

Interviewee: NEIL NOLAND
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: VERY LOW VOLUME THROUGHOUT]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Neil, you're from Asheville.

NN: Asheville. Absolutely.

MEH: Were you born there?

NN: Absolutely.

MEH: Has your family been from there for a long time?

NN: Yes, they have. All my older brothers — Harry, Ken, Bill, myself were born there. My mother's from Asheville, and my father's from Asheville. I suppose you want to know how we got interested in Black Mountain College.

MEH: Well, I want to know how you got to Asheville.

NN: Oh, how we got to Asheville?

MEH: Were you there a long time? Had your family been there a long time?

NN: As far as I know. I'm not a part of the family that keeps up with history. My older brother Harry knows the whole story, and when you talk to him — you'll get it all.

MEH: So what did your parents do?

NN: My father was everything — a lot of different things. Let's see. Our grandfather, his father, was an undertaker in Asheville, and he had two sons and two daughters. My father's brother was gassed in World War I, and came back, and he went to school, became a doctor, and he died very young, about 37 years old. My father's two sisters — on my father's side — married, let me see, people, men from New York. One was a Wall Street broker who, after the Depression, committed suicide, and the other one was the editor of The Brooklyn Eagle. He was from Asheville, too. His name is Horace Posey. He writes, he moved to New York to become an editor.

MEH: Horace Posey?

NN: Posey, yeah. And he later returned to Ashe — became an editor of Asheville Citizen-Times. My father was my grandfather's favorite son, favorite of the family. My grandfather on that side doted on him. When he was sixteen years old, my father wanted to learn how to fly an airplane, so my grandfather took him to New York where he learned how to fly an airplane. He came back to North Carolina and got his license. He was the second person in North Carolina to have a flyer's license, I've been told. But he was sort of a ne'er-do-well. He did a lot of different things. He became a professional photographer, did work as an embalmer with my grandfather's funeral home, he owned a grocery store in Asheville, a kind of a delicatessen type of thing, and he ended up in Chesapeake Bay area

where — he had lived in Washington, D.C. for a long time. He was also in World War II and wounded in the South Pacific. Finally he ended his life in Chesapeake Bay. My mother's father was a blacksmith, a very highly-skilled blacksmith who made a lot of things that were used — ornamentations that were used on buildings in New York. I'm not certain about it, but it is claimed that he had done some work that was on the Flatiron Building. I don't know. I never got into it. One of my brothers claims that, but he's — he may be right and might be wrong, I don't know. And my mother [Negosa/ UNINTELL WORD] had, she married my father very young, about nineteen or something. She had been a piano player for silent movies when they first came out, and she was very interested in music, very, very hip for her generation. Let's see now, do you want me to talk about my family?

MEH: Briefly. We'll get on to other things.

NN: Well, I'll just wind this up. But she had a — was a big influence artistically on all of the sons, all of her children.

MEH: Four sons?

NN: Four sons. Especially she — for example, she was — As I say, she played music for silent films before she got married, and she had played in a store where they sold sheet music. She'd play the sheet music, you know, when (UNINTELL). She was very sophisticated in her taste and she became very interested in Duke Ellington. A friend of hers — after my father and mother were divorced, a friend of hers owned a nightclub. It

was called "The Castle", it was on Beau Catcher Mountain, and this was during the '30s, and they had hired jazz bands who would come and stay for two weeks and then move on, and they'd get another group for a couple of weeks. There was a big transit spot for musicians on the circuit, so my older brothers got into the hip jazz of that time and my oldest brother, Harry, was very sophisticated in his taste. He was like a big influence on Ken and I, especially, because he was like a connoisseur type person. A natural born aesthete. He was able to show Ken and I, especially, how to listen to the creative part of improvisation, improvisational jazz when I was seven or eight and Ken was about nine, ten, eleven. We understood then that it was high class art. We really — it's been the big influence on our lives being able to understand how these great musicians were really very high-class artists at this early age. I would say it's a major influence on our lives even today. We're still into it. Well, let's see — World War II came along, we all went off to War. I was the last, the youngest. I went in the Navy in 1945, January '45. I was seventeen. Didn't finish high school, went in the Navy. Harry and my older brother Bill and Ken had been in the service, and they were all over the world, you know, in different places. And I ended up in the South Pacific, where I met my brother Bill. We were able to meet each other on VE-Day in Honolulu. (LAUGHS). So after that, after World War II, I came back to the States. My older brother Harry had found out about, great details about Black Mountain College and had applied and was accepted. And my

brother Ken applied and he was accepted, and I was living in Asheville — this was around 1947, 1946, '47, '48, and I was going to Western Carolina Teachers College when I applied to Black Mountain to go there, too. During that time I visited Harry and Ken at Black Mountain quite a bit and played jazz. I played clarinet and I played with the students at the college for Saturday night dances. Jim Tite and Merv Lane and a couple of other people I can't recall right now, and finally I just about in the summer of '48 I was interviewed in Washington D.C. by Dan Rice, who was the interviewer for students who wanted to go to Black Mountain College at that time, in that particular area. So, I was accepted, and in the fall of 1949 I went to Black Mountain College as a student. But I had been there, like I said, quite a bit before, visiting Harry and Bill, Harry and Ken. I knew people there already before I went there, some of the faculty.

MEH: Why at that point did you decide to go to Black Mountain?

NN: Because it was the best place to go! (LAUGHS) It was hip. It was a very fascinating place. It was a community, and I had never been involved in anything like that. Besides it was a democratic community. Very smart, very elegant people. And fascinating. All the people were at the top of their professions and the whole thing. It was fascinating to be among them. So, let's see, who was there, who came at the same time? I think, let's see, I believe Joel Oppenheimer came at the same time that I did, and Harvey Harmon. I'm not sure whether Fee Dawson had been there during the summer or not. But there was a group that came at the same time that I

did. I think Joan Heller, and I just don't recall right now who else. Don — can't think of his name now. There were new faculty at the same time. I think, if I'm not mistaken, I'm not sure whether that was Paul Leser's first year or not.

MEH: (UNINTELL) Flola Shepard?

NN: Flola Shepard. And —

MEH: Were the Hetheringtons there then?

NN: The Hetheringtons. Did they come then? Yes, I guess they did. They were there. They came — That was their first time. I was very close to the Hetheringtons.

MEH: How was that?

NN: Well, I don't know. They were a married couple with a young child and myself and a woman, a girl named Rima Axelrod somehow got into their group, or under their wing, so to speak. I was also under the wing of a couple of other people there too — Natasha Goldowski and Anna Goldowski, and also Robert Turner.

MEH: Did you have any idea what you wanted to study?

NN: Well, I was fishing around. I thought at the time I wanted to be a poet or something like that — writing, I was interested in writing. And I was in M.C. Richards' writing class, who was a very lovely woman, very brilliant, a sensitive, lovely woman. I was in her writing class, and I was also very impressed with Bill Levi, her husband, who had been one of my brother Ken's mentors while he was there.

MEH: What do you remember about M.C.'s class?

NN: M.C.'s classes? She was I guess the most democratic person I ever met in my life, and still is probably. She was one hundred percent human. Her classes were, you know, just like – She was able to tune into individuals, and she was always encouraging and saw things the students didn't see and would applaud any little thing that you discussed about with her. It was a beginning writing class for me. Later, when Paul Goodman was there, I was in his class for the summer, the following summer, '50.

MEH: Going back to M.C. a little more. Were you reading particular texts? Was this literature or writing or both?

NN: No, it wasn't literature. It was strictly writing.

MEH: How did she — Did you write things and then bring them to class and read them? How did she conduct the class?

NN: Well, our own personal experiences. She would take us on trips into the woods to see what our observations were. I guess she had planted things along the trail to see how many people would find them or observe them, you know, where their heads were, or who knows? But let's see — Anyhow, she was very lovely indeed. The Hetheringtons were very comforting too, you know, some kind of, kind of you felt close to them like a family, especially Louise. Well, I've run to a standstill. I guess still the Saturday night music things was one of my favorite things too because we still played — The Jennerjahns, that was their first year there too, I think. No, that wasn't their first year. I think it was the first year that they became

teachers. That's what it was. I was very impressed with Katy Litz, the dancer. I thought she was just a bird, a lovely bird. And Leo Amino was one of my favorite. But I guess Robert Turner was a very big impression on me, a true artist.

MEH: Okay, let's go to Robert Turner. I want you to elaborate a little bit. When you say that, what do you mean? What about him?

NN: As a teacher, he was a fantastic teacher. I mean he had infinite patience and a sharp eye and a noncritical way of critiquing. You know, a very positive way of critiquing and pointing. He seemed to be able to point to qualities that a person had made and show the significance and kind of move you in a direction that would help you advance something that you had done. And, technically, he was brilliant, and I'll never forget his classes, particularly one thing that always impressed me, a very simple thing but it always made a strong impression on me, it's not artistic at all, it's very technical. But making plaster for making molds for casting. He – I don't know where he learned this, maybe at Alfred or he learned it — He used to show the delicate way to make plaster fluid for casting, in a way that you wouldn't have any air bubbles in it. It's a funny thing, here in Bennington, there was a friend of his I met later who has the Bennington Potters here — I guess he was either Bob Turner's student at Alfred or knew him there or something. But the first time I met this fellow here in Bennington Potters, he asked me — we were talking about ceramics and schools, and he mentioned Bob Turner, and I said, "Yeah, I'll never forget

Bob Turner. I never put my hand in plaster again that I don't think of Robert Turner." (LAUGHS)

MEH: And you knew what he was talking about.

NN: Oh sure. But his pottery are all high-class art. All of his workmanship, very high class.

MEH: He was teaching pottery that year?

NN: Ceramics.

MEH: You took his course?

NN: [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: Now was the pot shop —

NN: It hadn't been completed.

MEH: Could you fire stuff?

NN: We did. We did. We had — The kiln building had not been completed. We were working the Studios Building in the basement, and we had a classroom there where we made our things and then we moved finally — I guess it was in spring that the pottery barn was finished, the studio was finished. The man who came down to build the kiln that Bob had hired stayed for, I don't know, about a month, became almost one of the members of the community, he had stayed there so long. And he was an interesting man. We watched him build the kiln and Robert instructed, you know, let us watch the whole thing. He made a very handsome kiln with a railroad car and the whole thing, you know. I'd never seen that.

MEH: What about — Did you take any physics with Natasha? Chemistry with Natasha?

NN: No, she was more — I took French with her mother, and Natasha had kind of a clique of people around her. There was Renner — I can't think of his first name. Eric Renner was one of her students, and she had I guess half a dozen students or so who were very close to her and she had a method of teaching which was, I understood, was kind of brutal but a very functional and a powerful way of learning. Something like — the gist of it would be she encouraged her students to read every page, read a page and then not turn the page until they really got the meat out of it, understood it and could explain it. Turn the page and do another one. Very slow and tedious and strong way of learning physics, really's what it's about, which is tough. I'm glad I wasn't in her classes. (LAUGHS). But I admired her and I liked her. I loved them both, Natasha and her mother.

MEH: What was Madam Goldowski like?

NN: Madam, yes, yes.

MEH: She was a little lady.

NN: Oh, a tiny little bird — fragile and cheerful. She had bright little intense blue eyes, and a charming — charming lady. Now let me see — Who else to go to.

MEH: Well —

NN: Oh — I want to say something about — Bill Levi had — This friend, one of the friends of mine was Harvey Harmon, and Harvey became, I guess,

one of Bill Levi's choice students, or somebody who was just glued to Bill, and that was because I think their class in literature was reading Proust. It must have been — I was jealous in a way that I didn't read and get into Bill's class for that because it lasted the whole year, and I think they read everything and discussed it. You know, there must have been maybe two or three students, three or four students, maybe more than that in the class. I really am jealous, as I say, that I didn't take that class with Bill Levi. I know — I watched the effect of it on Harvey, who — I think he was smitten by the depth of it all, you know, and what he was getting out of it. I don't know whatever became of Harvey. I know he's alive and around someplace, but I've never — often wondered what he did with his kind of life, you know, and I thought that was probably the biggest and most important thing that ever happened to him. I felt it in him, this sense that he was really into it. Of course, Fee Dawson was a charming fellow.

MEH: (INAUDIBLE). That's an interesting description of Fee.

NN: Oh yeah, "charming"? Oh he was! He was absolutely charming. He'd charm anybody. He was just fasc — he was fascinating. He was. And after Black Mountain, I met him in Washington D.C. and visited with Ken and myself, and he was very gracious and said that I had taught him so much about listening to jazz. I think we went to hear — later, in New York we went to hear Miles Davis and I think it must have been Coltrane in a night club, and he was just swooning. (LAUGHS). And Stan Vanderbeek was — He was in a different kind of group than I was at Black Mountain, but he

was nice. We were friendly. I'm not sure whether I shared a room with him or not. I can't remember who I shared a room with. It might have been Stan. But we were friendly with each other. Later in life, he had married a woman named Johanna Bourne, I believe her last name was. I can't remember what her maiden name was, but she had gone to Bennington College and they met in New York City. They divorced. They had two children and then were divorced, and where I lived in Amagansett from 1969, she moved across the street and we got acquainted. I don't think I'd ever met her. She became a very close friend, and Stan visited, and he had remarried and had children and came out there and visited and spent summers — bought a house in Springs and we visited and renewed our friendship, and Stan, of course, died, and he's buried in Green Rivers cemetery, and I made a piece of sculpture for his grave using some film reels, and right next to him, the grave next to him, is Henry Geldzahler, who died later after Stan. But Johanna had — Stan had always wanted to be buried in Green Rivers Cemetery with all the famous people — Pollock and everybody else, Stuart Davis, et cetera. And Johanna, there was no space left when he died, but she persisted and finally the caretakers or the trustees for the cemetery acquired more land and she had, she got her plot for Stan. (LAUGHS).

MEH: And Henry got his too.

NN: Henry evidently had bought one too, earlier. But they are side by side, and just behind Pollock. As a matter of fact, Pollock's up on the hill, they're down the other slope — the new property. Who else have I —

MEH: What about Joel Oppenheimer? Did you know him?

NN: Yeah. Joel Oppenheimer was — We were friendly, and we later met in New York and visited the Cedar Bar. Where else? In the '50s. And Victor Kalos and I, the three of us, we were in the Cedar Bar quite often. And Joel — He also became friendly with Stan's ex-wife Johanna Vanderbeek. I think they lived together for a while in a place that Paul Williams had up in Putman County or wherever it was. Joel was a baseball fanatic, and he hung out in the Lion's Head in New York City for years, you know with all the other writers and so forth and so on, and talked baseball and drank. (INAUDIBLE). Let's see now —

MEH: At Black Mountain was there any interest in sports?

NN: Sports? Yes. Joel and Fee Dawson and Harvey Harmon and there was a guy named Jack. I can't remember — Jack, can't think of his name now, but he was a sports fan. And Jay Watt. Jay Watt was a very terrific guy. I liked him. He played jazz sometime — he played trombone. He was — I think Mahler was his favorite composer. But he had — Jay went with Mitzi somebody. Is this boring?

MEH: No.

NN: Are you sure? He went with a girl named Mitzi, and I can't think of her last name, but anyhow they broke up and Jay had been, you know, just

crushed. Jay Watt was crushed by that, the breakup. She started going with this guy Jack. It's funny I can't think of his last name. Jay was very depressed after the breakup with Mitzi. He was really depressed, and I could see he was drinking. I later ran into Jay in New York at the Cedar Bar. He would show up periodically and I could tell he was having a hard time. By that time he was an alcoholic, and he was also a private detective.

MEH: For real?

NN: For real. I mean that's how he was earning his living. He was brilliant.

MEH: I understand he was gifted musically.

NN: He was! Absolutely. He was a very smart fellow, and I liked him. He was a very nice man, who had all those, in my mind — I don't know why he was so crushed by the love affair he had had with Mitzi. I never could understand that. Dan Rice –

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1; SIDE 2, TAPE 1 BEGINS]

MEH: Dan Rice?

NN: Dan Rice, you know, broke up with his wife, June. She started going with Merv Lane. But this I realize is getting like gossip.

MEH: Well it's interesting to hear you say you went because it was a community. It really was a community.

NN: It was a community, and that was part of the atmosphere. The thing is some of the things that went on.

MEH: Were students basically on their own in terms of personal relationships/
Was there any supervision or counseling?

NN: I'm not sure about the counsel — I never got into serious trouble, and I don't know whether — I mean it must have been obvious, it was obvious to the community in Jay's case and I don't know about Dan, whether he was depressed after the breakup with his wife. It was obvious they were depressed, but they could have gotten some kind of counseling too. I would imagine Bill Levi or M.C. or somebody like that — they were all perceptive people, so they knew. The staff, you know, the faculty, they knew. They read the situation.

MEH: Was there much drinking going on there then?

NN: No. Not particularly. I mean this guy Jack — I wish I could think of his name, I'll have to start looking. He was an advertising man later, in Manhattan. He lived in Connecticut. He was an interesting guy.

MEH: Don't worry. I can fill in the names. I can find the last names more easily.

NN: He was an interesting. I don't know why, I think it was physical characteristics that he was getting bald, bald-headed. He was only about 22 or 23, our age, my age. But he had a physique, his whole thing made him appear a very much more mature person, like somebody in their thirties. By that time — you know 35 or 36. But he wasn't. He was just 23. And he was a drinker. He liked to drink, and I think that was — Well, speculation — Who else drank? Well, we all drank, you know.

MEH: Did you go Ma Peeks? Was that a place you'd go to then?

NN: No. We didn't — I never traveled anywhere to drink. If I drank, it was wine and it was at school. But it wasn't very much, and I didn't circulate with anybody who was, you know, had bottles of booze or anything like that. We didn't do that.

MEH: What kind of music was around when you were there? What kind of music were people playing or listening to.

NN: Well, again I was a bit of a loner, and I was interested in jazz and I had jazz records and, you know, liked — Fee Dawson I encouraged, you know, I showed him how to listen to music seriously, the improvisation — think about it. And I don't know. Nobody else really dug the music like I did. I had no close friendship with anybody on music, where it was consistent. Everybody was — Actually I didn't spend too much time with any individuals, particularly. Bernie Karp was a friend, a very good, close friend. Nice man. He and I worked the following summer on the Work Program for residency, with a stipend. I remember I went to pick up Clem Greenberg when he came in on the train at Black Mountain. We had army vehicles, you know, troop carrier or something like that. I zoomed into Black Mountain, picked him up. That was one of my jobs. Brought him back. He watched Bernie Karp and myself and I overheard a comment he made one time — It was not true, of course. He said, "Well," he said, "I guess Bernie Karp and Neil Noland are just pretty much running this physical plant." (LAUGHS). It was not true at all. But his comment about Bernie, who was a nice guy — His father was a commercial artist who

lived in Philadelphia and worked for a big corporation in commercial art, corporation and did a lot of the art work for that famous celebration they had, some kind of clown celebration. I forget what — It's well known. It'll come to me in a minute. His father did an illustration, I've forgot the magazine he worked for. But he, Bernie, was into history. That was his — He wasn't into art very much. And there was a Marine Corps captain who taught history there, I don't know when, if it began in the summer or he was there in the beginning —

MEH: Was that John Adams?

NN: God, it could be. I can't even remember his name. But Bernie was — he was under his wing.

MEH: What did you do for entertainment? You talked about Saturday night concerts. Was that in the summer or through the year?

NN: Oh, it was a dance. That's right, we'd have a keg of beer and play music, play jazz, you know, for dancing. Everybody would jitterbug and stuff like that. Saturday night. That was it. The big night of the week. But there was parties going on in the studios, in the Studies Building. But I didn't really get into much of that. Who else?

MEH: So you were there for one whole school year — '49-'50?

NN: I was there for the whole — Yeah.

MEH: Did you take any art courses? Did you take Joe Fiore or — ?

NN: Oh yes. I did. Joe Fiore, I had a drawing class with Joe, and a ceramic class. They were the two art classes I took.

MEH: Did you study with Pete Jennerjahn?

NN: No.

MEH: What about the Light-Sound-Movement workshop that Betty Jennerjahn was doing with Pete? Did you have anything to do with that?

NN: No, I didn't have anything to do with that.

MEH: Sort of explored the relationship between movement, light, and poetry.

NN: No, they hung — They were in a crowd with Paul Williams and Vera, and I guess Stan and Ms. Larsen, Fee, Nick Cernovich were kind of in a group, and they were close with the Jennerjahns and Paul Williams and so forth. Let's see —

MEH: Was there much talk about Olson then?

NN: There was talk. I guess it was from M.C. and she, I guess, arranged for Olson to come to Black Mountain. As far as I know, she was probably the one who chose him. I guess Joel talked about him. I met, I think I met Charles Olson in Washington D.C. before he came down to become part of the faculty. I met e. e. cummings in Washington. My brother Ken was teaching in the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Washington, and I think Olson read there occasionally, Catholic University. I think the guy — the director — was Robert Richmond, and he used to invite people to meet, like I went to breakfast at his house and met e. e. cummings. I think I met Olson at the Institute. He lived in Washington at that time, I believe. Maybe not — I'm not sure. I didn't have much contact with any of the literary

people, except Paul Goodman. I met him later in New York after Black Mountain.

MEH: But you stayed for the summer of 1950.

NN: Yes.

MEH: And Paul Goodman taught that summer.

NN: Yes, he did. And —

MEH: Did you take his course?

NN: Yes I did. I had a class with him.

MEH: Was this a writing course?

NN: A writing course, yes.

MEH: What do you remember about it?

NN: Oooh, let's see. Not much. I swear I really don't. I wasn't — I couldn't get in, I wasn't deeply into it. I wasn't committed. I knew I wasn't — it was sort of like testing for me, you know, the writing thing.

MEH: That summer Greenberg was there.

NN: Oh yeah, Stamos was there. The community part of it, you know, like every day you'd be sitting at a different table, more or less, and so you'd be in a different crowd just about every night. And the conversations were all interest — I remember Clem was there, and Helen Frankenthaler came down for a visit, and I was at her table one night. Clem's son I think appeared while I was there, too. Stamos, I remember we talked. And Paul Goodman. Leo Amino. Leo Amino was a very good friend of mine. I really

admired him and respected him, and he was a very good friend to both Ken and I. We went camping together –

MEH: This was after Black Mountain or at Black Mountain.?

NN; No, at Black Mountain.

MEH: So Ken came back down that summer.

NN: Yeah, Ken was there for the summer, that's right, after he'd been to Europe. Leo was a lovely man, a good artist. His wife was lovely too. I'm not sure — it was Florence? I can't remember offhand. It skips — But she was lovely. I later saw them both in New York and visited them, and always admired Leo, and his wife was just a lovely woman. Who else did I see? Let me see, after I left Black Mountain, the following year —

MEH: Why did you leave?

NN: I don't know. There was a lot of chaos going on, there was emotional upset, you know, the arguments, fights, tension.

MEH: Were you involved in them at all?

NN; Well yeah, I took sides, you know. I liked — let me see — Dave, I had a class with him too, David Corkran.

MEH: [BRIEF PAUSE AND IRRELEVANT REMARKS] So I'd asked you why you left.

NN: Oh yeah. Several — I guess — impatience, and in a certain way I was – I hadn't found myself, and I wasn't committed strongly to anything though I – The chaos was a contributing thing. The tension.

MEH: What conflicts do you remember?

NN: Well, I mean there was a dispute with the people from the farm — Ray Trayer? had socked Bill Levi. That was an episode, an ongoing episode. There was an episode about Paul Goodman being gay, and that conflicted with, I think, Dave Corkran, whom I liked him. He was a nice man — brilliant and smart, very giving of his knowledge, very helpful. But he was on one side — I was supporting Paul Goodman, you know, his right to be gay and the whole thing. It didn't bother me. The whole business. It was people arguing, fussing, bitching, complaining. And so it was part of the tension. I was divided loyalties, or feelings. You know, your feelings got all mixed up. M.C. and Bill were not getting on well, and I liked them both. I guess I liked M.C. more because I knew her better, but I certainly admired Bill, Bill Levi. He later visited Ken in Washington, D.C. I later saw him again there. Well, there was tension between various different departments, the music department. I think Vollmer was quite a disciplinarian type person, but a nice man. Very strong in his belief. He was a very centered kind of guy, you know. There was a quartet. The other musicians I barely remember in that quartet for the summer. But nights we had that music. We had that quartet. They played once a week, too. Sundays, Saturdays. I don't remember. Rehearsed all the time. You could just drop in and hear rehearsal, practice.

MEH: Tell me more about what you remember about Katy. Katy Litz.

NN: Oh Katy Litz. Oh, she was gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous. Young males, unattached males would natural fixate on her and also there was Ellen

Siegel, who was a knockout — a dreamy, luscious lady. But she was mature and we were ima — A big difference in our ages.

MEH: Who taught weaving?

NN: Yes. And everybody was always flirting with her. You couldn't keep your eyes off her. Let's see, unattached males were hard-pressed (LAUGHS).

MEH: Why, because there weren't many unattached females?

NN: Yeah, and the ones that were attached, you know, everybody was trying to pry loose. (LAUGHS). Well that's the way it is.

MEH: Well, it seems a lot of people were shifting partners, so some people must have had some pretty good prying-loose techniques.

NN: Let's see — There were a few fellows — I can't even remember their names at all — but they — There were two guys who particularly hung together and they were different. I don't think they were gay or anything like that, but they must have been in some kind of, some religious experience. They hung to themselves.

MEH: Do you remember who they were?

NN: I can't remember. Both had A Model Fords and they were restored to the ultimate.

MEH: Was Tommy Jackson there when you were there?

NN: Tommy Jackson. I can't remember.

MEH: You would remember. What about Norman Solomon?

NN: No.

MEH: Did you take any photography classes with Hazel?

NN: No, I didn't. Stan was the man in photography and cinema. And Nick. And Fee, I guess Fee was into it too somewhat. I had a class in Music Appreciation with Vollmer that summer. Who else? I hate the part I've been talking about that's gossip, you know. I guess it's part of the experience, but it sounds bad and makes me feel a little bad.

MEH: Well, I think when I'm editing this I'm not going to focus on gossip, but there's a point to which the — It was a community, and it was, you know, the relationships between people were part of the total experience. What — So when you left Black Mountain, where did you go?

NN: Let's see, I went to Washington, D.C. and I got a job working for a restaurant chain. Saved money.

MEH: Did you have any idea what you wanted to do then?

NN: Well, I was still, still listening to jazz, reading, wanting — I had enough time on the GI Bill to go to Europe, so I was planning to sort of spend a year in Europe which I did. Save — Work, save money, bought a ticket on a student ship to Europe, came to New York and stayed with Merv Lane on Tenth Avenue, the top flight of a walk-up, for two days I think before the ship left. About 110 degree temperature (LAUGHS). Tenth or Eleventh Avenue, I don't know. He had the cheapest pad in New York. I think it was three dollars a week or month. But he shared it. I just camped out on the floor and visited the city. It was the first time I had ever spent any time in New York. I thought it was the dirtiest place I'd ever seen in my life. It was.

MEH: Were he and June together then?

NN: No. They weren't. I don't know where she was. Maybe she was in California or who knows? I don't. That would be '51. I believe it was.

MEH: What did you do in Europe? Were you in France?

NN: Yes, I went to the Grand Chaumière in Paris, and after about four months I decided it was too expensive on my GI Bill stipend, and I went to Spain, because I met Americans and we talked, you know, where's the cheapest place to go. I went to Barcelona and the first thing I did, I took a Berlitz course speaking Spanish a couple of months. Then I went to Madrid and enrolled in a special program for Americans, ex-GIs, at the Esquella del Bellas Artes. And I took a sculpture class and drawing, life drawing, and I stayed there until June or July – June, I guess. Then I went to Germany, where my brother Harry had gotten back into the military service career and he was stationed in Frankfurt. I stayed there for about two months. Then I came back to Washington. My mother worked there. She'd been there during the War, ever since the beginning— Well, I guess she got there about 1942, and she worked for Navy. She was in cryptography, and she stayed there and retired. So that was kind of in a way a home base, after the family split all up. My grandmother had died. She was originally – In Asheville. She had kind of taken care of me, particularly, at the beginning of World War II when my mother moved to Washington –

MEH: So you stayed in Asheville with your grandmother?

NN: Until I went into the service. Shall I go through the rest of my life?

MEH: Yes. Let's go through — After you came back to the States, you came back to Washington.

NN: Well, I came back — I stayed in Washington and got a job, I had two part-time jobs, one was in a library in Washington and one was in the Evening Star, it was a newspaper, in the advertising department. I stayed there — not long. I was there, let's see, that would be 1952. Well I would say I was there until 1953 and I moved to New York in 1953. And I began Reichian therapy. I'd sort of picked up on about, a little bit about Reichian therapy from Paul Goodman, who knew about it, and my brother Ken had known about it in Washington, D.C. through another guy who was a teacher in the A.S. Neill School in England or wherever it was. And I started in therapy, Reichian therapy, because I thought it was the thing to do and it turned out it was the thing to do, and I spent a long, many years in that. It's not an acute treatment, therapy like that, but it's just a slow, methodic kind of treatment and I resumed my interest in ceramics, and I got more — Then I was doing that in the city until 1956. In 1956 I left New York and I came down to Washington, D.C. and I worked — I got a job as a reporter on the Northern Virginia Sun. I was there for almost a year. Then I came back to New York, went back into therapy, went back to working in ceramics.

MEH: What type of ceramics were you doing, and where were you doing it?

NN: Well, there was a — I did ceramics, a little at Greenwich House in New York and some at — There was a place on Eighth or Ninth Avenue in a — it

was like a development, the basement of a development. I forget where it was. A housing development had a kind of program where after work you could come in and make ceramics. Those two places. It was still just pottery really. It wasn't abstract at all. And –

MEH: Were you doing stoneware then?

NN: No, it was just low fire —

MEH: Was M.C. working at Greenwich House then?

NN: Not when I was there. I was just there briefly. Still I was still doing some writing. I had a job. After I met the woman who had my child – we never married – I had a job. I worked for the Arab Information Center — the delegation, they represented the delegations from the Arab world at the United Nations. And I'd met this woman who was a friend – she had a friend – After I'd worked on the newspaper, I could write, you know, a little bit, you know — reportage. And for them I published like a cultural newsletter once a month, and prepared a summary of news concerning the Arab world which went out every morning to the delegates to the U.N. from the Arab world. That's all it was, social and cultural and economic news. I did that for a year or so. Met a real nice man from Egypt. He was on the United – What the hell was that called? It was like a — forgot the name of it now. But it was a thing like AP and UP for the Arab world Middle East News Agency, and he had owned the business in Cairo. Nasser nationalized it and he'd got booted, lost his — he ended up working for the New York Times in the foreign news section. He was the

guy that I worked for with the Arab Information Center, a nice man. Hosni Khaliffa.

Well, I had, you know, like I say, I didn't marry but I had a son with this woman who was an actress, Sudie Bond. She had a reputation in plays and then — That lasted, the whole relationship, the whole involvement, lasted until about 1965. I came to Bennington. I had established — I'd had a studio and freelancing and all kinds of work. I had a studio around Gansevoort in New York City —

MEH: Doing pottery?

NN: No, I was making figures, sculpture then, figurative sculpture. Knute Stiles was hanging out, down on the corner there was a bar, kind of a — it was developing in that Gansevoort area. He was around — I guess he ran a bar there on the corner for six months, or something like that. And then I was going to work for Tony Caro, at Bennington College, as an assistant. 1966. I came here, but within a month I had developed tuberculosis. I went to the VA Hospital up in White River Junction and was sent over to Tupper Lake, New York. I was in the hospital seven months, I guess. I was on therapy for two years, and Ken was living here in Shaftsbury and so I started working for him as an assistant. And altogether, you know, I worked for Ken almost ten years as an assistant, except for summers I took off. And I lived out in Long Island, which was the first opportunity I really had to resume my career in art, in ceramics. And I started out in ceramics. I made fish, life-sized fish, searching for my entrée into abstract,

finally found it, made a lot of it — [IRRELEVANT COMMENTS NOT
TRANSCRIBED]

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1; SIDE 1, TAPE 2 BEGINS]

MEH: You said you started out making fish.

NN: Yes, I started out making fish, and I finally I found a form that I could make abstract, which was where my head was at but I never knew how to be, to get abstraction. I really had a difficult time trying to discover within myself how to approach abstraction. Now my head, I knew about it, but personal feelings I had to developed. I think I got the clue from making fish, really, because in the decoration, especially on flukes and flounders, they have a very arbitrary kind of decorative thing. They have certain things that are typical decoration but the other part, the colorations, are so arbitrary that in trying to kind of replicate the feeling of it, got me into it, got my head, aim, I got my focus, I could say. I really did get a focus on how to approach abstraction. And I must say, I might be a little bit confused about it still but I don't think many people really understand about abstract art. The abstraction, what it is, or how to see it or explain it. I think there are a lot of misnomers. People who use that word without real meaning. I think, as far as I'm concerned, I discovered it for myself in a very peculiar way.

MEH: The fish that you were making — were they big fish, little fish, the actual size? Did they have a practical purpose, or decorative?

NN: No. The thing was — it was me, a personal search, for — When I resumed, I had the — The first time that I had enough security to really get

down into me, I didn't know where to begin. So the only thing I did, I began at the point of what are my feelings, what are my truth deep, what I really care about, what I really feel, have feeling about. I started out – because when I was a kid I used to go fishing by myself and catch fish and I just marveled at fish. Fish were just this very powerful thing to me, you know. So I just got down to a very basic fundamental thing that interested me. I had interest. That's something I learned, a very important lesson I learned is that interest. If you don't have interest in it, you're just messing around. If you're really interested, that's where it's all at. Nowhere else. So I made these fish, tediously and poorly in the beginning, and then I got — I made some very beautiful fish. I worked at them, improved them, focused: fish, fish, fish, a variety of fish, focused on the details, the sculpture, the form, the color, and the whole thing, until I'd mastered it. I could make some beautiful fish, as I say. I finally got to that point. Then as this was all developing in me internally. My mind was always, my mind was always out – how am I going to get into the abstract, be current. And this is ludicrous working fish, realistic stuff. It came. I discovered a form — the corrugated form, you know, because I had used some of the material, corrugated material. It's a fascinating insight here. I added on a room to work, to my cottage in Long Island, and I used corrugated material for the roof. I was just fascinated with the corrugations — waves, hills and valleys, the whole thing. And I remembered one of the first impressions, big impressions on me at Black Mountain College was the Studies Building, because it was —

on the sides was corrugation. And I had always marveled. You know, it came back to me later when I first went out there and started living there, that that corrugation and that larger scale — it was not that smaller scale, but a larger scale and it was building material, beautiful, fascinating. But it had been stored in my mind and of course in the South Pacific, I lived in Quonset huts you know. It's all corrugated stuff, too. Part-time when I was out there. So it all coalesced into something that meant, had meaning to me. Then as I started working, I made a mold of a piece of corrugated fiberglass and made ceramic, and designed it. I felt right into — All my faculties came to the tips of my fingers, my brain. It all congealed. I'd had kind of, I'd had plenty of sculptural training, you know, and drawing and sculpture — and not so much painting, but some painting. And, of course, my experience with Ken was enlightening to a great, a huge degree. So everything came together and I made abstract wall reliefs, in ceramic, and got a lot, I got quite a bit of attention. I exhibited them and got a lot of praise. I have a collection, and one of my ambitions now is to go back to ceramics, because I have much more skills since I first started working in abstract ceramics. I advanced, enlarged the concept into fiberglass, which you saw a show of in New York, and I used the techniques I've learned with ceramics — skills, and all of this, to transfer into fiberglass, which is a perfect way to transfer, relate one material to another, the skills from one material to another. But then I got in — I was working with fiberglass and I had to move around different studios out on Long Island. I finally ended up

at this great place, this great man, one of my major mentors. His name is Roger Wilcox and he has been in the art world for a long time —

MEH: It's a familiar name.

NN: Well, he was in with everybody. He knew everybody in the art world — Motherwell and Pollock — and he was drinking buddies with Pollock. De Kooning. He knew John Graham, was very close — tight — with him. He knew the whole family of artists from Europe. His wife — she was a Lebanese — had been in the art crowd in Paris, and married to an Italian sculptor, and divorced and immigrated, pre-World War II, 1939 or so.

MEH: [ADJUSTS CAMERA OR MICROPHONE]

NN: But anyway, I found this studio at this man's — Roger Wilcox's estate in Amagansett. And he was a fascinating man. He was an engineer type and an inventor. He invented a weaving machine that makes sculptured carpeting. He invented that — patented it. And, as I say, his wife had been in the art crowd, and she knew all of them, all the Paris artists in the late '30s, when they emigrated here. A lot of them lived in East Hampton, and she was there, and during World War II he was in the South Pacific. After he came back, he supported her and she, I think, exhibited at Castelli's — not Castelli, Janis or somebody like that — a few times. She's not a very good artist at all. Very poor artist. But he adored her, and subsidized her. She was very brilliant, spoke about eight or nine languages, knew all these people, and had traveled with the Murphys, you know, the Fitzgerald crowd. They traveled together after the War, too. And here. He was in that

group, like I say, with all those artists. But he had all these engineering skills, and he was a physicist to some, to a large degree. He was, at that time he was near eighty and he took me under — I had a very — I was terrible as far as engineering, so he encouraged me to make freestanding sculpture. I had been working on relief wall sculpture for a long time, with fiberglass, and he encouraged me to make freestanding sculpture and really taught me the engineering aspects of making sculpture, you know. I'd shifted to steel and made, I think, my best work in steel. So finally I left there about 1994, I guess, or something like that. He's now in the hospital, or nursing home, something like that. He's way beyond — But that brings us up to date, pretty much, besides my health. In 1995, I had health problems I told you about before, and so here I am. But my next thing is, I've learned how to make maquettes. Instead of building the steel myself, which I did brutally — it's hard, terribly hard work — I know how to make maquettes, thanks to Mr. Wilcox, who encouraged me to get into freestanding sculpture. So, now, one of my big ambitions or hopes is to go back to ceramics and apply some of the engineering skills that I learned into making skill — steel — and making ceramic pieces which are freestanding and which I think are going to be something I'm very anxious to do. I think that might be the last phase of my life's work, or whatever.

MEH: But now looking back over all of those years, two questions. Do you think Black Mountain had any real influence on what you've done?

NN: Oh, absolutely.

MEH: In what way?

NN: Well, it opened my eyes to the freedom of not being — of escaping, you know, from the system, the rat race, you know. I think without, if I hadn't had that experience at Black Mountain, I would have probably done something boring all my life, you know, to earn a living or whatever. Maybe not terribly —

MEH: You had a precedent in your family for people doing interesting things. I mean not just your brothers, but your parents and grandparents.

NN: Father, mother. That's true. I think the real key that Black Mountain gave me, opened me up to the view that you don't have to be a part of the rat race. It gave me a sense of independence, my sense of independence. M.C. was important to that. I think she represented something — She was very independent, and I think I must have latched on to some of that from her.

MEH: What do you think about Black Mountain really mattered? Why do you think Black Mountain mattered, in general?

NN: To people who were there?

MEH: To people who were there, and beyond that. What do you think its importance is?

NN: Well, I don't know what the extent of it is in the society at large. I don't know. I don't think — There's not a movement. There's no movement. It's individuals, which I think make a difference. There's a certain kind of sophistication, lifestyles, and art — sciences too. And wherever they are, I

think they, in their little orbits, have done well. I mean they're good for our society, and I'm sure they've influenced a lot of people, you know, in their lifestyles, what they learned, felt.

[DISCUSSION OF FISH BEING SHOWN] This is one of the early ones. It's all sculptured out and decorated.

MEH: It's quite beautiful.

NN: You can see this is one of the abstract pieces.

MH: You made after the fish. I can see how it grew out of the fish.

NN: That's one of the steel pieces.

MEH: You can see the progression from the fish. [COMMENTS ON POSITION OF SCULPTURE] About when would this have dated? [PHOTOGRAPHS OF OTHER SCULPTURES WITH ONLY TECHNICAL COMMENTS.

[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 2; NO SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

[INTERVIEW RESUMES ON VIDEOTAPE ONLY]

MEH: You were talking about your work here. You were saying that it's abstract but –

NN: It's abstract but the pieces represent some kind of image. A lot of abstract artists think image is bad. I think all of my work makes some kind of image but it's expressive. A lot of people like it. A few people have seen it, but a few critics have seen it and they like it a lot. I'm sure that if I ever have a show, I'll get a fair shake on a review. It seems it could be – One thing that some people would say is its dated, but it's my era. I was slow in developing to get to it.

MEH: So far as that goes, everything is dated. We are –

NN: Well, I mean, yeah. But they might say that's sixties art, sixties sculpture.

MEH: Oh, right.

NN: Which is alright with me because that was my era. I didn't get a chance to do it. It hadn't coalesced. Bit still, every piece is expressive. That's one of the things I think about – the confusion about abstraction. People go into an exhibit and they see paintings and it's semi-abstract or it is abstract. But that's not my idea of abstraction. Abstraction is like getting to the core of something, the expression of it. And if paint is put into a lot of different places, if doesn't coalesce into something that's expressive, they don't know what they're talking about if they say it's abstract. I think, like Bill de Kooning, that is abstract and it's expressive. So is Franz Kline. A lot of the other painters are not abstractionists. There's two kinds of abstractions to my mind. There's like one – how am I going to explain that? You can create something absolutely out of nothing, and if it's expressive, it can be abstract, it can be expressive. But if it's just things put together without an expression, it really doesn't function. And a lot of people get away with a lot on that score.

MEH: Who would you describe as a painter who is abstract without being expressive?

NN: Without it? I can't say specifically, but a lot of it is. I'm really not expressing what – sometimes it's clear to me, a clear way to express it and sometimes it just doesn't come through out of my mind. But let me think – I can tell you generally, I think. There's two ways, two ways that art is made. Painting, sculpture whatever. One way is it's made to be art and the other way it's created art. If the consciousness part of it is making it, it's one thing. It's a whole different

separation between quality and art. Some people are like footnotes to other artists. You know. And they'll never make art. They're making art but they're not creating art. That's the big distinction I'm trying to make. It's art that has life and will endure unlike an art that won't endure because, it's empty. It doesn't have the spirit. I think the majority of art today is made that way. It's made in a professional way. It's not made from creativity. Creativity is a natural function. When you're making art, the thing to strive for is to be natural, and if it's intellectual knowledge of art, it's not going to be natural. If it has studied content, that's a big failing in some content art, if you can discover in the making – It's a discovery. It's like a love relationship. Making art is love. It really is. It's a love relationship with each individual piece or painting or whatever. And the people who can do it – I'll tell you my favorite phrase of all time. Louis Armstrong said, "If you are a musician, you can't play jazz, if you ain't got soul. But you can still play music!" That's it. It can't be said any better. That's it. That's my notion about it, too. Really. It has to be kind of – you have to have the depth to be natural. And that's – the thing that's left in the piece of art is that. What that person left there, it's always there and it'll be there a thousand years from now and it always has been. So that's my finale.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]