

EMMAUS HOUSE-PEOPLESTOWN DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

Interview with: Susan Taylor
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LEEANN LANDS: Would you would introduce yourself and tell me your history of Emmaus House?

SUSAN TAYLOR: I'm Susan Taylor. I'm thinking my history of Emmaus House is in some of the earlier years, from 1969 until about 1980. One of things, LeeAnn, that you asked me to do was to consider how Emmaus House has changed and my guess is what I can do is talk about how I knew it in that era, early on, and then you'll be able to put that in the context of what other people have said, and do some analysis of some of the changes.

In Lent in 1969 I was a senior in High School in Dalton, GA. And Austin Ford and Frances Pauley and Gene Ferguson came to Dalton as part of, I'm guessing, a Wednesday night in Lent event. I remember sitting in the church with my mom, I think—maybe my mom and dad, but my mom—and listening to Austin Ford and Gene and Frances Pauley talk about this place that I'd never heard of before, Emmaus House, a community center in Atlanta, south of the stadium. 1017 Capital Avenue SW. And the three of them came to our home afterwards and we continued talking and, I can't tell you exactly how it happened, but from that moment I was determined that this would be where I would come that summer. I was graduating from high school, going off to college in September. Whatever stories it was they told, I was convinced that this was the place for me, working in the summer program with kids that summer. So you know, amazingly—here I am white, middle class, sheltered, small town, Dalton, GA, [and] my parents said "sure that would be just fine." I can't tell you why. What I don't remember is if we came to see [Emmaus House] beforehand—I have some vague memory of that—or if we they just dropped me off. I'm sure we must've come to see it before hand.

My first experience with Emmaus House was a phone call I got from a man named Elmo Coleburn (who was in charge of me for that summer and my work on staff) because I was going to be on staff. I was going to be paid \$25 a week and room and board to live here in Emmaus House all summer long and work in the summer program with children. I was seventeen and not a trained teacher in any way. I came and lived out back in the cottage. I remember meeting Sister Marie [Mimi Bodell] when I first walked in the door. I remember the biggest fear that everyone had was losing our keys, because then we would just have to write Father Ford a note, stick it under the door of his apartment and run away; losing the keys was such a huge deal, all the locks would have to be changed.

I was very naïve. I was from a small town in North Georgia and I had that summer a group of, I think, seventeen or eighteen five and six year old boys. And I was in charge of them. I believe I was in charge of their academic success in school or something, except I didn't really

¹ The Emmaus House-Peoplestown oral histories are edited to provide reading clarity while preserving the interview's conversational tone and the speakers' speech patterns.

know anything about teaching. We met out at St. Bartholomew, at that time, for the summer program. It was kind of astonishing, the volunteers and the staff members involved in that summer program were “playing school” —we were teaching school—I guess the way we had been taught. I remember—probably not that first summer—we tried to collect test score data or something from the schools where the kids went—as if we would know then what to do with that. I don’t remember anything about what I taught the kids, I think I did probably. . . nope, I don’t remember a thing about what I taught the kids. What I remember is really loving being with them.

Every afternoon we went to some city park or another in Atlanta and went swimming. Now I’m a white middle class kid from North Georgia. I swam on the swim team—good swimmer—so that was my claim to fame, I believe, is that I was Sue and I could swim really well, and I would play with you in the pool all afternoon long. I had one child that you may have heard about from others, Willie Pitts, in my group, who I guess had some kind of brain injury from some kind of blow to the head. He had a huge scar right across his forehead. And, as I continue to do in my teaching career—because I actually then became a real teacher who knew a little bit about what I was doing and teaching kids—I was always drawn to the kids who were the most in trouble with other people, so I was really drawn to Willie Pitts. I can remember riding on the school bus, because we rode out to St. Bart’s and went on field trips on the school bus and went to the pool on the school bus. Ralph Johnson was probably driving the school bus at that time is and I can remember Willie Pitts being determined to jump off the school bus for some reason, and me sitting there holding him—really restraining him (not even knowing the word restraining), holding him in the seat of the school bus. I’m guessing that probably is a metaphor for what I did that summer. You know, I held kids in some way or another—in high regard, and in fun, and in play, and in whatever it is I was supposed to be teaching them.

I also got to attend a group called the senior teenagers. Now these were kids from the neighborhood who were my age (I was seventeen). There was a lot of money from the federal government in the summer of 1969 (and I believe for a few more summers), and so as a virtual member of the senior teenagers I got to go everywhere with them. I think they must’ve met four nights a week, and we went to movies and we went to events and the Atlanta Jazz Event which was at the stadium at that time. I can’t say... I don’t know what I contributed, but as I suspect you have heard from so many others of the volunteers and staff members, it changed my life to be here. To this day, I look at everything—that’s probably an exaggeration—look at much of what I do in life through a lens of race and class that I learned when I was seventeen.

When I came here, my main job was to work in the summer program, but there were [also] marches. The one I remember, in particular, was Tenants United For Fairness [TUFF], it was, I believe in 1969. That organization was organized around fairness in public housing here in Atlanta. My mom and her friend Celia Luper, from Dalton—here I am seventeen year old white girl—with her mother and her mother’s best friend walking in this march in the streets of Atlanta for public housing fairness. So I think it not only changed my life, it changed the life of my whole family.

I think it was probably that summer that I got arrested, not for any civil disobedience but because Gene Ferguson and Debbie Erdmancyk—another volunteer—and some other black man— it might have been Terry Curry, don’t know who the fourth person was—we were riding in the car down Capital Avenue and I think that there was an unopened six pack of beer in the back seat. I’m not really quite sure about that. We were stopped by police and we were taken to jail for I suppose—I think someone must’ve told me—at that time, if there were white women in

a car with black men, we must be prostitutes. The thing that I remember is being put in the paddy wagon and, like, being terrified and saying something to Gene, and him telling me to be quiet—because he was clearly the one who could get in trouble, not me. I don't know who made the phone call to Father Ford, but I don't believe we ever went out of the booking area. Margie [Pitts] Hames, a famous civil rights attorney, came and got us out. We went to court the next day. And it was that first summer, because in order to go to court I put on this pink dress that I had, and put a pink hair ribbon in my hair, and went to court and just was as innocent as I clearly was. I remember calling my mom to tell her about this—I don't know if it was before or after having gone to court—and she said, “you know, Susan, the thing is, if you had been black you would've stayed in jail.” We were raised in our home certainly never to say the N- word and to treat people with respect, but we weren't raised with any kind of real racial consciousness like that.

As I say, I think my coming here to Emmaus House gave many members of my family a whole other lens. I have a sister who's ten years younger than I am, probably not that first summer because she was seven, but maybe by the next summer she was coming with me to Camp Mikell, when we would go for the week. Like Dee Williams children, who grew up at Emmaus House, my sister Kate who was eight and nine years old grew up as a camper with all the other kids at Emmaus House, just like I got to be a member of the senior teenagers. So I think for me these early years, they gave me that lens that I really do still look through, really guide my politics and my way of being in the world, my way of being as a teacher.

It was also—and I know that other white volunteers have got to of said this to you—the biggest gift that I could have ever had, to have been invited to cross those boundaries, to be in people's homes, to have that gift of coming to know a neighborhood and individuals in a neighborhood that I would never had access to in any other way. I'll say, for me as a white staff member/volunteer, that was a huge function of Emmaus House. It reminds me a little bit of Teach for America where they don't really expect the [young teachers] to stay—which is a problem for me as an educator—but what they expect the [young teachers] to do is have their outlook on life changed forever and to have sensitivity to these kids. [In Teach for America, these] are top graduates from their colleges and are placed without any teacher training into the schools where teachers struggle the most. One of the big goals of that program is that those people will become board members and bankers and lawyers and all kinds of other large wig jobs and that their view of education will forever be changed and that in those kinds of ways we'll change education. I've never heard anyone articulate that as a goal of Emmaus House, but I think it's an outcome for all of us who came and worked here and lived here.

I kept working in the summer program for four years. After I graduated college in 1973, I joined Teacher Corps and moved to Nashville. Okay, I'd always known I was going to be a teacher just after I had a regular major, in a rather elitist way. But I hated Teacher Corps and I quit—I never quit anything in my life. I quit and I moved back to Atlanta to Emmaus House. And so for a time then, I lived here in the cottage as a full time staff member, and one of my main jobs was (so this was probably in 1970, I graduated in 1973, this was probably in 1974), there were four kids who were living here at the time—four kids from the neighborhood—and one of our main jobs was to support/oversee them in their homework. So I'm guessing this is kind of really the precursor to the Study Hall. Just like I didn't know how to teach those young kids that I was first assigned to, I was making up this big kid stuff, too. One of my strongest, I think really the only memory I have of whatever it was I was supposed to be doing with those kids was sitting there with them in front of me and I was sobbing because, you know, they

weren't doing their homework, or they weren't taking it seriously, or they weren't taking me seriously or something like that.

Another thing I did which actually I was more capable of was, was—during the time of the not just [minority to majority public school] transfers here, but the result of the *Armour vs. Nix* school desegregation suit in which four schools (which I won't be able to name—but you know them right? Morris Brandon, Sarah Smith, E Rivers, some other one) were chosen as schools to be integrated by kids from this neighborhood—and so a thing that I did was ride the, not the Emmaus House school bus, but the [Atlanta Public School] bus out there everyday to be with the kids—I guess all day long because I didn't have any other way to get home. Probably, occasionally someone picked me up so I could go deliver surplus food. Probably Tom Erdmanczyk picked me up out there sometimes so I'd help him deliver surplus food. My job there, I believe, was to tutor kids who were—black kids from this neighborhood—attending Morris Brandon.

Pretty soon after that, like in 1975, I started my Masters in Education at Georgia State [University] to get certified in that way, and moved probably first of all to Grant Street to a house in the neighborhood. And so I didn't live [at Emmaus House] anymore then after that—1975 or 1976. But for the next four years I organized the monthly—not organized, but organized the food for—and went on the monthly trip to Reidsville State Prison.

My friends were either staff members here or people in the neighborhood. I lived really close to the Thrasher family. I spent a lot of time there, in their home, playing cards, eating their food, teaching the teenagers how to drive, being a member of that family. I remember Ivan Thrasher, who's deceased now, played football at whatever high school he went to. And so I would go with his mother and sisters to ball games and people would say to Ivan “who's that?”. And he'd say, “oh, that's my sister.” So, you know, that's just another example of the gift that I was given really.

And then in 1980, I married and moved to south Georgia and was there until 1997. And I'm now back in Atlanta and have a really peripheral relationship with Emmaus House now. So that's what I can think of to say.

LANDS: So let's go back to the very beginning. You're 17, from Dalton, GA. You come down here to Emmaus House. Can you remember your first impressions of Peoplestown and Emmaus House?

TAYLOR: There was a experienced staff member whose name was Sue something, who told me that when I was out in the neighborhood, I should always wear a skirt or dress, because that was respectful. So, in fact, I did that because we must have—now that you ask that question—we must have gone door to door soliciting and eliciting participation in the summer program. I'm guessing that must've been one of my first jobs. As well as, we did a lot of political organizing in that way, going door to door passing out flyers for various marches and that kind of thing. I honestly don't—this has got to be a lie but—I honestly don't ever remember being afraid. . . .

I can't tell you why I wouldn't have been afraid, so I must've been. Stuff was stolen all the time, but I didn't have stuff. I didn't bring stuff here. I do remember one time when my brother and sister—mom must've been dropping me off at some summer or another—and my brother and sister who were younger than I, so I was eighteen and they were, oh I don't know 16 and 13, came with me and they stayed in the car, out in the driveway, while mom came in with me for a moment. There was some event where Tyrone Crawford and some other teenagers did

some kind of something—they were like rocking the car back and forth—so I think my family members were afraid.

My first impression of the neighborhood, surely I must have been struck—dumbstruck—by what people didn't have, but I don't remember that. There was a grocery store, Vic's grocery store right down the street. That's where we went to buy snacks. I wonder if I really started smoking that summer. Probably not, but soon after. I know I'm really not answering this question that you have asked me. Peoplestown and Summerhill were my neighborhoods and I was protected by the fact that I worked and lived here at Emmaus House, that's got to be true. Our stuff wasn't always protected here, as the cottage was broken into, but I think we really were all protected by the neighborhood, by people in the neighborhood.

LANDS: Tell me about the cottage, I haven't seen any pictures.

TAYLOR: Well you know it's rebuilt now.

LANDS: Yeah, it's pretty swank.

TAYLOR: Totally swank.

LANDS: Tell me what it was like when you lived there.

TAYLOR: Oh, the toilet was falling through the floor. There were holes in the walls that were like [gestures]. And there were rats. I slept in a room like. . . I don't know if they were really bunk beds, but if they weren't bunk beds there were like two or three single beds, at least my first summer. I can't really separate out the years that I was here then. Female staff, girls—wonder what they called us, don't know what they called us, [as] we were young—lived in the cottage, and boys or men—or whatever they called them—guys lived in bedrooms around where the chapel is. I remember Gene's bedroom was there, and I think the guys from Union Theological Seminary their bedroom was up there. The house was open until 11 every night so you were either on duty here—which meant being at the front desk and answering the phone—and rarely was the front door locked (occasionally, occasionally, but rarely) —and having the house open. So at night, I was doing that or I was, oh yeah, going some place with the senior teenagers, or participating in something. The cottage, I think, was really just, it was like a dorm where you went and slept. That is where I was supposed to be tutoring the four kids who must've also lived in the cottage then by that time, you know five or six years later.

There was a fair amount of partying. And I was really young and naïve, and I remember when the guys from Union Theological Seminary, when I saw their cigarette rolling machine, they told me it was for tobacco. And I believed them, because I didn't know what else it might be for. There was a good amount of hooking up between volunteers and between staff members, and neighborhood people and neighborhood staff members, but—I participated in my share of that, so I participated in my share of that at least at one point in the cottage, but I'll bet you that's when I was living here full time. I bet that was not when I was coming here in the summers.

LANDS: Now, Gene [Ferguson] told me about the senior teenager, and one of the things I was asking him about was how he taught and encouraged capacity building and organizing amongst the young people. So did you experience that, that way?

TAYLOR: Yeah, Columbus [Ward] was a member of the senior teenagers when I was a member. And then he became the famous big C, so that's certainly an example of capacity building. From my perspective it was a social organization. As you say that, I can picture Gene within that group, now that you say that. I don't know that I have an example for you, though. But just that kind of talk that he was always doing to kids—that kids both liked and rolled their eyes about—in which, in which he taught black history and African history. I'm sure that happened in the summer program and in the senior teenagers as well, so there was that kind of capacity building there—political action capacity building. And there was—I cannot remember stated leadership roles among the teenagers—I would call it capacity building through community. Through community and through mentorship and through encouraging kids to see through the same lens that Gene saw politically and socially, and capacity building through community by not going to jail, [but] by staying whole, in the community, and by not being in trouble, by not making choices that teenagers might make—any teenagers might make—poor teenagers might make, by being aware of the politics of race and class.

LANDS: Now when you say that—the politics of race and class—was that something you actively discussed? or did Gene put that in front of you? or was it discussed amongst yourselves? What did that look like or sound like, do you remember?

TAYLOR: Yes, yes. It sounded like Gene! [Laughs.] I do remember some study group that I was in with Dennis Goldstein and Gene and I don't know who else, that was actually like some Marxist study group. But that, that is just some small little piece. It was really about breaking down what was happening out in the world, and choices that were being offered to kids as ways to keep them down on the plantation. I really wish I could give you an example, but I can just see Gene talking and kids kind of listening and not listening. Both staff and kids really depended on Gene. When we got broken into, you would go to Gene and he would like help you get your stuff back. Equally with the kids: when they got in trouble, I believe they would go to Gene. So there was that, and then there was really political teaching that he would do and political talk that he would do. And maybe others [did that, too], but I can't picture that; I can just hear Gene's voice.

LANDS: At some point, you and others are organizing with TUFF, or you're organizing marches. What did that look like? How did that kind of thing take shape?

TAYLOR: We were assigned roles by Father Ford. My main role here was always working with kids. [The protests and organizing] were peripheral roles, and so it might be—go pass out these flyers, go to Carver homes, go in a car to Carver homes with three or four other people and spend this afternoon encouraging people. I don't know if they were really flyers; I bet they weren't. [It was probably more like] knocking on people's doors and saying there's going to be this march can we pick you up. Doing that in public housing and doing that around the neighborhood, this is the part I would say that I played. I was not a community organizer. I knocked on people's doors and told them what I was supposed to tell them about an event and kept track, perhaps by phone calls, of who was coming and who needed a ride and then participated.

LANDS: And others played that role too?

TAYLOR: Yes, yes, some people who were here as full time staff, that was really more their role, I think.

LANDS: Do you remember who played that role on staff? Who the central figures were on that kind of community organizing?

TAYLOR: I think, certainly, I think Dennis.

LANDS: Goldstein?

TAYLOR: Yes.

LANDS: So, you've got the Poverty Rights Office, and you've got the children's education component. What are the other major programs?

TAYLOR: Food. Surplus food.

LANDS: Okay.

TAYLOR: And that, that was a huge part of the full time male staff here—Tom Erdmanczyk, Dave Morath.

LANDS: I don't know Dave Morath.

TAYLOR: I'll get you an email address for him.

LANDS: Okay.

TAYLOR: He was a Vista volunteer for two years. Tom Erdmanczyk was a conscientious objector who worked here as alternate service. There were some other people like that. A huge part of their job—this is before food stamps—was the picking up and delivery of surplus food organized through the Poverty Rights Office.

I don't think of the Welfare Rights Organization—and I could just be wrong about this—but their work seems really different to me than the work of the Poverty Rights Office.

LANDS: They're separate?

TAYLOR: In my mind, the Poverty Rights Office—and because I never worked there, I'm just saying to you this is in my mind—the Poverty Rights Office was a service organization to help people make it on a day to day basis, with issues of rent and healthcare and, primarily I think, financial aspects of being poor. The Welfare Rights Organization was about the political aspects of being poor, and pushing on the powers that be in that way. Now, the Poverty Rights Office may have also pushed in that way, yes. You know, as I'm saying that, I'm sure they did in some ways through their connections—because those were connected, white suburban women who ran that Poverty Rights Office. The Welfare Rights Organization was Ethel Mae Matthews

and poor black women who, together with Austin Ford, worked in the streets, and at the capitol to change law.

LANDS: Gotcha. So, they're the groups that were often lobbying, and informally lobbying.

TAYLOR: Mm hm, Mm hm.

LANDS: Ok. So you leave go to South Georgia, and you come back in 1997. What's the neighborhood look like then? or did you even come back?

TAYLOR: Yeah, it looked like this you know. This was after the Olympics, and it looked like this. When I lived here there were still dirt roads and chickens in this neighborhood. There were—as raggedly as they were—primarily single family homes with some apartments on Crew Street, and then the beginnings of something that was built right down there in Peoplestown by—I'm not going to be able to get the name. But it was still, you know, there were trees, there were, it was really a neighborhood and people had their own houses. A friend of mine is in downtown redevelopment and I was talking to him about this because, you know, clearly, having boarded up houses is not good for a neighborhood. And having these giant whatever-they-are—houses—that are sprinkled around here, [it] doesn't feel right to me either. And he said, “well, you know there's a way of redeveloping neighborhoods where you develop the same housing stock that's here. And so if there are primarily single family homes that are one story in this neighborhood, or they are perhaps two story, that's what you redevelop.” So, I found it shocking to drive around or walk around when I came back in 1997. I was just driving here from Georgia State—you should be able to go straight. Courtland became Washington Street, went two blocks behind Emmaus House (and Gene had a house back there, some point, on Washington Street). You know, you could get here, you could get to this neighborhood. I think there was urban redevelopment when [the Olympic stadium, now Turner Field] was built and when the expressway was built that resulted in the destruction of community and community resources. In a lot of ways, that's what this feels like to me now, looking around the neighborhood. And, of course, people have moved away.

LANDS: Let me ask you another question, since you've been a careful observer of the redevelopment and thought a lot about the structural issues here. What explains, this neighborhood—Peoplestown, the zip code, NPU—still having extremely high concentration of poverty? Hypersegregation?

TAYLOR: How would I explain why this section of town is really poor, really black, high unemployment?

LANDS: *Still.*

TAYLOR: Well because nobody has succeeded in tipping the balance and moving the people who live here far enough out and taking this space (as they have taken, Capitol Homes). And, there's no public housing here to tear down. It's not quite close enough to downtown—quite—to take over. Really, to me, it's a question of... it's a really good and interesting question, and I really don't know the answer. The question to me is, why this space isn't more attractive for

gentrification? Because I think we take over whatever we want, so it's clear we don't want this space—"we" being white yuppies, and the powers that be, and the people who tear down all the public housing in Atlanta, I don't know.

LANDS: You still see a role for institutions like Emmaus House and the Lokey center?

TAYLOR: Mm hm.

LANDS: What do you think their charge is today? Or, what do you think they should be doing?

TAYLOR: Well, certainly poor people need access, and that is certainly a role of the Poverty Rights Office, the Lokey Center. No matter how much the venue for the civil rights struggle changes, as long as there are poor people, poor people are going to need access. So there's that. The Emmaus House—in a larger way, as a mission of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta—I think if we can figure out how to continue to use this space as a boundary crossing place—as a context for different kinds of people to come together in the quest for social justice, however that looks now—I think that is a really important thing.

Oh, and on the capacity building thing—Silva was a member of the senior teenagers.

LANDS: Silva Britt?

TAYLOR: Mm Hm. She was Silva Griggs, then. Silva Britt.

LANDS: What else do you think I should know about Emmaus House that we haven't covered?

TAYLOR: I don't have a thing to say about this except that Emmaus House has certainly been affected by "founder's syndrome." Emmaus House was Austin Ford, and Austin Ford was—. You know, that's probably why I could come here, because Austin Ford talked to my mom. Just metaphorically that probably is true of...that's why there were volunteers from Union Theological Seminary. It's not surprising for a lot of reasons that Emmaus House is kind of struggling for an identity, if that in fact is true. The civil rights struggle has changed venues and is more complex now. Even the issue of school integration is one that many people question. Did that really advantage people? So, the venue for the civil rights struggle has changed, and it's not about voting rights anymore so much as a kind of a catch all for what it used to be about. It's about economics and—that's the question you were asking about this neighborhood, I believe, part of the question you're asking about this neighborhood. So, times have changed. The person who was the institution, who was able—for whatever reasons—was able to reach out across many, many lines and be a true friend and colleague of Ethel May Matthews, and of whatever that famous anthropologist is who came here and got us all in trouble—.

LANDS: Margaret Mead.

TAYLOR: Margaret Mead, thank you very much. You know, a friend and colleague of Margaret Mead, and of the rich white philanthropists, and Ralph Johnson who drove the bus. So

he was able to reach across boundaries. And so, if indeed this is work that is about reaching across boundaries in order to provide different groups of people with different kinds of access—I was provided with access here—then I don't know how that work goes now exactly.

LANDS: What it looks like?

TAYLOR: Yeah, I think that's kind of the problem, that nobody knows exactly what it looks like. That is a problem. And I'm not active [at Emmaus House], and I certainly can't critique it all, and I don't intend to. I think just from what happens to institutions, you know. . . anyone could have predicted that there would be some uncertainty.

LANDS: Well thanks for all your time today.

TAYLOR: It was fun.