BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Beverly Guy-Sheftall
Writer & Activist
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Interviewed by Sara. W
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ON SCREEN TEXT:
Makers: Women Who Make America
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:
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SARA W.:
I wanna start out by talking a little bit about your childhood and your upbringing.

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, in the Jim Crow South in the '50s. Was born in 1946. I grew up with basically educated parents. My father taught in the Memphis public schools, and so did my mother, actually, before she decided to stop doing that and become an accountant at a college. And there were three of us girls. And when I was, I think, in the eighth grade, my mother and father separated. So I grew up in a intact family till I was about 11.

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But my father lived right around the corner from us, and continued to take us to school. So it was- he was not an absent father in any way.

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SARA W.:
What were each of your parents like? I know you called your mom the first feminist you ever knew. What- Can you explain that?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
This is something I think I realized in retrospect, the feminist part. I think I always knew she was a "race" woman, in the sense that she constantly was telling us about how ridiculous Jim Crow and Southern racial etiquette was. So I grew up hearing a lot about race. And because my maternal ancestors

were from Mississippi, I grew up hearing about the horrors of being black in Mississippi.

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And because after my mother and father separated, we moved with my grandparents, who also came from a very small place in Mississippi, Canton, which was pretty toxic. I grew up hearing about race. Now, my father was more urban, grew up in Memphis, and don't recall him talking as much about race. But my grandfather was a Baptist minister, very active in the Civil Rights Movement.

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So I grew up in a family where race was really talked about. I sort of realized in retrospect, that my mother was- had very progressive gender ideas. Because when I was in the eighth grade, she petitioned the Memphis public schools to keep me from typing in the ninth grade- I mean, keep me from taking home economics in the ninth grade. And argued that I should, since I was college bound, take typing, which would be more useful.

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SARA W.:
What did that teach you? I mean, what did-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

Well, the first thing it did, of course, was embarrass me. Because I ended up being the only… Very young in the ninth grade and had to sit on pillows to get really up to the typewriter, so this was really quite embarrassing. So at that point in the eighth grade or ninth grade—and I was two years younger than my classmates, I would've been 12—all I could think about was that my mother is causing more difficulty.

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But in retrospect, when I got to be older, I understood what a feminist, activist stance that was- she took in the '50s, actually. In the '50s.

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SARA W.:
What did they expect for your future? How were-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Oh, they all were my entire family always expected that everybody in the family would go to college, and definitely work for a living. I mean, that's what the women mostly did in my family. So we would graduate from high school, go to college and become meaningfully employed. Probably be public school teachers, which is what most southern African American women who were educated did at that point. Marry and have children. So I think that was the vision.

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SARA W.:

You mentioned your family coming from out of this, sort of, very steeped in sort of the indignities of this Jim Crow South. You as a child, did you feel exposed directly to those?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

Oh yeah, there's no way to grow up in the South in the '50s and not feel that. I mean, you go to- You sit on the back of the bus. You go to the zoo on Thursdays. If you go to the movies downtown, you sit in the balcony and walk lots of steps up. If you go and get a milkshake, you go in- go to the back of the place. You… I mean, there's certain places that you just simply couldn't go.

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You couldn't go swimming except in segregated pools. You couldn't be buried except in segregated cemeteries. So there was no way to escape rigid racial segregation. You lived primarily in Black neighborhoods. You went to Black public schools. You could not go to public colleges in Tennessee. So there was literally no way not to understand what racial segregation meant. You went to Black churches.

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SARA W.:

What kind of student were you?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Oh, I was an excellent student. I mean… And my grandmother was an elementary school teacher, my father was a teacher, my mother was a teacher. So education in the family was really, really stressed. My uncle was president of a college in Memphis, so… And it was just normal, I mean, it wasn't anything special. So you do well in school, you make good grades, and then you go to college.

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SARA W.:
So, how did you choose Spelman as an undergraduate?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I didn't choose Spelman. My mother chose Spelman as an undergraduate. I graduated from high school when I was 15, because I had skipped a grade and had two grades in the same year. So my mother- I was 16 by the time I was to go to Spelman, but my mother chose Spelman because she felt like I was young, inexperienced. And she picked this women's college that she knew was- had a- very heavy values called something like- in *loco parentis*.

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So she chose Spelman 'cause she thought I would be sheltered, and she probably also thought I wouldn't be exposed to boys very much at this women's college. So my mother chose Spelman. I wanted to go to Howard University in D.C., and she thought that that urban, big environment was a little much for her 16-year-old daughter.

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SARA W.:
How did you sort of first develop your interest in women's studies?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
When I went to college, which was '62 to '66, there were no women's studies courses. No Black studies courses either. So… after graduating from Spelman, I went to Wellesley College, which is another women's college in the Northeast. And I had what was my first women's studies course, though I didn't know that's what it was. It was a course called Women in Drama. And so I think that if I had to specify a particular moment, it probably was taking that women's studies course.

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But probably more significant was that I came back to Atlanta for graduate school at Atlanta University. I was pursuing a master's degree in English. And I started reading feminist literary criticism, because I decided I wanted to do a master's thesis on Faulkner's treatment of women in his major novels. So I

started reading that early feminist literary criticism that was coming out in the late '60s.

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And there was one book in particular that I remember called *Sexual Politics* that was very important. So the- Doing the thesis on Faulkner's treatment of women in his major novels is what led me to reading feminist literary criticism.

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SARA W.:

So if you could help give us some context, at this point, what constituted the canon for an English major and graduate student like yourself?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

Well, the canon was all European, all male. I mean, one of the reasons I ended up doing Faulkner was because I was interested in American literature, and so I chose a so-called major writer. But the canon in the '60s was European male writers, American male writers… Whitman… I mean, they were all male and they were all European.

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All of the courses that I took- Most of the courses that I took in the master's program were British lit courses, most of whom were male authors. And the

American lit courses that I took were mostly White and male. So I had the old, standard, predictable, Euro-American male literary canon.

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SARA W.:
What were the texts that you wanted to be reading and teaching?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I don't- I'm not even sure I knew what I wanted to be reading or teaching. By the time I came to Spelman to teach in 1971 in the English department, I did know that I wanted to disrupt the Euro-American male literary canon that I had been subjected to, exposed to, subjected to. And these were women's studies courses, though I wouldn't have necessarily called 'em that then. The first women's studies program in the country is 1969, 1970.

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So I came to teach at Spelman in 1971. And I started teaching- I designed two courses. Images of Women in Lit and Images of Women in the Media. This was in the very early '70s. Not ever having had any women's studies courses. And then I taught two really important courses in terms of my own political and intellectual development, and it was a mini course on Black women writers. Too many courses on Black women writers.

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This was also the point at which I decided to, with a colleague, publish that first Black women's literature text, *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Lit*. So I was clearly trying very hard to expose my students to a different literary canon than I had been exposed to. So I was interested in them reading women writers, reading Black women writers, but I was also interested in them understanding how women characters were treated in the major writings of males.

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SARA W.:
So what were some of those new texts that you were introducing them to or that went into…

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Well, I taught a course on Black women novelists, and I taught a course on a Black women autobiographer. So I taught them, actually, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* I taught Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, I taught Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which I had never heard of when I was an undergraduate English major. Alice Walker makes the same claim, and Alice was also at Spelman when I was at Spelman. So those are the kinds of texts that I was teaching. I was really interested in teaching African American women writers.

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SARA W.:

And how were you discovering those texts?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

Oh, by then, there was beginning to be interest in Black women writers. I was reading a… not very well known publications like Negro Digest, which got to be Black World. And there was an early article in Negro Digest by Margaret Helen Washington called *Black Women Image Makers.*

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And she had put together two small anthologies of Black women writers. This would've been the early '70s. So there was beginning to be what we now call a Black women's literary renaissance, with the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, with the publication of Shirley Chisholm' s *Unbought and Unbossed* in 1970. So by the mid '70s, you could really get the text that you needed to teach courses on Black women writers.

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SARA W.:

You helped edit and publish *Sturdy Black Bridges*…

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

Mhm.

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SARA W.:
Was that a first?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Sturdy Black Bridges was the first anthology of Black women's literature. And that was published in 1979 by Doubleday.

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SARA W.:
Was it a challenge at all to get it published?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Yeah, it was especially a challenge because my colleague, Roseanne Bell, and I were young junior professors. Didn't know anything about the publishing world, and just sent out, blindly, inquiries. And of course, most of them came back having been rejected. But at Doubleday, there was an editor, who over time got to be Johnnetta Cole, and my literary agent, Marie Brown, who decided to publish that anthology in 1979. And so, I think she understood how important that text was.

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SARA W.:
This time that you're starting to teach and all of this, this is really the birth, in a way, of the women's studies.

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
The women's studies movement was sometimes referred to as the academic arm of the Women's Movement. But I think women's studies was trying to do some very similar things as Black studies was doing. That is challenging the male focus of much of what went on in higher education. And also trying to help the Women's Movement make inroads in mainly higher ed, not so much in K-12.

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And in fact, what I would say is that the women's studies movement had sort of two objectives. One was, of course, establishing separate courses. And it's interesting that those courses initially were in English departments. Most of those early women's studies scholars and professors came out of English departments, which is very interesting, and taught literature courses.

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SARA W.:
Why do you think that is?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think because anybody who was in an English department or a history department would realize quite quickly how male focused that canon was. So people like Florence Howe, for example, who founded The Feminist Press, was an English professor. I can just- Mary Helen Washington was an English professor. I mean, many of those early women, Nellie McKay, Hortense Spillers, were English professors.

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But there was another move as well. In addition to establishing separate women's studies courses, there was an attempt to so-called mainstream a women's studies in the regular curriculum as well. So both of those efforts happened at the same time.

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SARA W.:
Was there any resistance to getting it on the curriculum?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think there was more curiosity, not a lot of resistance. Well, lemme just say, at Spelman, not as much resistance as there was at majority institutions. I mean, I do recall how difficult it was for women's studies courses to make

their way, especially into elite majority institutions in the early '70s. I mean, it was a real struggle. Lots of those early professors didn't get tenured.

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At Spelman, I would say there was less resistance to the courses that were being offered in the English department. Because at that point, we weren't trying to establish a women's studies program, we were just trying to add courses to the department. And that was not a huge amount of resistance. Now, I will say that the classes were small in those early years. So we had a big marketing process to get involved in, but very little resistance from the college itself.

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SARA W.:

So when did you work to establish the full program?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

So I stayed in the English department from 1971 to 1981, and then decided that Spelman needed a full-fledged women's center and women's studies program. By this time, women's studies programs have proliferated primarily in California and New England, and a colleague and I went to Boston and looked at what was going on with respect to women's studies. And we came back and said that Spelman, being a Black women's college, needed a full-fledged women's studies program.

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There was some resistance to that, as opposed to just doing some English courses. There was a little bit of resistance to the establishment of a women's studies program. Arguments like, "What are students gonna do with a women's studies program?" There was also the assumption in the early '80s that women's studies was not a subject that African American women were that interested in. I mean, there was a lot of resistance to feminism on the part of lots of racial ethnic folk,-

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-the assumption being that women's studies or women's movements would take us away from our primary movement, which was the Civil Rights Movement. So there was a little bit of resistance to women's studies. And in those early years, the courses were small. But over time, and with a lot of tenacity, we established a minor. We eventually established a major. And it became a very popular program on campus.

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SARA W.:
What was the reaction of the students?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
The undergraduate students in the early '80s, this would have been, were a little bit suspect of feminism. I mean, feminism was a dirty word in the '80s.

And maybe an even dirtier word in African American communities. I mean, it was not perceived to be a political ideology that was supportive of the agendas of African Americans in the '80s. I mean, the assumption was that racism was the predominant -ism. So there was a little bit of curiosity, little bit of resistance, and a little bit of not quite knowing that this was important.

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SARA W.:
Do you consider yourself a feminist?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Oh, yeah, I definitely consider myself a feminist. And the women's studies program that we started in the '80s at Spelman was an explicitly Black feminist- specifically informed by Black feminist politics. I had- And by that I mean, by the time the women's studies program started at Spelman, I had read *The Black Woman* by Toni Cade, I had interviewed Toni Cade Bambara for *Sturdy Black Bridges*. I had been impacted- I was, by now, in the Women's Movement.

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SARA W.:
When did that moment happen for you? How did you start identifying and getting involved and-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Probably, again, when I started doing that master's thesis as a graduate student. I mean, I was reading feminist literary criticism. I was reflecting on my own feminist upbringing. I was reflecting on the importance of disrupting these Eurocentric, male-centered curricula. So by then, I'm considering myself a part of the Women's Movement, and an out Black feminist.

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SARA W.:
You know, there's been a lot of critique, of course, and you mentioned even the resistance in the Black community of the early movement, you know, being focused primarily on issues that mattered to educated middle class White women. Did you feel like that was a fair critique?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Those early women's study courses were very much focused on middle-class White women. Middle-class, U.S., heterosexual, able-bodied, White women. Those early women's studies courses.

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SARA W.:

And what about the movement in general?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think the movement in general in the early '70s was neutral about, blind to, or maybe indifferent to, issues of race, which is why you had a Black feminist movement to evolve. I mean, the reason Black feminism had to emerge in the early '70s was as a response to the male focus of the Civil Rights Movement and the White focus of the Women's Movement.

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So, you wouldn't have had a Black Women's Movement if both of those movements had been more intersectional in their analyses. That is, think about race and gender and class and sexuality.

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SARA W.:
Can you talk a little bit more about how the Civil Rights Movement felt male-centric?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think the most- one of the most visible reminders of the male focus of the Civil Rights Movement was the March on Washington in 1963, in which all of the speakers were men. So if you think- if I think about the March on

Washington, despite the fact that you had people like Dorothy Height, who was the head of the National Council of Negro Women and huge numbers of women in the Civil Rights Movement,-

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-that the face of the March on Washington and the face of the Civil Rights Movement was largely male. And even when people like Rosa Parks was mentioned in the Civil Rights Movement, the complexity of her politics was minimized. I mean, she got constructed as an old black woman who was tired and sat down on a bus one day. She got stripped of all of her political activism.

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We didn't know at that time that she was a member of the NAACP, that she'd been trained in nonviolent resistance strategies at Highlander School. And even more recently, as a result of a new book that's out called *At the Dark End of the Street,* we now realize that Rosa Parks was actually an investigator of- who went into the rural South and investigated rapes of Africa-American women by White men.

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I mean, this is just astounding that a lot of her civil rights work as a member of the NAACP was around sexual violence against Black women. But the movements constructed her as this passive African American woman who just sat down one day.

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SARA W.:
So how did Black feminists in the early '70s sort of develop their own strain of feminism within the broader movement, let's say?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Lemme just say that there was- there's been a longer history of Black feminism, going back to the 19th century. Going back to people like Anna Julia Cooper in 1892, or even going back further than that to Maria Stewart in 1832. So you've got a long history of Black women understanding the connections between racism and sexism. It would be impossible to think about slavery in the U.S. and not understand the connection between racism and sexism.

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In fact, so-called first-wave women's movement, those women were abolitionists, who gathered in 1848 at Seneca Falls. They came out of the abolitionist movement. So the connection between race and sex was always present in women's activism, even if the racial part of the struggle got muted. So African American women, going back to the 19th century, understood how partial it would be to just focus on gender,-

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-when trying to think about women's subordination. So, the main thing I think that African American feminists brought to the movement was the importance of something we now call intersectional analysis, which is

thinking about all of the ways in which all of those structures of oppression are connected.

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SARA W.:
What do you think became the issues of Black feminism?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Well, I think the first thing that the Black women would've said is that you can't lump all women in the same category. So the first thing to disrupt is that there's this monolithic category called woman. It doesn't work in the U.S. context. In other words, women are differentiated by race, by class, by ethnicity, by sexuality.

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So there's no way to talk about American women, though, a lot of those early feminist writings did that. Lumped all women in the same category. So the first thing then, is to say, "Which women?" and, "How are we different?" Even though there might also be some commonality. So the first thing is to disrupt this monolithic notion of womanhood, and to specify all of the ways in which women in the U.S. experience what it means to be a woman differently.

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I mean, there's- I mean, you think about Native American women on Indian reservations. That was not factored into early claims by White feminists in

the ‘70s. I mean, Native American women were just invisible. Life expectancy on the Indian reservation is 43. So, how do you construct a movement, a women's movement in the U.S. that takes into consideration all of these different experiences that women have?

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SARA W.:
And so, can you mention, maybe, a few other examples of experiences that…

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Well, I mean, the other example would be sharecropping African American women in Mississippi. People like Fannie Lou Hamer, who get sterilized in her 20s. So you got women who are sterilized, women who've only been able to complete a fourth grade education, Native American women, and then you're gonna try to say you're gonna try to come up with a thesis that captures all of the realities of women?

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It's just not possible. You got women who’re incarcerated, or you've got immigrant women from Nepal, or immigrant women from India, or immigrant women from Korea, and then you're gonna try to make an argument about the situation of women in the U.S.? It just didn't make sense.

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SARA W.:
What were some of the things that were coming up around that time in the '70s? Especially as different women's experiences started to get incorporated.

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Generally speaking, gender issues tended to be narrowly focused on issues like abortion, not even so much broader reproductive rights issues like sterilization. So one of the things that women of color, not just African American women, but women of color and other marginalized women, argue is that we have to think about gender issues very differently. So we have to take into consideration the specific realities, material realities of women's lives.

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SARA W.:
What for you are sort of the key texts and key moments that got that message out?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I was very drawn, for example, to all of the activism around violence against women. And for example, one of the- the first rape crisis center in the U.S. was actually in D.C., and it was primarily for African American women. The

the early sexual harassment cases were brought by African American women. So I was-

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I mean, while I certainly was interested in choice and I was interested in reproductive rights, I was very interested in violence against women, because I think that the experience of gender specific violence, with all of the complications around that as it relates to race and class, probably underscores more than any issue that I can think of the commonalities that women have around gender, but also the differences with respect to gender-specific violence.

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And so I got very involved, for example, as many people did, in organizations like the Black Women's Health Project. And we were focused on a range of health issues as they related to African American women. So getting out- So I'm teaching literary criticism, I'm teaching Black women's history, but I felt it was also extremely important to be on the ground doing feminist activist work. And violence against women was one of the things that I was very interested in.

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SARA W.:
So, can you just tell us why you decided to start the center and what purpose you wanted to serve?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

The Women's Research and Resource Center was my response to the absence of a women's studies curriculum at Spelman, and also, I would say the absence of explicit feminist politics at the college. So we were interested in establishing a women's studies program, but we were also interested in community outreach, and that's why it's the Women's Research and Resource Center. So outreach was extremely important. We wanted what we did at Spelman to be sensitive to and responsive to women's day-to-day realities.

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And so we partnered with organizations like The Black Women's Health Project. And I guess very explicitly, we wanted to produce the next generation of young feminists. And we thought that we could create a space with the Women's Research and Resource Center that would do that. So we started feminist activist organizations in addition to the curriculum. So we were, I would say, a pretty radical feminist space on the Spelman campus.

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We were the first Women's Research and Resource Center at a historical Black college. We were the first historical Black college with a women's studies major. And I think that we probably still are the only historical Black college with a full-fledged women's studies program. And we were also really interested in dealing with issues of sexuality, LGBT issues, particularly in African American communities, and so that made us rather radical as well.

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SARA W.:

What do you think the status of women's studies is at Spelman more broadly?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

Women's studies and feminism at Spelman feels deeply institutionalized on the campus, and it feels radical, and it feels like it has helped to transform Spelman College with respect to offering students a range of feminist curriculum and feminist activist projects that probably would not be there without the Women's Center.

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I think women's studies doesn't look like, feel like, smell like, taste like it did in 1970. I mean, most women's studies programs now are global in their reach. And if I think about, for example, what's happening with the National Women's Studies Association, I mean, that space is transformed by women of color, by women from all over the world. And so women's studies is no longer this narrow focus on a particular group of women who constitute the minority of women in the world. So I think women's studies has come a long way.

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SARA W.:

So, could you speak a little bit more though about the resistance that there may have been at first, and particularly in Black colleges and African American community towards feminism?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Those of us who were out and Black and feminist in those early years were- had a very difficult time. Constantly having to explain why we self-identified as feminist. Constantly being told that, "Why are you being a traitor to the race? Why are you joining with White women, who are fundamentally racist and don't have the interests of African American communities?" Oh yeah, lots of that.

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SARA W.:
Is there any specific moment you realized?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Oh, lots of moments at conferences. And also being labeled lesbian. That was a tactic that was intent to have you distance yourself from feminism. So it happened on a regular basis.

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SARA W.:
How did you deal with that?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Just kept going. Just kept going, and of course, our numbers got bigger, and it was a little less lonely.

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SARA W.:
Do you think that maybe some of the White women in the movement, did they understand that dynamic?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I don't- I think some of them probably did understand the dynamic, but I think some of them may not have understood the dynamic. Because the assumption, I suppose, was: Feminism is wonderful, and who would not want it?

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SARA W.:
Is that one that… Speaking of a dirty word?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
That's right.

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SARA W.:
Do you think maybe feminism in general had something of a messaging problem in terms of explaining to-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I don't. I think the popular media was hostile to feminism because it was radical politics. I mean- And I think the mainstream people in the U.S. preferred for women to stay in the kitchen and at home. And feminism had a different had a different message. So I don't think it was the message of feminism that was a problem. I mean, from my perspective as a Black feminist, I would say that it wasn't elastic enough and broad enough, but I don't think it was a messaging problem, per se.

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SARA W.:
But there were definitely stereotypes that made-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Definitely.

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SARA W.:
-made younger women start to think of it as a dirty word?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Definitely stereotypes, and many of those stereotypes didn't fit the reality. I mean, one of the stereotypes, dominant one that still permeates, is that feminists don't like men. And if you were to just name most of those '70s and '80s feminists who- that we can think of, many of them were married and many of them had male companionship. So that was a totally erroneous stereotype. Now, it's also true that many feminists were also lesbian. But it was not true that all feminists disliked men and didn't wanna have anything to do with them.

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SARA W.:
Do you find, as a whole, that young women understand how much has changed for-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
No, I don't think that lots of young women understand how much things have changed because young women don't know what things were like. When you say to young women, for example, that, “When I got married in the '60s, I couldn't get a credit card in my name,” that's alien to them. When I tell young people, not just at Spelman, but when I go on other college campuses—unless they've had women's studies course—

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—that one of the reasons that women didn't wanna report rapes was that it was permissible for your entire sexual history to be paraded in court. Students- Young women don't know that.

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SARA W.:
Do you worry at all that that lack of understanding might imperil some of the progress?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think the movement I still consider myself a part of has got to do a lot of work with young women to counter those claims. Another one is that women—this is sort of an alternative one—that the women's movement is- has done its job and now women don't need a movement. So you have both

the, “I didn't know what women experienced,” to, “Okay, women did really experience all that horrible stuff, but it's now gone.”

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I think the media perpetuates that idea with this notion about post-feminism, the same way that it perpetuates notions about post-race. You know, “racism is gone, sexism is gone.”

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SARA W.:
So what do you think are still some of the biggest challenges that remain for women today?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think poverty's a huge issue. I think the wealth disparities among women or resource disparities among women are huge and urgent, and a lot of it has to do with race and a lot of that has to do with immigration. I mean, if I- if we think about the plight of immigrant women or the plight of poor women or the plight of women of color, it's- we have a huge amount of work to do. I think violence against women is still rampant.

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I mean, the date rape, acquaintance rape is rampant. I think that one of the things that's very disturbing is that violence against women in interpersonal relationships is actually happening among women at younger ages. So this

this notion that you don't really have to experience violence until you get to be an adult, is not the case. If we think about pornographic images of women that float around in popular magazines, if we think about child pornography., I mean, I could just talk for the next 30 minutes about all of the issues that women face still.

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SARA W.:
And do you think that these issues are still harder to address in African American communities?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think that issues of feminism in African American communities, those issues are not as hard to address as was the case in the '70s, but I think they are still hard to address. I mean, one of the things that I might think about, for example, is the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas case 20 years ago. The numbers of African Americans who supported Anita Hill or who believed Anita Hill were in the minority.

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The assumption was that she's not telling the truth. And number two, even if she'd experienced sexual harassment, she had no right to keep an African American male from being seated on the Supreme Court. The assumption being that sexism is not nearly as problematic as racism.

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SARA W.:
Where does the Women's Movement leave men?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Many more young men self-identify as feminists than would have been the case 30 years ago. And I think that that has to do with the fact that they've taken women's studies courses if they were fortunate enough to go to college, or have been raised by feminist mamas and aunts, been exposed to feminist girlfriends. So I do think that 30 years later- And there's also been a sort of…

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And I'm not talking about the sort of mainstream men's movement, but I think that young men have been exposed to many more gender progressive ideas than would've been the case among men of my generation.

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SARA W.:
And would you say that's an important proponent of-

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

I think that's an extremely important component of the women's movement. And I would also say that that was one of the things that distinguished African American feminism from mainstream White feminism in the early years. African American feminists always believe that this was a struggle that men within racial ethnic groups needed to embrace. So bell hooks would write a book called *Feminism is for Everybody*.

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And she was one of the early Black feminists who were constantly talking about how important this movement was for men, and she attracted large numbers of young Black men.

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SARA W.:
And why? What is her theory? Why is it so important?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Well, her theory was that all people interested in the transformation of a world needed to be interested in dismantling all of these -isms, and that men needed to be involved in this struggle as much as women.

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SARA W.:

You've also written about or learned about contemporary hip hop music. What- Can you tell me a little bit about what you feel like the message is contained in that music and that culture about women? What messages are represented?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think the messages in too much mainstream hip hop music, music videos… What's most available and most accessible to the largest number of people, not underground, progressive hip hop, but that category of accessible, popular hip hop is fundamentally misogynist.

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And the messages, too many of the messages in that music are harmful to women and men. This is the argument that I will make. Harmful to women and men. I think the masculinity norms that are in that music are narrow, inflexible and not helpful to men, women or children.

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SARA W.:
Have there been female or feminist pioneers in hip hop and rock that you've studied?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

You know, there have been feminist hip hop artists. Some of whom we talk about—Johnnetta Cole and I—talk about in *Gender Talk*. I think Queen Latifah, for example, would be one that I would think of right at the moment. I think that she, at a particular point, resisted these narrow anti-female images and messages in *Gender Talk*,-

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-and had a message of women's empowerment that was outside of this sort of hypersexual imaging of women in very traditional, particularly gangster rap lyrics.

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SARA W.:
What about other sort of popular female performers? You know, from Madonna to Beyoncé or just celebrity women in this respect who claim very strongly their sexuality as a means to empowerment? How do you feel about that?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think it's very complicated. And I think there's a way in which there are mixed messages that get circulated that young women may have a hard time navigating. That is, I think that there's a very, very thin line between a heavy message about deploying one's sexuality for empowerment, and buying into very traditional gender scripts of mainstream culture, which basically say

that the only thing that women really have to offer is their sexuality. And I think that's a- it's very complicated.

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SARA W.:
It's a fine line?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
It's a very fine line. And I'm not sure always that young women between the ages of 14-18 can navigate that complexity.

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SARA W.:
What messages about, sort of their bodies and beauty ideals do you think they internalize these days?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think unfortunately, one of the first messages that young girls internalize in this culture right now is that, "The most important thing about me is how I look." I think that that's the message that young girls get in the U.S. and it's everywhere. Magazines, billboards, TV. That the most important thing to me about me is how I look and whether I am appealing to men.

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Whether I'm sexy. I think that young girls don't get much messaging about, "Am I smart?" I think it's "how I look." "Am I too thin? Is my hair the right length? The right texture? Are my clothes looking the way they need to look?" I think that's a very hard message to disrupt, and that was not the message that I grew up with.

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SARA W.:
When you grew up, what did you expect in terms of getting married and having children? Were those a given for you?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
They were given in terms of the generic U.S. culture, in terms of African American culture, and certainly in terms of my mother. Who, even though she was a professional independent woman, thought it was really important for women to have children. So, one of the probably most significant differences between my mother and I was around the issue of motherhood.

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When I chose, even within the context of marriage, not to have children, she was very upset about this. And couldn't really understand why any woman would choose not to have children. She understood how if you weren't married, you may not want to have children. If you were having all kinds of

medical issues… But she couldn't understand how her daughter, within the context of a good marriage, would choose not to have children.

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I think there—this is a little bit in retrospect—I think there are a range of complex reasons why I chose not to have children. One was that I had what I thought was an excellent mother, and I did not believe that I could ever be the kind of mother that my mother was, nor did I want to construct a life where children came first.

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So part of it was that I did not believe that I could successfully manage the kind of life that I wanted to have. And the most important part of that to me was freedom. And I did not think that I could be free and independent, and manage having children and being a responsive, attentive mother. So that was one issue.

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Now you can just imagine that my mother was not compelled by this argument at all. Number two, I happened to have married a person who also didn't want any children. So I did not have the conflict that a lot of women have, having chosen a partner who really wants children. So that was really a wonderful thing, that is to not be in a partnership where two people want two different things.

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So the person that I married decided at age 12 that he did not wanna bring children into the world, so we were perfect match in that regard. And then

thirdly, I wanted to travel. I didn't want any constraints. I didn't want to- I was not a morning person. I mean, I thought about this really carefully. I didn't want a life where I had to hit the floor at a particular time and prepare food for anybody. And I felt like I had the right to make that decision.

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SARA W.:
What made you feel like you had the right to make that decision?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Well, I always knew from even when I was a little girl that I had the right to make any decision I wanted to. I mean, I was always self-defining and self-actualizing and making decisions. Like not becoming a debutante when my mother wanted me to be a debutante. Like not having a wedding when were… So, I've always been a little independent, free-thinking child. And maybe that comes from my father,-

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-because my father was much more unconventional than my mother. And basically, also, which I think was a plus, didn't have rigid gender expectations for his three daughters. So his attitude was, "Be free." So I didn't have that constraint as well.

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SARA W.:

And do you think that's a message that more women today need to…

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

I do. I do. Especially now. I mean, when I was growing up, it was much more difficult to be free and to make unconventional decisions. But what I say to young women now, is you can craft—and I'm talkin' about women with certain kinds of privileges, I'm obviously not talking about all women—but women with certain kinds of education and privileges and vision, and even women who don't always have all of those privileges,-

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-can say to themselves, "Do I want to get married? Do I wanna partner with- Who do I wanna partner with? I have many, many options. Do I wanna have children or not? When do I wanna have children? How many do I want?" And if I made that decision for myself in the '70s, without a lot of role models, then I think young women can do that as well.

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SARA W.:

And what about your marriage? Was that a traditional marriage?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

No, it was not a traditional marriage. And one of the things that kept it from being traditional was that there were no children in there. And then the other thing was that both of us were college professors. So we had the kind of flexibility in our schedules that made it possible for us to craft rather free lives. That's one good thing about being a college professor. You can do all kinds of things. And we didn't have traditional gender assignments in the marriage as well.

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SARA W.:
What's the most meaningful, useful piece of advice you've ever received?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Stop making excuses and do your work.

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SARA W.:
Who told you?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
My mother. Stop making excuses and just do your work.

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SARA W.:

What's a piece of advice you would give a young girl on building a career?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

I would say, to the extent that you can—and I understand that there are huge class differences—but to the extent that you are able to construct the kind of career that you would like, really choose something that you like doing. I still like the career I chose, which was teaching undergraduate students feminist politics.

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SARA W.:

What about work/life balance?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:

I'm not a good- I'm a very bad example of work/life balance, being probably an unapologetic workaholic. But I think that I would say to young women that it's important for you to figure out you, and not other people to figure out what will make your life meaningful. And if that's too much work, as opposed to a balanced life, that's okay, if that's what you want.

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If that's not what you want, then you should figure out how to have a more balanced life. But there are people who really like working a lot, and who partner with people who take up a lot of slack. So what I would say is women who know that about themselves, choose somebody who will enable you to do that.

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SARA W.:
What accomplishment are you most proud of?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
I think the thing I'm most proud of is the work we've been able to do at the Women's Center at Spelman College, and that is making feminism very attractive to young women. I think that's what I'm proudest of.

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SARA W.:
Have you seen the effect that it's had firsthand?

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BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL:
Oh yeah. Yes. See it every day with the students. See students changing their majors. See students mobilizing. See students deciding that making a whole

lot of money is not really what they wanna do. They go to Fulbright and they go to graduate school, and they decide that they wanna eradicate all kinds of things. And so that's been the most important thing I think I've done.

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