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VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: TWENTIETH CENTURY RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

NARRATOR: DR. GRACE E. HARRIS

INTERVIEWER: KATHRYN COLWELL HILL

Place:	Grace Harris Leadership Institute	No. of CDs: 1
	West Franklin Street	No. of tracks: 1
	Virginia Commonwealth University	Length of interview: 68 minutes
Date:	November 29, 2006	Interview: 1 of 1

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Introductions

Kathryn Colwell Hill: Today is November 29th and this is an interview with Doctor Grace Harris. She is the interviewee and I am the interviewer, Kathy Colwell Hill. We are at the Grace Harris Leadership Institute on Franklin Street here at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Harris, hello, and thank you so much!

Grace E. Harris: Good morning, it is good to meet you!

KCH: It is nice to meet you and it goes without saying that your reputation precedes you; it is an honor.

GEH: Well, I have a long history with VCU as you know.

KCH: Yes you do. That will lead into one of the questions later, your long tenure. Just now, as you and I were briefly discussing oral histories, you said that you had a cousin at Virginia State who had done some ancestral research and oral history interviews and that some of those were archived in the Library of Congress, due to the efforts of another relative. That is where I would like to start the interview, [ancestral history], your youth, maiden name, your parents' names and a bit about their professions. If you could sketch out for us what your early youth and education was like I know that you as a social worker, believe that those early formative years are critical.

0:01:40 Early Childhood

GEH: Very much so. I'm pleased to do that and I thought that would be a beginning question.

I was born in a little town in south side Virginia, Halifax, Virginia. I am one of seven children, six girls and one boy. I'm the third child. My parents and grandparents were teachers and preachers. So, when I talk with my leadership group—we do a session with a little bit about my background—I always say that I come from a family of teachers and preachers. Actually, my great-grandfather was the founder of a Baptist church in Halifax County, Virginia and both of my parents were teachers. My father was a science teacher in the high school there, which was until the 1970s a segregated school. My mother was an elementary school teacher. My maternal grandparents were also [teachers and preachers]. My grandmother was a teacher, an elementary school teacher, and my grandfather on my mother's side was a minister. My father's family was also educated

professionally. My father held graduate degrees, as well, in science. He always told us that he wanted to be either a dentist or a doctor but he got married and had to work, had children. He ended up being a teacher, which was fine.

KCH: He and your mother's name, your maiden name.

GEH: Yes, my maiden name is Edmondson, E-d-m-o-n-d-s-o-n. My mother's maiden name is Ewell, E-w-e-l-l. The story goes that we were the decedents of a white family in the area whose name was named Edmonds and we took the name Edmondson, which I think is somewhat standard for the decedents of slaves who took the name of the white master family, in some way or another.

We were all expected to go to college and we all did. My sisters and my brother are all professional people. The college of choice for five of us was Hampton Institute, then. My mother and grandmother are graduates of Virginia Union University. One of my sisters attended Virginia Union and one attended Central State College in Ohio, in Wilberforce, Ohio. That was because of a teacher at our school who influenced at least one of us to go there.

0:04:58      Family emphasis on Community Service

We had a very family-oriented childhood and we did things together. We had chores, were expected to help one another. It was a good, *good* upbringing that we had and not just the immediate family but cousins and uncles. One of our uncles was very involved in what could be described as the beginnings of the civil rights movement at that time in that county. He helped us to think about community involvement and making changes, helping to make sure that we didn't just make changes for ourselves but for the community at-large and for where we lived. I think some of those roots also influenced me to go into social work.

I was always a good student. I was the valedictorian of my high school class. When I went to Hampton University, I was a good student there and was graduated with highest honors, one of three students who had that distinction. I've been fortunate to have that background of education and support from family.

KCH: You were part of a large family, which gave you a tremendous sense of belonging I assume.

GEH: Absolutely, and we still do. We have family reunions; in fact, we had one this past summer. We do it every two years. That's another way of keeping the family together. The decedents of my mother's grandmother and grandfather are pretty much the ones involved in that family reunion.

KCH: The Ewells?

GEH: The Ewells who were Colemans. It is called the Coleman family reunion. The grandfather that started the church, he was a Coleman.

KCH: —the grandfather who started the Baptist church in the Halifax area?

GEH: Correct. The Piney Grove Baptist Church.

KCH: The cousin that you mentioned who did the oral history interviews that are archived, under what names are those interviews archived?

GEH: I'm not positive, but she was a Coleman. She was the daughter of my grandmother's youngest brother. She and her sister and brother were more our age, were more like friends. They were more like first cousins rather than second cousins. In fact, they were more like sisters and a brother. We continue that relationship, very closely.

KCH: The important roles, when one looks back at your history, are Coleman—is that—

GEH: Coleman, C-o-l-e-m-a-n, and Edmondson, E-d-m-o-n-d-s-o-n, and Ewell, E-w-e-l-l. The Ewells and the Colemans were my mother's and Edmonson, of course, is my father's name.

0:8:44            Education at Grinnell College

KCH: I know that in one of the articles I read about you—an interview that you gave for *Style Weekly Magazine*, I believe it was 1994—it mentions your experience at Grinnell College, that you went to Grinnell as an exchange student, in 1952.

GEH: Yes, yes.

KCH: —and that that was the first time that you had observed such a two-tiered society, racially, I think predominantly. I am starting to understand that statement a little better based upon what you've said about your youth. You really grew in this huge community, a supportive community, which did you—

GEH: I suggested a community of family, and friends, but a segregated, black, situation.

KCH: Okay, that clarifies it. You mentioned that some of your relatives were involved in the early civil rights activities, so at a young age that seed had been planted—the contribution to the community was also an extension of civil rights for people, for opportunities.

GEH: Oh absolutely, yes, yes. As citizens of the community, we had a responsibility to make changes where changes were obviously needed.

KCH: Then having that orientation—looking at a fairly young age at how to impact community—the Grinnell experience, if you put it in that context of suddenly being in a predominantly white community that had given little thought, probably, to racial equality, because there weren't African Americans in the community—,

GEH: Right, right. Yes, it was quite an eye-opening experience; I guess one would say. Actually, my interest in going to Grinnell, I don't think, was founded in some of the reasons that we have been talking about. I think it was founded more in the interest and that it was an honor to do that. The opportunity to go was the reason that I applied. It wasn't so much the bigger issues of societal change and issues of race, but going to a prestigious school and having that experience.

I was one of five African Americans at the school at that time. My roommate was from Minnesota. Recently we have reestablished contact with one another. We email each other and talk by phone. She looked me up. I think when she called, actually, no; she sent me a letter, a long letter. She sent it to Hampton University, to the alumni office. She thought that they might know how to track me down. I don't need to go into all of the details of that other than to say that it has been just wonderful to reconnect. It was around the Fiftieth anniversary, I think. So now, I am on the Grinnell College list of alums. (Laughs)

KCH: I bet you are!

GEH: Of course, they send notices about funds. (Laughter) So, that has been good.

KCH: The opportunity to go to Grinnell—it is such a fine school—. I grew up in Nebraska and so I am very familiar with the Midwest attitudes and really the lack of awareness, often, regarding racial issues because there are not enough of any one

minority to be (pause) a force to be reckoned with. I guess that is the only way I can say it. There is often a real naiveté on their part.

How did that [time at Grinnell] then influence you? All of a sudden, you were in an environment that was very different. How did that change your thinking in how to impact community? Was there a piece of you that said, “Okay, my place should be here in the Midwest.” Did it strike you that the issues were much larger, maybe, than you had perceived? Or, were you hopeful because you saw other ways of approaching the problem?

I’m not phrasing the question very well.

GEH: I think I understand your question. What I’m thinking is that I’m not sure that I thought very much about those bigger issues at that point. I was a college student. I had a very wonderful opportunity to study and grow personally and academically. I think those were my primary goals in going and being there.

There was one black family, in the community, who provided some comfort with meals and by inviting black students to their home, that kind of thing. But it really was not a tense situation or a difficult one from a racial perspective because we were all there studying and growing and trying to have a little fun. I think I fit in very well in that regard.

KCH: This may actually highlight some of my thoughts before meeting with you. I based these last questions, last line of thought process, on an article I read, which stressed that that Grinnell experience had really changed your focus, or was that interviewers take on that story. What I would really like to have come out of our time together is what you would like to convey about your experience at VCU. In other words, an oral history interview should not be a time when your thoughts are interpreted through somebody else’s lens.

GEH: Yes.

KCH: I think that's right where we are now! (Laughs)

GEH: That is an interesting point to make and for me to think about. I have to be very direct and thoughtful in my comments so that there's no room for misinterpretation. (Laughs) Well, maybe there is room but at least I’ll have given it my best shot.

KCH: I would think over time—and you have given many interviews—that it is often an exercise in being careful. Do you know what I mean?

GEH: Yes, exactly. Yes, because things can be so misinterpreted if one doesn't have an appreciation for some of the pieces of one's life that helped define who we are.

What was I to say about VCU? Is that a part of—?

KCH: Oh, definitely. It would be valuable is if you would share your experiences and insights as to the evolution of VCU. It has gone from a segregated school to one that has a large minority population and an increased number of minorities on the faculty. I know that part of that is definitely attributable to you.

GEH: Well of course my history at VCU goes back to when it was Richmond Professional Institute (RPI)—well, part of it was Richmond Professional Institute. Of course the fact that I was not able to enter graduate school here during the period of massive resistance here in Virginia and in education in the South. But I was saying to one of the leadership groups quite recently that I actually love VCU. There is something about it that just resonates with who I am and I with it. That sets the stage for whatever I would say and that love has grown over the years. It was when I joined the faculty that I really began to really think about how I felt about the University and how I fit within it.

0:18:30 Social Work Career: positions in community and at VCU

KCH: Right. You had been working in the Richmond community—is that right—with the Friends—.

GEH: —in social work, both with the State Department of Welfare and Institutions and then with Friends Association and eventually with the Community Action Program. I came here in 1967 when it was still RPI; it became VCU in '68. I guess some of the things I have said about VCU are there because I saw it as an opportunity to help make some changes here, to be a part of the growth and development of a new institution. That has pretty much been my history with the university. First, as teaching faculty in the School of Social Work that gave me the opportunity to help other people understand some of the issues of race and segregation and where we needed to grow, not only as a group but also as individuals.

The teaching experience was good. It was wonderful. I never thought about being a teacher. (Laughs) I don't know what I thought about being. Some people have



said, “Did you plan your career? Did you say that you were going to do this?” I can't recall ever saying that that was what I wanted to do. (Laughs) I never thought I'd be sitting in this room talking to you today! But, the teaching was also part of being a social worker, so the two things came together. In fact, my first position was not only teaching faculty in the classroom but I had what we called field placement, where the students did their practicum, and I was the supervisor of those students in the public school system in Richmond. That broader experience of community and social change and social action and being very much a part of the community—I've been on so many boards I could not name them—VCU gave me that opportunity and gave me the ability to contribute more than just what I knew from an academic background. The teaching here was the beginning of my commitment to the university and a commitment to making the university and community partners in coming together in a better way.

0:21:23 VCU and Community relations

KCH: Did you find that there was somewhat of a rift there [between the university and community]?

GEH: I don't know if a rift, it just wasn't there, the relationship. I think that in some programs such as social work, programs that have a teaching practicum experience, out of education and medicine, [these were] professional programs where you do have some relationship with the community. The ones that did that the best, in those early days, would have been social work and education.

KCH: Yes.

GEH: Over time, and certainly President Trani's coming to the university as president, there was that opportunity to continue that commitment of bringing the community and the university much closer together. The job that he hired me for—

He tells people that I was his first hire, and I think that is accurate, but there were some others that he talked to. But when he came—I never will forget—it was a Saturday morning and he wanted to meet me at a hotel, at like 7:30 in the morning for breakfast, to talk about the position that was going to be open, it was the Vice-Provost for Continuing Studies and Public Service. I tell everybody that that is the best job that I ever had at VCU.

KCH: It sounds like a good fit!

GEH: It was, it was! It was just what I wanted to do and it was at the right time, and with the right person in the leadership role. That brought things together for me professionally in terms of my own professional background in social work.

KCH: At the time that President Trani came, were you Dean in the School of Social Work?

GEH: Yes.

KCH: And you had helped that program grow significantly, from what I understand.

GEH: Yes, we did, not only in numbers but also in different locations within the Commonwealth. We established off-campus programs. Actually, Elaine Rothenberg, who had been the dean prior to me and was one of my mentors here, had created that idea and had started a program in northern Virginia. We expanded the northern Virginia program and then we went out to southwest Virginia, in the Roanoke area as well. That was really a good move for the school.

KCH: In expanding the program, was your goal to have accessibility for students in those areas or was it more for the practicum experience, a broader field experience for the existing students?

GEH: It was to have a full-fledged program in those areas of the state, to have, as you said, accessibility and to make that possible for people. At that time there were—I'm not sure if Norfolk State had established their program at that point or not, I don't think so—. At any rate, we were the only school to move north and west. Since then, Radford University has established a program.

KCH: Was that a charge, so to speak, that movement outside the Richmond metropolitan area that was legislated?

GEH: No, it was initiated within the university, within the school. Then, as I say, Elaine Rothenberg, the dean at that time, was very creative in making that happen and I followed in her footsteps. We grew and expanded, in locations as well as numbers. The northern Virginia program is still alive and well. (Note: George Mason University has since established an undergraduate and master's program.)

That's a little bit about VCU and what I have done here in the early years with the school, and then I moved into the vice provost position.

0:25:58 Career as Vice Provost: Significant issues

KCH: The vice provost position, I assume that one of your first responsibilities was to develop objectives and goals and a mission statement and that type of thing. Did you have that type of initiative?

GEH: To some extent. It was somewhat easy because President Trani came with ideas about community outreach. One of the programs that he really was excited about the use of faculty in the community. We established what we called the Community Service Associates Program, where faculty were on leave to work in the community project or agency. That was one piece; the other thing that he was very clear about was to establish relationships with community groups and so we organized community groups around the university on both campuses. Especially at that time, there was a lot of resistance about the university's growth and moving toward—

KCH: That's exactly what I was going to ask you about! There must have been those who thought you had a schizophrenic personality because on one hand you have the relationships and on the other hand, there is this construction emphasis.

GEH: We organized a lot of community groups around the university and much of my efforts in that period involved working with those groups. I was just reading an invitation of a recognition program for Barbara Abernathy.

KCH: Oh yes, Barbara!

GEH: She was one of my starch allies (laughs) and supporters and we built so many good programs for the Carver neighborhood. This invitation was about something that's, either this week or next. I hope it hasn't gone; the invitation is on my desk!

Anyway, that was the aspect of reaching out and involving the community that Dr. Trani was committed to. He called it his "C's," the letter C, community service associates, community groups, and—several other programs that I did with him.

KCH: I'm familiar with the Carver/VCU initiative, were there others?

GEH: There was a community group around the Fan and, south of the campus, with the Oregon Hill community. Then we had a community group related to the MCV campus that involved more business and professional types than just the local citizens.

So, the outreach was to the business community as well as the residential community people.

KCH: I have to smile a bit because, when I think about the communities that border VCU, you have some unique communities: one predominantly African American and lower income, and you had a more affluent Fan community, and again Oregon Hill with a very different kind of make-up.

GEH: —and, at that time, predominantly white, and then the MCV program was very different. That was much of my work when I was in that position of vice provost.

KCH: How did you approach those meetings with the different populations? What was foremost in your mind as you thought about both seeking input and also moving towards change? Change being a healthy relationship.

GEH: I guess the social work skills helped a lot. One you allude to is that of listening, knowing what people were concerned about and their fears. I never will forget one of the ways that we addressed the Carver community around the question of their fears was that the president made a statement—and he lived up to it, we all did—that we would never go beyond a certain boundary into the community. That was a very practical statement that could be supported. Of course, the community service associates were putting our faculty out there to assist with projects and that was something very real. I think that those types of activities helped a lot so that people could begin to believe. Of course, there were the doubters and the naysayers and some of the meetings could be very difficult, but we tried to always tell the truth and be very direct and listen. That was the key to it and, later on, to provide some actual very specific services with faculty and programs. I know when we were looking to expanding the School of the Arts and we were looking at space on Marshall [Street], that was a difficult time. But we kept meeting, talking, and keeping the lines of communication open. When the dormitories were built, we committed to making services available in those facilities that could be used by the community.

KCH: Exactly.

GEH: I think that in working with groups you have to be very clear that you need to give something. We gave some very concrete things that were meaningful to the

community. The recreational facilities for the kids in the community were one of the things we pushed as part of our program.

KCH: Approximately how many years were you involved?

GEH: That period was—. Dr. Trani came in 1990 and that was when it all started. Of course, I moved from the vice provost position to provost in 1993 and so I wasn't in that job too long. But as provost I was able to support the continuing efforts that had started.

KCH: You had identified specific things that you had wanted to accomplish.

GEH: Exactly. And then that unit then reported to me as provost so I could very easily identify with the mission of the unit and the activities. Sue Ann Messner became head of that unit after I moved to provost position.

KCH: Were you ever conflicted, over the decisions that needed to be made? Your social work based values versus an institutional—.

GEH: Yes in the sense, that one's loyalties had to come into play. I always tried to be honest about the fact that I was a university person, that I represented the university, but that I was there to listen to the community as well, and that we hoped that together we could come up with some good answers. Barbara Abernathy was a key person in working with me because she was committed to being a part of the solution and that helped a lot. Many a day we sat in my office or the president's office just to have some good honest, open, discussions. So, that was good to have her in that leadership role because she was able to understand some of the issues that the university faced and we could listen to the perspective of the community. It wasn't always easy for her because she was representing views that said, "Let's work together with the university," and there were people who were saying, "We don't need to work together! We want to do it our way."

But she was able to hang in there and some good changes occurred over time. I think some of the best changes were that we were able to build more facilities on Broad Street and to open up so many of those facilities to community kids and adults. That was a good period in my life, in my career here at VCU.

KCH: As you look back over your career, it sounds as if that was one of the highlights as far as accomplishments.

GEH: Yes, that is very true; the other part of it was being the provost and being a part of so many changes that came about during that period.

0:36:29 Career as Provost: implementing change

KCH: Could you name some of those changes?

GEH: Well, one of the things that I do take a lot of credit for is increasing the diversity of the faculty, for women and minorities. And, being part of changing some of the policies and procedures that—I'm thinking specifically about our promotion and tenure policy, for example—that made it a better opportunity for a diverse type of faculty in our university. Not just the emphasis on research and scholarship, but looking at teaching and service in a much more complete way as you think about what is the role of faculty member. We had many good discussions and meetings around those issues and we did change our promotion and tenure policies. We established what we call collateral faculty positions within the university; that is that a person can teach and can make a contribution without being on tenure track. That opened up doors for many people who were more in the clinical area of teaching. For example, for a field liaison person the mission was more direct service. We tried to broaden the opportunities for faculty in the university and I feel good about having had a role in that.

KCH: It just occurred to me. Did RPI's conception as a School of Social Work—and then you had the School for the Arts—with an emphasis on careers that are not easily evaluated by quantitative measures—initially, RPI did not have an engineering school or a science department or some of those things—contribute to a thought process that has persisted through the years and made the university more open to some of these changes? Or, was it just time and people realized that the school needed to embrace people of different talents.

GEH: That's an interesting point you make and I hadn't thought about it, but I think you're absolutely right that the history, especially of RPI, was such that the focus was on practical experience, of social change, if you will, of doing and not just studying. The actual application of much of what was being studied was part of, certainly, the arts and social work on occasion.

I think that clearly has remained a principal in those schools and has spread to others as well. As the medical college merged with RPI and became VCU, clearly you have that clinical piece, that practical piece. All of that must have an impact on the character and the definition of Virginia Commonwealth University. It didn't start as a university that was committed solely to an academic focus and research focus.

KCH: There certainly are schools that have that technical focus

GEH: Exactly. Clearly that merger, I think, of the two campuses helped further define the university in a way different from some universities.

0:41:07      Merger of RPI and MCV

KCH: Could you talk a little bit about that merger and how that played out, the resistance, the fears, plus some of the excitement that was coming from it.

GEH: Clearly, it established a university. We were RPI, the arts school, (laughs) and MCV was its own institution with a lot of the prejudices and ways of doing things that were different from what RPI was all about. I think one of the most rewarding changes that I had seen with the merger has been not only the establishment of a major university but also the opportunity for MCV to change some of its views. I speak specifically about racial segregation when I say that.

People in Richmond of my generation all talk about the segregation and the humiliation and some of the bad things about MCV, and so to see that change over time has been one of the great things about the merger. To see President Trani come and make that a major focus of his administration: to bring about one University. We all laugh about what is the name! (Laughs) What am I supposed to say? Even now I wonder if I am supposed to say MCV campus or—.

KCH: And I think that for many residents of the Richmond area, we don't associate the university becoming VCU when it consolidated RPI with MCV, because MCV kept a separate identity for so long. It is only recently that I tie them together as closely as they actually were tied together.

GEH: Yes. I see that in the Leadership Institute that we have participants from both campuses and the hospital. Dr. Trani insisted that if we were going to have a program, that it would be a university-wide program. I think his insistence on making one University out of all of these distinct parts has been what I would see as his legacy.

KCH: A very critical one. And you have been at his side throughout all of this.

GEH: We have had some good times together! We had lunch recently and we were talking about some of the good times we've had together. As I was saying, it is about time for me to go home and sleep late!

KCH: Sometimes, when you went home at the end of the day, something had happened and you went, "Ah ha! We are getting there! This is something to rejoice over!" Could you identify any moments like that?

GEH: Interesting question. I think the engineering school probably would be one very outstanding example because we had many, many meetings with many different audiences. And I never will forget, one occasion when I was serving as acting president—he was out of the country—and I had to speak to city council about the engineering school. We were seeking funding from the localities as well as state revenue. I was really well prepared; I just knew that I had to be. And there was one woman on that city council who gave me a hard time. (Laughs) In the end, I got the money and that was fine. Then there were times with the state and dealing with funding from the state. There were editorials that we had to answer. It just—. It was challenging, and in some ways exciting. But, we were determined to win and I like a good (chuckles), a good fight!

KCH: What sustains you through those times? Is there a bit of you that is competitive?

GEH: Absolutely! I like to win if I think I'm right, and I assess very carefully with myself if I'm on the right track. I do my homework. I've always—. I say this to my leadership groups all the time that it is very important as a leader to know who you are and to develop your own personal qualities and style, but bottom line, and I guess this comes from a childhood, lifetime, with teachers, you have to *know* what you're talking about and I have always been very careful to do my homework.

I think that is an interesting statement. I always did my homework in school. (Laughter drowns out several sentences.)

KCH: When you said from the very beginning that you had ancestors that were preachers and teachers, I thought, "I wonder how that preacher piece of her might play



out?” Because a preacher often conveys information, a bit differently than a teacher does, at least in some respects. There is a passion.

GEH: I started to bring to you, to share with you, a booklet that one of my sisters made. She is on the faculty at the University of Connecticut, she's a PhD trained researcher. She thinks very differently than I, but I'm workin' on her (laughs)! Anyway, she did this booklet for our last family reunion and in the book is a sermon that my great-grandfather delivered when he started his church. I read that a lot because it inspires me. What he was able to convey about being, about having been a slave and having turned into such a *good* person. So I think the religious piece for me—the ministry piece—is how you treat your fellow man, or fellow person. And when you turn that into a very positive aspect of your own life, you are also helping the lives of others. That's how it works for me.

We aren't very active in the church but we do try to live our lives in such a way that we are making sure that we are good people. Good has many definitions, but I think you understand what I'm saying.

KCH: Yes, it would sound as though you have not neglected your spiritual side, that you feel that it is very much a part of you.

GEH: Yes.

0:50:23      Approach to life decisions

KCH: I wonder when you talked about the evolution of the person that is Dr. Grace Harris, did you at any point in time come to a crossroads and say, “What is appropriate now for me?” Did you find that there were a number of forks in that road? I know that you have children, which had to have influenced taking on professional responsibility. Of course, when asked to be the vice provost you know that that will impact your time and travel. I believe that I am addressing that to you as a woman.

GEH: There were several different challenges in how I could keep it all together, keep it going. I credit my husband, a lot, for being a partner in childcare, cooking dinner a lot of days and for being such a support in the daily things that have to get done. Sometimes I repeat, “Do I really want to DO this?” and “Is it fun?” because I do have a strong belief that on any job and in any position you have to have a little bit of fun. I tell people that there was never a day that I really did not want to come to work. I mean there

were days when I thought, “Oh my! How am I going to deal with this?” But I guess that that was my inner strength, to know that I had a responsibility. I’m a very responsible person. I do what I say I’m going to do and in doing it I try to have a good time too.

We built into our lives a lot of opportunities for good times. We travel a lot. We go to the Caribbean a lot and that is my favorite travel. We’ve traveled in Europe, Africa, and Asia. I’ve experienced those really good opportunities for personal growth and development and then developed a really global perspective about who I am as part of this world.

With that, I am going to divert for a minute and say that for Thanksgiving my grandson, who goes to school in Arizona—it’s an international program and he’s in 10th grade, it’s a boarding school—he brought home a fellow from South Korea and a girl from Montréal, Canada.

KCH: How interesting.

GEH: It was. It was. He and my daughter—my daughter is divorced, but she and my grandson travel a lot together—they have traveled almost all over the world.

I’ve had some good opportunities for using my professional life. I was on the board of Christian Children’s Fund for a long time and we did many trips to Central and South America, Europe, and Africa. So that was really great. I was reading the paper this morning in fact and they just appointed a new president for the Christian Children’s Fund.

Anyway, that one piece has not been too difficult for me because of the support system. I think that the most difficult part was when I was working on my doctorate and driving to UVA [University of Virginia] three days a week. That was really hard.

KCH: And they had asked you, if I recall, to redo some of your masters.

GEH: I had to get another masters. I had a master’s in social work and I had to get a master’s in sociology before I could take the PhD courses. But I was determined and it turned out fine. In fact, they offered me a job teaching when I finished.

KCH: And how old were your children during that time?

GEH: Oh, they were kids. The oldest was eight or nine, with ballet lessons and swimming lessons, and the youngest was about two or three.

But the most difficult part of it was just getting the homework done. I had to get it done and maybe this was the control part of me. I made a decision and I set aside a day to study—I didn't go out. It was like going to work. I ate my breakfast and I locked myself in a room, or went somewhere else. But I studied full-time for that solid day. I'm pretty well organized. I'm not as organized as I used to be. I've gotten lax.

I take my time now. I think being organized and having support helped me a lot as a woman. We're not that big on whose role it is to do this. We share what we do.

KCH: Where did you meet your husband?

GEH: in College, at Hampton.

KCH: Was he also from the Hampton area?

GEH: Yes, he is from Newport News, the tidewater area.

We used to go down there a lot. We bought a little house on the beach and that's our relaxation time. We went down for Thanksgiving in fact. And in fact, the weather around Thanksgiving was magnificent. We'd just sit there and watch the Chesapeake Bay. That's how I relax.

0:57:29      The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute

KCH: Some of the characteristics that you speak of that have helped you to be a very successful person, both personally and influencing the broader community, are those the basis that created the Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute? How did this institute come about?

GEH: Well it was a surprise to me. When I—. I guess during the last year when I was provost—I had made the decision to retire that year—Dr. Trani and some of his staff in the president's office talked about it. It was actually his idea and he presented it to the board of visitors. It's in the board book so I guess it's still good. I wasn't quite sure if I was wanting to do it. I had to think about it.

KCH: Even though it is named after you?

GEH: Exactly, so it's been really good. It has been very much a joy to be a part of it. I just meet so many people through the institute. It is really a treat. They send me notes and call me and I get to see them advance and develop; that's the best part of it.

KCH: Absolutely.

GEH: Yesterday I went to the Wilder Symposium Program. I saw so many of my graduates, who are in positions at the university or outside the university and are doing really well, and they shared their gratefulness. In the end, I am very pleased that it happened. I was saying to Dr. Trani recently that it's time for me to think about the future of the institute though. We're going to sit down and talk about that.

KCH: The Institute has existed now for how many years?

GEH: Since 1999. We had our first class to start in the fall 2000, and so our first graduates were in the spring of 2001.

KCH: How much is the institute dependent on you and your personality and is that part of that discussion [with Trani]?

GEH: Yes, that's the part that I think about. How will it continue without me? And, not just in the next few years but after I am no longer here. We said we were going to do some evaluations and some research, put some things maybe on tapes. I'm having my doubts about that. But you know how it just keeps moving along and you just don't do those things. But just this year, I've been thinking of the need to do that and thinking about a time period when I would not be so involved in the ongoing administration of the program but maybe just available sometimes to give my little talk. We call it "A Conversation with Grace."

KCH: What I've read about you, it was one of the things that really made me smile, because it talked about how you approach people as friends. You are provost of the university but you greet someone as though they have been a friend of yours for a period of time. That is your demeanor, but when it gets down to the business how one is reminded of how organized you are. You have that wonderful combination of bridging. That is something that you cannot put on paper.

GEH: Thank you. Right, right, yes.

KCH: It is based on character development.

1:02:30      Influence of Aunt Grace Ewell Harris

GEH: Well there is one person in my family whom I did not mention at all, and that's unusual, because I am named after a woman named Grace Harris. She's my mother's sister. My husband says all the time that I married him so that I would have the last name of Harris. (Laughs)

KCH: Oh. I was trying to figure that out in my mind.

GEH: She was a Ewell and she married a Harris. I was named after her and so now, I am Grace Harris. But, she was an outstanding woman of her time, too. She was the first black woman to have a job in the State Department of Education in Virginia. She traveled a lot around the state. She didn't have children so my sisters, brother, and I were really close to her. And, of course, as her namesake, she was especially close with me. She was a very forceful woman so I guess some of that other side of me—. She wasn't very gentle. The gentle piece I get from my mother and the forceful piece I get from my aunt. She was truly a professional. She always looked good and I just admired her to the utmost. So that some of that understanding and appreciation for knowing what you are doing and doing your homework and being prepared was the influence that she had on me.

She was very fair skinned. She could actually pass as a white person and we had many funny stories about how she used that when it became necessary. I started to say that she was very practical-minded. She wasn't doing it to make any kind of statement. She was just doing it so that she could have a hamburger if she were hungry.

KCH: When you said that she was a ranking person in the Virginia State Department of—.

GEH: Education.

KCH: Education. What year would that have been?

GEH: That was probably the 50s.

KCH: While we still would have had segregated schools—

GEH: Oh, absolutely.

KCH: —all the way across the state. That would have been a difficult task at times, as a representative.

GEH: Oh, yes. Well, as the Supreme Court decision of '54 came into being some of her responsibilities broadened in a way. In the beginning, I'm sure that—in the very early years of her professional career—she probably was assigned only schools that were segregated, only black schools. But, over time, she was part of an integrated professional staff. She had gotten her masters degree, a very similar story to mine about going out of state for graduate education. She got her masters at Columbia University in New York

and that was always something to look up to. She set the tone for some of the things that I wanted to do.

KCH: And you began your graduate program at Boston College is that right?

GEH: Boston University. I was there during that period when the school was very well known for its Theology Program. Martin Luther King was there at that time.

KCH: At the same time?

GEH: Yes. Some of the well-known theologians of that era studied at Boston University. So that was quite another kind of dramatic piece of my life.

KCH: Yes. It would have been and how inspiring.

GEH: Yes,

KCH: I can imagine that if you were at all timid about taking on the challenge of making a difference in the community, at that point in time you were surrounded by people—.

GEH: —who had that same goal. So, that's a little piece about my aunt that I had forgotten to tell you and that I wanted to share.

1:08:00      Thoughts regarding writing memoirs

KCH: Have you written memoirs at all?

GEH: (Laughs) Well, when I did my doctoral work at the University of Virginia my dissertation was on the life and works of E. Franklin Frazier. E. Franklin Frazier was a black American sociologist who studied at the University of Chicago and later became dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work and eventually his last years were at Howard University in Washington. I did my dissertation on his life and works, so from that I did a small piece from the dissertation work.

But I've not done my story other than some articles. There is a nice article in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, I think that is it is *Black Issues in Higher Education*. I think they still publish that. That was a nice piece. There have been the newspaper pieces and *Style* did that article when I was in the School of Social Work.

There's a young woman who is now back at the University and doing some work with my office and the president's office, named Kelly Miles. Kelly was my assistant when I was provost and she used to tell me. I needed to write my story. She's a marvelous writer. She finished UVA with her degree in English. Then, when she worked for me,

she decided to go into social work and she did her social work degree here, then she did her PhD work in public policy. She's been around in various jobs and recently came back to VCU. She's doing some work with me and with the president. And she's been telling me for years, (whispers) "I would love to do your book. I would love to do your book."

KCH: It sounds as though with her unique combination of education and skills—.

GEH: And she's become a friend, too. She's really become a wonderful young woman. So I don't know, I've thought about it and I have lots of the articles in boxes somewhere. There are some actually in this hallway. I don't know if it's a book. Is it a book?

KCH: I think it would be a wonderful book. I truly do. It seems as though role models are critical in our society. How does one continue the legacy, the personality of someone like yourself who's considered a role model to many different kinds of people?

GEH: Michelle (Dr. Harris's assistant) is taking a class in women's studies and she asked me to speak to her group a couple of weeks ago. There were I guess thirty or so women in the class and two men. But the women were very, I think, inspired. When I do my "Conversation with Grace," I feel some of that as well, especially from working women who are mothers and wives and sisters and children of aging parents and all of that. But there is a story there I suppose. I enjoy doing that and I feel good doing that. I think it is good to share some of the experiences and some of the values.

KCH: It is a very different perspective for you, as I think about it. You are continuing though your "Conversations with Grace" to work toward that goal of enhancing other people's abilities and broadening people's perceptions of the community. But, you are doing just though examples from your life. It's a very different kind of experience to do it based on who I am and what I've experienced. I can see where it might be difficult, with your humility, to step across that line and say, "This is a life that can exemplify...."

GEH: I guess in many ways I am really not a very public person even though I have been in the public a lot and represented the University. It's always kind of at a professional level and it is the personal piece that is still—that I am still uncertain about how much I want to share.

KCH: I think that is a very valid way to look at it. My guess is that part of the reason that you have been so successful is that the personal piece, your own ego, has not been a part of, has not been evident, in the challenges you've taken on. You've been passionate about the cause.

GEH: I think that is very nice of you to say and it is probably very true.  
(Laughs) I'm not so humble that I can't recognize it! It's a nice compliment, but also based on reality.

KCH: Maybe that is a good place to end today. If we could, let us talk a little bit [off tape] about another conversation and what specific areas we might cover. Is that all right? Is there anything more that you would like to say today?

GEH: No, that is fine.

1:08:43 End of CD

*End of Interview #1*