

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

This transcript of an interview with Kenneth Gaines is part of an oral history project entitled "Patterns of Change, Edwards County, Kansas 1950-1970" conducted by the Kinsley Public Library. The project was supported by a Kansas Humanities Council Heritage Grant. Gaines talks of his family, education, and his memories of the Edwards County community.

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Interview with Kenneth Gaines

September 3, 2011

Conducted in the Kinsley Library, Kinsley, Kansas

Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, Kinsley Library

Joan: What is your full name?

Kenny: Kenneth Winchester Gaines.

Joan: Where do you currently reside?

Kenny: Columbia, South Carolina.

Joan: And when and where were you born?

Kenny: March 12, 1947, in Kinsley, Kansas.

Joan: And what were the names of your parents?

Kenny: Norma, it would have been Winchester at that time, and George Thomas.

Joan: And your grandparents?

Kenny: My grandparents would be John Walter Winchester and Minora Anne Winchester.

Joan: And on the other side? The Gaines side?

Kenny: Gaines would be my step-father.

Joan: Okay, I didn't understand that. So your father's name was actually Thomas.

Kenny: Yes.

Joan: Do you know his...

Kenny: I don't know that much about his side of the family although he is still alive and living in Hutchinson.

Joan: We missed that in your mother's story. Where did she meet your father?

Kenny: Well, he was in the military. He was from Hutchinson, so she met him I guess, here in Kinsley.

Joan: I already know this, you have some brothers and sisters?

Kenny: They would be my step-brothers and sisters, Stanley Gaines, Pam Gaines, Jackie Kennedy, Kay, Paul and Brenda.

Joan: I guess we've already talked about what brought your grandparents on your mother's side. You're too young to remember World War II. You were born here and spent your first few years here?

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 2

Kenny: Yes, up until I was in the...I think I was through the first grade.

Joan: Do you have any memories of childhood here?

Kenny: Yes, kindergarten and first grade, basically. I went to Northside. I went to kindergarten over on Southside, but first grade was over on Northside.

Joan: And then your mother went to Oregon?

Kenny: Yes, she went to Oregon, I think, after I completed the first grade. I went to the second, third and fourth grade in Oregon.

Joan: What was the school like out there?

Kenny: Well, we went to an inner-city school. Portland, Oregon, was pretty much segregated in terms of the housing situation, so the schools were segregated. The school I went to was called Elliot Grade School and it was predominately a black school. But it had lots of problems in terms of discipline. We didn't learn much of any substance in terms of subject matter. I can recall that in terms of what I had experienced up through the first grade in Kinsley, the students there were very, very far behind. I kind of drifted and got behind.

Joan: It was a typical inner-city situation then.

Kenny: Oh yes, definitely. It was kind of like survival every day. You didn't think about learning anything. I came back to Kinsley and things were so much different. It was like night and day the first day you went into the school. I remember students sitting with their feet together and hands on their desks. Everything was sparkling, you know, hardwood floors were shiny. So it had an immediate impact.

Joan: Portland at that time, I'm trying to remember, it would be the fifties.

Kenny: About '55 or somewhere.

Joan: Were there problems with drugs or that sort of thing at that time or was it just poverty?

Kenny: No, they didn't know anything about drugs. It was just the section of town where most black people lived. It was not that you couldn't live somewhere else. It was just that the economics and just kind of the culture there was just like everywhere else. You had a black community that was concentrated in certain parts of the city.

Joan: Were the teachers not as good?

Kenny: I don't think it was really that, I remember my second grade teacher, especially. I really liked her. But I really felt sorry for her. She was a white teacher, and I remember that I always felt sorry for her because she had such a hard time trying to teach anything because she always had to discipline somebody. It was very, very stressful for her, I could see.

Joan: So you came back here to live with your grandparents?

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 3

Kenny: Yes.

Joan: Your mother said this was your decision in a way?

Kenny: Well, it was something certainly I dreamed of and I wanted to do. But it was really her decision. She could see that I was not performing anywhere near what I was in the first grade. We moved when I was in the, I believe, third grade. We moved to a different section of Portland that was...we were the first black family to be in that part of town. I can remember there was a lot of controversy about us moving there. So we went to a school that was then predominately white. Some of the old habits that you learned in the inner city school kind of carried over there. So I wasn't showing much improvement, so that's when my mom decided that maybe it was best to come back to Kinsley. I can remember that it was like overnight, on the first day home.

Joan: Did you do the whole fifth grade in Portland?

Kenny: I came back here in the fifth grade.

Joan: Were you in that new school then?

Kenny: Yes, for the third and fourth grade. It was Vernon Elementary School.

Joan: Was the discipline there more like Kinsley because it was a white school?

Kenny: Well, yes, discipline was not anywhere near as much of a problem, but if you didn't have a good base, you know what I mean?

Joan: You were behind.

Kenny: Yes, you were behind. So that just kind of carried over.

Joan: You think expectations were different for you also? Do you think perhaps the teachers thought you couldn't do it?

Kenny: Do you mean in the new school?

Joan: In the white school, yes.

Kenny: Maybe, it certainly could have been. It just didn't fit. It was more, I think, it was more of a disciplinary problem. In other words, paying attention and actually doing the work. Then also, going home and not getting a lot of reinforcement. Because my mom worked, you know. So you didn't get much reinforcement at all at home, and then I ended up having to help take care of my siblings. That was part of my responsibility until she got home from work. You probably couldn't do that now.

Joan: I don't know, there's a lot of latch-key kids.

Kenny: I was definitely a latch-key kid. I had to change diapers and do all that stuff.

Joan: So she brought you back here? By car?

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 4

Kenny: Yes. I came back and I remember Mr. Metling was the principal at Northside, and I remember they tested me and all this stuff. They found that I was behind, and they worked with me to help bring me up to par and get me on the right track. That was part of the positive part of coming back here.

Joan: Now, were you the only black student at that time?

Kenny: Yes, definitely, the only one. I remember I had good friends and had a few friends that were not so good.

Joan: You mean they led you astray?

Kenny: No, we had friends that taunted you racially, you know, that we always had to kind of battle against. But the fortunate thing was that I had good white friends and also the administration of the school helped deal with the situation. It was like you weren't battling this by yourself. Then that was when sports started, basketball and these sports. Then I discovered that I was pretty good at some of it, basketball and track and that sort of thing. That helped put you on a different pecking order, I guess. So that kind of helped the academics too because that kind of exposure, at least in my situation, made me want to do better in school too. It was all kind of a hand-in-glove situation.

Joan: Were you a pretty good student then, once you caught up?

Kenny: Once I caught up, yes. I made steady progress. I think probably when I got in junior high and beyond, I started getting above average, and then became a pretty strong student. By the time I got out of high school, I was probably a pretty solid B+ student.

Joan: What was it like being raised by grandparents?

Kenny: Oh, it was good, because they were very well thought of and they disciplined in a very positive way. It was a very good experience, and they were always very supportive of the school activities, the extracurricular activities. They were very supportive of that. My granddad would always come to the games. I think more than anything, it was the peer pressure that I felt from my classmates. They made you feel like you needed to do well to be respected. You kind of felt that. It helped keep you on the right track. Plus, being the only black person, you didn't want to be singled out. You could feel the expectation; the expectation was that you probably shouldn't do as well. So it made you, at least in my case, want to do better. It doesn't always work out that way, but it did for me because I didn't like to have people think of me in a negative light. Because I felt like they felt that anyway. So to counter that, you would try to over-achieve.

Joan: So you had both here in Kinsley. There were people who had low expectations.

Kenny: Yes, but it was just general.

Joan: Or the whole country had that expectation.

Kenny: Yes, when you're a black person you know that you have to do better. You can't just do average and be respected. In order to really excel, you've got to do better. You've got to really excel at something. So that's why the sports were easy, you see. Then once you saw the results

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 5

of how you were viewed and treated, then trying to get the other side of it up to par too, was another goal that you set, to try to do that. But it was a little more difficult because I didn't get started out in the right way. It was a lot of work.

Joan: You were the only child in your grandparents home at this time?

Kenny: Yes, I was the only one. Well, I think there was one year when my cousin Michael Shepherd came. He would be my Mother's niece's son.

Joan: Did you have chores, or were you mainly expected to go to practice and the extra-curricular...

Kenny: Yes, practice. I didn't have a lot of chores. You know, my granddad would like...he would request that I hoe the garden and that sort of thing. But by and large, he wasn't much of an enforcer. He kind realized that I had to practice and I had to do a lot of homework. So I stayed pretty busy.

Joan: You graduated in the class of '65?

Kenny: Yes.

Joan: When did sports start for you? Was it junior high then?

Kenny: No, I was in grade school. Fifth grade.

Joan: Fifth grade. What was it, a field day?

Kenny: They had organized basketball. We played Offerle in the fifth grade, and that was where I kind of had a break-out right there and discovered that I could play basketball. I'd never played in Portland.

Joan: Were you tall at that time? Or just average?

Kenny: I think I was probably about average height. I was skinny, real skinny.

Joan: But could handle a ball.

Kenny: Yes, well, I think probably at that age, my coordination was further advanced than most of my contemporaries.

Joan: But you hadn't done any sports in Portland or earlier? Street ball?

Kenny: Yes, I did. I played baseball. I did play baseball.

Joan: That's interesting that they competed in fifth grade in that time period.

Kenny: It really was unusual. We played, I don't know, two or three games.

Joan: So then you would have had JV or did you have junior high sports then too? Probably, all

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 6

the way through.

Kenny: Yes, we had a regular schedule in junior high.

Joan: And you played all...football, basketball and track.

Kenny: Yes, football, basketball and track when I got in junior high. Well, I think I started track in the fifth and sixth grade. That's when I found out I could really high jump and all that stuff. That's when Mr. Metling got excited, 'cause I was able to jump almost his height because he was kind of short. He was about 5'6" or something like that. I was jumping his height, and he couldn't believe that, I guess.

Joan: Now, when you traveled with the team. Did you experience discrimination at that time with the team?

Kenny: You mean in junior high? In junior high we really didn't...

Joan: Like Offerle...

Kenny: Well, when I was in junior high, I already had a pretty strong reputation in sports. I kind of had a little celebrity status. So if there was any animosity that way...

Joan: Well, in western Kansas too, as a black boy you were unique.

Kenny: Yes, right. And the key was to be unique in a positive way. Because I'd hear my grandparents talk about segregation and things they experienced when they grew up. It always fascinated me that these things could happen. I always wondered, I was always kind of alert to whether these things could happen to me. My grandmother was very fearful. I can remember she was always very fearful of me being out, especially in the evening with my friends and stuff. She just thought that was so unusual. I remember her always saying, "What is it that they like about you?" She was afraid they might do something. You know, "You can't be out there where those white people all of the time."

Joan: I think in one of the interviews, and I can't remember which, but someone was out with your grandfather and had car trouble. They asked him to go up to the farmhouse to get help, and he wouldn't do it because he was worried about going up to a house with probably a white woman in it, even though it was right here in the county.

Kenny: Oh, they knew the rules. No question about it because they would talk about having to sit in the balcony of the theater.

Joan: But you never did?

Kenny: No, I never did.

Joan: That's what people have told us.

Kenny: No, never did. I never did experience much discrimination, at least overt discrimination.

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 7

Joan: We also had someone tell the story about the team maybe not going to be served or you couldn't be served. Do you remember that? In St. John or something.

Kenny: I don't really remember that. It seems like there was a time when they may have told the coach something like that, and the coach didn't hesitate. We went somewhere else. It wasn't even discussed; it was just decided to take the team somewhere else. So my teammates always kind of protected me in that way because we were very close. They knew I was good in sports, and they wanted to see me perform. They didn't want anything to interfere with that.

Joan: With the teams you were playing, were there ever any slurs or anything? I had brothers who played basketball, and..

Kenny: Not actually. The only time I ever heard any slurs were when I played summer baseball in some of the little towns we played.

Joan: That would have been more recreation, not school related.

Kenny: That wasn't school related.

Joan: Well, that's a positive thing.

Kenny: But during school, I never did have that problem. It was always people would come up to you and want your autograph and to talk to you and ask question.

Joan: So what were some of your team's accomplishments when you were in school?

Kenny: You mean like junior high and high school?

Joan: Yes, how did the basketball team do, or what records did you set?

Kenny: Yes, there were lots of records, high jump, long jump, high hurdles, relays, basketball...we had some good district tournaments that we played well in and won. I remember my freshman team had a terrible losing season. I can still remember that. I think after that we had a pretty decent seasons in basketball. Football was something I really liked to play, but I think the coach really tried to protect me for track. He didn't want to put me in a position where I'd get hurt.

Joan: What position did you play in football?

Kenny: I played end in football and I played safety on defense.

Joan: Because you could run!

Kenny: Yes, but in junior high I played in the backfield where you're getting hit all the time. Then they didn't want me to get hurt.

Joan: My son played here too, and he didn't want to get hurt, he was into basketball. He didn't want to get hurt, and if they ever got the ball to him he was like you. He ran fast enough they couldn't catch him because he didn't want to get hurt. And then in basketball, you played what

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 8

position?

Kenny: I played forward and center sometimes in basketball.

Joan: You have some good memories of all those athletic years?

Kenny: Yes, very good. If it hadn't been for sports, I wouldn't have gotten to go to college.

Joan: Because you won a scholarship?

Kenny: Yes, nobody in my family had the money to send me to college so you had to depend on a full four-year scholarship, especially at the school I went to.

Joan: And you went to the University of Kansas?

Kenny: Yes.

Joan: Did Kinsley equip you academically for the University of Kansas?

Kenny: Oh yes, definitely. Although I will say that the first year or two, my own lack of discipline was a problem for the most part because you have a lot more pressure in college. When you travel and your practice time and that sort of thing means you can't take certain courses at certain times. Your afternoons are pretty much taken up by practice, so you can't take certain courses. It makes it much more difficult, at least at that time, for an athlete, to get your schooling on time and to have decent grades.

Joan: I think maybe back then they expected you to have decent grades more than they do now.

Kenny: Well, yes and no. I think maybe then it might have been the other way around because they have more help now for student athletes. The focus is also to see that these athletes graduate. At that time, they just basically wanted to keep you eligible. So if you were doing just enough to get eligible that's all they were worried about. So for an athlete to actually make it through college on time and to major in something important, it's not easy. For one thing, after you get done with your practice and that sort of thing, you are so... I mean, you are out there three hours or longer every single day. By the time you get home, trying to study, you are so tired. But if you do that so long you think that's just normal. You don't realize that people that don't have to do that, that's why they can do better in their subjects is because they don't have that extracurricular and all that physical exertion and tired all the time.

Joan: You were in track four years at KU. What were your events?

Kenny: High jump, triple jump, and long jump. I ran high hurdles. I had some school records in especially the high jump and triple jump. I think I still have them in...

Joan: Do you remember what they were?

Kenny: Well, in the triple jump, it was 52.5'. High jump was about... I think my best jump was almost seven feet, about 6'11". I think that was right after my freshman year. I think those were the two records, I had the freshman records in the high jump, and I think I might still have the

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 9

school record in the triple jump. I had the United States Federation Record for a good long while in the triple jump. The triple jump is really hard on you, you know.

Joan: I think my son used to look at your records, and he competed against you because of the record book on the wall at the school here. He liked triple jump. This would be...you were traveling to the other colleges that were in KU's...same as...

Kenny: Yes.

Joan: Were these just spring competitions?

Kenny: No, in the fall and winter you had indoor, and then in the spring you had outdoor.

Joan: So unlike basketball and football, you had the whole...

Kenny: Yes, and that's one reason I didn't play basketball because you'd miss the indoor season. It's hard to do two sports in college.

Joan: Yes, I would think. What was your major?

Kenny: Education.

Joan: What did you think you were going to teach?

Kenny: Well, elementary and secondary education. When I got out of school, I ended up taking a job with the State Civil Rights Commission.

Joan: Hold that thought for a minute... You lived in the dorm at KU? Or in an apartment?

Kenny: Yes, I lived in a dorm.

Joan: Did they have an athletes' dorm at that time?

Kenny: Yes, they did, although track athletes were put in the same dorm, but it wasn't exclusively for athletes. We had one or two or three floors.

Joan: And your team was integrated at this point, you weren't the only black man.

Kenny: Oh yes, it was completely integrated. If anything, we probably had more blacks!

Joan: How was that adjustment, going from being in a minority here to where you were...how did you feel at KU at Lawrence?

Kenny: Well, overall you were still tremendously in the minority. But on the track team you didn't feel so much like a minority on the track team. Although what you ran into was more...sometimes the coaches did not understand the culture of minority athletes. Sometimes there were some clashes there. For example: mustaches, goatees or beards were something that kind of goes over in black culture, but our coach always wanted everybody clean shaven. So that was...and of course you're talking about 1965 to '68. You've got the Vietnam War going on.

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 10

Joan: And Civil Rights.

Kenny: Yes, and everybody is kind of clamoring for change and independence and that sort of thing. So that complicated things too. So I think the coaches learned a lot too, in that they had to change some of their thinking. Of course, you had John Carlos and those people down in Mexico who defied their coaches and supported Black Power and that sort of thing. Lots of us were trying to emulate that in terms of trying to assert our rights. So it was a very interesting time to come up in.

Joan: We interviewed Boyd, and it was an interesting time for him too.

Kenny: Yes, everybody was trying to find, "Where does all this fit?"

Joan: Did you have trouble integrating into the black community, having been so much in the white community growing up?

Kenny: A little bit, especially when I first got to KU. It was strange. I remember one funny incident that was my first realization of that. It was when I had some loafers; they were called "penny loafers." If you remember what they are, and I actually had pennies in the loafers. I can remember my roommate was from Kansas City. When he and some of his buddies saw these shoes...you know, I'd moved in and hadn't really met them yet. They'd already been in the room and kind of looking things over when they saw these shoes. They used to tease me about those shoes! They would always say, "Kenny's got pennies in his shoes! Kenny's cool because he had pennies in his shoes."

Joan: So that was a white thing to do because I remember that was a cool thing to do!

Kenny: Black kids didn't do that, wear penny loafers for one thing, and then actually put the pennies in the loafers. I said I'd have to learn some things myself.

Joan: Was there a conscious effort to put black roommates with black?

Kenny: I'm not sure about that. It turned out that way, but I don't think it was intentional. I think they were looking more toward, you know, these were freshman. If you wanted to change, you could change, but when you go in as freshman you really don't know anybody. But I never got the feeling that the coaches did that on purpose. But for me it was probably a good thing, because...

Joan: You had some catching up to do?

Kenny: Yes, I had some catching up to do; it was probably a positive thing for me.

Joan: Because it would be a pretty sheltered life in Kinsley, too, compared to...

Kenny: Oh yes, when I get a roommate from Kansas City, I'm going to learn a whole lot of different perspectives on life.

Joan: Your few years in Portland might have been good for you at that point, at least you had some idea!

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 11

Kenny: Oh yes, I had some idea, but of course this was a different age and time. I was more mature now, and the black culture was just coming to the forefront as something that could be accepted and asserted. So that was very, very important too. In other words, this new-found kind of assertion and acceptance of black culture was something that you wanted to be a part of. You didn't want to be seen as someone who didn't agree with that.

Joan: You mentioned Vietnam a moment ago. Were you worried about the draft or anything at that time?

Kenny: Oh yes, everybody was worried about the draft. That was very stressful, but then they came up with the lottery at that time. I can remember you had to look in the paper to see what your lottery number was. I can remember, my lottery number came up 300, and that was enough to put me out of it because they would never get to that number.

Joan: And so after college, I interrupted you, what did you start doing?

Kenny: I worked with the State Commission on Civil Rights. I was field investigator for that.

Joan: Were you living in Topeka?

Kenny: Yes, Topeka, and then I was transferred to Wichita.

Joan: Describe what you did for that job.

Kenny: Well, I investigated complaints of discrimination.

Joan: All over the state?

Kenny: Yes, all over the state. I had a car and all that stuff. That's where I kind of got interested in the legal field because we had administrative law judges who heard our cases. We had an agency attorney who I met and had a lot of conversations with. He'd gone to Washburn University. Then I met some of the judges that they used who were actually lawyers from Wichita and other places. I got to talk to some black attorneys who were also hired as administrative law judges and would hear these cases. So I got to talk to them, and that's kind of where this idea got planted that maybe I could go back to school.

Joan: You graduated from college in '69, so this would have been...

Kenny: Yes, it was either '69 or '70. I think it was probably actually '70, in the spring of '70.

Joan: So this was right after the civil rights legislation. What kind of cases were coming up around campus?

Kenny: Well, there were housing cases. Most of the cases were employment, though, nearly exclusively. They would conciliate the matter, or they actually go to a hearing on an administrative level.

Joan: I assume these were mainly in Wichita, the eastern part of Kansas?

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 12

Kenny: Yes, the Wichita area, Hutchinson, Topeka, Kansas City, in that part of the state.

Joan: Now, I don't have a sheet on you. Are you married or anything at this time?

Kenny: No, I'm still single.

Joan: So when you made the decision to go to law school, what year did you go?

Kenny: I went to law school in 1973.

Joan: And where did you go for that?

Kenny: The University of Kansas, that's where I got my first law degree. I got another law degree about 1990 or so.

Joan: So did you pass the bar in Kansas?

Kenny: Yes, Kansas and in Washington D.C.

Joan: After you got your degree, your first job as a lawyer was...

Kenny: In Washington D.C.

Joan: What kind of a lawyer?

Kenny: Well, I worked in the chancellor's office and I was what they called an equity attorney at the University of Maryland. I also was an attorney for the criminal justice administration; they appointed cases to me. I was there probably until 1978. Then I went to South Carolina.

Joan: And you started teaching there, or as a lawyer?

Kenny: No, I came in actually to the administration. I was an assistant dean. I had a title of Assistant Dean and Lecturer in Law. I did that for about 12 years, and then I went back and got another law degree, a more advanced law degree. When I came back from that sabbatical, I started teaching full time.

Joan: What would you consider your specialty as?

Kenny: Criminal and civil litigation.

Joan: Marriage. Is it in here somewhere?

Kenny: Yes, I was married in undergraduate school for about two years. I didn't make it very well.

Joan: Any children?

Kenny: Yes, I have a son living in Albuquerque.

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 13

Joan: What's his name?

Kenny: Jeffrey.

Joan: Currently, are you married?

Kenny: Currently I'm not married, but I'm engaged, and have been for a while. At any rate, she works for a large law firm in Columbia. But in January she will be a U.S. Magistrate Judge.

Joan: What have I forgotten? How about church for you when you were here with your grandparents? Where did you attend church?

Kenny: I always attended church with them.

Joan: Where? What church?

Kenny: Well, my granddad went to several different churches. He went to the Free Methodist Church, sometimes he went to the Assembly of God, at times we went to the Nazarene Church. You know, he just went to church. He liked to sing in church, and he pulled me right along with him.

Joan: Let's see, you sang also around town?

Kenny: Yes, and also Miss Losey, you don't know if you remember Miss Losey. She was a teacher here, you probably remember her. She taught my mom too. She had me do readings for the speech festival, and I took musical solos to the music festivals. One of the stories that was in the paper my senior year, the speech festival and the state track meet were in Wichita on the same week, same day. I had to do my speech and then change clothes and go run the high hurdles. It was quite involved there, but that was one of the times where everything conflicted with everything else. But it all worked out. You know, one of the funny things, I got a one on my speech. Miss Losey had me do a lot of these James Weldon Johnson things. I still have the score sheet with the comments from the judge. They gave me a one, and he wrote in red on that sheet, "This contestant is a credit to his race." He thought he gave me this really glowing complement! "He is a really a credit to his race." I was laughing and showed my mom; my grandparents read that and just laughed because he thought he was really giving me this comment.

Joan: And you went to the state track meet as well.

Kenny: Yes, that's when I set those records, the state record in the high jump, that day. I think I also might have set a record in the long jump too that day. You know, that was a day when you were at your peak in everything.

Joan: And you excelled, you were a renaissance man at that time.

Kenny: Yes, it seemed like...you experience a certain amount of pressure when people acknowledge that you're good in something. You don't want to let them down, but you don't want to let them down in anything. You don't want them to say, "Oh, he's good in high jump, but he can't spell. Or he doesn't know how to add fractions." That was the part that I didn't

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 14

want to happen. So that kind of helped propel me to working hard on the other things too.

Joan: Okay, you were living in Kinsley sort of at the beginning of the decline of population. And now you've come back for the All School Reunion. What changes do you see?

Kenny: Oh, there are lots of things. Of course, you've got eight man football instead of eleven man football. Schools are kind of consolidated I think now. The downtown just isn't anywhere near the same because you just don't have the same businesses. The same institutions don't seem to be here. I think the main thing is that you don't have as many young people staying in the community.

Joan: And you didn't stay here because of your career choices.

Kenny: Yes, right.

Joan: Was part of it, too, being the only black person? Is that why you wouldn't come back here? Or was it just basically career?

Kenny: It was probably exclusively career because your opportunities for employment are in Topeka, for example, or Wichita. Then if you're going to go back to school, well you're going to go back to school somewhere, especially for one of the bigger schools, in the eastern part of the state. So, the opportunities just would be in Kinsley, not the kind of opportunities that you wanted to pursue at the time. They just weren't here. So you realize that rather quickly, and that's kind of the unfortunate thing. If there was opportunity, besides farming or agriculture, probably some more would stay. But that's what happens all over in small towns.

Joan: It's not a bad place to live and raise children.

Kenny: No, it isn't. And I heard this from some of my former classmates. In talking to them last night and today, they're moving back to the state because they want to either raise children or their grandchildren are here someplace in Kansas. They think Kansas is better than some of the other places that they've been living. And I think that for me, early on, Kansas was a better place educationally at least in elementary and secondary education. The high school was better than other places in terms of being able to actually excel at something. And actually be in a position to work hard and try to do your best. Because you didn't have as many students, so the pressure to stay "in line" was greater because you didn't have as many, and people knew you. Everybody knows everybody. You're not anonymous.

Joan: And your car, everybody knows.

Kenny: Yes, wherever you're at. So that helps kind of keep you focused in a positive way, rather than going the other way.

Joan: Can you think of anything else you would like on this?

Kenny: Well, there was a time when there was kind of a correlation between... you were talking about working hard for something, after I got started teaching full time, then there came the issue of tenure. Which was a challenge, but that challenge was... I kind of drew on my past experience in a small town like this to meet that kind of a challenge. To stay determined and

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 15

focused, and to not get discouraged to a point where you don't follow through and give up on something.

Joan: So tenure for a college professor, you would say, is a good thing?

Kenny: You mean in general? Well, now it's being questioned some. I think it is a good thing in some disciplines. I think overall it is a good thing, but I think it may be a little overblown. You have to have some protection, do you know what I mean? You have to have some academic freedom. You have to have academic freedom. And if you, for example, are on some kind of a contract of some sort and people don't like what you write or don't like the way you teach, you are under attack. You couldn't do the kind of things that you really want to do. So tenure does, I think, help that side of it. It gives you the academic freedom. I think that is very, very important. But at the same time, I think there are professors who don't really worry too much about that and would be happy to work on a contract, a renewable contract. I think if that option was available the emphasis would be on teaching rather than... In research institutions, the emphasis is really on scholarship. They want people that are going to continue to do scholarship and publish. One way to do that is to put tenure kind of as a carrot to go after. But of course, after you get tenure, you're supposed to continue. But that doesn't always happen.

Joan: Here and kind of after you went to college, you were a bit of an activist. When you were in Washington D.C., did you continue working with civil rights and that sort of thing?

Kenny: Yes, to a degree because part of my job was the campus equivalent of the state civil rights commission. In other words, we looked into problems with discrimination on the Maryland campus. So yes, I continued that. Then when I went to South Carolina, part of my job there also was to make sure that our minority students were comfortable in their environment because South Carolina, of course, has a different history.

Joan: That's a different culture too.

Kenny: They were under court order to desegregate and so there was a lot of emphasis on how do we get more minority students and keep them here. It was something that not too long before that was just the opposite way. How do we keep them out? Everything was designed that way. They had two separate law schools before I got there. They had another law school that was just for black students. The approach in South Carolina was whenever they were forced by order to desegregate, rather than desegregate, their way was to create another school.

Joan: Separate but equal.

Kenny: Separate but equal. That was the legal kind of word *du jour* response to desegregation.

Joan: Did affirmative action play any role in your...because you had a full ride college scholarship. Or in getting jobs. Was there an emphasis in having a more integrated college, did that ever affect your life?

Kenny: Yes, I think it affected me when I first went to South Carolina. I think because when I went there was no other minorities on the faculty or the administration. And even now, we only have four. We have four professors now. No, we have five, because we have one administration and we have four black professors. This is in the law school now, of course that's out of about

Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina

Kenneth Gaines - 16

45 to 50 professors.

Joan: How about in your admission to law school at K.U.?

Kenny: Oh yes, that was definitely a time when K.U. had a history of not admitting black students to the law school. Because when I went to undergrad school, there was no more than one or two black students in the whole law school. When I went there, my entering class only had seven blacks out of about 180. There were only seven of us, and believe me, we stuck together and tried to help each other. Fortunately, our classmates, our white classmates, really tried to help us and make sure we stayed in. They shared everything with us, I mean they really tried to improve us. It was tough. It was a new experience for the school and a new experience for us as students to have to be as rigorous in terms of our approach to our schoolwork. It was something we'd never experienced before.

Joan: Did all seven make it?

Kenny: Actually, we started out with eight, and one black female dropped out the very next day. We ended up with seven, and all seven of us did make it. That was just a miracle, I guess, that we made it.

Joan: Were the rest all male?

Kenny: No, I can only remember one other female. I think we had only one, all the rest were male. No, we had two females, I think. Going to law school was a major undertaking for a black student, because you didn't have the resources in the first place. It was very hard to find resources. It was expensive, very expensive.

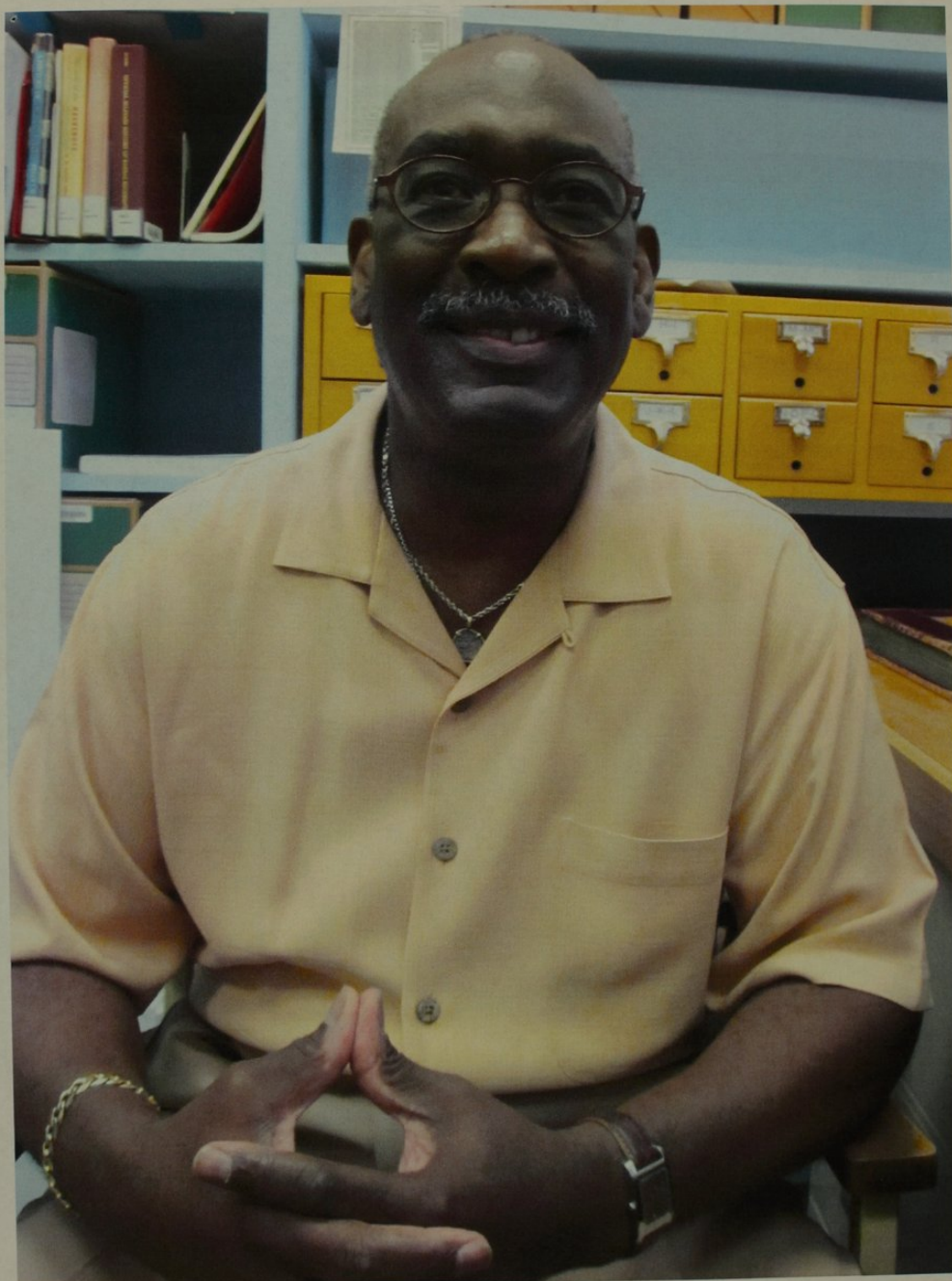
Joan: There wasn't a scholarship for that, not the track scholarship.

Kenny: Yes, and it was harder to compete for scholarships in law school. It was really different. And plus, you had to make sure that you didn't have any excess baggage dragging you down. I mean, you had to devote full time and all your priorities went to law school in every aspect. Everything else took second place. Being married or something like that would be a real...very difficult at that time, or if you had kids or whatever, it would be very difficult because they wouldn't see you. Because I'll tell you, it was 24 hours a day. That was tough.

Joan: And it took two years?

Kenny: Three, and it was tough.

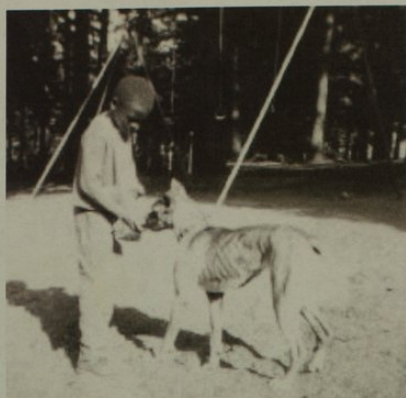
Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina



Kenneth Gaines

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Kenneth Gaines interview, Columbia, South Carolina



Kenny Gaines, 1957



Kenny Gaines, 1965 H.S. graduation



1964 Kinsley High School Football team



1965 Kinsley High School Track team