

Oral History

Interview with Dorothy Gilliam

By Sicilia Durazo

Durazo: This is an interview on Saturday, April 24th, 2004. It's taking place at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University during the symposium: Civil Rights and The Press. I'm Sicilia Durazo. First of all, tell me, growing up, how you decided to become a reporter.

Gilliam: I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and grew up in northern Kentucky. My dad was an AME minister, and when I was five years old, he was moved from Memphis to northern Kentucky. So I was born in the South, I attended segregated schools. I was used the hand-me-down books. I think I wasn't aware of all of this because we lived in black neighborhoods and we were, we certainly had a very full life. But we were very comfortable with the larger segregation in society and the black community had organized its forces to help us know that we may be separate, but that we were capable and we were equal. So I heard similar messages from my home, my school, my church, my family, the community, that this is a segregated society in which we've been forced to live. But that does not mean you are less than, and that turned out to be a very important message as I became one of those people who walked through those open doors when the civil rights movement occurred.

I became a reporter, not because I had role models, because I don't remember seeing – there were no black people on the television. In fact there wasn't even that much television until, you know, the late 50s. I graduated from high school in 1953. So television was just coming of age. There were no black reporters on the news, the daily newspaper in my hometown, and actually, let me tell you where the germ of the idea to become a reporter actually started. I know when I finished high school, I said I wanted to be either a journalist or a children's lawyer, and I had the opportunity to test the idea of being a reporter. And this is what I did. I took a job after school to help pay my way through college. I was attending Ursuline College in Louisville, Kentucky. I took a job as a secretary at the black weekly newspaper called the Louisville Defender. And each day after I left my classes at Ursuline, I would go to the Louisville Defender to type letters for the publisher, Mr. Stanley. And after I did it for a few weeks, he came to me one day and he said, "The society editor is ill, and I'm going to let you cover some of the stories that she would normally cover." So I started as a reporter. I was 17 and I stepped in for the daily society editor, and it gave me the tent. Even in a limited way, it became very clear to me how journalism opened doors. Journalism really opened doors to worlds that an individual never would have an opportunity to see open certainly in the way that journalism does. For example, I talked about, you know, I'm working as a quote unquote "society editor", just replacing this lady, but to cover stories that was going into homes, and you know doctors and lawyers, about doctors and lawyers in Louisville. I had access to

people that I would normally never have access to and I wrote about interesting things that were going on, and the people who were doing things and the movers and the shakers and even in that, you know, certainly limited way that I was doing that when I was 17, it really just made that, that small seed that had been planted germinate because I could see that this is a field that could really open doors to the larger world.

And I decided that I wanted to major in journalism, and I transferred from the Catholic women's college because they didn't offer a journalism major. And after two years, I went to Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, and graduated in 1957. And my desire to become a journalist was definitely multiplied by that experience.

Durazo: Tell me about your first journalism job at the Tri-State Defender.

Gilliam: Well the Louisville Defender was my first job as a student, right, but my first job after graduation was at Tri-State Defender. First of all I should say I tried to get a job on the daily, the white daily newspaper in Louisville, The Louisville Journal, was the morning paper and the Louisville Times was the afternoon paper. And you know I sent in my resume and informed them that I was a recent graduate and a journalism major et cetera, et cetera, and I was turned down. There was no encouragement at all. They told me they had two internships, that they had already given their internships to students from Indiana University and you know, in other words, don't bother. So I went back to the black press and I got a job at the Tri-State Defender and went to the Tri-State Defender in August of 1957. And what's significant about that was that the Tri-State Defender was run by a man named Alex Wilson, who actually was the editor. He was a very tall, gruff, and demanding guy. And he was beginning to kind of shape me as a journalist, you know trying to teach me how to write in a more, you know, forceful way, to write the way they wanted to see things covered in the black press and so I was beginning my tutelage. And Memphis is a few miles from Little Rock, Arkansas, so in September, early September, Mr. Wilson said he was going to go to Little Rock to cover the integration of Central High Schools there. Nine students had been selected to enter Central High School, and he told me to stay behind. He said, "You're too young, and you're too inexperienced. I'm covering this story. You stay in Memphis." And I did, until I started seeing all the pictures and all the images coming out.

Mr. Wilson had been covering and keeping up with all the various machinations, about Southern politicians you know all them – Orval Faubus – was pretending he was calling out the Arkansas National Guard in order to keep order, but he was really calling them out to stop integration. So Mr. Wilson was one of the group of reporters and this morning we heard from Moses Newson, who came to Central in order to cover the integration. And the crowd turned on them because they thought that these black reporters were the parents of these students, and they started chasing them except Mr. Wilson would not run. Moses Newson was

hit, got away but Mr. Wilson didn't run because he said he had once been chased by the Ku Klux Klan and he said, he told himself he would never do it again. So he was very badly beaten, very brutally beaten and so, I went to Little Rock.

Mr. Withers, the photographer who was here, and I, and a lady who works in the office who knew where to take us, and so I ended up going to Little Rock and covering some stories out of Little Rock, after Mr. Wilson was brutally beaten. One of the significant things about not being in Little Rock was that I also met a lot of the black reporters who had been covering the South and who had covered Brown v. the Board, who had covered Emmett Till. I also met people who were from Jet and Ebony Magazine. And I was offered a job at Jet Magazine out there, you know later that fall so I left the Tri-State Defender in Memphis after only a couple of months and moved to Chicago where I started working for Jet Magazine. And I worked for Jet Magazine for a couple of years.

Durazo: What were your (boss's injuries)?

Gilliam: Well, well he had been pretty brutally beaten and I, I'm pretty sure he was hospitalized but he was, you know I think...

Durazo: Did you go, not knowing he was beaten, or did you go after you found out?

Gilliam: I think I went down when we started seeing the images, yeah, and I don't know at that point whether I knew he was beaten or not. I don't remember, and so I'm going to be asking, I'm going to try to clarify things a bit from Ernest Withers, who is here, just to get the sequence of events. I remember going to the home of Daisy Bates, who was the head of the NAACP in Little Rock. And she was one who shepherded the students so they'd be safe, that was the hub of the activities. And one of the key things to remember was just being exposed to these reporters who had done this, but basically my reaction is that he was necessarily that happy that I was there but the fact was you know he had been pretty brutally beaten, but I have to really double check the sequence of this whether he had gotten beaten before or after.

Durazo: When you got there, you know, what was the story you wanted to get out?

Gilliam: I wanted to get out the story of the failure of these, here is the first significant school integration case in the United States. Here was the story where it would take the president, President Eisenhower, calling out the armed forces in order to get these students into Central High School. Here was the first case when, you know, a president had to send in troops to enforce the law of the Supreme Court. I think that was the story, this was the first major configuration of the whole school integration battle. So after the 1954 Brown decision

outlawing school segregation, this became the most significant case and the most famous case because this was the first time that the president had sent out troops to actually get the students into the schools. So that was the story that we wanted to get out. The story was the way the community reacted, the way they hooted and jeered and turned on these students. And then finally because with the army coming in, they were able, these students were finally able to enter Central High.

So the story was, this is what it took to really enforce the law of the land. This is how, you know, deeply entrenched the anti-black feelings were. This is how strongly the white people felt about their rights to an education that totally excluded blacks. So the story was that Brown had been probably the most important racial story, in terms of how we started opening a new America. You know what had happened.

Durazo: You have your actual memory, your vision of seeing the people, looking at them. All I have in my memory is seeing the crowds surrounding the little pathway, the students walking, and then the guards in front of the school building. Tell me about some of your memories. I want to know the people, when you looked at them, were they angry at you? Were they angry at every black there, or were they just angry about the situation there? The national media of Little Rock, I just want to know the feelings you got from it.

Gilliam: Well, the feelings I got was – I can still see the images of the hatred, you know, the hatred in the face of the whites. The person whose image I see most strongly is Elizabeth Eckford, who was that one African-American girl who did not get the word the day they were trying to integrate Little Rock. She didn't get the word that she was, she was supposed to go with the other eight and so she came by herself and so the other eight had come with Daisy Bates and had been turned around by the National Guard. The National Guard captain said his orders were to keep the niggers out, and so they had retreated and left. But Elizabeth Eckford came by herself and she tried to get into the school, and she was there by herself trying to get in and she ended up finding someone to get her out of there. But, but for me the scene and the images were about the hatred on the faces of these white people, the feelings of fear that they had already beaten some reporters and they would certainly beat others. But I think what's important is that you know that was not, I was not covering that story in the same way I was covering say Ole Miss seven years later, because as I said my boss had time to cover, I had gone over there as a working reporter saying I gotta have a piece of this story. And I did do some of the coverage, but my major images are those of just the fear I felt and the psychological impact of knowing, you know if this is what it takes to bring this about, what kind of country is this? What kind of country is this?

Durazo: Were you fearful for your life?

Gilliam: I most feared for my life when I was covering Mississippi. After working for Jet Magazine, my dream was to be a daily newspaper reporter. So I knew that I was going to have to go back to school and get basically – I knew I had to get some white credentials because I graduated from a black school, and I knew that if I wanted to work for a white newspaper, they were the only ones who had daily papers at that time. There may have been one black daily in the country, I'm not sure if there were any, frankly. So I went to Columbia and graduated from Columbia and I was one of two blacks in the class at Columbia. There was a man and I and also you have to realize at that time there weren't that many women, there were almost a quarter of women in journalism. Our class at Columbia had about 80 people. There were 15 women and the women always thought that was about the quota of women and I think the quota of blacks were, was about that same as well. So the point is that I was entering a very segregated profession and when I had this desire to go into daily journalism, without really understanding all the huge ramifications of what I was doing, I was going to become a trailblazer. So when I graduated from Columbia, the editor from The (Washington) Post came down and routinely interviewed people, and he told me, he said, "You know I'm kind of interested in you," he said that. "You don't have enough daily experience, go out into the boon docks, get some experience, and come back and see us." And I believed him. And he said, "If you happen to be in Washington, however, just drop by and meet our managing editor who is a man named Al Franley. And I happened to be in Washington that summer after graduation because I was going to Africa for the summer as part of the student program. I called him and said I'm in town and by The Post, met him, and the managing editor asked me if I was there and I told him I was going to Africa and he said why don't you write us a feature from there, and I said sure. And I did, and when I came back in the fall The Post offered me a story, and it was that day I thought they finally looked at me as a reporter.

So to make a long story short, one of the first assignments I had – well, not the first – I had been there about a year, and I was sent to Mississippi. That was when James Meredith enrolled in the University of Mississippi and it's important to, to really think of Mississippi to remember the context of Mississippi. As you know we know that the South was a dangerous violent place when it came to blacks. Blacks were kept as second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-class citizens and with threats of violence and it was a horrible way of life. But Mississippi, even in that hostile climate, Mississippi was a case apart and Mississippi, one person once called it the evil wonders of the world. And it had open violence, it was incited by people like Bill Beelberg and the Ku Klux Klan just dominated. Its whole job was to keep black people in their place. Segregation was written into the laws, meaning the Democratic Party bylaws, it was enforced by lawmakers, the police force, the sheriffs, the White Citizens Council. Everything that you could imagine worked against blacks ever achieving equality. And the blacks who lived there just were trapped, many of them in, almost the same kind of lifestyle they had in slavery. So James Meredith decided he was going to integrate the University of

Mississippi. A lot of people said he's crazy, but my in my view he was crazy courageous. Because it was so important for that to happen and so The Post sent a group of reporters down there and one of the people, a lot of reporters were covering the day to day events and filing daily. I was sent down to write about how the black view was reacting and the first thing I did was to call Ernest Withers, who I had met when I worked with the Tri-State Defender, and asked him to go with me to shoot pictures. Also I knew that he would help, he knew the South. And if I was going to get out of there alive, he was going to be the person who was going to help me do it because he knew how to negotiate, which meant doing whatever he had to do if he had to say "yes" or "no sir" – you know, bow to these old nasty, bigoted, racist whites, he would do it. He would get us out of there. So I flew into Memphis from Washington, I'd been married a year – wait a minute – what am I talking about, September 1962? I just got married, but we were driving into Memphis, Mr. Withers and I. He had Tennessee tags on his car, of course, and we were just stopped by you know these whites, who were just checking tags, you know, "All right, what are you doing here, niggers?" And he would get out, and he'd talk to these people with guns, and yes I was afraid, there was no doubt about it.

We got into Oxford and you know, the whole place seemed to be in flames. And of course my job is to get into the black community, see what was going on and we didn't have any place to stay. There were no hotels for black people there, so your whole job is also just finding places to stay. And I stayed one night in this funeral home, this black funeral home. Other times I stayed with whoever we could find to stay with...

One of the things that Moses Newson said this morning was that black rooming house, and I have to remember I have to go to see if I, talk to Withers about whether or not that we stayed there one night. But they're the people he knew, Withers would know, you know. And they would move to other parts of Mississippi after we covered that place, for example we went to visit Ebbers, and again where ever you are, you just have to find places to stay, so there's no hotels maybe, looking back now, how did we manage?

Durazo: Yeah, I'm looking at you and I didn't know if you can see the expression on my face, I'm looking at you when you're saying "gun drawn" and that you stayed in a funeral home. I mean am I being naïve and young or is that –

Gilliam: Yeah, yeah, that was part of it, but part of it is also that we didn't move how – I mean Mississippi, black people. Mississippi was hell. That was the way we looked at it and going in with this, I mean this fourteen-year-old kid from Chicago who supposedly whistled and he was killed. And the people who killed him were just acquitted, you know like, you know, "my life is not worth anything." You talk about the soldiers in Iraq, you know, you tell me about covering Mississippi right here in the U.S. But anyway, the culture was to kill a black person if they made a misstep, that's the whole, that's the bottom line about

Mississippi. So there was great fear in the black community because here were the troops, all these reporters, and they knew that kind of once all that was over, they felt like they were going to be left with these white people who would, who would do anything to them.

But you know they also had so much courage, and I remember as I interviewed them and I'd talk to them you know, and they said we're so glad he's doing this, that we're willing to take it because finally there was there was a glimmer of hope that this weight of oppression that nobody ever looked at, that finally this weight would be lifted. And so finally they had a glimmer of hope, that there may be another opportunity, there may be another life. But there was also this fear because they know how vicious whites were and how determined they were to keep them down, out, separate, and unequal...

Durazo: Like you said, that the government in Mississippi had no intention, they wanted to keep everyone out – when you were reporting, were you thinking, if I'm not here covering it, nobody's going to know? I mean were you conscious of the fact that what you're writing is letting people up in Washington and other parts of the United States know what was going on in these places? What was your personal reason when you were going down there covering stories – were you thinking about how white leaders are going to react to it, and how black leaders are going to react, how differently they would react to the stories?

Gilliam: No, I don't remember thinking in that way. I was certainly conscious that writing in The Washington Post was going to give me a very different audience than writing in Jet Magazine. Now Jet Magazine is a very important publication in terms of the black community, but The Post was a whole different situation. I knew that the stories that I would be writing in The Post would be read by white, as well as black, you know, and there were only three black reporters on the whole Washington Post when I got there. Well, there were hundreds of reporters, but there were only three of us and I had, I believe I was the first full-time black woman reporter. I always kind of try to couch that, but most people there say that they believe that as well. So the point is there weren't that many black reporters writing that kind of story, and I'm not saying white reporters could not have written a story of what was going on in the black community, but they certainly were very open to sharing with me and so I felt like I was able to tell a story that maybe a white reporter wouldn't have gotten.

Durazo: Because your experience as a Southern black woman or –

Gilliam: Because I was a black reporter, right, because I was a black reporter. I think that doesn't mean you got some great reporters downstairs, and some of those guys are great reporters, and they really were able to get stories, and they went into all kinds of settings and situations. But, I think that it's because I share the racial piece, I was able to ask the questions and to get some answers that perhaps they wouldn't have thought to ask. And that doesn't mean I took into it

any bias at all, but I did, there was a shared experience that I think gave me the insight to ask questions in a different way.

Durazo: With that being said, were there any restrictions placed on you by editors, you know language? Which stories you could or couldn't do, you know, coming from a black newspaper going to a white audience, white Post – were there any restrictions by the editors of what you could and couldn't cover?

Gilliam: No, I don't recall there being any restrictions, when I first got to The Post in October of 1961, I was most interested in covering – was thinking I don't want to be stereotyped, you know, I was on the city desk, I don't, I want to cover you know whatever. So I was sort of a general assignment reporter, and then I started seeing that the best stories were the stories that were – The war on poverty under Kennedy was just starting, and you know The Post was interested in what was going on in terms of poverty, welfare. I saw that the best stories were those stories, so I started asking to cover what's going on in the black community. I mean there are some reporters who don't necessarily want to do that, and I'm talking much later now because when I started in the daily press there were, I think, I don't believe there were, in the whole country I don't think there were 25 black reporters working for white newspapers. So there weren't that many of us. But I decided, and sought those stories that put me into the black community because I am, not only in part selfishly as a journalist, those were the good stories and they were the stories that were getting the good play. So rather than do these features that landed on the Metro front, I thought I want to do these stories that have the chance of making page one. So that that's why I wanted to go out and do – a lot of the black stories.

Durazo: Now that you're saying that you know you were given the opportunity to go down there, do you find it kind of hard to believe that The Post, you had to make your own accommodations and to go down there, stuff like that? Do you ever think about that, like if you were a white reporter, would they have made accommodations or was it just everybody for themselves when they got there?

Gilliam: No normally, the paper makes your accommodations before you go, and it's interesting. I hadn't thought about that because now I mean I've traveled all over, everywhere for The Post and yeah, the hotel is all arranged before you leave, because you leave the airport and you go to your hotel and put your bags down, right? But I don't remember how we worked that. I mean, obviously I knew there weren't many hotels for blacks and just this morning, for example, I had always thought the name of the hotel was the Sand and Sea Motel in Oxford that I couldn't stay at, and the guys this morning were saying that the name of the hotel, the motel they stayed in was the Ole Miss hotel – not very important. But the point is yeah, usually those arrangements are made by the travel office of the newspaper, and for me the travel office couldn't make the arrangements. I have never thought about that. And I'm sure it was because – I don't even know how we discussed it, that's interesting, yeah.

Durazo: You'll have to think about that. One of the gentlemen downstairs was talking about, brought up The New York Times – how did that affect you, did you ever believe that something you said, take it yourself, meant you or the people in court?

Gilliam: Not in a specific way, you know. It was always drummed into our heads you know the issues of accuracy and things like that, but not in the, not in the legal way that you're talking about. In terms of me personally, no I never had that experience.

Durazo: I'm going to say the following phrases, and I want you to give me, say what comes to mind, so – 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Gilliam: Eat anywhere, and stay anywhere. The reason I say eat anywhere is because that was a very famous headline in one of the black newspapers when the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was passed, that was public accommodations. And finally, you had been just forced to go to separate counters and take your own lunch, go to separate bathrooms, relieve yourself, and you know you have famous black stars having to travel on the highways and they'd have to go off on the side of the road and relieve themselves – you know, just everything designed to denigrate. So that was a famous headline. For me it was also being at The Washington Post in 1961 before the public accommodations act. It also meant that there were places in Washington I couldn't eat. There were lunch rooms, but the only place I felt I could be assured of eating was the YWCA down town right between 17th and K, which is around the corner from The Post. And even though there had been some local agitation for opening public accommodations and opening theaters and opening, you know, like there was some famous downtown places where they had live theater and blacks had advocated to open these places up. And apparently there had been some local laws dropped so that some of things were, supposedly integrated but, but they didn't, the, none of those laws were really implemented in a consistent way. And so blacks had a lot of fear of just trying to go into a restaurant because you might be turned away.

Another thing when you say public accommodations was this is a little, slightly different but this, the whole thing of trying to get taxi cabs was a huge problem for me as a reporter at The Post. Because you know people look at, they look at me and they see I'm black and, they assume I'm going to some bad neighborhood. The taxi wouldn't pick me up. Once I got where I was going, I'd finish the story as soon as I was done reporting the story. I got to get back, the deadline is ticking away, and I have to get back to write it on deadline and taxis would just pass me. They would just look at me, and I can just remember the tears flowing because I also couldn't go back to The Post. And every day, say that you know the taxis wouldn't pick me up, you know I'm late getting back here, you know I can't make the deadline because the taxis won't pick me up, I can't get back here. And I know I couldn't do that because then I would look, be considered a

whiner, and she's only complaining because she's not up to the job, you know that's an excuse and they just wouldn't believe it. So you know you had to suck it up and just do it, make it happen, just in spite of it all.

And let me do this real quickly and it's important only because, as I said, part of it is also what women went through. And years later I felt so, I felt such a release when a young black reporter from The Post went to another newspaper. She was an intern, and was going to another paper to interview, and she was mistaken for a secretary, and she came back and she told everybody and she was so outraged you know. "They thought I was a secretary, I—" you know and I thought, wow, you know there are finally enough of us here for a black person to come and have a legitimate – and could actually share what's going on with them, what they felt, what happened without being, without worrying that by sharing what was really going on with him, they were going to block the way for additional people coming -- because I really felt that if I didn't succeed it was going to be harder for the next black journalist and that I couldn't fail. So that meant I had to suck stuff up, I couldn't come back and complain, I mean I could tell some, you know my friends. There'd be people I would try to share some of this with so that I wouldn't explode. But I still remember that when Michelle came back she was so outraged she was walking around and you know the back and around the office (big sigh).

Durazo: Ok, I'm going to say a couple more phrases: March.

Gilliam: That was not anything of, anything in which I acted, participated or covered, but important, important, yeah, another step, important step.

Durazo: Little Rock

Gilliam: Yeah, I talked about that already.

Durazo: That's ok, Freedom Riders.

Gilliam: Incredible courage on the part of the people who participated in it, and on the part of the journalists who covered it.

Durazo: Lunch counter sit-ins.

Gilliam: They kind of help start it all in many ways because the lunch counter sit-ins began to take what was happening with Martin Luther King and everybody knows that Little Rock, what was happening with Martin Luther King, what was happening with as far as the 1960 green march and all that. But it was it was the lunch counter sit-ins that really kind of swept that into the streets. You know it caught the imagination of people all over the country. So that, that, I think that was a seminal time.

Durazo: In your coverage in Little Rock, how do you think photos and images played a role in the coverage?

Gilliam: They were enormously important. It started, it was almost television's grandest moment as far as I'm concerned, because those images were shown in homes all over the country. And for the first time, Americans could no longer say that we don't know what's going on because they saw it. So I thought, I think images and television were absolutely key.

Durazo: In general, how would you assess the coverage of civil rights?

Gilliam: My assessment of the coverage was that it was excellent, it was good coverage from the white press. It was one of the finest moments in the white press, and I think it also was a fine moment for the black press.

Durazo: I mean I know you can not speak for the white press but what do you think whites learned from covering the stories of civil rights?

Gilliam: Well I think that what we're hearing at this conference some of this, so many white reporters, I think it gives you a good indication of what they learned. But I think that many of them learned what was going on in America. I think they learned the depth of the fear, I think they learned the depth of the hatred. I think they saw an America that, that perhaps they either didn't see or they had been ignoring.

Durazo: How did you get your story to The Post?

Gilliam: Well I was writing for a section of our paper called the Outlook section, which was published weekly. So that particular, you know, how on Sunday you have these special sections, right, so I wasn't filing every day. So I just came back and wrote it.

Durazo: So you'd just go down there during the week, come back on the weekend and –

Gilliam: Right, and I was only, I was only in Mississippi for you know for about a week, I think altogether, yeah and I came back and –

But how most reporters filed, they filed every day. Because I said I wasn't, I wasn't doing it everyday. But, you know you dictate, you dictate live. That was when you filed your stories, because there were no fax machines you know, obviously there were no computers, there were no modems and all that. You were working on the typewriter, and I don't know, I guess some had some form of tele-type but that may be an interesting question to ask people. But the story, as I said, I went to Ole Miss once and stayed down there about a week and covered the story and came back and wrote it. It wasn't relevant.

Durazo: What do think was your most relevant story at the time, that you were covering, what do you think about coverage back then?

Gilliam: For me, Ole Miss, Ole Miss. That's what defines it for me because that's where as a daily newspaper reporter, I was there to see the full unfolding and to experience it kind of through the eyes of the black community.

Durazo: Thank you very much.