. He was raised by her. Peter Bell lived down the street. Corky Finney lived three blocks away. Dennis Lazenberry lived down on 385 North Chatsworth, which was half a block away. Readeus [Leslie, and Tommy] Fletcher were around the corner from us. They were raised by the Fletchers. He’s just now finding out stuff about his family and how he was

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10 Harold J Schafer's Market was located at 334 Chatsworth
raised—him and his sister. So yeah, it was a pretty tight knit community. Mrs. Jackman lived next door to us. Wallace Jackman runs the Spokesman Recorder. His mom and them, they all lived next door, and Glennie Jackman and all of them. They go down to Saint Peter Claver.\textsuperscript{11} I see them on Sundays. Mrs. Wheat, the White lady. Her son Jerry and his sisters, they all lived across the street from us.

Mama, Debbie, brother Dwayne,
Neighbor Rober Tisdale, brother Dale.

It was a mixed neighborhood. It was integrated. We all got along. Actually, where I lived at down there was closer to Saint Peter Claver, because I was a block away from Saint Peter Claver. We had Saint Peter Claver Catholic School, which was run by the Benedictine nuns then, and so a lot of kids in our neighborhood went down to Saint Peter Claver [Church and School].

We were Episcopalians, and so I went to Saint Philips Episcopal Church.\textsuperscript{12} I grew up with Father Denzil Carty, who had a great impact upon my life and the civil rights movement that I was involved in.

\textsuperscript{11} Saint Peter Claver Catholic Church began in 1889. A new building was erected for the segregated Black congregation at 322 Aurora at Farrington in 1892. After the new school and convent were built, a new church building was completed at 375 Oxford at Saint Anthony in 1957.

\textsuperscript{12} Saint Philips Episcopal Church was formed as a mission church in 1894, meeting in a home on Carroll Avenue. Later they rented a store on Rice Street, and in 1900 purchased their current building at Aurora and Mackubin.
He and his wife Sylvia [had three daughters.] And one of my best friends was Denise Carty, his oldest daughter, and then there’s Celeste and Jackie and, you know, it was just a really tight neighborhood and we all got along. In the old days, you know, we had Oatmeal Hill\(^{13}\) and Cornmeal Valley\(^{14}\) and so we were supposedly on Oatmeal Hill down on that end. And Cornmeal Valley was on the other side of Dale going towards downtown, so it was all an economic thing. You know, pork chop hill and [Cornmeal Valley] things like that. It was all on economics. It wasn’t on anything other than that when you had these discussions with people that lived throughout the community. But we were still a solid community.

KHC: So people were aware of the economic differences or slight class differences, but didn’t treat people differently even though there may have been economic differences?

\(^{13}\) Oatmeal Hill was a term referring to Rondo west of Dale Street toward Lexington, sometimes known as Upper Rondo. More affluent residents tended to move into this area, giving the impression the residents had a higher social standing. This middle class neighborhood consisted of predominately single family homes.

\(^{14}\) Cornmeal Valley, also known as Lower Rondo or Deep Rondo, was East of Dale Street. This was a lower middle class residential neighborhood with predominately single-family homes. From the 1930’s, this part of the community struggled with growing poverty.
DGM: I didn’t see any of that. I don’t know. I was kind of a lighthearted, happy-go-lucky kind of kid. I was a tomboy when I was a kid. I got along with everybody. I was a jock, so I played ball with everybody. I usually beat all of them up! Dave Winfield and Stevie Winfield lived a block over on Carroll from us. Tommy Hardy and Cathy Hardy lived right behind the Schafer Grocery Store. We all got along and we just kind of played and kind of grew up together. We went to different churches. I know the Hardys were Lutheran and the Winfields were Lutheran and Irvin and the Brewins were Catholic. Like I say, it was a mixture.

But the churches back then were very strong in our community. I think that had a big impact upon the kids and we went to church on Sundays. That was just required. You just went to church. Now you have a difference today that we didn’t have then. I think the churches were a strong foundation for us. In the summer, we all went to bible school and it didn’t make any difference if you’re Catholic or Lutheran. I remember always going—I went to Pilgrim Bible Camp in the summer. I went up to Redeemer Bible Camp, which was Lutheran, and Reformation. It was just an opportunity to have a week of getting some spiritual guidance and I don’t think anybody was too worried on where you got it from or how you got it. Just as long as you had it.

KHC: Did everybody kind of make the rounds of the different bible camps? Would they be different weeks, and everybody would go to all of them?

DGM: Yeah. Yeah, pretty much. Ones that we ran with, there was something for us to do. There was an organized activity and with your parents working and it was somewhere that the kids would be able to go. Back then, you also had—
it was a village. If you did something wrong or said something out of hand or didn’t respect your elders, boy... I mean first of all, whoever you did it to, they were going to discipline you and like everybody says, by the time you got home—you probably got licked two or three times before you got home, and then when you got home you got another one. So it was a strong village environment and everybody looked out for each other’s family.

If you needed something, you could holler across the street. You need a couple of eggs, you need some milk. Everybody kind of shared, and that was the Whites and the Blacks together. It just was a real close-knit community. It was a real loving community. People cared about you. They were concerned about your success.

I look today—I look at Peter Bell who’s running the Metro Council. Corky Finney, Chief of Police. Dennis Lazanberry was the Assistant Chief of the Minnesota State Patrol. Denise Johnson and them. She’s an editor of the Minneapolis Star newspaper. Tommy Hardy’s a big shot in Washington, D.C. with the Department of Commerce. Always calling and trying to tell me he’s got grants and wants to get some money up here in Saint Paul. The Winfield’s, David—you know, pro baseball player. Stevie just got inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Saint Paul Baseball Hall of Fame.
Oxford Playground\textsuperscript{15} was a block away. Back then, it was a swamp. Bill Peterson was a young, twenty-one-year-old marine that got out of the service, had this little flat top hair cut that they had back then. He came in there locking like a hunk and here he is and he’s got this playground that was a swamp, and all they had was a little old warming house out there. And here he’s got all these little Black kids and a few White kids and he’s sitting down there trying to teach us how to play ball. We learned how to play t-ball and soft ball and baseball. In the wintertime, he went out and he’d flood the rink. I mean it was too cold back then. I mean these folks today talk about cold, it was cold back then! And he’d get out there and flood this ice—now Oxford back in the old days was swamp, so he’d flood the area that we’d have to skate on, and then he’d go out and beg, borrow and steal skates so that we all could skate.

As it was, he just kept us engaged and when you got into the warming house—[all that it had inside were benches with a square box with a piece of wood dividers in the middle]. It was a box that had like a board in between and little holes and you had—it was like playing hockey and you had to get this one of those little checker pieces through the hole. That was it, you know? And he had his office and that was it. There was nothing else in there. We didn’t have a basketball hoop. We had—the old Quonset huts were back on there, on the back of the Oxford Playground. So they had like a merry-go-round, a metal merry-go-round. And then they had about six swings that

\textsuperscript{15} Oxford Park is located at Oxford, Iglehart, Lexington, and Rondo.
you could swing on if the chains weren't broken. But that's kind of what we grew up.

We learned how to communicate with each other because there weren't a lot of things that you could do and that, and you had to learn how to talk, you had to learn how to work with people. You had to learn how to be teams. When we put teams together, you had to learn how to play together, build those relationships. You couldn't be mad at anybody too long because you knew you were going to see them later in the day, and you were going to have to be involved in some activity with them, so... Yeah, I got a picture of me and Tommy Hardy and Gayle Gayleth and his sister [Kathy] behind the Schafer Grocery Store, because there was a vacant lot back there. If we didn't go down to Oxford, we'd be playing ball in that back yard, and I'd have this

Debbie, Dwayne, Tommy Hardy, Greg and Gayle Gayleth

bat and glove and ball. That was the extent of it. I mean it wasn't like everybody had a glove. It was like you gotta rotate these things around.
But like I said, I just never realized that we may have even been poor. I mean, when you look at it today, I didn’t have a lot of material things, but I had a lot of love. But I was never one to look for a lot of material things and I think that was kind of interesting that when I sit back and think about that, it was a great opportunity to really get to know and work with your friends, get to know everybody’s family, help out when you can.

I see Mrs. Brewin when she comes back home—I used to get up. I was an early bird riser, and I would always go over [to the Brewin’s]. My best friend was Margaret [Brewin]—and Gayle Gayleth. I’d be [at the Brewin’s house] beatin’ on the door at six o’clock in the morning. Well, Mr. Brewin was an air force pilot. And on the day that the two air force officers came and knocked on Mrs. Brewin’s door, I was there when they came to tell them he had got killed in a plane crash. To this day, I can still remember seeing those two guys in uniform, full dress, coming to make the notification. And I’m at the door at six in the morning as they were, to notify Mrs. Brewin that her husband had been killed and my friend’s father had been killed. So those are the kinds of memories that I have. They’re good [and some not so good memories].

Mrs. [Ora Lee (Lucius)] Anderson, I still see her today. Roger Marvin Anderson. She’s gotta be—if she ain’t ninety, she’s darn near ninety! Even today, “Now you know you’re supposed to act like a lady, now!” You know! They always stayed on me. Allie May Hampton, she was a good friend of mine, and when I say friend, she was an older woman that was real active in
the NAACP\textsuperscript{16} and got me active in the NAACP and got me involved and took me to first NAACP conference. I don’t even remember where it was at, but...

KHC: How old were you?

DGM: Oh, my God. I must have been maybe thirteen. Twelve, thirteen years old. And we had quite a few—like I say, lots of kids. She was getting us involved in what would be nowadays “the political process.” But getting us to understand the issues that were going on back then. This was in the Fifties, late Fifties, early Sixties. I ended up—after I came back from the conference, they made me the president of the youth group. So I got all the kids involved in the NAACP youth group and we ended up having the largest youth chapter in [Minnesota of] the NAACP that they’ve had that I know of. We had 650 kids involved in it back then, because we had tons of kids and there were a lot of issues going on and I got really involved with the civil rights movement after I got to go to my first conference and meet all the kids from the South and the East and the West. Listening to what was going on down South and we’re up North, and none of that stuff was going on like it was. Our schools were integrated.

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\textsuperscript{16} The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in New York City in 1909 by a multiracial group of activists. The NAACP believes that all men and women are created equal. Attorney Frederick McGhee of the Rondo corridor was invited by W. E. B. Dubois to attend the second meeting of the Niagara Movement. When he returned to Saint Paul, he organized the Twin City Protection League, which became the Twin Cities Branch of the NAACP in 1912.
I went to J.J. Hill School. Back then, from kindergarten to sixth grade—when I first got in there, Harvey Jones and Diane Jones lived down the street from us and there was like five of us that were at J.J. Hill School. The rest of [the Black kids], like I say, went to Saint Peter Claver. And then the further down that you got going towards downtown, they would go to Maxfield, the old Maxfield, or the old McKinley if you were further down on the other side of Dale. So I ended up going to elementary school with probably—the majority of my friends at school were White, because there just wasn’t a large diversity up at J.J. Hill.

And how I got to J.J. Hill I don’t know, but that’s where I went. I remember when I graduated from sixth grade from J.J. Hill—and all the schools back then went into Marshall Junior High School, and so you had all the White kids from J.J. Hill and you had the African-Americans from Maxfield and the African-Americans from—now you’re getting into economics again. The African-Americans from on the other side [east] of Dale [were at] McKinley. And you’d all feed into John Marshall.

17 J. J. Hill School was originally built in 1905 at Selby, Hague, Chatsworth, and Oxford. The school housed kindergarten through 8th grade. This building was torn down and a new building built in 1974 for J. J. Hill Elementary School. Currently, the building serves as Montessori School for four year olds through sixth grade.

18 Maxfield School was originally at 363 Saint Albans at Saint Anthony, and was built in 1890. In 1955, a new school was built at 680 Saint Anthony at Victoria, Avon and Central.

19 McKinley School was located at 481 Carroll Avenue, between Mackubin, Arundel and Rondo from 1903 – 1986. Fire destroyed the building in 1977.

20 Marshall School was built in 1925 at Grotto, Holly, Ashland and St. Albans. It was Marshall Junior High from 1926 – 1937. In 1937, 10th grade was added; in 1938, 11th grade; and in 1939, 12th grade was added, with graduating classes from 1940 to 1953. It returned to junior high only in 1954. Webster Elementary School was built on the same site in 1926. The two buildings were connected in 1975 and become Webster Magnet Elementary School.
Mr. [Arthur] McWatt was my math teacher. He was my history teacher. I had him in seventh grade and in eighth grade. He could tell you terrible stories about me! [Laughs] I was far from the best attentive student. I was kind of active, I would say. But in the old days, Moline Lowe, she was one of the Black kids that came. She came up from McKinley.

When we were all up at Marshall. I would walk home with my White friends, because I mean I went to kindergarten through sixth grade with them. I knew them. So the Black kids who were on the other side were saying, “What do you think you’re White? You’re walkin’ home with these White kids.” And so they kept pimping me and stuff. Well see, they didn’t know me! Now the guys on the other half of the neighborhood knew that I was a tomboy and I wasn’t going to take much crap from anybody, and I kind of just play it off. So finally, the Black kids said, “Well, you know, you gotta walk home with us.” And I said, “I don’t know you kids.” I mean when I got to school, I got to know them, but I didn’t know them and so... And she was the bully down from her side of the town and so she said, “Well, we got to meet in Blood Alley.” And Blood Alley was between Marshall and Dayton on Grotto, which when coming home from school and that’s where all the fights happened, you know, on you’re way home from school and stuff. So anyway, one day she says, “Well, we’re gonna meet in Blood Alley.” And so I don’t know. I said okay, I’d go down there because I was tired of them bothering me. And none of my White friends would go with me! They were all going home. They weren’t going to go down there because the Black kids were going home down Grotto, and like we used to go back home walking
down Laurel or Hague or one of those streets and coming back home. So anyway, I go to Blood Alley and I’m meeting all these kids—I knew them from school, but they weren’t any of my best friends, my best friends that I had growed up with. So anyway, Moline and I were going to fight in Blood Alley and... So we had a fight and I kicked her butt! [Laughs] So then I didn’t get asked anymore. I could walk home anyway I wanted to walk home. And so that kind of ended that whole discussion. Yeah, it was kind of interesting to go there.

Then after that, you left Marshall and you went to ninth grade and you would go up to either Central\textsuperscript{21} or Mechanic Arts.\textsuperscript{22} And the majority of kids ended up at Mechanic Arts because the boundary lines for Central only came like three blocks into Summit-University neighborhood.\textsuperscript{23} They went all the way down to Mississippi River Boulevard, so you had all the White kids that had money. It went all the way out to Highland Park,\textsuperscript{24} because they didn’t build the new Highland Park until 1965, so it picked up all the Jewish kids. It

\textsuperscript{21} Central High School began in 1866 and consisted of two rooms in the Franklin Building, downtown Saint Paul. By 1872 it was known as Saint Paul High School, and moved to Seventh and Jackson. In 1883, a 27-room building was completed and the school was named The Saint Paul Central High, and located on Minnesota Street in downtown Saint Paul. Because of space needs, a new school was built at 275 Lexington Avenue in 1912. In 1977, the building was reduced to its structural form, expanded and rebuilt to the current building.

\textsuperscript{22} Mechanic Arts High School was located between Central, Robert and Aurora from 1911 – 1976. It was sold to the state and torn down in 1978.

\textsuperscript{23} Summit-University is a term used to refer to the area in Saint Paul that is enclosed by Summit Avenue in the south and University Avenue in the north, Highway 35E on the east and Lexington Avenue on the west.

\textsuperscript{24} Highland Park, located between Snelling Avenue, Lexington Avenue, Highland Parkway and Edgcumbe was acquired by the City of Saint Paul in 1925, largely due to the efforts of Commissioner of Parks Herman Wenzel. Undeveloped when it was purchased, within seven years Highland Park featured an eighteen hole golf course, ten tennis courts, a picnic area, football and baseball grounds. It also sported a stadium seating 2,700 people, an artificial "swimming hole," and a new clubhouse/reception facility proclaimed the best of its kind in the Northwest. Most of those facilities, either rebuilt or renovated, still stand today.
came a few blocks in on the other side of University before Wilson\textsuperscript{25} boundaries came in, so you picked up some of the Midway\textsuperscript{26} kids, and then it came three blocks into the African-American neighborhood.

Central High School

Like in my graduating class, we had 847 people, of which only thirty-eight of them were Black. The rest of the African-Americans were at Mechanic Arts High School, so there was always a rivalry between the Central High School kids and the Mechanic Arts. They always had those rivalries going on. Some of out parents would—went to some of those schools. But it was some

\textsuperscript{25} Wilson School was located at Albert, Blair, Pascal, and Lafond. Built in 1925 as a high school, it became a junior high school in 1964. It currently houses the Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program and has been known as Expo School since 1993.

\textsuperscript{26} Saint Paul's Midway Neighborhood is south of the railroad tracks/Pierce Butler Route, east of Lexington, north of University Avenue and west of Transfer Road.
history there with that rivalry. It was kind of interesting to go to the football
games and the baseball games that went on with these kids from the other
half of the neighborhood. And we all knew each other, but it was just they
went to different schools, so there was a lot of activity that went on and lot of
friendships made and always competition. Always competition between the
schools.

KHC: Now you refer to being a tomboy and you refer to skating.
DGM: Yes.

KHC: And it’s my understanding that you were quite the skater.
DGM: I was a jock. I was very athletic. I had a lot of energy. I was a little wiry thing.
Like I say, down at Oxford, you had Dave Winfield and Paul Moliter. Bill
Peterson was the baseball coach of the boys Attucks-Brooks [Legion] All-State baseball team, which Paul Moliter and Jack Morris and all those guys,
they all played on those teams down there and they all came through
Oxford. So because it was a swamp and the field was not real good, nobody
would come out and scrimmage our girls team.] And the other thing is, it
was in the heart of the African-American neighborhood. So a lot of the other
rec centers wouldn’t come and play us on our park because we didn’t have a
good field and so all of our games were away and a lot of our parents didn’t
have cars. So what would happen would be that we would scrimmage the
boys’ Attucks-Brooks baseball team, and we’d be playing softball, the girls
team. Dave Winfield was the pitcher then and Paul was shortstop and these
guys were all out there. We’d be playing Margaret Brewin, Harriet Nay—aka
“Bonkey”, Mary Lee Redmond, Jackie Coulter which is Stewart now—my
cousin Lenore Foster. We’d all be down there and we’d be playing ball, and
these guys, they were given typical boys. I mean they were throwing that ball in there like they were throwing to guys!

Anyway, I ended up being one heck of a softball player. I'd hit the ball—if you take the far baseball diamond that's closest to Concordia and Lexington, if you look at where it's set up now. And then there's the white row houses down there on Oxford and Carroll. Dave was pitching and I'd hit the ball and I'd just cream it! To this day, David'll tell you—he said, "Boy, she just killed my pitches!"

So when we were getting used to playing the All State boys' team, when we went and played other girls teams at other parks, we would kill them. I mean, we beat them twenty-five to nothing or something. You're pitching fast and you're running—it's softball and you're running hard. You're sliding like girls wouldn't slide, but with the boys we had to learn how to slide because they'd be throwing that ball in there at us. I broke my best girlfriend Jackie's thumb about four times, because I played shortstop and I threw the ball so hard—nobody else would catch my balls coming in from shortstop. I was a good basketball player and I ran track. Like I say, in the wintertime, Bill got us skates and I probably must've had the biggest feet or something because I ended up getting these black speed skates. The other girls had these white figure skates and the boys had these hockey skates.
We would play Butch Ewing and them—they put together teams and we’d play hockey on it. He’d flood it and put up the boards and we’d play hockey. [Bill Peterson] taught us how to play hockey.

Anyway, I was speed skating and Bill would say—in the wintertime, for the Winter Carnival, they would always have the races out at Como, and so he’d throw all of us in his little red 1954 station wagon and drag us out to Como to go get into these races that they had for the Winter Carnival. We’d get out there, and I didn’t know how to speed skate when I first started, so I literally out ran people around the ice on these speed skates. And then finally, they took an interest in me and saw that I had some potential, and so then Bill got a couple of guys to work with me, to try to teach me how to stride and how to skate. So then I became really, really good. They had two speed skating clubs that were close to us, and that was the Blue Line Speed Skating Club, which was over here on this side of town, and which was kind of a high buck speed skating club. It was out there by the river. And then East Side Shop Pond, which was over on the East Side. So anyway, because the Blue Line Club was over here, Bill took me over to tryout for the club and they weren’t letting any Black kids in. Like I say, it was a private club. But I had to skate two out of three heats in the tryouts against Mary Meyers, who turned out to win the 1968 gold medal, and I beat her two out of three heats. To this day, Peterson and them all say, “What could you have done if you’da had any kind of training at all?” I mean I was obviously an athlete before my time as far as athletic ability. So like I say, in 1968 when she got the gold medal and
all we could say was, "Lookit. You beat her two out of three heats in the tryouts and they wouldn’t let you in the club."

The East Side Shop Pond, they would take me in the club, but we didn’t have any transportation to get there. Bill didn’t—he was the rec director, so he couldn’t be hauling me over there for practices and stuff like that. But I got all kinds of blue ribbon medals from skating at the Winter Carnival and winning all the blue ribbons and that and playing baseball and softball and basketball and—if it had a ball, I was playing it!

KHC: Debbie, how did that feel to know that you were good, to know that you were better than their best, and they wouldn’t let you in the club?

DGM: You know, I’m kind of a laid back person. There were so many things going on back then in the 1960’s, that that wasn’t an important deal. I mean it was important from the sense that it was an opportunity missed for them to have somebody like me to do that, but the sports part was kind of secondary to people getting the right to vote. You know, we didn’t get the voting rights bill in until ’65. There were just tons of issues going on—open housing issues. We didn’t get open housing in Saint Paul until 1960. So there were just tons of issues going on back then, and sports was an outlet to me and it felt good to succeed, but I never dwelled very much on “this is an opportunity missed.”

If you look at my yearbook and look at—I was involved in everything, I was in the Y teams. I was in the Latin Club. I was in the Minute Maids.
From Central High School’s 1964 CEHISEAN:

GILBREATH, DEBORAH
"Debbie"
Minute Maids
Girls’ League V. Pres.
Latin Club V. Pres.
Student Council Rep.
Fides in Deo Y-Teens
Pep Club Rep.

LATIN CLUB
Bottom Row: Miller, Julie, Sec.; Lechman, Norma; Boylan, Helen; Roberts, Judy; Jones, Stephanie; Brehler, Meredith, Miss Mrs. Row 2: Gilcrease, Debbie; V. Pres.; Gingold, Sandy; Koch, Marilyn; Lindgren, Chris; Duchter, Darly; Bevanor, Polly; Perkins, Susan; Row 3: Hesselmark, Ann, Pres.; Steka, James; Belkin, Judy; Howard, Janie; Hammond, Sue; Vavaphos, Story; Feltner, Dave; Wight; Rolaine, Row 4: Mayerson, Denny, Texas; Nippert, Jim; Johnson, Doris; Logan, Harry; Fella, Craig; Eckdahl, Karen; Melina, Debbie.
Before me and Sue Compton, there were only like two other African-American girls in the Minute Maids. Me and Sue Compton got in our class.
I was breaking barriers all over the place, but I never took it personal. I just kept going on. This is stuff that you just do and you just go on. Interesting that my last—we’re having our fortieth class reunion this year, and at my last class reunion, Bill Hubbard, one of the White kids that I went from kindergarten to twelfth grade with. And he was telling me, him and some of kids that I had went all the way through school with, most of those were White kids. They said, “You know, Debbie? You were so far ahead of us back then.” I mean as far as this race thing. Because they never—other than go to school, they all kind of did their own thing, but the majority of kids at J.J. Hill, because they came up from the Laurel and those sides of the street. And we got along well and I’d never had any problems with them, but it was interesting to hear them say this on our thirty-fifth class reunion, that they thought that I was just so far ahead of them.

There were just so many more important things going on that to me were more relevant, trying to get open housing, trying to get people’s voting rights. Trying to get equal opportunity, trying to get schools open to people, quality education. Like I say, if you look in the yearbook in the class of ’64 at Central, we had four African-Americans that were in the top ten percent of our class out of thirty-eight. I was the highest ranked African-American, yet nobody would have thought of me being the highest ranked one, because we had Sonny Massey, Reverend Massey’s son’s kid. Jerome F. DelPino, Reverend DelPino’s kid. The ministers’ kids always do really well. And then you had Sue Compton, who was known of Salimah Majeed later in her life. We all went away to college.
Well, I stayed here and went to the University of Minnesota, because I was raised by my grandparents and I was the oldest. She couldn't afford to send me further, although I got offered nine different athletic scholarships. This was back before they were doing girls' stuff, but I was a jock. I got a scholarship to Tennessee State. I was a track star. I out ran all the guys. I wanted to go to USC, which was my first choice to go, but it was a private college and we didn't have the money for that. All the rest of the [colleges] where I was getting scholarships [offers were] too far away, and I was kind of a homebody. My grandparents were older and I had two brothers right underneath me, so I just figured I'd stay home. So I went to the U. But I got involved out there.

We were in the take over of Morrill Hall.²⁷ [Laughs] Matt Stark called up. He says, "Hey Debbie! I need to put you on an interview on the take over of Morrill Hall." I said, "Matt, I don't think I want everybody to know I was there, ya know?" But Rosemary and all of us that went to the U—back in the Sixties when I was there, from 1964 to '68, we only had a hundred African-Americans. Back then I think there were about 40,000 students at the U at that time. There were only a hundred African-American students out at the University back then, and the majority of them were all in the College of Education, and the majority of them were on the football team, the basketball team, the [other] athletic teams [track, etc.]. They were students that—most of them, it was interesting, were brought in from outside [of Minnesota].

²⁷ Morrill Hall is located at 100 Church Street SE on the Minneapolis University of Minnesota Campus.
They weren't from here. They didn't have a lot of native Minnesotans, which was kind of interesting, because it took a while to get them to understand that we had homegrown talent here that they were not even looking at. Which kind of tells you what people were thinking about, the Blacks that we had here and their expectations for them.

They just didn't look at them to the same degree. I mean, to go outside of the community and recruit all of the—Bobby Bell, Chuck Munsey, Judge Dixon, Alan Page. [They were all] capable to bid the pros, but the rest of these guys, they played for the Gophers. LeRoy Gardner played for the Gophers. Dave Winfield played for them, both on basketball and baseball. We just had a lot of homegrown talent, but it was never really recognized or thought about. They always went outside somewhere else to try to find talent, [and skilled position players.] If they'd looked right in their back yard, it was right here. A lot of talented people. And the thing is back then, Minnesota was ranked number one in the country in academics.

And the other thing is we had perfect attendance at schools, because back then in the old days, you had to walk. There wasn't any buses, so you walked to school. I mean, if you wanted to see your friends in the wintertime, you went to school because it wasn’t going to do you any good to stay at home. So there wasn’t a lot of truancy going on because people wanted to see their friends in the wintertime, so you’d go to school. So we had the highest graduation rate in the country for kids, and that included minorities and things like that. So you look back in the old days, there was a
lot of closeness, a lot of success. Maybe not always recognized, like I say to
listen to my friends that graduated from school with me, to tell me that they
thought I was so ahead of them on issues, well...

KHC: I'm hearing from the time that you were barely a teenager, you were working
on civil rights issues. What were you doing? How were you working on it?

DGM: Well, like I say, up here, when we first got the youth group together, we were
fighting for open housing. Most of the African-Americans that lived in the
city lived in the Summit-University area [or what was then the Rondo
neighborhood.]

KHC: Define open.

DGM: Being able to buy housing [anywhere you wanted to]. What banks would [do
was] give you loans [in certain areas of the city], because they used to red
line\textsuperscript{28} [when it came to buying or owning a home.] And they still do red line,
but back then it was more open that banks wouldn’t give you loans to buy
houses. So if you didn’t have money saved, or you didn’t have somebody
who was going to sell you a house, similar to contract for deed or something.
If you had to go to the bank, banks wouldn’t lend you money other than to
buy in what’s now the Summit-University neighborhood [or the old Rondo
neighborhood], which is why the majority of the African-Americans lived
there.

The first families that went outside were the Colemans and Jim Griffin and [a
few others] that got up to Wheelock Parkway. Actually, you could track the

\textsuperscript{28} Redlining is a discriminatory practice by which banks, insurance companies, etc refuse to limit loans, mortgages
insurance within specific geographic areas, especially inner-city neighborhoods. The name comes as if banks outlined
such areas with a red line on a map.
African-Americans [housing locations as they tended to follow the Jewish communities, as they would sell their homes to African Americans]—I did a paper back then, back in the Sixties.

The people that would sell African Americans houses were the Jewish, and the Jewish people would sell houses. So the Jewish people, if you look at the history of them, they came in through the West Side of Saint Paul, and so when they moved they’d sell their house to an African-American. Then they moved over into like what is the Summit-University area [or the old Rondo neighborhood]. The Kramitz had the house that we ended up moving into. After they took our house on Saint Anthony, we moved up to 889 Iglehart. I still have the original abstract. But the Kramitz had it, and that house was built in 1854. They sold their house to us. But if you look at all the abstracts, a lot of the Jewish families sold their houses to the African-Americans and then they went up—like I say, by economics, those that had a little bit more, they got up to Wheelock Parkway. And then of you tracked it a little further, this is in Saint Paul, when they made it. Our doctors and that got out in Highland Park. But it was always the Jewish people that were willing to sell their houses to the African-Americans. so you can track that through. I need to find that paper I wrote, because there was a lot of history in that paper. A guy from Washington, D.C. came and took it when I was showing him some of the facts on how we were doing the red lining and the fact that we didn’t have open housing back then [until 1960].

KHC: What did you as teenagers do about the open housing? Did you protest or...
DGM: We had the protest. We were down in the hole. They had a big hole down here by Oxford. They had dug up the street and we got down there. We weren’t going to let them do any work. So we did demonstrations and trying to get banks to loan money so you could live in other areas and things like that, and then they claimed they opened up loans so you could move other places and you’d get maybe a house here and a house there if you knew somebody who was going to sell it to you, and you had the right amount of money where the banks would give you a loan. But if you look at it, the majority of us were right here. We didn’t go a lot of places and our churches were right here, so you kind of stayed around your church. I think that was a stronghold of the community. You know, the Pilgrim Baptist Church back then, Reverend Massey. Reverend DelPino at Camphor. In fact, I’m hoping Jerome comes back. I haven’t seen him in a while. I grew up through Saint Philips Church. My husband’s family is Catholic, so they grew up at Saint Peter Claver and they all went to school down there. Not my husband. He ended up at the Cathedral, but the rest of them were at Saint Peter Claver.

KHC: Were there adults that were guiding these kids in setting up the protests, or were you just kind of educating yourselves and doing it?

DGM: No, we had people like Katie McWatt, Allie May Hampton, a lot of the old NAACP members. Allie May is gone. She was just a gem. She saw I was a

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29 Pilgrim Baptist Church was first organized as a prayer group before 1863, and formally organized as a church November 15, 1866. Their first house of worship was constructed in 1870 at 12th and Cedar Streets in Saint Paul, and it moved in 1918 to the current location at 732 W. Central Avenue, Saint Paul.

30 Camphor Memorial United Church was established in 1919 by the Methodist Episcopal Church Conference. They incorporated in 1920 and moved into their first permanent home at 13th and Broadway, northeast of downtown. In 1931, the congregation moved to its present location at 585 Fuller Avenue near Dale Street. In 1970, the building was demolished and a new building was constructed in February, 1973.
rabble rouser and intelligent and articulate and so she made sure—she was the one that took me to my first NAACP conference, and then I get really involved in the NAACP. I remember when the civil rights movement started and they had buses going down to Mississippi and Alabama and those places, all the White civil rights people out of Minnesota—we were good for sending White activists down, and I was one of the Black youth that went down there. I remember going, taking my first bus ride down there.

My Mama was scared to death because she was from [Starkville,] Kentucky and my Dad was from [Lubbock,] Texas, so they knew about the South. I didn’t have a clue about what was going on, other than I knew I was fighting for a cause and not realizing that people were killing people. I did realize it, but I didn’t think it could happen to me. So I’m on the bus with a lot of White kids and White adults going down and a few civil rights folks and we get down there and we demonstrate and then get on a bus and come back, [fighting] for voting rights and stuff like that. Then, because my Dad worked on the railroad—he and Mama, who could get passes on the railroad, [they] never traveled on the train. They never rode the train in their whole life.

And when I got active in NAACP, we had to go down to Chicago or had to go down to Atlanta or had to go out to Baltimore for conferences, my Dad, he’d get me a pass and put me on the train. He’d take me down to the depot. He’d hook me up with a porter, one of his porter friends, and the porter guy would put me on the train. They’d usually put me in the food car because they could feed me back in there and make sure I was taken care of. Then when I got to Chicago and had to transfer, they’d take me by the hand and
take me to another train and hand me over to another porter and say, "This is Gil's daughter. She's on her way to Baltimore and she'll be comin' back at such-and-such a time. If you're on the train back, tell 'er where to meet you when you let 'er off. Let 'er know that you'll pick 'er up when she comes back."

KHC: How old were you?

DGM: Oh, I was probably about fifteen then, when I was doing this. My parents were just scared to death. I mean, being from the South, they were just scared to death, and I was just kind of a free-wheeling kid. "I gotta go do the right thing for the right reason." So it's kind of interesting. Like I say, getting on these trains and—I ate the best. The porters in there, they were cooking steaks. I was eatin' good! I didn't have to pay for nothin' because they took care of me, and they'd put me back there. So I did spend a lot of time in the food car, so that was kind of how I got back and forth. But that's how I got involved.

And then when I got involved in the NAACP youth branch at the national level, I got elected when I was seventeen [to the National Board of Directores for the NAACP]. When I was fifteen and sixteen, I had got real active in national youth movement, so I made friends with Chris Nelson, which was the president of Region I which is the West Coast Region. Andrea McKissick, who was from North Carolina and she was in charge of that region. Aaron Henry, his kids were down in Mississippi, so they got me involved down there. So I was real active and Chet Lewis, who was the NAACP rep for Region IV – that's what our region was up here, Midwest region. And he
there were positions for the national board of directors of the NAACP. I was just a rabble rouser. I had made friends with everybody in the youth group and then they had told their Dads, and like Floyd McKessick was Andrea McKessick—if you read up on the history, I mean he was one of the big civil rights leaders in North Carolina. And Aaron Henry was a big civil rights leader in Mississippi. Their kids and I were friends. We were all active in the national youth movement, and so they’re telling their dads, “Oh, man! She’s neat, man. She’s smart. She’s articulate. She’s from Minnesota.” They thought Minnesota was off the world. They didn’t know anything about Minnesota up there.

And so anyway, Chet [Lewis] was an attorney out of Wichita, Kansas, and he was a [Region IV] representative to the national board out of our region. He was a big time attorney and it’s those kind folks that got into those positions, they just—it’s a position, you know. He’s not out their fighting and rallying and stuff like that. He wasn’t inspiring anybody. So the kids got together at the youth branch and said—this is at the national level. Said, “We’re going to run you for the national board.” Because I couldn’t get elected out of my region, and so Andre and Aaron and Chris and them, they got together and they rallied all the kids together, and they got their parents together.

Debbie Gilbreath graduation picture
And so at the age of seventeen, if you look at the NAACP history, you’ll see that I got elected to the national board of directors, and I ran nationally, at large, at the age of seventeen. I was on the national board of directors with Roy Wilkins, Margaret Bush Wilson. I mean all of the people that you see in there, and here’s this little seventeen-year-old girl out of Minnesota that’s sitting at the board with all these big shots. I remember the first time I had to go to the national board meeting was in New York City, and aw, man!

That was the first time I got on a plane. It was wild, because I got on a plane and my girlfriend was at Barnard College. Denise Carty [Father Denzil Carty’s oldest daughter]. And she says, “Okay, I’ll meet ya.” And I get to the airport and I flew into JFK, and I called and she says, “Okay, you gotta get on the trains. You gotta get your bag and you gotta go over to the bus station, and the bus station is going to take you down to the train. You gotta get on this train, and I’ll meet ya [at this stop.] The train will come in at this time, so I’ll meet ya.” And she told me which stop to get off on. Then I’d stay with her in New York at Barnard College and then go to the board meeting and learn how to get around. All she ever did was give me a roll of tokens [and a subway map and tell me how to get to where I was going]. She never took me anywhere! Just “Here’s a token. Here’s a map. Get on the train and here’s where you get off.” So I mean I was just adventurous. I never thought about—I mean, you know, today you think about sending a kid out by themselves in New York City, and I was just going. I was on a mission. I was fighting for civil rights. I was speaking up for people. So that’s some of the stuff that I did.
KHC: What was it like being on this national board with all these adults?

DGM: Well, I don't know. It was interesting to listen to the discussion. I mean, you had lawyers, [bankers, politicians, etc.]—like I say, you had lawyers. Chet [Lewis] and them were, on there. They were talking about legal issues and how they were going to deal—Thurgood Marshall, how you going to deal with the legal issues to take to the Supreme Court. What's going on in Missouri? What's going on in Kansas? Minnesota back then—the issues were nowhere near what was going on down in Atlanta and in Birmingham, Alabama, and Mississippi. They just had huge issues, and you're sitting there and you're listening to the discussion and listening to how they're going to handle it. What kinds of voting registration things and who they were going to target.

That's when I found out about target voting. "We're going to try to go after these seats and we're going to try to get somebody in these positions." And trying to get folks registered. Back then and still today, there were poll tax.31

These folks in these rural areas had to pay poll tax to go vote, and so they were trying to fight all those issues to get folks to come out and to do that. As you know, from the civil rights movement, they were killing young people that were going down there in cars, similar to what I was doing. I was kind of blessed. I was back there—I marched from Selma to Montgomery with Dr. King and I was in the March on Washington when he gave that "I Have a

31 Poll tax is a capitation tax, the payment of which is sometimes a perquisite to exercise the right of suffrage, also called a head tax.
Dream” speech. You just talk about the mood, how you felt, the energy. People were standing around, 250,000 people, and they're listening to this guy talk and it was just phenomenal. And to get a rush and to think, “Hey, we’ve gotta fight for our rights. They gotta give us the right to vote. We have to be able to buy homes. You know, we need to buy property.” Trying to get banking institutions so they would give loans to people. There were just so many major issues going on back then, I didn’t have time to think about little things. My mind was always out here. I'd come home and the adults here were always talking about how bright I was. I wasn't any brighter, I was just kind of active in everything, trying to figure out how do you make things work.

I went to the U, and that’s why I majored in Political Science and Sociology. Originally I was going to go into law, and I ended up getting a fellowship to go to the Humphrey Institute,\textsuperscript{32} in Urban Planning and Urban Law, with a minor in social gerontology, because I got a fellowship from the Administration on Aging, AOA. I didn’t know anything about social gerontology, I didn’t even know what it was. I had to figure out what it was, but they paid for me to go to school and gave me a five thousand dollar stipend.

KHC: When was this?

\textsuperscript{32} Humphrey Institute is located at 301 19th Avenue South in Minneapolis, MN. The Public Administration Center was founded in 1936. In 1969 it became the School of Public Affairs, and The Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs was named for Hubert H. Humphrey in 1977. The Institute is a graduate school offering Master’s Degrees in public policy, public affairs, urban and regional planning, and science, technology and public policy. It is also home to a number of research and outreach centers devoted to public policy and administration.
DGM: 1971. Yeah, 1970-71. And I went to the Humphrey Institute. And Willie Mae Wilson and I were the only two African-Americans in our class. There’s just tons of folks that are now—especially at Minnesota, that are running companies that I was in—Larhae Knatterud, that’s her name now. [She’s working in the Minnesota State Human Services Department as one of the top managers over the department.] I went to school at the Humphrey Institute with her. I see her now. She’s got so much knowledge about the older Americans.] My best friend Jackie Stewart [is retired and is working with the Minnesota Senior Federation].

When I was in there, me and Willie Mae [Wilson], when we got into the school, we were the only two and they made us go to summer school for ten weeks to learn statistics, because I had no statistics. I think Willie Mae had some statistics. And in order to get into this Humphrey Institute, you had to have some statistics. So they taught us in a ten week crash course on basic statistics, and then when you got into the Humphrey Institute, you had to take bio-statistics and macro-statistics. And Vern Weckwerth was the teacher back then, and he’d start talking and I didn’t understand a word he was saying. It was so far over my head. That ten week course, it may have grounded me in something, but it didn’t ground me in anything this guy was talking about. And I’d be in class, and if I didn’t understand, I’d raise my hand and I’d say, “You gotta break this down, brother. You gotta tell me what you’re talking about, ‘cause this is all Greek to me.” Finally, Ken, who was a Ph.D. guy—he was from Texas. In fact, he had a Ph.D [in mathematics and] he was in the [Humphrey Institute] going for his Master’s in Public
Administration. And he had sat and he'd listened to me and he was always a quiet guy. And he'd listen to me and listen to the questions I was asking. And so one day after class, he came up to me and he says, "Debbie, I think I understand where your problem is, and if you want, I'll help you." I said, "Shhd, brother, I'm here! Whatever you can do, because I am lost in this class!" And the first class I had got a C in, and in graduate school to pass you had to have a B or better. So that meant it was a two part class, which meant I had to get an A in the second part of the class. And Ken would take me to the library and we'd get in the back of the library and he'd tutor me. And on the second course, I got an A. So I ended up with a B average for the two courses and everybody was getting mad. They were saying, "Well, what are you doing? How come Ken’s helping you?" I said, "I don’t know. Maybe because I’m just crazy and I don’t know nothin’ and I’m willing to admit it."

And at the end of the second class, Vern Weckwerth, who was the professor then, he said before the whole class, he said, "I just want to thank Debbie Montgomery for making me have to teach this class, because she made me have to take it and break it down so that I taught the class." So that was kind of a little moving piece right there, because I didn’t understand a thing. Everything he was talking about, I couldn’t even connect it to anything.

And Willie Mae—I’m a slow reader. I got 98% comprehension, but I read slow. And in graduate school there’s a lot of reading, and so I was always constantly trying to read, and Willie Mae was a much better reader and she digested it, so I’d go and read it, but Willie would synopses it for me. She’d kind of take notes and break it down because she’d get it done, and I—by the
time I got done, we’re ready for the test, so I had to have some notes to go. So yeah, we both got through the program, but I’m telling you, it was an interesting experience being the first Blacks that were in there back when it started, the Humphrey Institute. It was an interesting time, but folks respected me at the end because I wanted to learn, they saw I wanted to learn. We just came from different backgrounds. We didn’t have the exposure to some of the things that they had, so...

KHC: What I hear is incredible courage, a willingness to ask questions, total curiosity and being willing to put it out there. How did growing up in the community that you grew up in give you that kind of confidence to just be out there with courage and curiosity and a willingness to say, “I don’t know?”

DGM: Well, there were a lot of strong leaders back then. Reverend Denzel Carty at Saint Philips Church, Reverend Massey at Pilgrim Church, Reverend DelPino at Camphor Church. Back in the old days, Father Theobold from down at Saint Peter Claver, Father Ed Flavin. The church was a strong factor in my life, and it was a strong factor in this community. They always reassured you. I don’t care where you went. All the different churches you went to. They kept us involved. They made us have faith in ourselves, made us have faith even in hard times. There was always hope. There was always a vision, a hope.

Like I say, I never saw the bad side of things. I just kept looking for how are we going to make things better, and I think that was my whole philosophy. That’s the whole thing that we got. Nobody—if you look at the kids today,
it’s just funny. I look at the kids that I grew up with and I run into them all the time. And they said, “Girl...” I just went to a wedding this week and Mary Lee was saying, “Girl, you were always a success. We always knew you were going to be a success.” And I said, “I never even thought about being a success. I just was moving through the system, you know?” But no, people respected me. I’ve always been honest. I’ve always—even today when I talk to people, they said, “We hear the passion in your heart, in the way you speak.” I don’t know, it’s just me, you know? I don’t know any better. I just say what I feel.

At this press conference we had earlier today, the one guy said, “I met you. You probably don’t remember me. I met you at the Chamber of Commerce.” They had a debate which was televised and he said, “You were so thoughtful in your answers. You didn’t jump on ‘em.” He said, “You stopped and you thought about it and then you responded.” And they went on to talk about some other folks. I said, “You know what? My mind just has to think about something. I can’t just jump on out there. I gotta look at it where it’s coming from.” He said, “Well, you know, you did an excellent job.” I said, “I didn’t know how I did.” But he said, “You did an excellent job and I think a lot of people felt very comfortable with how you process things.” I don’t know. I just felt a lot of support.

My parents—they worried about me all the time, because obviously you can tell from this conversation that I was into everything. There was nothin’ I wasn’t willing to try or to do. I didn’t mind meeting new people. I loved
traveling. I love traveling today. I want to see how people live. We just came back from Panama earlier this year and I saw all the dark complexion people in Costa Rica, where we got off the boat. And they were there and the houses were shanties and stuff, and the light complexion Costa Rican that was our tour guide—we went on a tour. We were going to the capitol of San Jose. I started asking him, “How come all the people that are down here by this pier are Black? Are they Costa Ricans?” And he said, “Yeah.” He said, “A lot of them were Jamaicans and from the islands and the different islands, and they came to Costa Rica but then they stayed here and they’ve been born here and they’re Costa Ricans.” And I said, “So why do they live like this?” Because here we were in the city, San Jose, the capitol, and you saw a lot of the White Costa Ricans. And he said, “Because they don’t have any political power.” I thought to myself, “God. Maybe I need to come to Costa Rica and start a civil rights movement.” [Laughs]. I mean, it was just—it appeared to be by race. I was only there for a day, or not even a day. Seven hours from the time the ship stopped, but you could just see the poverty and the people. And then when he said they don’t have any political power, I’m thinking, “So how do you have a country where you know a group of people doesn’t have any political power. How do their voices get heard? Who takes care of their needs? Why do we want to keep one group lower than another?” It’s those kinds of questions that went through my mind the whole time when I was growing up. God raised us all and put us all here on this earth, and I don’t believe that He wanted us to be treating each other differently. He or She. So those kinds of things. So that’s why I got active and involved.
KHC: Were there any causes that you picked up, got active in, and were disappointed because you couldn’t make a difference?

DGM: No. I have to honestly admit, we were there for the open housing. We got open housing here. We fought that battle. The takeover of Morrill Hall on the issues that we had, we won that battle. Every issue that I was involved with, we got what we were asking for. And we weren’t asking for anymore than what was right for everybody else. The voting rights, marching from Selma to Montgomery and trying to get voting rights for the people. I mean these folks, they were in the army, they were serving their country and yet they didn’t have the right to vote? They were on the front lines, if you look at the history, and getting killed in larger numbers, and they didn’t have the right to vote. They didn’t have the right to own property. They had the poorest jobs. Like I say, I look at Mama and Dad. Never once did I feel that we were poor. There was a richness in our house. There was a strong faith in our house. I don’t look at the downside. I just saw the up.

KHC: How has your faith influenced your life?

DGM: That’s been the stronghold to me. My kids laugh at me. They said, “Mom, you cuss so bad!” And I say, “Well, it’s because you kids run me crazy and you don’t listen when I’m talkin’ to ya!” No, it has been. It’s been a stronghold in my life. Even to this day. My husband is Catholic, so I’ve raised my kids through the Catholic Church. When we got married, he was a divorcee. So in the Catholic Church, we couldn’t get married in the Church and it was my first wedding and my only one after thirty-eight years. So I wanted my wedding blessed, and so we got married by a justice of the peace, and I went down to Saint Philips, which was the church I grew up in, and we
Debbie Gilbreath Montgomery, Mama/ Isabelle Gilbreath, Matthew Montgomery, and Gloria Gilbreath Wilson

had our marriage blessed in the church. And then when I got to having kids and raising the kids—is mother is a Jamiolkowski. He’s a Black Pollack. And his mother’s a Jamiolkowski and his father’s a Montgomery. So she was all excited when I had the kids and I got them baptized in the Catholic Church and sent them to Catholic grade schools and sent them to Catholic high schools and three of them went to Catholic colleges. She thought I was the greatest thing since sliced bread! But it was a quality of education.

Back then in the old days when my kids were coming up and it was time to go to school, they created the Highland Island. If you live in the Summit—they were going to desegregate the [Saint Paul Public Schools in the city. So they created the Highland Island, so all the kids that lived in the Summit-University area were going to get bused to the new Highland schools, the grade schools and stuff like that. And I was working midnights, and I said, “You know, there isn’t no way you’re busing my kid. I can’t find ‘em if they
call me.” I said, “There’s a school two blocks down the street from my house.” I still live in the same house that I raised the kids in, and Maxfield is two blocks down the street. I said, “I’m not going to send these kids on a bus.” They all went to Maxfield for half-day kindergarten, and then in the afternoon I sent them to Saint Luke’s for afternoon kindergarten, so that took care of my daycare problem! And then after that they went from kindergarten to eighth grade at Saint Luke’s, except for Mark.

At the sixth grade, when the others were up at Saint Agnes, I took him out at sixth grade and put him over at Saint Agnes in the middle schools. It became apparent to me that he wasn’t going to survive over there with those nuns, because they still wore the old habits and do mass in Latin and they were a little rigid, and he was a straight A student and a three sport athlete and he was not listening to them. So I ended up after two years taking him out and he went to Saint Thomas Academy. He needed the military rigidity, and he didn’t like it. He hated it. He graduated in 1990. So it had been ’86. He was in their affirmative action class. When he went out there, they only had six Blacks from seventh grade to twelfth grade out there, and so when he went out there they had five in his freshman class. So they had eleven in the whole school out of seven hundred kids. He was the only inner city Black. The rest of them were suburban Blacks from mixed families, and he was from an all Black family.

The kids were calling him names, and he popped one kid in the mouth and went to the office and said, “He called me a nigger and I popped him, so you
need to do something with him!” and walked out of the office [Laughs] and called me. So anyway, I went out there and said, “We can’t be having this now.” But he’s like his mother. He just speaks up.

Interestingly enough, the kids he went out there with—my kids were the first kids—I went to school with Joe Oden, who’s related to the Benners and them, and he played hockey at Central. But he was so light, when he got on the ice, you didn’t even know he was Black, when you looked at him with the rest of the kids. But when my kids came, they were like the first Black kids to play hockey. Robbie came home one day from Saint Luke’s, and his friend Luke was playing hockey and he finally had said, “Mom, I want to play hockey.” I said, “Baby, I don’t know nothin’ about no hockey. So give me Luke’s mom’s number.” Well, it turns out Luke’s mom was a single mother, so I called her up and asked her about hockey and she said she didn’t know anything neither, but I could look at the equipment. She said, “You need to go talk to the coach.” So I went over, knocked at this guy’s house one evening, and here’s this Black mother with her little Black kid, and said, “Hi, my name is Mrs. Montgomery and my son Robbie is a friend of Luke’s and he wants to play hockey, but I don’t know anything about hockey. And I was wondering could you tell me what I need to buy and how do I get him on the team and what do I need to do?” And he looks at me and my son and then he says, “Well, you know, you all have weak ankles.” And I said, “So what do we do about them?” You know, I’m taking him at his word that we got weak ankles. I don’t know anything about our ankles!

KHC: And you did tell him that you had been a speed skater?
DGM: I didn’t tell him anything! I’m sitting here, “Okay, so we got weak ankles. What do you do about it?” I didn’t pay any attention to that. So he tells us where to go to get the equipment. So I go out to Strauss. Now you remember, I was a speed skater, and so Strauss is out there and I said, “Hi, Mr. Strauss.” I said, “My kid’s gonna play hockey so I gotta get some hockey skates, but I got to get some strong ankle support because the coach said that we got weak ankles.” [Laughs] And he looked at me and he said, “Mrs. Montgomery, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with you all’s ankles!” [Laughs] And I was insistent that he make sure he had strong [ankle support]—“Make sure that whatever skates you give me…” Because I figured the hockey coach knew more than this man who’d been selling skates all his life. That it had to have strong ankle supports. Anyway, he gave me skates with some tough leather up at the top. And my kids were playing hockey and they’re the only Black kids on the ice.

This was in the Eighties, and kids are calling my kid out of their names. What happened is when Robbie started, I made all of us have to watch him play hockey. So we’d go and to show you how inconsiderate folks were, parents—my kids were always bigger kids than the ordinary hockey player kids. The White kids were a little shorter, and mine were a little stockier and they’d come and they’d learn how to skate, and they skated faster than the kids, and then they got into the checking and they hit them harder and the kid would go down. Then the Dads—if you know anything about hockey, the worst parents are hockey parents. They’re always, “Go get ‘em! Kill ‘em! Kill ‘em!” I said, “Well, that’s my baby. Why do you want to kill ‘em? I ain’t
hollerin’ for him to kill your son or nothin’!” And then as they got bigger, they’d always talk about, “Go get ‘em. Hit ‘em!” So finally now, my kids are big and I taught them how to stride. Their hockey coach was teaching them to skate and play hockey. Well, I’m teaching them, because I was a speed skater, how to take those strides. Because they were big.

My Matthew was 6’2” and 220, and Robbie was 198 and 5’11, Mark was six feet and 178 soakin’ wet. But they just had gumption. They were just out there and they were skating and hitting and running and moving around and I told them when I looked at this thing, “Well, I can’t afford goalies.” I told them they couldn’t be a goalie because I couldn’t afford all that [equipment]. And then I saw the guys that were on the line, they were always getting hit by the defense, and I said, “You guys better be the hitter. Be on the defense. Don’t be the hittee, because them kids are getting racked up!” So all of my boys were defense. I paid money and sent them to Herb Brooks, [Ken Yackel, Chuck Gillo, etc.]. In fact, when I went to Herb Brooks’s funeral this past year—last year, Danny Brooks was there. And other than Tom Timpton who sang at the thing, I was the only other Black person I saw, when I came through the long line for the wake, and Danny was standing in line. I had been looking for his mother Patty but she had been standing there [so long that], so she was gone. ‘Cause I got to be good friends with them because our kids were the only Black kids [in the hockey camps] and they were actually good players, and Danny said, “Mrs. Montgomery, how’s Matthew doing?” Because he skated with my oldest boy. I said, “He’s fine.” I said, “He’s skating in six senior men’s hockey leagues out in Maryland, and
he said, “I always liked him. He was one of my favorite players. One of my favorite guys.” But Herbie got Matthew an agent when he got done with college, because Matthew went down to Saint Mary’s in Winona. Saint Mary’s College had seven Black kids out of thirteen hundred kids. The other five were from Chicago on the basketball team, and then they had an African-American girl that was mixed out of Winona, and Matthew was the only Black hockey player. And when we went down there to get him into Saint Mary’s, I remember going down there and turning in [the campus and I knew this was the place for him]. He wanted to go to the U, and he’d been skating with all these big time hockey players in the summer camps and doing well, but Doug Woog didn’t want him. He just decided not to take him, so Matthew was really into hockey and so we ended up looking—we went up to Duluth to Mike Sertich and he didn’t know anything about him, because they went to Saint Agnes, a little Catholic school. Wasn’t like they went to any of the big schools and stuff.

So anyway, we finally get down to Saint Mary’s in Winona and I remember pulling in there and turning into the campus and it was just tranquil and beautiful, and Matthew was kind of—as my daughter calls him, her hermit brother. He’s kind of a recluse. 6’2”, 220, recluse. And so anyway, all he wanted was a school that had hockey, and Saint Mary’s had hockey and I didn’t know nothing about Winona. And Winona is a big Polish town and my mother-in-law’s a Jamiolkowski and they had a Polish scholarship down there. I can’t think of what it is right now, but anyway, I put my kid in for this scholarship, and they looked at Matthew and looked at us and thought,
“Yeah, here’s some more Black folks tryin’ to get over!” So I had to bring my mother-in-law down there to say, “It said they only had to have one parent fifty percent Polish. Here he is!” [Laughs] We didn’t get the scholarship, but it was funny going through the process.

Anyway, we ended up sending him down there, and I remember talking to Don Olson, who was the athletic director and the hockey coach. I still see Don all the time. He’s still the hockey coach and athletic director down there. I said, “Mr. Olson.” I said, “My son wants to play hockey and I’m just wondering would you have a problem with a Black skating on your team?” And he said, “I don’t promise any positions.” And I said, “I didn’t come and ask you that question. I just said would you have a problem skatin’ a Black kid on your team.” And me and him went round and round, and I said, “Listen, Coach. I just need to know. Would you have a problem skatin’ a Black kid on your team?” And he said no. And I said, “Okay. I just need you to understand one thing. There’s not a team that you can put on this ice that my kid isn’t gonna make.” And this is right before I’m getting the kid into the school, and so this guy is thinking, “This woman is crazy and I isn’t payin’ no attention to her.” So, as a freshman, he made third line on the team, the college team. I said, “I rest my case. I told you there wasn’t a team you put out here that my kid wasn’t going to make!”

By the end of his sophomore season, he was leading the team in defense and in scoring from the defensive position, and Doug Woog now was calling because everybody’s—you know, he’s playing Saint Thomas, so he’s coming
up here and Woog is seeing what he’s doing. Now all of a sudden, Doug wants to have him transferred to the University, but he’ll have to sit out a year to do the transfer. And I said, “Baby, you need to understand something. Doug, I had four kids in five years. I told ‘em from the beginning, ‘You get four years. I’ll pay for it’ The number one killer of African-American males is hypertension. There’s no need for you worrying about paying these school loans back if you have to have them.” I said, “I will pay for you to go to school. Understand one thing: you got four years. I don’t care what it is you want to major in. You got four years and you’re coming out because there’s ones right behind ya, and I can’t be payin’ for all this stuff.” And I was working two jobs [off duty as a Saint Paul Police Officer and teaching classes at Lakewood Community College] and a paper route, my husband said. I worked every off duty job I could, and we paid. When each one of them graduated, their tuition was paid; none of them owed any loans.

So anyway, Matthew, he stayed down at Saint Mary’s and in his senior year, he took Saint Mary’s to their first NCAA hockey tournament in the history of the school. If you go back and look at the western collegiate conference in 1989, he was the only Minnesota kid to make first team All-American. There was not one Gopher that made it that year. He made first team All-American out of a Division III school. Brad Buetow gave him the award. Matthew got this plaque. I told these kids, I said, “Listen, if you want to play the White man’s sport baby, you’d better be good because I ain’t comin’ out here for these folks to be calling you “Watermelon Man” and “Jiggaboo.”
We got up to Concordia [and Moorhead] and they was hollering Jiggaboo. And I didn’t know what a Jiggaboo was neither, and my son skates over and he says, “Ma, what’s a Jiggaboo?” I said, “Baby, don’t pay any attention to them. These are just more ignorant people that we don’t know anything about. Just go out there and play hockey. And while you’re at it, see that one over there? Get him, too, ‘cause he hollerin’ crazy things out here, too. Take him into the boards, but do it legally, now! Don’t do anything illegal!” [Laughs]

KHC: Debbie, how old were you when you were married?

DGM: Going on twenty-one. Yeah, I was going on twenty-one.

KHC: Now you’d been in the community. You’d been active. How’d you find time to find somebody to date?

DGM: Oh, I didn’t. I was a tomboy. It was funny, My best girlfriends, they laughed at me because it happened to be my husband—his brother-in-law. My husband’s sister was actually two years ahead of me in school. A lot of people didn’t like her because she was kind of a little cranky. So I knew her and everything, but he—my husband’s eleven years older than me, so he had been in the military for twelve years, and he had came out of the military and had this convertible car and all these girls, every time—they thought he was drop dead gorgeous. I didn’t know anything about him because I was too busy being a tomboy and I...

KHC: He is gorgeous!

DGM: [Laughs] Thanks. They’d all want to talk to him. Listen to him tell you. He said, “She was coming down the street one day and my brother-in-law—“It was his brother-in-law, turned out to be my brother-in-law, too, said,
“Debbie!” And he said, [his brother-in-law Tommy Clemons hollered at me as I was driving by Roberts house on Central Avenue and] I stopped on a dime, backed up, jumped out of the car with my sailor cap over my head and my pants on and my top and said, ‘I am the light! Before me there was none and after me there will be no more.”’ And he said, “I was gonna put that light out.” That’s him telling the story. That’s when I actually got to meet him. I was actually with my brother-in-law and Robert during the whole time [we dated]—we hardly courted. I met him in August and married in November, and there wasn’t a date we went on that my brother-in-law wasn’t with us, because we used to go to drive-in movies and my brother-in-law was there every night. So it made no difference whenever we were going to the movie, my brother-in-law was always with us. So then he asked Mama could he marry me, and she just said, “You’d better treat her nice because she’s a sickly girl.” Because I had eczema and I was a little skinny thing and you know, beating up all the boys and she’s worried about me. I had traveled the world. [Laughs]. But yeah, so we’ve been married thirty-eight years.
KHC: And we should have a picture of the grin on your face when you talk about it. And I’ve seen the grin on his face when he talks about you! [Both laugh] And you moved right into the Rondo neighborhood.

DGM: Yeah. In fact, his house where we live at now, at 1016 West Central—he had been living in the house for, I think it was a year. He was renting it from the neighbor next door, Mr. Owens, and when we got married, Mr. Owens asked us did we want to buy the house. And so we bought the house for fifteen—I think it was fifteen or sixteen thousand dollars. And we’re still living there. Raised all four kids in a two-bedroom bungalow. We had to expand the attic and made a dormer bedroom for the three boys and had to rehab the bedroom down on the first floor, and then when Matthew got to the place where he figured that he needed his space, we finished the basement and put him down in the basement and the other two stayed upstairs. So all we did was expand the house. Now the kids say, “Aren’t you going to move?” And I say, “The house actually fits us. You guys are gone!” [Laughs] So yeah, we live in the house that Robert was living in [when I met him].

I lived one half block from the house I was born and raised. The neighbors that live across the street from me have known me my whole life, the Burroughs went to Saint Philips with me. Mr. Graham, who died a couple of years ago, went down to Saint Peter Claver. He died at ninety-seven [years old]. Mr. Blakey lives across the street. He’s been there the whole time. Mrs. Seales, Connie Graham. [Ben Alexander, they have known me since I was a kid.]
The Owenses died. They were next door. My son’s got their house now. The only two rental pieces of property are next door to us going to the east, but otherwise, everybody—Mr. Alexander across the street. Ben Alexander’s son Ben was Robbie’s godfather. Dmintri [Burroughs] was Matthew’s godfather. That’s how close the community is. All of us—they were all my friends and they’ve been my kids’ godparents and it’s just a close-knit community. It’s a very healthy community, very tight-knit community. When I ran for city council this time, if you look at the figures, I mean the people who came out and voted for me were people that have known me my whole life. They believed in me and we had—our ward has the lowest voter turnout, but our precinct, they came out in droves to vote. So that was an interesting [and humbling] time, too.

KHC: You’ve talked about all the different challenges and the causes. What are you most proud of in your life?

DGM: Well, my family. I think we did a wonderful job raising our kids. They were all successful. They’re all good human beings. They’re all contributing [to society and not being a drain on society].

My daughter, [Dawn]—this girl, she’s got more energy than I got. She just finished her [Advanced Master’s Degree in Business Finance from Tulane University. It’s her second Master’s. She had one Master’s and then she did this, and then I was just telling her I got an invitation to the Kellogg School of Management for women moving up in senior management. She’s a senior vice-president at J. P. Morgan Chase Bank in New York City, Rockefeller Center. The people that she works with on investments—I mean, to talk to
her you gotta have five hundred thousand dollars or more, so she’s making
more money than I’m making and I been working for thirty-five years. Her
husband and her two kids, our two granddaughters, live in Chestnut Ridge,
New York.

And my son, [Matthew] he’s married and his wife, Kim is finishing her Ph.D.
in clinical psychology [from Howard University] and he’s only got to work
six more years. He’s a police officer in Prince George County. He wants to be
a masseuse, so I’m trying to tell him to go to school. He’s waiting for his wife
to get out so he can go to school and get his masseuse license. That’s what he
wants to do in retirement. And he’s like the military out there. He’ll get a
pension and have insurance benefits so he can afford to do that. [His wife is
pregnant with their second son, Blake, due in May of 2005.]

Robbie is married and he’s got two sons, and he and his wife Jeanne and her
daughter Shyia just moved down in Dallas, Texas. He is working at Target as
a security manager and is interviewing for police jobs

Mark lives next door and he’s single. So they’re all successful. They’ve all got
their families. I told them when they left the door swings one way. I said, “I
paid your tuition. You left here. You don’t have no debt.” When I was telling
you I paid their tuition because of hypertension, one of the biggest thing that
affects African-American men is if they go to college—if they go and they get
in debt, they’re not the first to get hired, so six months after you get out of
college and once you start repaying loans, and here they’re worried about paying loans and they ain’t got a job and so I took all that stress off of them.

Luckily for me, God is good. The last two kids I had, Dawn and Mark, both got full scholarships. Dawn got a basketball scholarship to Xavier [University.] She went down to Xavier in New Orleans and got—little old Minnesota girl goes down South. I was trying to get her to Winona to go to Saint Mary’s because I fell in love with it. She said, “I can’t find no husband in Winona, Minnesota.” I said, “I’m not sending you to school for no husband. I’m sending you for an education.” So anyway, she said she wanted to go to a historically Black college, so she went down to Xavier and got elected Miss Sophomore in her sophomore year and got elected Queen of the College in her senior year, and she was captain of the basketball team, vice-president of the honor society Got a fellowship to go work on her Master’s from the University of Illinois and did her internship at the NCAA, NBA and WNBA and then she got into money marketing. She’s doing well.

Matthew, he went out to Maryland. Got recruited off of Saint Mary’s campus by the CIA. Was out there for eighteen months. They made all kinds of promises to him and after eighteen months they had him doing computer stuff, which is not what he wanted to do. He said, “I’m outta here.” And that’s when he went over to Prince George County’s [Police Department] and he’s been there for fourteen years. Got six more to go.
Robbie, he went to Saint Thomas [College] and graduated from Concordia [University] and got his Master’s [from there] and he’s now down in Texas. He quit the [Saint Paul] police department after thirteen years in November and went down to Dallas, Texas, as an area supervisor for Asset Forfeiture for Target Corporation.

And Mark, he’s a seven-year police officer on the Minneapolis Police Department. He played at The University of Wisconsin—Madison. Took them to their first Rose Bowl in 1994, since ‘63. So we got to go to the Rose Bowl on January First of ‘94. And then got drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles and played with them for a year. Ripped his hamstring and couldn’t pass medical, so he came back home and he was living at home, which I told him, “Nobody stays at 1016 without a job.”

So he said he was going to get a job like his mother, being a cop, because I don’t do anything. [Both laugh]. I said, “Well, that sounds like a winner.” I mean, I was out [working] midnights for the first eleven years of my career so they wouldn’t know, because I was always working when they were sleeping and I’d be home in the morning to get them off to work. I mean off to school. All they saw me was in the morning, and then when they got home from school, I’d be waking up and I’d feed them and do their homework [with them] and put them to bed. So I don’t know why he thought that I wasn’t doing anything doing those hours. [Both laugh.] Like I say, they’re all successful. They all got families. They’re good parents, they got good spouses.
I was real blessed. My friends all say, “Boy, you’re kids turned out so well.” I kept this ten shoe in their butt. Because my husband and I were pretty strict disciplinarians. I know Matthew, his birthday came late in the year, and he was eighteen years old when he went to his prom. He had to be in by midnight. I remember [him] telling his Dad, he said, “My date can stay out longer than me!” And my husband said, “Well, then you need another date, because you’re going to be in before midnight.” He said, “Your mother works nights and she wants you all in this house, because she said that [all that’s out at midnight are] drunks, derelicts and dopers are out. Ain’t nothin’ goin’ on after midnight but drunks, derelicts and dopers. So you will be in the house.”

I took them all down to the emergency room of Ramsey Hospital when I was working off duty down there and I made them sit there on the first of the month on a weekend. I made them sit in the emergency room and watch them bring everybody they hauled in to the emergency room. And I said, “Now you see who’s dying. It is the innocent guy that got hit by the drunk. The drunk is not dying, so now you understand why I said nothin’ happens after midnight that you need to be out there doin’.” And it’s funny, because none of my kids are late-nighters. My hermit son, my oldest one my daughter calls, he doesn’t go out a lot. They don’t drink. Maybe sociably, but for any other purpose they just don’t drink. So I don’t know. Something worked.
KHC: In your professional life, because a lot of your life from thirteen on has been in the public, what are you proud of?

DGM: Well, probably having been the first woman to get on the Saint Paul Police Department, and competing against men. I was working at Model Cities in '68 and I was a social planner and I had graduated and had my Bachelor’s Degree and I got out of school. And I was going to school for my Master’s. And these guys, it was really nice to work with people and work with the issues that were going on. It was a community of change. Obviously, the freeway coming through and things like that. After I did that—under model cities, you’re supposed to do three years and then their city is supposed to take you in and that never really happened. The city took the White people who had worked for Model Cities, [Joanne England, Terry McNellis, etc.] and hired them as permanent city civil service people and the rest of us were provisional.

[The first civil service job I had with the city was police officer in 1975. Before that I held positions as an administrative assistant for Mayors Charlie McCarty and Larry Cohen, a budget analyst, city planner, grant in aids assistant director.] If you look at my transcript with the City, the first civil service job that I ever got certified in [Laughs] was the police officer job. I was a city planner, a budget analyst, a grant and aids writer. In fact, I even competed—I have the newspaper article where I competed against George McMahon to be the grants and aids coordinator, and anyway, they said at that time I didn’t have the political savvy. Now I don’t know what kind of political savvy they wanted me to have. I was marching back and forth
between Selma and Montgomery and everything else. But I obviously didn’t have it up here.

So anyway, I ended up getting hired by Charlie McCarty. He had me as an administrative aide to him when he was the mayor. And then when Mayor Cohen came in, he had me as administrative aide to him when he was the mayor, and that’s when I got into—I was finishing my Master’s Degree in Urban Planning, so they had me doing some urban planning and city planning. As a matter of fact, I was the planner for Carty Park\(^3\) that all these complaints are going on now about. I created it as a passive park because they were building all those new houses around it.

And then in 1975, they had had an injunction against the Saint Paul Police Department from 1971 to ’75, they hadn’t hired because the NAACP had put an injunction against them because there was six percent Black population in the city and they only had like five Black officers. Anyway, finally the police union said it was a life safety issue and they should hire. And [Judge] Miles Lord said—they were going to hire fifty and Miles Lord said ten of them had to be African-American, because the NAACP had filed the injunction. So Ron Jones who was the EEO officer for the city, and he had said, “You know, Debbie? I need you to take this test because you’re the only woman I know that can pass it, and they don’t have any women. I mean, it says we’re fighting for Blacks, let’s fight for some women.” I said, “Ron, I do not want this job.” But I was a jock and the West Point military entrance exam was a

\(^3\) Carty Park is located between Iglehart, St. Albans, Carroll and Grotto.
part of the test, and back in 1975, there weren’t no women in West Point neither.

So anyway, I took the civil service test and passed, and then you had to do this physical agility test where you had to run twenty-five yards and over this four foot fence, twenty-five yards and over a six-foot wall and twenty-five yards, climb a ladder, get down a cylinder and get out of it—they had a hole cut at the six foot level because back then, they had a height requirement [of six feet]. You had to be six feet tall. Well, I was five foot six and three-fourths, so I had to jump up and get out of this hole and then I had to run this obstacle course twice in sixty seconds. I ran it in sixty-two seconds, so that would mean that I would have failed this test, except there were only eight men that ran faster than me out of two thousand people that took the test, and 450 of those were women and I was the only woman that passed. And you had to do thirty-five sit-ups with a ten-pound barbell behind your neck. We had to do this press to see how much strength was in your upper body, and I was strong because I was a tomboy. I pulled as much strength as the average man did. And then they had this machine you put between your legs and see how much strength was in your lower body and I blew that off the scale because women’s strength is in their lower body. So that machine. I just killed it!

And then they made you do a medical and a psychological and then they made you go to a demonstration school for two weeks where you went in and they gave you—they showed you gory movies of accidents to see how
you would respond if you’re the first car there. You had to take the drivers’
test again. They talked about self-defense. They made you go in and look at a
shoot scenes where they gave you a gun and they put you in the firing range
and they put a scenario up and then they timed to see if the door would open
and—in my scenario, the guy comes out, he’s got a broom in his hand. And
so they want to see how long it takes you to decide whether to shoot or not
shoot. And in some of the scenarios, the guy would come out of the door and
he’d have a gun, and so that would be a shoot situation. So when they did
the psychological on me, they thought that I wouldn’t shoot anybody and
that was one of the things that they kind of pushed me on, that they didn’t
think that I would shoot anybody. So I finally—after the guy kept pushing
me during the psychological, I said, “You need to understand somethin’. I
got four babies and a husband, and I’m comin’ home. So trust me. I am
gonna shoot somebody because I am not gonna let them sit there and shoot
me.” And so I don’t know if they believed me or not, but they went ahead
and passed me on that.

Like I say, I passed the test, and then I wrote a letter saying thank you for the
opportunity to take the test, but no thanks, I don’t want it. And I was the
only woman to pass the test, going through all those things. My original
number was nine, but after Veterans’ Preference, I dropped down to forty-
two. Then they were going to stop the hiring at forty. Now this was after
they announced fifty. And somebody said, “I don’t think you want to do
that, because I think the judge would be a little upset.” But see, they had
gotten to the point where they had ten people, and so that's why they wanted to cut the list.

KHC: They had ten Blacks.

DGM: Yeah. Well, at forty they didn't, but at forty-three they did. So then after they wanted to stop the list at forty-three, because they picked up me and Tony Blakey, and Melvin Carter. We were at the end of the thing. They didn't want to go to fifty because they have ended up picking up three more Blacks which would have gave them thirteen, and they were already upset about taking these ten.

So I had wrote this letter saying thanks for the opportunity to take the test, but no thanks, I don't want the job. And then turns out my brother-in-law, who had passed the test but then decided not to take it, dropped out the Friday before the academy. So the only person on the list that the mayor had control of was me, because I was already a city employee. So the mayor called me in and said, "I need you to go sit in this academy because I gotta get this class started and you only have to sit there and then you can come back." That was Larry Cohen. And I said, "Well, I don't want to do that." And he said, "Well, I need you to get this academy started." And I said, "Well, this is a ten thousand dollar cut in pay. How we gonna make this up?" "You'll be taken care of." Well, twenty-eight years later and ten thousand dollars a year, I got folks that—Bob Kessler was my intern when I left, in planning, and he ended up being the license inspector making $50,000 more than I was making, at least $25,000 more than I was making. So I'm trying to figure out how I won this battle here.
KHC: [laughs] But the mayor kept saying, "You’ve got to stay there. I won’t take you back."

DGM: He told me he just wanted me to stay there for two weeks, just to get the academy started. And I had to go out and buy my own first issue, and by God, my gun was $198, and my uniform. So I must have put out about—I don’t know, about six, seven hundred dollars buying my first issue, of which he said, "You’ll be taken care of."

And anyway, back then they didn’t have any women, so all of the uniforms are men. And men didn’t have any butts, and they were all six feet tall, so here they are trying to tailor a man’s pant onto me. And I weighed, when I started the job, 119 pounds soakin’ wet. So they’re trying to tailor the shirts. They had to cut the sleeves off because the sleeves, even the shortest sleeved shirt was too long. The collar, if you look at a picture of me, the collar is too big. My neck was too small. I mean, I looked like Clarabelle the Clown in that uniform. So anyway, I sat in the academy and I was doing well, and after two weeks, I’m ready to go back [to my city office].

The mayor calls me into his office and says, “Can you stay two more weeks? The judge may think something’s up if you come out after two weeks.” So I said okay. So I go back for two more weeks, and at the end of a month—I mean, I’m doing well. I’m passing all the tests. We’re building this camaraderie. They give me no special privileges. They held the academy in the National Guard Armory. They didn’t have any women’s bathrooms. There weren’t any women over there. So I had to share a locker room with
twenty-one men. Anytime I had to go in the bathroom, they’re yelling, “Woman in the hole!” and all kinds of things that they probably wouldn’t get by today with.

And I had to change. They’d send me in and I had to change using five minutes before the rest of the guys came in to get out for PT [physical training], and then at the end of PT, they’d work me down close to the door so that when they blew the whistle for dismissal, I’d be the first one to go in. I had to go in there, and my job was to turn all the water on, so by the time they got there, there was hot water, and I’m taking these cold showers. Then I had to hurry up and go to the locker room, get my basic clothes on and finish dressing in the classroom while all the men from my group go in to take their shower and get dressed. And that was what we worked on how we got through that PT part.

Then like I say, at the end of the month, I was doing well, and I thought, “Well, you know, I don’t want this job, but maybe there’s a woman that wants it and so maybe I should stay to the end of the twenty-one week academy.”

So that was what I did, and I did everything. I was passing everything except the gun. I couldn’t shoot a gun. I didn’t have a clue about a gun. Nobody in my house shot guns. We didn’t have a gun at home. My Dad wasn’t a hunter. And so I was having a terrible time trying to shoot this gun. In fact, folks used to say, “The best place to stand when she’s firing is in front of her,
because she ain’t gonna hit ya!” And Sergeant Jim Charmole, who was the range officer at that time, towards the end—I was at the top of my class and doing all the academics and defensive driving and investigation and stuff like that, but I couldn’t hit anything. So he started taking his lunch hours and taking his lunch and coming over to the range with me and working with me, and on the last day that I could have possibly qualified before they were gonna kick me out of the academy, I finally shot a .75. So before I got back to the academy, they had called over to tell them I passed. So when I walked in, all of my academy mates were standing up and clapping, because by that time we had built a camaraderie up, and you wanted everybody to succeed. So that was kind of a moving moment in the academy.

And at the end of the academy, I thought, “Well, now for twenty-one weeks I’ve been running around dealing with these crazy guys.” I didn’t have any bullets in my gun. You don’t get to drive any squad car with the red lights, so I thought, “Well, let me go on out in this field training so I can drive the squad car and put real bullets in my gun and just say I’ve done this.” As it turned out, in the meantime, the guys that were in the academy
was calling back to their uncles and brothers and nephews and everyone else that was over there saying, "Listen, she's okay. She did everything we did. She didn't get any breaks."

They didn't give me any breaks. So anyway, [you] have to give the Department credit. They honestly tried to pick some FTO officers that were going to try to at least give me a chance and not dump me. And Jim Gillette, Kenny Shepherd. I had some just really hardnosed FTO's [Field Training Officer.] Kenny Shepherd, he was hard. He was a Detroit cop that had lost his partner and I'm working with him over in Mt. Airy Projects, and I get out of the car. There's a big riot going on and I forget my baton and I've gotta get my baton and I'm getting out there, and he's telling me that—he's trying to be protective of me. And I'm trying to tell him—because he already lost a partner in Detroit. He didn't want to lose another one. He used to always tell me that in the car. I said, "You aren't gonna lose me. I can take care of myself." He didn't know I was a tomboy and could fight and—they were swinging chains and stuff, it turned out to be a signal thirteen, so all kinds of squad cars came and we're out there fighting, and I was holding my own in the battle, and so that kind of gave him a little bit of more faith in me at that time.

34 Mt. Airy Homes was built in 1954 - 1956 between Pennsylvania Avenue Mr. Airy Street, Jackson Street, and L'Orient Street. This public low-income family housing project is run by the Public Housing Agency of the City of Saint Paul.

35 "Signal 13" is a police code for "send help, send all the help you can immediately."
Jim Gillette, we had a guy that got ran over by the train and the joke in my academy, that everyone will tell you, my weakest thing was dead people. I did not like dead people. I would get called to a DOA and I’d be in shock, because I hadn’t accepted death. McCutcheon actually sent me to two death education classes, trying to get me to understand that these people are dead and these are the least people that are going to hurt you. And it wasn’t so much hurting me from them as me hurting myself trying to stay away from them. But I had some of the most gory suicides, where guys took shotguns and blew their heads off. A guy took a gun and he was cleaning it and ended up blowing his head off. He put it up to his head and his wife’s sitting across the breakfast table—dinner table—from him, and he pulls the trigger and there’s a round in the gun. He blows his head off. His body is still alive, so the medics have to haul him, but he has no head. And his wife is just looking at them. She’s in shock, and Sergeant Joey Renteria was my sergeant then, and I was coming into the room and Joey said, “Debbie.” Because he knew how I was. He said, “Debbie, you got to go outside. I cannot deal with you and this woman [Laughs] and this body that’s breathin’ and stuff going out here.” But I worked Rice Street for sixteen years.

KHC: I want to stop here. And I want us to come back and talk about the police career. Can we do that?