

Interviewee: Phyllis Estus  
Interviewer: Eleis Brennan  
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Location: Assumption College



Overseen by: Prof. Stephanie Yuhl, College of the Holy Cross

Abstract: Phyllis Estus was born in Virginia and attended college at Virginia Tech. After marriage she moved with her husband to New York in 1956 and began a family. She moved to Worcester in 1966. In this interview she discusses growing up in the South, the Civil Rights Movement, and how today's Iraq War compares to World War II and Vietnam. Phyllis also talks about her political involvement in the Worcester Pushkin Sister Project; her musical career; and her work at The Methodist Church, WPI, and Assumption College.

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EB - Ms. Estus do you give permission to have this interview transcribed and recorded?

PE - Yes.

EB - Can you state your full name including your maiden name?

PE - Phyllis Snider Estus.

EB - Can we start with a history of your childhood? Where you were born? Where did you grow up and go to school?

PE - I grew up in Virginia where my parents were both natives, and I lived in Virginia all my life, prior to marriage. I went to school at Virginia Tech 'cause it's in my hometown, and also at the women's division then, which was Radford College. I eventually got my degree from Assumption, but I did most of my work in Virginia. I majored in music, did some work at Duke University, where I moved after leaving college. My husband was a graduate student at Duke and we lived there for three years and then moved to New York City where he was in graduate school and got his doctorate. I worked at that time at the national office of The Methodist Church. I worked with campus ministers across the United States.

EB - What about your childhood? Can you talk about your parents and your siblings?

PE - I was the youngest of three; I had a brother and a sister; they were ten and twelve years older than I, so I was like an only child. We lived outside the town of Blacksburg, which has expanded now past the town limits of where I grew up. Because I was the

youngest and we lived outside the city limits, I didn't have many close friends who lived near me, but I occupied myself by just wandering around in the woods and making believe and visiting a lot of older people who were very kind to me. I used to go, and this is when I was quite young, to a friend of the family's where there was an organ in her home. I didn't know how to play at that time, but I would go there and she would let me play on it and that was exciting for me.

EB - So how did you get your start in your career after you finished school?

PE - In my current career?

EB - Well talk about all careers that you've had.

PE - Well all through college, I did work during the summer. I worked on the campus at Virginia Tech and had accrued some skills in office procedures which included typing at that time. I always had a summer job at the school. Then I was married and lived at Duke. I had a position working with the dean of students and kind of managed that office. Then I also utilized a bit of my music at that time and had a church choir and directed a church choir; I mean I played the organ and directed the church choir. Then having moved to New York where it's rather hard finding an organ to play, so I didn't do much of anything with my music in New York. I did study harpsichord and we actually built a harpsichord ourselves. We built the second harpsichord kit that was available at that time. We worked with the person who designed the kit. The kit was very small it consisted of a set of instructions, a bunch of music wire, and a keyboard. We had to drill the holes into the keys, and fill them with melted lead. We had to build the whole outer case. It was quite a project! Once we finished it, I did study harpsichord for a while in New York so I didn't give up music completely. Then my husband started teaching at Drew University which is across the river over in Madison, New Jersey and we were very involved in the Civil Rights Movement and other movements going on at that time. Then we came here where he was on the faculty at Clark University and eventually he was on the faculty of Assumption. I don't know if there's other things about my childhood that you want to know or if you just want to go into Worcester.

EB - Well maybe would, could talk about your political involvement during the Civil Rights movement.

PE - First of all, when I was working at The Methodist Church headquarters in New York, that was really the beginning of a lot of activity in civil rights. My office in my work with campus ministers would sponsor a variety of things on campuses that dealt with Civil Rights not only in the United States, but outside of it. We would arrange for people to speak from other countries at universities, and I did this for campuses over the entire United States. At Drew, by the time we were there, there were many things going on, such as the Martin Luther King marches and also within that city, and in New Jersey, there was the beginning of acknowledgement by the blacks that they were not being treated equally. When we arrived, the barber shops wouldn't cut the hair of blacks and it was like...what? And there was a lot of protesting by faculty members and students at

Drew, and we were involved in that. Then we were involved very much in the Vietnam protests. As a result about twenty faculty members resigned from Drew because the president didn't like things that were going on, the president of Drew that is. Contracts were renewed but no one got tenure, so there was a mass exodus. We were among those, so we came to Clark and my husband taught for a few years at Clark before we came to Assumption. Shortly after we came to Worcester, Eugene McCarthy was beginning his run for president and we supported him. Actually, we were quite involved in the Worcester Committee for McCarthy. My husband was the chair of that committee and day and night we were working on that. He (McCarthy) won in Massachusetts. That involved after that various civil rights and things that I've since forgotten, but just mostly by supporting certain demands from some of the blacks in Worcester, which has very few blacks compared to the major cities. It has, over the years, increased and of course the Hispanic population has added to its, to the numbers here. Having been involved in those political things early on, and the children were small, so I didn't have a whole lot of time, so I went into a not-so-active time until they were older. Then, around the early 80s, the Worcester Pushkin sister city project was formed and I became active in that organization. There had been an attempt to do that for a few years because of the Cold War to allow a person-to-person interchange with people from Russia. In this case, it was the way to start going up behind government to make a good impact. That was difficult because people in Worcester, particularly the newspaper, were very suspicious of any person or any group that had contact with Russia in any way, so we were all called Communists and things like that. Eventually we did have a sister city but even before the sister city was given to us, that is something that the international sister cities organization does, they assign sister cities in other countries to different groups, so we were without a sister city for three years or so. We just didn't know what city we were going to get, but we were given Pushkin which is a part of the greater St. Petersburg area. This has been a wonderful experience. What I started to say before I digressed a bit, was that we started to have some officials from Russia come to work and speak. I remember- I think it might have been something like an ambassador, maybe not an ambassador but someone in that category- that the speech was at Holy Cross. The newspapers made a big deal about all the people who came to hear this person. Eventually when things died down with this Cold War mania, we were accepted as a legitimate group. The Worcester Pushkin Sister Project was considered a great thing, we had many visitors from Pushkin both culturally and politically and also businesses. We also went there as a group- a large group of what was termed as "artists" of various kinds. We had an art exhibit with crafts we took to Pushkin when we were there. We reciprocated and would have artists come here. During those years from the mid-eighties until 1998, when our sister city project merged with the International Center of Worcester, we had lots of visitors from Pushkin and we sent lots of visitors there. The Performing Arts School sent musicians and orchestras. There were a couple of artists visits. In that sense I was very involved in the Sister City Project. It took a lot of time; we merged with the International Center of Worcester in 1998. That involves having visitors from various countries. They are sent and approved by the State Department. They come here we match them with whatever their profession is to someone here. We match them as a sort of internship here in their fields. I've been very involved with that and that takes a lot of my time. I'm actually co-president this year. The other organization that I've been very involved in in Worcester

since, I don't know '70 maybe around '70, first the Salisbury Singers, I was a member of that for about thirteen years and then I changed to the Worcester Chorus. I am still member of the Worcester Chorus. I also belong to a women's group; its mission is to provide educational scholarships for college students. Those are my major organizations.

EB - Can you talk about children and how you balanced your political interest and work and family?

PE- It was hard it was very difficult. During the involvement with the McCarthy campaign my children were very young, 3 and 1 I think, so we used a lot of Holy Cross and Anna Maria students to baby sit for us, and Clark students because we access to those students. Then when the older one entered kindergarten I went back to work, and, of course, not having working for a while, I wasn't sure what the heck I was going to do. Also I went to work because my husband was taking a leave of absence for some post doctoral graduate work and it wasn't sabbatical time, it was leave without pay. I ended up in admissions at WPI and worked there. I was going to work for a year and I never left. I worked in admissions for several years and then became the senior development researcher in the development office, which is like institutional advancement here [Assumption College]. I did that for more years than I was in admissions and then came here. It was hard, the children were in school, maybe it was kindergarten or first grade. I had a neighbor that was a high school student who would just be in the house when the children came home. We would just manage that part. Trying to do much else was hard because there was always housework to do, and then when they got older there was the running around, taking them to this that or the other. My daughter was a ballet dancer and my son was a musician, violin, so it was constant rehearsal, lessons. It required a lot of balancing and I guess I did it.

EB - After you lived through the 60s and Vietnam what's your take on the world today and what's going on in Iraq?

PE - Well I feel the very same way. I am concerned because I feel that this has many more implications for our world than Vietnam did. I mean the whole Middle East is sitting there staring us in the face and we're again the bad country, and I don't really understand why there hasn't been more protesting. I mean it just doesn't add up, I just can't figure that out. There has been plenty of articles, and people I think, generally, don't support the war but there's no protesting. There's no organized protesting, not like there was for the Vietnam War.

EB - Do you think there's a difference in the young people of the Vietnam generation and the young people today?

PE - Well there must be, and I don't know whether it's because that's too long ago and that's not a part of their life. I really, I don't have an answer for that. I know my daughter said, and I know she disagrees with the war but she doesn't do anything about it, and she said she remembers growing up and watching the news every night and seeing all those people killed in Vietnam. That's her whole memory of that and she said she really got to

the place where she really didn't want to hear about it ever again. My son who was younger, he was 3 years younger, and he certainly agrees that we shouldn't be in Iraq but he's out of the country teaching in Asia so he can't really do anything.

EB - What's your take on women's role in politics especially with the upcoming election and the possibility of the first female president?

PE - Well I think that it certainly has increased just nationwide. We see not enough, but we see more and more women elected to places of importance. I would, and I think the people I know- and of course my circle is not representative of the entire country, but we certainly would be happy to see a female president

EB - What would you say is the most important or significant event that occurred during your lifetime? What affected you the most?

PE - You have to give me some time to think about that.

EB - It can be more than one event.

PE- I think the first thing that affected me was Kennedy's election 'cause we were in New York at the time and it was the first time we had voted in a national election. We stood on the corner like everyone else did to see Kennedy. His assassination, Martin Luther King's and [Robert F.] Kennedy's, all of those assassinations were just horrible events that had a significant impact not only on my own view of the world but on everyone and on how things were done. I think, too, technology has made a real impact not only on me, but on everyone else. It has changed everything.

EB - What are the most important issues for you today, in terms of what the candidates have debates on, like health care or the environment?

PE- Both of those, both health care and the environment, and also international politics are the ones that I feel are important, and education. Those are considered the most important to me.

EB - Is there any major change you'd like to see in the next ten years? Do you think that we have the potential for change in certain policies?

PE - Depends on who's elected!

EB - Well if it goes the right way...

PE - I do think that in all of those areas there will be significant changes. I don't see how we can not have change. Enough people are concerned about those issues and those issues are known at the local level, as well as the state and ultimately the national level. I just think there will be changes in all those areas. There almost has to be, because I don't think we can continue on the way that we're going.

EB - Can you go back and tell me more about your experience campaigning for Eugene McCarthy and what kind of inspired you or led you to become involved with that?

PE - Well, his whole mission, which was for change, and the Vietnam issue too. He was a very intellectual, caring man and you felt that this guy knew how to do things. He was very provocative and I thought that he garnered the support of anyone who wanted a government who could think beyond their finger tips. It just caught fire, person after person and when you talked about it there were just inspiring moments. It is too long ago, I can't remember them, just that it happened.

EB - What kind of things did you do for the campaign? Was it a lot of canvassing or phone calls?

PE - Organized the city. We really organized the city, and we had teams that took over-- no not took over-- that would canvas each district in the city and also telephone people. There were, was lots of coffees and lots of presentations, really a whole lot more than you ever see now. We won a lot of votes, and he was not supposed to win. This was true over the whole state, though there was a good state organization, and obviously since he won the state it worked. I mean he was something new, not like the old politics as usual, and I think it was our organization that worked well for us. We just did everything that we could- from small coffees to big events to personal phone calls. We tried to contact a big percentage of people, and the students were wonderful from all the colleges. They would just work with someone from Worcester in little groups and go out and do the canvassing.

EB - Do you see a lot of difference between the campaigns of the 1970s and the campaigns today with the Internet and the media? Do you think there's a big difference?

PE - Yeah I do. I think that within the Internet and news TV, in general I think people rely on that more. It was mostly newspapers, some TV, but not to the extent that it is now. For some of us who worked so hard, we all got tired and kind of thought that we couldn't do this anymore. I'll do the support, but I'm not going to run around the neighborhood. I'm not sure but I think that's typical for some of the people who worked during those campaigns. However there was a resurgence of that and there were a lot of active people for the Kerry campaign. I have friends in, well it's a well known city in Madison, Wisconsin, who worked their tail off there for his campaign.

EB - Do you think the media coverage of Vietnam was more in depth than the media coverage of Iraq? Do you think that we don't get of the graphic war scenes?

PE- Well, that's hard to say, we did get a lot [of Vietnam] but I'm not sure that we-- on one level now we get the horror and the killings, and then you get this other level that talks about the successes and there's this dichotomy about the success and the non success that is very clear if you keep up with it. If you don't keep up with it and other things, then you might not notice it as much. I'm really not sure about how to answer the thing about Vietnam. There was so much on that, but now I just can't remember how

graphic it was and I think that the graphic part makes a lot of difference. I'm reminded this by the recent series that Ken Burns did on World War II. We saw things [in the series] that we never saw or that were never shown. I don't know if I can answer that adequately about Vietnam and now.

EB - How did your education influence your political thought and your career path?

PE - Well I have to say for one thing my own idea, having grown up in the South, that I was somewhat fortunate in that where I grew up there were not a lot of Black people. In many areas there were, and it made the white people distrustful of them. We didn't have a large population in my community and I was never-- now I think that my parents, I would probably say that my parents were not open-minded about that but they never talked about it, so they didn't precondition me. In fact I used to play with a little Black boy, he was the son of somebody who used to work for us. We'd play together and there was nothing ever thought of that. I'm not sure if, in other places in the South, that would have been allowed. When I was in college and I was a very active in the Methodist student group on campus, I would go a number of college conferences. I also was the church organist all the time I was in college, which was how I helped pay for my college. I went to number of conferences, and one conference in particular was very early on in my college experience in Richmond. The speaker was a Black, he was the president of a Black college in Richmond and it was really eye opening for me. You know I can't tell you what he said but I remember being really challenged to think about inequality of what was happening with the Blacks in the South. And that was before civil rights movement. And then when I was married and we were at Duke University. My husband was doing graduate work, he graduated from the Duke Divinity School and was studying for another graduate degree in sociology. He was doing a study of how the churches responded to the civil rights that, when was, that was '64 I guess , '65? There was another one before that. Anyway, trying to get just a simple questionnaire to go into a church and say could you just fill this out and let us now how you feel? There were questions, you know, just about how you feel and they were very simple I'm telling you- it was like pulling teeth. They might support it but they were afraid to let this happen in their church and I remember this one little church. It was in the country somewhere, they would have it in a meeting, there was an evening meeting or something and we would distribute them and I remember one man getting so mad and just started calling us every name you could imagine. I really thought he was going to come up and attack us, but it showed me how narrow people's minds can be, particularly when they're never subjected to another idea and it just confirmed my belief in support for the Civil Rights Movements.

EB - How about when you were young growing up in the South before the Civil Rights movement did you notice a lot of narrow-mindedness and did that affect you at all?

PE- Well, see I wasn't aware of that, because I think there was such a small Black population in my community, that I really wasn't aware of it. When I was made more aware of it and I started to form my opinions at that conference in Richmond.

EB- At what time did you move to New York about?

PE- In '56.

EB- So can you talk a little bit about the difference between living in the South and living in a city like New York?

PE- Well with my music background, of course, it's the oasis and I loved living in NY and I didn't find it hard. I think some people do find it hard to adjust. I did not, because I loved being able to go to the museums, all the concerts, to all the operas, anything. Plays, we saw almost every play on Broadway while we lived there. And we lived there for six years before moving to Madison which is only an hour from New York, it's about as far as we are from Boston, and lived there for four years. So I really felt I had ten years of New York. Of course its different but again my circle of friends have always been academic and professional, and I've haven't had a lot of conflict.

EB- So what would you say, you lived in Worcester for the longest it seems?

PE- Oh yes. We've moved here in '66.

EB- Are you happy that you ended up here or is there a place that you would rather live?

PE- No, I really like Worcester. Its history and its opportunities are just really great and people, a lot of people, do not recognize or take advantage of what we have here, but I really do like Worcester.

EB- You were very young during World War II but do you have memories of that?

PE- Because my brother was twelve years older than I, he was drafted and he was in World War II and, yeah, I was in third grade I think second or third. It was very scary for me, because, I mean, all I knew was that we had this horrible war, we had the bombing and then he was sent to Europe and actually served in General Patton's army which was awful. I was always aware that he may never come back and, like all the children at the time, you got very involved in the war effort. You saved paper, you saved tin cans, you learned all of the flags of most of those countries and you learned the insignia of the armed forces, little things like that that we all did, but I was aware of, not everything, but I was certainly aware of those major battles and how awful they were.

EB- Do you think living through major wars like World War II and Vietnam and horrible events like Pearl Harbor and coming to more modern recent events like September 11<sup>th</sup> and the War in Iraq, and you've lived through a lot, does that change your perspective on what's happened recently? Can you compare them to each other or is it a different time and a different place?

PE- I think that, well 9/11 certainly was a unifying force, I think, which didn't last very long. And I think that didn't last very long because then we have the Iraq thing, but most people didn't think we should have gone. I don't think we've ever had any kind of visible



unifying force like World War II in my time anyway. There were those visible signs from Vietnam but it wasn't, unanimous- you know there was big controversy. There was not really much controversy with World War II, and the Iraq War has been so- I think from the very beginning there was a lot of disbelief and non agreement with that but again its not been so visible and I don't know what that reason is, as I said before. I do think having had prior experiences certainly does something to one's perspective, sometimes it can be a negative one in that you think, you know, what the heck can you do about this? But then you look back and see, well there was change, I don't know if that's an adequate answer.

EB- Speaking of change, have you seen a lot of progress? You started becoming active in civil rights, have you seen progress with rights for women and equality for the races? Do you think that there has been progress or do you think that we've had enough progress?

PE- Well definitely not enough. I think there's been progress, and I do think that while there were many, well just a whole lot of things that happened during the civil rights movement that in a way hampered women, but on another level they were able to become freer and do more things. I'm thinking particularly some of the SDS, is that right? SDS? Students for Democratic Action? SDS, and also SNCC which was a Black Student movement. The women at first felt that they were being included and were very free, but eventually it was very clear that they were not, they were really being used. But most of them came out of that, and out of that came more and more freedom for women. And, yes, I think there have been changes and they've been good and will continue. I don't believe we can go back. I hope not.

EB- What can you say about your parents' generation? Were they politically active at all? Did they talk about their experiences growing up?

PE- No, they really weren't politically active. I remember some comments occasionally when someone was running for president but nothing significant. No, I would say they weren't.

EB- They talk about World War II veterans and refer to them as the Greatest Generation. Do you agree with that?

PE- Well I think I might. There just were so many significant things that happened that resulted from World War II after the veterans came back. They had a sense of focus and went back to school. I remember in my college town, it was full of veterans, some of my high school teachers were wives of veterans who were back in school, and that was another thing that was great about growing up in a college town. We had so many people from other areas which I think was, in a subtle way, an influence on my whole perspective.

EB- What kind of advice do you have for young women today who want to become politically active and be able to do something for the greater good but yet still balance family and work?

PE- Well, I think you can balance family if you plan it well, and I think that being involved, if it's not a political organization, an organization that is a social service organization or whatever. I just feel that involvement gives one a different perspective and an appreciation for many things and it opens your avenues for knowledge. So I think that people -- women -- should be involved. I also think that anyone should try to have a historical base.