Cass Corridor Documentation Project
Oral History Project

Interviewee: Gilda Snowden

Relationship to Cass Corridor: Artist, Professor of Art at Center for Creative Studies

Interviewer: Sean Marshall

Date of Interview: April 13, 2011

Location: Gilda Snowden’s studio in the Corktown District, Detroit, Michigan

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Marshall: Reading verbatim from the interview agreement and release form Cass Corridor Documentation Project, Wayne State University Library System. We have agreed to be interviewed as part of the Cass Corridor Documentation Project. The Cass Corridor Documentation Project seeks to document the art community associated with the Cass Corridor area of Detroit to the 1960s through the 80s. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The interview, audio and transcription will be housed at Wayne State University Library System as part of the Cass Corridor Documentation Project. The interview may be used by the Wayne State University Library System in physical and online exhibits and presentations. It may be available to researchers on the campus at Wayne State University and on Wayne State University campus on Wayne State University websites. You have seen a copy of this one?

Snowden: Yes I have.

Marshall: And that, and that you did sign a copy?
Snowden: Yes I did.

Marshall: Okay. The time currently is 13:58 or closer to 2:00 pm. We are currently at the address please?

Snowden: 2000 Brooklyn Street, Detroit, Michigan 48226 in the Corktown area of Detroit.

Marshall: And what part? And what building?

Snowden: This is the alternative work site, Locke Building.

Marshall: Okay. And your name is?

Snowden: My name is Snowden.

Marshall: And your current position?

Snowden: I am a full professor at the College for Creative Studies and a Detroit artist.

Marshall: And what’s your connection to the Cass Corridor art community?

Snowden: I was a student at Wayne State University in the late seventies. And so I became aware and acquainted with a number of the Cass Corridor artists.
Marshall: Okay. Can you tell me about, can you tell me when you were born and where you grew up?

Snowden: I was born July 29th 1954. I was born in Detroit; I grew up in Detroit so I’m a native to this area.

Marshall: Okay. And can you tell me about your parents?

Snowden: My parents are very interesting. My father was a dentist, he’s Dr. John Thomas Snowden and my mother is Clara Margaret Perry Snowden. They were both from the south, they came up as infants during the great migration. My father was from Montgomery, Alabama. He was born there. My mother was born in Beaumont, Texas. So both of their families came up prior to 1920.

Marshall: During the first migration?

Snowden: The first wave of the great migration of people coming from the south to find jobs. My grandfather, my father’s father, went first to Chicago and left the family in Montgomery and then went over to, came over to Detroit and was working in the Packard plant and then he sent for my father’s family. Then when they came up, my last uncle was born here so all the rest of them were born down south and those who weren’t were born here. My mother’s family was from Beaumont, Texas. I’m not quite as sure about the details of their migration. I do a lot of genealogy research. I’m trying to find that out. They moved around a lot, from Beaumont, Texas, here, and a portion of their family was from Louisiana. I’m trying to put that up in terms of doing my research and that has made a big impact on some of my work right now because I do a lot of frolicking of family history.
Marshall: Siblings?

Snowden: I have 2 sisters (laughs) and a brother. It’s kind of interesting because I’m the oldest, I’m the second oldest rather. I have a sister who’s 12 years older than me she was the only child for that length of time. Then I was born and then I have a younger brother, three years younger, he was born in ’57 and a younger sister who was born in ’61. So, the family dynamic was that my sister being so much older than the three of us, she was gone from the house a lot of the times because she was in high school and then in college and three of us were at home and we became this kind of interesting tight little unit because of the close proximity of our birth. My birth coincided with my father graduating from dental school which is why I was born because they were not going to have any other children until he got to a point where they could afford to have them. So my sister was born when they were first married. And then they waited 12 years and then I came along when my father got his degree and he got his degree at a later age, he was at his mid-30’s.

Marshall: Where did he go to school?

Snowden: He went to the dental school of the University of Michigan. I heard a lot of stories about that because when he was trying to get into U of M, and he was an older man, he was mid 30’s when he got out. He wasn’t automatically enrolled. It was quite racist and the story that he told me was that when he met with the dean in order to get enrolled the dean said, “Oh well your grades are all good, good, and we always like to have a few colored boys up here.” And so my father had to bite his tongue because he needed to get that dental degree so that he could provide for his family. He said that “It’s a state school, our taxes have gone to support this and they like to have a few colored boys up there.” At the same time he’s saying to me, “My experience need not necessarily be your experience.” So this is
my history. Every day he drove to Ann Arbor because they’re living in Detroit and every evening he drove back and he was driving some kind of car, some Ford, or whatever that had no heat. So he’d drive in up to Ann Arbor with one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand under his leg to keep it warm, and then he would switch when the other hand was cold. So he always told us these stories to explain how important education was and what price you have to pay. First, they are going to say well there a few colored boys up here. Then you have to go through this trial in order to get there and I don’t exactly know how far Ann Arbor is from here, like 45 minutes or whatever, twice a day. I don’t countenance any kinds of complaints from myself and anybody else because I think of his example and his experience.

Marshall: Your mother?

Snowden: My mother is an interesting case. My mother finished high school. She went to the High School of Commerce, which in the 30’s was attached to Cass Tech. My father went to Cass Tech. My mother was a stenographer and she had a job and she worked as a stenographer from a very early age. All the young women, especially young African-American women were encouraged to take practical jobs. She was a stenographer and I was always very impressed with the fact that she knew Greg shorthand, left and right, inside-out and she had an old 1915 Grand Underwood typewriter which is very skeletal and black. I used to play with it. And she would talk about working after my father got his dental degree, she didn’t work outside of the house. In fact, I never knew my mother as a working woman outside of the house. At the time I came along, that was her job, to be in the house. There was always some kind of disconnect as I saw between my mother and father which kind of influenced me not to be a housewife. At the time of being very young, I maybe didn’t value my mother as much as I should have. She and my father were completely different. There was this thing that happened once,
kind of like cute, where we were getting into the car and someone in the neighborhood had just cut their grass. And my mother said, “Oh the grass when its cut smells like fresh salted watermelon.” And then my father would say, “That smell from that freshly cut grass is a chemical reaction,” and so that was like the difference between the two of them, this polarity and it didn’t occur to me how different those things were until I became an artist and saw that more poetic, more rational. My father had poetry about him too but in that one instant I saw this difference. My mother had psychological problems, emotional problems. And I don’t know where they stemmed from but that’s another reason why I kind of distance myself from her emotionally. She got a high school degree and I knew I had to do more than that because I wanted to pattern myself after my dad in terms of that kind of obvious success. He tried to steer me towards medicine. He said, “Do not become a dentist, do not become a dentist. You should be a real doctor.” And I laughed and he laughed. But the reason he went to dental school is because that was a way to get, at that time, a medical degree quick. To go through medical school would have been a lot longer and he needed to provide for his family as quickly as possible. So he was steering me towards the sciences. I remember one year I got a microscope, not a toy, it was a real microscope. And we would do experiments where he would take the glass slides and scrape the insides of his mouth so we get those little germs and we looked at them and they’d be crawling around and it was very fascinating. But what he did was he steered me into the direction being inquisitive, but artistically as opposed to medically. So, I never did become a doctor.

Marshall: More on that later.

Snowden: Yeah.

Marshall: What was Detroit like when you were growing up?
Snowden: Detroit was fun. Being born in ’54, the peak of my remembrance, or my first remembrance are the 60’s and it was very, you know, turbulent and exciting. And when I say fun, the turbulence and the excitement had to do with the changes in the political atmosphere, especially as they related to African-Americans. But since we were somewhat sheltered from the difficulties of that turbulence, being up north, growing up in Northwest Detroit, we didn’t experience racism or segregation as our youngsters. I lived the kind of idyllic atmosphere with my friends, riding our bikes and putting bugs in jars, things like that, and finding stray animals. When the riots came in ’67, that was the closest that I came personally to seeing that kind of strife, and still it was just distant for me. My elementary school, I went to Custer Elementary, and there were national guardsmen bivouacked in the playground, and we’d look up and we’d see masses of helicopters in formation flying over and we just thought, “Oh wow look at that they look like mosquitoes.” And then we saw on the news about the burning and I wasn’t totally oblivious to it, but my parents kept us away. Coincidentally, my father’s office, his dental office, was at the epicenter of the Detroit riots. His office was on the corner of 12th and Clairmont where the blind pig was. And so, we were quite interested in it. He didn’t go to work for that whole week because it was a volatile area. But I remember it was the time of my birthday and they told me, “oh we have some of your birthday presents that’s stored at the office.” And he wasn’t about to go to the office to go get them. I don’t remember what they were, but I remember him saying I hope they burn it down and I’ll get the insurance. It didn’t burn down. In fact, the neighbors in the area protected his office because he was Doc Snowden and he would very often do dental work in exchange for services because they didn’t have any money.

My Detroit back then was a very changeable, fun, odd, poignant situation because of the assassinations and these things happening and as a child being on the periphery but not being on periphery, it was a
lot of confusion and my parents tried to explain that to us. When Martin Luther King was assassinated I remember mother saying what are we going to do now? And it was how we were going to cope? And were we insulated from that and then Vietnam and all of these things when I think back on them, the whole time was compressed but day-by-day-by-day, we would re-heal and then something else would happen. It started with the assassination of President Kennedy, which I remember exactly. People say, “where were you when that happened.” I was nine years old in school and the class next to us was watching it on TV in their room. So the teacher came into our room and said, “The president has been shot!” There was a little bit of silence and we all started laughing because this teacher was known for being like a jokester. He said, “No, no it’s real! It has happened!” And so then were struck and shocked. They dismissed school and as a bunch of us were walking home we would think, if the president dies, we’re going to be slaves again. And we may think that’s kind of weird, but we thought because Johnson was going to be president and he’s from the south that slavery would reenact itself. This was happening in our nine year old minds. So I walked home three blocks from Custer school to my house. I remember every step. I remember every bump. I remember the cars going by on the John Lodge service drive. I turned on to my street, which was LaSalle. I walked down to the middle of the block where my house was. I walked up to the steps and my older sister is on the door and she says to me, “The president is dead.” Then the curtain dropped. I don’t remember anything like that. It was amazing, an amazing time. So it was like my life was like this film that speeds up and slows down at the same time and I think about these historical events and then I see them on television and I’m telling people I remember that. I’ve lived through that. I remember my father talking about when Lindbergh flew across and he was, that was in ‘25 or ‘27. My father must be 8 or 9 years old and he said, “That was awesome.” I remember exactly where I was when I heard about it and it has always affected me because of how important that was as a historical pinpoint, punctuation in one’s life, and here this was my very first punctuation. My very first one when that happened. Then there was other things, but it
has influenced me now to record and document because instead of having these pinpoints. I want to know everything. I want to remember everything and be able to say, “This was where I was when this happened.” It’s still happening and I need to be able to share that with my daughter or my students or my younger nieces or nephews because they don’t have an understanding of how important these things are.

**Marshall:** As a tangent, how does that come out in your art?

**Snowden:** It comes out directly. My art is defined by a lot of different things. I’m doing paintings of Kafleur Urbano which are my responses to the *prairieization* of Detroit. Vast swatches of land are going back to nature and people are planting on them, flowers, food, turning what was fallow into something now beautiful. So I’m responding to that with these paintings. But in other works, where I use photography, what I do is I photograph these places or these situations and I try to preserve them before they’re gone through my eyes. Other photographers do it much better but this is through my eyes and through my work. I document my family. I document myself. I document my students. I documented Tiger stadium as it was being torn down because I could see it from my studio window. I documented when Hudson's was imploded in ‘98 because these places were like the pyramids to me. When I was growing up, they were never going to go anywhere. Tiger stadium’s gone. Hudson's is gone. And now Cass Tech is getting ready to be gone. These are places you think are never going to be invisible. And the only thing left would be that empty space. Like this, yesterday morning I took pictures of the area where Tiger Stadium used to be and I would have posted on Facebook I try to put them out there so people can respond to them but I’m looking at it before and after and our memories are the only things that preserve that.
Marshall: Back to your younger years, what was the first? Did you do art in high school and in grade school?

Snowden: Oh yeah. I did art in grade school. I did art in middle school. I did a little bit of art in high school. My exposure to the arts in the public school system began to diminish. In elementary school all kids draw and paint. I went to the public schools in Detroit at kind of have a golden time when there was a lot of art. There is still some art, but as you know that art is being excised from the school system because its quote, unquote, unimportant. But my art was not done with the idea of it being a future profession. It was what is done. So I did these drawings and paintings in elementary school and I had them and I brought them home and I remember seeing this one picture I painted of a brown-skinned woman with blonde hair riding a horse. And my mother kept it for the longest time. Then as I began to go on, when I was in high school, I was not in the arts program at Cass Tech. I went to Cass. I was not in the arts program. I was at home ec [onomics] and my sub major was clothing and textiles. So I designed and sold wearing apparel: block hats, tailored coats, and as elective I took a drawing class and an art history class, but that was a supplement my fashion design. I was really thinking of going into fashion design. I was looking at the University of Cincinnati because at that time they had a very good fashion design program. But I didn’t go.

Marshall: You didn’t go?

Snowden: I didn’t go. I asked my father, “Can I go to the University of Cincinnati to study fashion design?” And he said, “No!” And I said, “Okay.”

Marshall: What did he want you to study?
Snowden: He didn’t say. It wasn’t fashion design. And my mother said, “Well you could go into social work, that’s a good job.” And I was just willing to do whatever. When I started Wayne I was in sociology. What I’m trying to illustrate is that I had no plan, no clue, no professional point of view whatsoever. I lived day to day. I came home from school, I watched soap operas. I did nothing (laughs). My life has been pretty accidental.

Marshall: Serendipitous.

Snowden: Serendipity? Yeah. And I also believe that things happen for a reason. There was a reason why I didn’t go into art at Cass. The structure was when I was at junior high, I went to post junior high. My counselor said there was, no I want to go to science and arts in Cass. She said, “There is no such thing. You need to go to home ec. So I said alright because I didn’t question authority at all. And I figured that these people know what they’re talking about. It didn’t occur to me till years later that here was this black woman who was my counselor. She probably felt that she was doing me a favor because here was another young African American female who needs to be prepared for a life of domesticity and the best way to do that is to study home ec, maybe go into nursing, taking care of somebody. So she said go into that. But I knew one thing, I knew I needed to go to Cass Tech because everyone in my family went to Cass Tech. And I can’t do science and arts because they don’t have it. I will go into home ec because at least I’ll be at Cass. And I knew I was maybe more, I was more intelligent, smarter. I knew I had the potential to do more, but I didn’t want to challenge it because I didn’t challenge authority. I didn’t feel the confidence in myself to try something that was maybe more challenging, I didn’t do it. I just didn’t.
Marshall: So you graduated from Cass Tech?

Snowden: I graduated from Cass Tech in ‘72. The senior trip was quite nice. We went to London, England, for a week. We did like a side thing and Paris. I was 16 and my parents were first apprehensive about me going and I said the magic word educational. And so we went and I had a good time. I was not into art. I bring that up because we went to the Tate and we looked at Turner watercolors and I remember the curator in white gloves pulling all of the Turner watercolors out of this drawer. We’re looking at them and I thought I couldn’t make hide nor hair of these things because they were totally mushy. Years later after I became an artist I began to understand about how I wasted that time in my ignorance. I was at the presence of Turner watercolors and I didn’t know what I was looking at and I can’t—my memory—I can’t go back in retrospect and revel in that experience. I remember we saw the crown jewels, we were in the tower of London. It was a great senior trip. I graduated from Cass and enrolled in Wayne State because it was right there and I couldn’t go to the University of Cincinnati because my father said I couldn’t. My father said something else. He said: “As long as you’re in school as long as you’re in the process of educating yourself, you can live at home until you’re 40 years old. I'll support you.” So he said education is important so I went to Wayne in ‘72 and I knew one thing, I wasn’t going to do any more home ec. I wasn’t going to do any more sewing. I threw away my needles, everything and I went into sociology because my mother suggested it. I hated it, totally.

Marshall: Why did you hate it?

Snowden: I didn’t want to sit around talking about that stuff. It wasn’t fun. I didn’t like it. I didn’t. I think subconsciously is because my mother wanted me to do it. It was quite an interesting subject and I
was in there for maybe a year. I changed my major into something else and something else, history, because I love history. And then I got into what Wayne had at that time was a general curriculum for people who don’t know what they want to do. But you still take classes. I began to like gravitate towards history, which I loved and I still love. The History Channel is like my jam. But then my mother and father said maybe you could teach, you'd be a good teacher. And I thought, I don’t want to do that because my whole experience with teachers were all the ones I had. And I didn’t want to do that. Last thing I wanted to do was teach in like K-12. But that was the only thing offered to me and teaching on college level was not an option. It was not something I was thinking about at all. So I did all that and I was in this general curriculum until I think I had to take some math class or science class, and in order to get out of that, because I didn’t want to be challenged, I took humanities. Because at that time, if you were on this track and you took humanities, you can get a bachelor’s degree without doing the math and science. Which I knew pained my dad. It pained him. But I said I just want it to be easy you know, and that’s where I began to involve myself with the creative arts, this time I was in third year of college. So I spend just a lot of time just taking classes. Coming home, I didn’t socialize. In fact, my older sister told me at one point that she was very worried about me and my lack of aggressiveness, which is kind of interesting because I’m totally aggressive now in terms of what I do. But I had no motivation up until then to just take these classes, come home, watch soap operas. I still watch those soap operas, and I can’t remember exactly how I filled my days. I had friends. I wasn’t a hermit. But my life was very much about school, home, school, home, and watching TV. I did play Jeopardy a lot, and hung out with my friends on the street while doing that. And I know my dad was feeling I wasn’t living up to my potential. But he wouldn’t say anything to me. He didn’t try to, “Why are you doing this? Why are you wasting your gifts?” He didn’t want to. I think maybe I just didn’t want to deal with it because at the same time my mother was going through some issues with her psychological problems which had a great impact on my family, great impact. My mother was
paranoid schizophrenic and when she wasn’t taking her medications, and the only reason I’m saying this now is because they’re both gone, but it does have an impact on how I am. When she was taking her medications, she was kind of even. When she wasn’t taking her medications she was volatile. And sometimes that would manifest itself by yelling and screaming and fighting with my dad. Once I came home and all the windows were broken out in the house and my friends were asking me about that and I said, well not my friends but people on the street, “What happened to your house?” “Oh in the middle of the night some boys broke some of the windows out of it.” And then the smart aleck kids said, “No boys did that! Your mom did it.” And then this good friend of mine, he was kind of like my partner that I rode bikes with, he said, “Don’t let him talk about your mom like that. You want me to kick his ass for you for saying those things about your mom?” And I couldn’t tell him to do that because what that kid had said was the truth. And I just retreated and that’s one of the reasons why I kind of kept a low profile.

**Marshall:** And you fell into art.

**Snowden:** Then I fell into art. I found a focus.

**Marshall:** How did that happen? First by falling into art.

**Snowden:** Well, I fell into art by understanding, finally, I think the level of hubris that I have. When I took this humanities class, listening to music and looking at art, and it was like an introduction into creativity. And so the art that we looked at one day was Van Gogh, and I was aware of art and art done by Van Gogh, but the instructor was talking about how difficult it was to do it and the genius of Van Gogh was that when he painted—and this is me much later to realize this—the genius of Van Gogh
was that when he painted, he made it look effortless. He was telling the truth immediately. But when I was looking at it then, it just looked like spheres and it was easy. So then I took a painting class because I needed some more electives and I found out that it wasn’t easy, but it was also pleasurable, and it gave me an outlet to express myself. And so I just went at it. I was just painting and I loved it. And that was the click that connected me to that as a possible track that I could follow, that path that would lead me somewhere. I shifted all of my electives to art and at the same time I was also taking history. When I shifted my electives to art I began to really like it a lot. I also began to think in the terms of how I am going to support myself and how do I do that with art. Well, the logical way is to go into advertising, to do advertising art. In that way I’m being creative and I still can get a job somewhere. And I was still fooling myself but I didn’t realize it. So, I took all these classes and I didn't really like it, but this is what you have to do in order to be creative and make a living. I tried to get an internship with J. Walter Thompson and I took my portfolio.

**Marshall:** Where is J. Walter Thompson?

**Snowden:** At that time they were in the Short Twin towers in Dearborn. I think they have moved, but I don’t keep up with them anymore because I quickly got out of advertising and the desire to do it. I took my portfolio which had all of my advertising projects and the art director told me, “Where are your, where’s your art? I want to see what you do.” But I said, “But what about this?” He said, “We’re going to teach you what we need to do if you get the internship. But you know, these don’t look good because, in the first place, the techniques that you’re being taught were outmoded in 1955.” And this is 1975 thereabouts. And so I thought, “I’ve wasted my fucking time doing these things?” And he said, “Well, this is what I want to see, so he took me into his office and showed me all these drawings and his paintings that he had done. And said, “This is what we want to see.” So I didn’t get the internship,
I took my portfolio and I tossed it and I went from thinking about myself as an advertising artist and saying to myself, “Gilda look, you’re going to be an artist, just do what you like and let the chips fall where they will. Do what you feel like. Do what feels good.” And that’s when I made a decision to major in Fine Art in Painting. And it was right before I got my BFA. This was 70, whatever. This was ’76 – ’77, something like that. Maybe getting my years messed up. But it was right before I was going to graduate with a BFA. I had enough credits but I didn’t have enough knowledge in fine art. So this is what I did: I finished up my BFA with my major in Advertising Design/Painting. At that time they put it on your diploma. I don’t think they put it now. And then I immediately applied for grad school and grad school would’ve been my finishing up. My mental structure as being a visual artist, because I just didn’t feel that my BFA, to my way of thinking, credit wise it was enough, but in terms of the experience it wasn’t enough for me. So I went into the master’s program at Wayne State, I got accepted in Painting. And with an informal minor in German history, because I wanted to test myself outside of the fine arts department. So I took my electives in German history.

**Marshall:** You told me in the pre-interview that someone told you that you were born with a paintbrush in your hand.

**Snowden:** Oh! How did I forget that? It was in this first painting class, or second painting class, and you have to realize when people start something new, they tend to be somewhat timid about it especially with art because people think that there’s a right way and wrong way and there really isn’t. So, being ignorant about the right way or the wrong way, I approached it just okay, well here’s some colored grease, here's a stick with some hairs on the end, and here’s this canvas. And I set up some little still life and I’m just going at it. I mean most people go at it very timidly. They’ll draw lines, and fill them in with color. I just started painting and I did it with a kind of a verve, because I’m also still
thinking about Van Gogh and his direct way of painting. Well, I’m in this painting class and, in the
studio in Old Main and I’m painting. Unbeknownst to me the instructor and another student are
observing me from a distance and the instructor told that other student, and maybe he was trying to use
me as an example or something, “So you see that girl over there? See how she’s painting? She was
born with a paintbrush in her hand. But don’t tell her I said that.” So as the instructor leaves, and the
other student, and I don’t even remember his face, he came over and he said, “You know what? John
told me this, but he told me not to tell you, but I’m going to tell you anyway. He said that you were
born with a paintbrush in your hand. He really was impressed with how you were going at it.” And I’m
thinking, “He did? He thinks I was a natural painter?” That’s what I got from it. I was on cloud 17. I
got home that day after class, and I told my father and my younger sister. I think she was
maybe 9 or 10, and you know how bratty little sisters are. I said, “John said that I was born with a paintbrush in
my hand.” And my sister says, “Yeah, and a fork in the other.” I smacked her. I’ve always tended
towards that kind of corpulence. But I really didn’t appreciate her sullying my anecdote. But after that,
I went into it feeling well, this instructor feels like I’m natural. I need to keep doing this and keep doing
it, you know just keep at it, keep painting, and I did. And that illustrated for me how important just a
little, even a little positive comment can make someone feel good about what it is they’re doing. I use
that philosophy now in my own classes. At that time I wasn’t thinking about anything other than that
painting in front of me. I had no idea that I’d end up as a painting professor or working with young
people. I had no clue. But I think back on that and when I critique my own students, I’d give them
constructive criticism but I tend to temper it with positiveness. I saw how it all affected me. I wouldn’t
be here if it weren’t for some of those positive comments that I got early on when I really didn’t know
what I was doing. That instructor was one of the original Cass Corridor artists, John Egner. I took a lot
of his classes. When I was in grad school, he was my faculty advisor. But that was my first
introduction to him. I didn’t know who he was when I was in that class and that student shared that
Marshall: How was going to art school at Wayne State?

Snowden: It was exciting. It was thought provoking. It was the best time I’ve had. I contrasted my experience in the Art Department at Wayne State with the previous experiences that I had in those other classes when I was thinking I was going to be a social worker or what have you. Those were classes I took, in the art department those were classes I’ve lived in. And my peers, my fellow students, who I worked with, we felt the same way. It was exciting because of the time. The instructors that we had were either Cass Corridor artists directly or related to the Cass Corridor or they were living down there, which is really the definition of Cass Corridor artists. But that was all I knew, all we knew, because we were studying with these artists and we were studying in that area that was the Cass Corridor. Our classrooms were not just the studios in 150 Community Arts or in Old Main. It was the street, it was the Cass Corridor. So there were no lines of demarcation or very few because we will be in class and then we’d be in Alvins. We’d be in class, or we’d be at the New Miami, or we’d be at the Willis Gallery. We’d be at the [Jackie] Feigenson Gallery. All those things blended together to make this total educational experience that we just reveled in.

When I think about it, when I think about those times, I have a very challenging—it’s hard for me to say where it began and where it ended. It ended when I got my MFA formally. But I was still there because by this time, I have moved down there myself. So I was living in the area. But in most part when I was in school taking classes, I still live at home but I needed to be a part of it physically and that happened after I got out of school. When I was in school, it was something that we had to work towards to achieve this wonderful atmosphere. I know I’m going on and on and on, but that’s how it
was. It was full, because we had not only the Cass Corridor artists teaching us, I believe there was John Egner, Jim Chatelain was an adjunct, Douglas James. And then a number of the other ones were coming in as visiting artists and then we had New York artists who came in and taught for a semester. So we were steeped in it. And then the museums’ relationships, and then all of the galleries. So we had this experience that was beyond educational. It gave us, who were studying, an idea of how our professional practice could be achieved. How we could then be a part of this and also be called Cass Corridor because it was about a lifestyle and not just about learning the craft.

**Marshall:** When you say it’s about lifestyle, can you give me an example?

**Snowden:** Well, I made a note about this in my mind because I was thinking about this too. When we were in the painting studio, for example, in Old Main, it fronted onto Cass, on the third floor. You could look out the window, or walk right out of the building and see Old Convention Hall, which was further up the street on Cass. Old Convention Hall was where a lot of those artists lived and worked. So we saw it. We all saw ourselves in it.

**Marshall:** What corner was Old Convention Hall?

**Snowden:** Old Convention Hall, let me get this straight, right now there is a large Wayne State apartment building there. It’s like Cass and Forrest and then there’s the next street, oh what’s this, I think, Prentice going towards Canfield.

**Marshall:** University Towers.
Snowden: Yes. That’s it. That’s where Old Convention Hall was and it was in a state of disrepair because there used to be these large conventions there. I guess car conventions, what have you. Then the artists moved in and they were in the studios. It’s very much like what the Russell Industrial Center is now, only it’s much more, much larger. And what’s also interesting is that Convention Hall, which I believe had these car shows there many years ago, Russell Industrial now was designed by Albert Kahn and I believed there were things having to do with cars there. So it’s amazing how the car culture laid the groundwork. The artists then moved in and give these places new life. They either are torn down, like Convention Hall was, and then the artist goes someplace else. And the artists didn’t mourn the fact that these things were torn down or changed. Yeah, you felt sad, but then just move on you find another studio somewhere. And that one of the things, you know, talking about the culture. Our instructor, especially Egner would say, “The minute you find the studio, start looking for your next one because they don’t last forever.” Somebody will come along who will either tear down the building or want to re-gentrify it so then you have to move on. But in the meantime, the artists have made it like a habitable place. The phrase in New York was, when the artists move into Soho in the early 60s, surreptitiously, and we know what Soho is now, it’s a mall: “Artists create real estate.” And I forget where I read that, somebody important said it. Artists create real estate. Artists come in, clean it up, fix it up, show you what the potential is, and in come the gentry. And I’m glad that this hasn’t happened to this building where I have my studio now because the landlord designed this building space to be for artists, for creative people, so much so that we had to show our portfolio to get in here. [There is] nobody working in this building that was not some kind of creative worker. So we have photographers, filmmakers, painters, sculptors, musicians, and that maintains the integrity of this place.

Marshall: How open was the art community to newcomers?
**Snowden**: That’s a good question. Let me think about that. The newcomers? What do you mean by newcomers? What do you think?

**Marshall**: Well, people like John Egner were the old guard by that time and here comes the new turks.

**Snowden**: Oh okay, yeah alright. Very welcoming, because one of the things that Egner would talk about was that in order to have a thriving art community, you have to have that newness, you have to have that new ones coming in to kind of like re-stir it up. And my friends and I were those new ones, because we were moving up. A number of the Cass Corridor artists, they were moving up and moving out, and then the new ones come, not to take their place, but to add to the mix, discovering new buildings to repopulate with studios. We were always really embraced. With myself, Gary Meyer, Kurt Novak, Lamanda Sharp, Lyla Kadesh, we were all coming up and for the most part, we were Wayne students. There were also students from arts and crafts, and students from Eastern [University], but in the Cass Corridor, for the most part, we were Wayne students who have worked with these Cass Corridor artists directly who then moved into the community. Like I said, I moved down, I lived in northwest Detroit and I moved here into the Cass Corridor in 1981. And I’ve been there, I had a flat, which was my studio for 10 years. Then I moved someplace else. But it was still in this area. It was very welcoming. The Cass Corridor artists, I think I mentioned earlier, was defined by the location, and then also, the type of materials, and a focus or point of view, about found object, about assemblage, because these artists were poor. So they weren’t buying the best of everything to make their works with. So lots of sculpture was made out of found materials. The painters were painting. We can’t find a tube paint in the alley. You still have to buy your paint, but what you do is, you sacrifice in other places to get what you need to make your work and that was the culture that we plugged ourselves into. Yeah, we’re going to be poor and poorer and when you’re young, that’s okay. You can live that kind of hard
scrabble life. But then, maybe you want to get a little bit more, a little bit better. I remember Egner saying, he was sitting in a lecture, a critique and he had on these boots, I’ll never forget this, they were Frye boots and I think at that time Frye boots were like 50 bucks, which is a lot of money to pay for some boots. You know what Frye are? F.-R.-Y.-E. And he was saying, you know, I got these boots—and I’m paraphrasing of course—but I got these boots because I have a job. And my job is college professor and that’s how I support myself. Now, you have to support yourself, so you have think in terms of how you going to do that. If you get a master’s degree, that enables you to teach on a college level.

That’s when I first started thinking in terms of, “Oh, I do have to start taking care of myself, don’t I?” So I began to think I could teach. As a graduate student I did have some classes. I also worked in the parking lot too. So that’s how I supported myself. At that time I was still living at home, but I knew I couldn’t do that forever. So he’s saying to us, “You have to prepare yourself for the eventuality of getting out of school, supporting yourself. And then there’d be a lot of Cass Corridor artists who were doing construction work. They were doing all of these kinds of jobs. Now for the most part of though, these are males, and they can do construction, and they can do these jobs that were carpentry. This is when I began—some of my female friends—we began to see that there was this kind of like divide, in terms of how we were going to support ourselves. We didn’t like obsess about it because you know, you get job waitressing and that’s how you supported yourself, or you did this or that. I did for a while telephone sales in order to support myself. I know this like grinded on my dad, “Doing telephone sales?” He never said anything to me about it. He said to my sister and then my sister would tell me. But he never told me because I think, I know his belief was, “I went to dental school and sacrificed so you wouldn’t have to make the same kind of choices. And since I wasn’t married. I had no children. I didn’t have to worry about supporting a family like he had to worry. I’m going off on a tangent, but
it’s important to me because all of these things kind of like played into one another where I began to see how some of the Cass Corridor artists were doing things that I wanted to pattern myself after and some of them I didn't. I knew I wasn’t going to do any construction. I didn’t want to be a waitress. But I did want to do what Egner or what Tom Parish, some of the others did. They taught and I said, ‘I'm going to that direction. I’m going to pattern myself after that.” While I was still in school, my friends and I who were in class would stop and, “Let’s give ourselves a critique, let’s talk about our work, critically, in class. We don’t need Egner. We don’t need Parish. We don’t need Egory. We could do it ourselves.” And I’d be kind of like be directing it, and then they would direct it and then we’d talk and then we’d go out to the bar and talk some more about our art. And that dialogue, as we did it more, solidified more in my mind that teaching is good. Teaching is a way that you can communicate. You can talk about your art. You’re helping young artists and you’re getting paid. So that’s what I did.

**Marshall:** But you said your dad was not happy. After all, after all, he didn’t want you to go to Cincinnati to study fashion design which is an art, probably expose you to art and here you are at Wayne and you fell into art.

**Snowden:** Both feet, my whole body fell into art. I wasn’t passionate about the fashion design and that’s why he said no. Because he knew I wasn’t passionate about it. I was his daughter. He could read me. But when I said I’m doing this, and I was passionate, totally. I was talking about it all the time. I was dragging him to art shows. I was explaining to them what this meant and why does a pile of asphalt in the middle of the gallery was a viable work of art. I was explaining that to my dad, and he said, “But daughter, it’s just a pile of asphalt. But dad you see, it’s a metaphor for blah, blah, blah. And the artist had put a yellow line on it.” I’d say, “You see that? Can you relate?” And so I’m talking and I’m showing him all these stuff and I was passionate about it. He met and knew all my teachers. He
knew my friends. And I say he because I really didn’t bring my mother that much into it. My father came down and participated more than my mom did. She came to the shows but she didn’t, I didn’t talk to her about it. And so when he saw that my passion, he felt better about my choice and he didn’t try to dissuade me from it at all. And because of that, I was able to become much more pronounced, much more aggressive, much more involved myself with this art because I saw the possibilities beyond just taking a class. So much so that when the classes were over, I stayed there. I’d be in the painting studio before class. I’d been in the painting studio after class. I was still catching the bus home so I’d be catching the bus home late at night or if I can get a ride or something. But I was there painting constantly. Me and a number of my friends, we lived in the painting studio and there were times surreptitiously we stayed there overnight which was exciting cause at any moment, the Wayne State guards could boot us out. When I was in grad school, we didn’t have 24 hours access to our studios so we would climb through the window to get into the studio and I stayed there very often. I’d go in my studio, paint, go out to the New Miami, hang out and then come back, climb through the window or what have you, go back to the studio and felt I was living the life. I was on the edge. At some point I would be able to call myself a Cass Corridor artist. Gilda was a Cass Corridor artist. At some point I began to see differences. I would break away from certain aspects of that identity, especially when I began to acknowledge within myself that here I was, this black female, black and then female and that wasn’t being reflected to me in that community. That’s a whole path that I can talk about. That I began to question?

**Marshall:** Since you brought it up, that was my next question.

**Snowden:** Oh good.
Marshall:  Okay, it’s really back to the art community. In criticisms that it was macho.

Snowden:  Macho.


Snowden:  White male dominated. Well, you know, I wouldn’t use the word dominated. That’s who they were. And there was no club.

Marshall:  I meant dominated in terms of numbers, not dominated in terms of personality.

Snowden:  Well that’s what I mean, by numbers. Okay, let me illustrate it like this, I patterned myself initially after those white male artists because they were the ones that were right there and I didn’t see a difference because they didn’t promote or support any kind of difference. They’d say, “Hey Gilda, how’s your work?” We’d be at the bar and [they’d say] “What you doing?” There were no lines of demarcation. They never shut me out. I never experienced personally, any kind of racism or negativity from any of them. But, I don’t know how to enter this. I began to want to know more than just the Cass Corridor, ’cause that is a physical place. Cass Avenue, from the Boulevard to Alexandria and further down, and then you had 3rd [Ave.] and Woodward. That's Cass Corridor, that’s a physical place and these are the people who are living there. Wayne State art students, Wayne State instructors, for the most part they were living there. Me and my friends, and we’re African-American, we were not living in the Cass Corridor. I lived in Northwest Detroit, other friends of mine lived out. We commuted into that. And once we commuted into there we were a part of it but we commuted back out again. I don’t want to lose my train of thought. Ask me that question again.
Marshall: It was seen as white male dominated. That was the question.

Snowden: Okay, alright. And on one level it was, on many levels it was, in terms of how the public persona, and when they showed their work, that’s all they were. The collectors that came in, the ones that promoted these artists—these artists were in a group, Egner, Sesta, Luchs, Phelan. Mitchnik, Platos, Chatelain—they were all right there and they showed their works in groups or in two person shows or individually. But they were there as this group and that was promoted and talked about in the news media, and so that’s the face of it. The second generation was more diverse because they enticed these newer artists, like the ones you asked me about before. There’s myself, Michael Sofell Gardner, Lyla Kadash, Ruth Lampkins, Gary Meyer, Keith Ioke, we’re very much a diverse group because we were studying with them and we were from all over. So, I think that’s the natural progression. Initially it started up as this really tight group and people. I think people talk about Cass Corridor group as being like hundreds of artists, but wasn’t. It was a very tight, a very small group of males and females. They were white. There were some others on the periphery, like this man named Bob Hanamura who, I met him but I didn’t really knew him because he was I think a curator. And then there was Aris Koutroulis, who came from Greece who was a part of that. Who was my other mentor because he was in the Cass Corridor then he went over to Center for Creative Studies and he’s the one that hired me. The group began to disperse especially after the initial group, a number of them went to New York. Ellan Phelan left. Nancy Mitchnik left. Egner they would go back and forth between here and New York. Now he's in New York. And so then the gap was filled up by the rest of us. Now this was made apparent in 1980 when they had this big show at the Detroit Institute of Arts called “Kick Out the Jams” and the catalog had all of their works in it, but in the first essay the curators were talking about the second generation and they mentioned our names. My name is in there. And so that was like, let’s
When I had my show at the DIA in ’90 it was a two-person show with myself and Michael Luchs. So here you have Michael Luchs who was like the first guard of the Cass Corridor. And then here I am. Physically we were about as different as you can get; he's older I’m younger, he's white I’m African-American. But what we had in common was our sensibilities and sensitivities about the type of work which was pretty much make do with what you have, be creative, never stop being creative no matter who tries to get in your way. There were other pinpoints though where those differences that society puts on you have to be acknowledged and then you have to determine what you’re going to do about it. But those artists never did any of that to me. They never said, “you can’t come in here because you’re this or that.” But at a certain point, you know, you start to question; you are not white you are not male, how will that affect what it is you do? Will it affect what you do? But this is from the external society and also from my own desire to know about artists outside and more than the Cass Corridor because it was all white and I wanted to know more.

Okay, I’m living in Detroit. Detroit [is] 80% African-American. Where are the other artists? And so I found them and some of them found me and more doors opened. And the door stayed open and I began to associate myself with all of the different constituencies that I was a part of, either as an artist, as a female, as an African-American. It was a two-way street, come on in let’s have dialogue, and those dialogues have persisted. And Cass Corridor was like was my introduction to the art world. But then I began to realize that there is no one art world. There are a million art worlds. How many do I belong to? How many can I associate myself with? One of the things that was most impressive to me when I first started showing my work I was in a two-person show at the Artist Guild of Detroit Gallery, myself and a fellow student who’s older than I am, her name was Stephanie Crawford. We were both
still very figurative in our kind of work. The Artist Guild of Detroit Gallery is no longer in existence but it was a very important gallery. When I had a show there they did a poster and I met some people. I was 23 years old. I met some people who said “we have a file on you.” And I said “on me? You have a file on me?” “Oh yes because it is our quest to document and promote African-American artists and we see you and you’re an African-American artist, we’re interested in what you're doing.” And that's when I met Edsel Reid and Shirley Woodson-Reed because they’re icons in the arts community here. Edsel passed away in 2000. Shirley I talk to all the time now. When they told me they had a file on me, I thought “wow I'm nobody I’m just you know,” and they were saying “you’re not nobody, you’re a part of this community too.” And they also said every artist has a file because you run into people that you want to maintain connections with that you want to revisit their work so you create a file. And so then because of their influence I started a file on artists, especially African-American artists because I wasn't seeing a whole lot of them. I had to know that they were around. So when they told me that I began to engage myself in this dialogue in addition to what I was doing with my Cass Corridor friends. Because I was still in school. I was 23. I was still in school. I had now the beginning of this kind of dialogue and then the female part of it came around the same time. I have to explain something. It never was a thing in my family to talk about or to say that because you’re Black, you can’t do something. Being Black was the norm. That’s who we were. My father was a professional. He was a dentist. My mother was a stenographer. My uncles were—I had an uncle dentist, an uncle lawyer uncle and so this kind of professional atmosphere was what I grew up with. You have to be a professional. My father said, “I don’t care what you do, whatever you do, just be the best.” So it wasn’t like you got to be the first Black one, you’ve got to be the best one. So I grew up with that and it wasn’t until I began to get out into this larger world that I saw these lines of demarcation. Well, if you’re a female you may have this road block, or if you’re Black, you may have this road block. That’s totally foreign to me. So I remember when we were at the museum, there was
this small gallery that was—I forget the who the artists that were in it—but it was the history of African American art or 20th century African American art. The room was small and the museum was big and I said, so by this time like my sense of aggressiveness had kind of like kicked in, “Is this all I have to look forward to, this little room? And there’s like maybe twelve artists in it? In this little room?” And that’s when Egner took me aside later and he said, “You know what? There are going to be people in the world who are going to try to keep you from showing because of your ethnicity, because the world, our society is racist. But no one can stop you from working in your studio. No one.” And I thought, yeah, here is this white guy telling me this which made the message that much more, because he’s being upfront with me. He’s not saying oh yeah you could show anywhere you want. He can show anywhere he wants. But maybe not, because Cass Corridor artists did have difficulties convincing people that this was art. And so I saw that as being okay I’m going to show whatever I want. I could do my work wherever I want. Nobody is going to stop me from making my work. Not because I’m female, not because I’m Black, not because I’m from Detroit, which is another roadblock that some people have when they hear that you’re from this place. And so I began to just be much more aware of all of the divisions in me which were not really divisions but made me who I am, to acknowledge all of those.

**Marshall:** What were the relationships between the Corridor artist and the mainstream art community at that time?

**Snowden:** There were some. As I remember, we had, the Cass Corridor artists had allies. Very important allies that helped put them over as it were because the prevailing winds were not very, as I remember, accepting to this kind of art. The art is rough and tumble, the art is hard edged and rough edge and frayed edged and all these different kinds of things.
Marshall: I think the words were said, “gritty.”

Snowden: Gritty.

Marshall: Tough.

Snowden: Tough.

Marshall: Defiant.

Snowden: Defiant.


Snowden: Yeah. Because if you’re living hand to mouth in the Cass Corridor, you’re not going to be painting pretty pictures. The work is a reflection of your life. That was a big thing for me to observe. Your work is a reflection of who you are. And so, their allies were people like Joy Colby, who wrote for the Detroit News, Marsha Miro, who wrote for the [Detroit] Free Press. They saw this group of artists as being real important, and real exciting, and they wrote about them. When people see things in the press, they pay attention. There were collectors who promoted this work, and showed this work, bought this work. One of the main ones was James Duffy. Mr. Duffy bought the work. Now prior to him being aware of the Cass Corridor, he was buying Piccassos, and Brachs, and all of these important art works and he had them in his house. When he started being involved with the Cass Corridor artists,
he bought their works too. He put them right next to the Brachs, and the Piccasos and the whatever. What an illustration of how this work was equally as important. And then Egner took our classes to Mr. Duffy’s condo in Grosse Pointe. We saw it first hand. There’s a Brach and it’s not in the museum. It’s in this guy’s house and there’s a Sestock right next to it. Oh my God, that gives me hope. It gives us hope that there’s a guy out there, other collectors who believe the same thing. And so, these people, I want to say conspired, but it was a wonderful conspiracy, where they elevated these artists. And when they elevated the first generation of Cass Corridor artists, we’re coming up there too. Because when I had my first show, March of 1981, at the Willis Gallery, Mr. Duffy was there. Suzanne Hillberry was there. A number of the collectors of the Cass Corridor first generation were at my opening. And they bought. I sold almost everything in that show with the exception of a few drawings. These constructions that I was doing, and these rough edged things that I was doing they bought them. Mr. Duffy bought one. I’m in the collection of Jim Duffy, who has Sestock, Egner, Elizabeth Murray, Brach, Doofee, you know, I’m right in there, oh my God! And then the younger artists were coming and seeing this too. So what happened was it was like a snowball rolling downhill picking it up getting bigger. When they got this notoriety in this positive, positive publicity it was like the bandwagon. It was our thing. It was Detroit. It was validated and more collectors bought.

They did a show, I think it was at Oakland Mall. I heard about this like historically. They had a show— no it wasn’t—they had a show at the Oakland Mall, but when they had their shows done at the Corridor the collectors were bussed in. They would get on the bus way out there where ever the collectors live, out in the burbs, and they would be bussed to the Cass Corridor. They would come to the show, because you know with the safety of numbers. And then they started coming, buying these works, going to the galleries, going to the studios, because just like Egner said before, “to have a viable community you got to have several things; you got to have those young artists, you also have to have
people who will write about the art, and these people who write about the art will get people to buy the art.” These collectors bought the art. It was a total environment that was working really well for a long time. Then things began to happen and began to kind of dissipate. But it was a thing of natural thing and for the most part, for a number of years it was solid.

I go into the Avalon Bakery now which is where the Willis Gallery was. Every time I go into the Avalon Bakery I look on those walls and I see this empty space. I can remember where each one of my pieces was on those walls. I can remember that round painting right there was one of the pieces in that show, one piece that didn’t sell. I’m glad because it reminds me of that. I remember what wall it was on. I remember all the people that were there and I also mourn the fact that not very many pictures were taken at my show, which is why I'm so much into documentation now. In all of the places I went with all these artists who are now of historical importance, I wasn't taking pictures, other people were. But I wish I had from my perspective because like this whole interview was from my perspective. I would have, I would love to be able to go right now and look at the photographs taken from my perspective as a young artist looking at this environment. Because it’d be from this angle that would be unique because of my particular vision, where all of our visions are unique. But to get back from your original question about was it supported. There were other factions, other art communities, lots of other ones. There was the art community that was surrounding the Detroit Artist Market. The Detroit Artist Market started in 1932 and their point of view was to support young artists. They used to be called the “Young Detroit Artists Market” back in ’32, which was well before my arriving in the scene. And then it kind of folded in, not exactly to the Cass Corridor but a number of, I would say some Corridor artists may have shown at the Artists Market because they always did this big group shows. Everybody showed there. They also did an important show in 1969, I think. It was called, “Seven Black Male Artists.” I believe the male was in there. You can probably check. And historically I
looked at, “Oh wow, look at all these black male artists.” I’m looking at this in a catalog or something. I thought, oh, Charles McGee, Lester Johnson, Harold Neal, a number of artists that I then made it my job to become aware of and know. In fact, one of them, Lester Johnson, was my longtime colleague at CCS when I started teaching at CCS in 82’. He was a professor there and he welcomed me and he became one of my mentors. Charles McGee, Allie McGee, I began to find out who these artists were, and part because Egner introduced us to Allie McGee and Charles McGee because Charles was showing. Charles had a gallery called Gallery 7 in the Fisher Building, and Egner took us there to see the Allie McGee show. And I remember, I was telling Allie about this not long ago, I couldn’t make sense of that work because he did these very abstract paintings and he put pumpkin seeds on them for texture. And I said, “My friend he’s got food on his paintings.” That was like my ignorance. He was using texture. He said, “You can use anything to make art with.” But he wasn’t technically in the Cass Corridor but he had that kind of sensibility. So Detroit artists, wherever you live, wherever your group was, for the most part, for a large part, had and have this sense of economy about the materials and in the Cass Corridor, it was a lot. It was a lot more dense because they were all right there. But I found these other ones and I was so happy I did. I still know them.

Marshall: How do being an artist in Detroit which was not saying as being one from New York or Chicago, or from Los Angeles, influenced the Cass Corridor artists?

Snowden: You mean how is Detroit different from those other places and how does that affect the work?

Marshall: Yes.
Snowden: Well, Detroit is always been kind of like the armpit. New York is the big gun, the big honcho, the place you go to. Chicago is a lot more like Detroit in terms of being rough and tumble. But Detroit, being part of that rust belt mentality, it’s a lot harder to be an artist here in my estimation because of how industrial it was and is and how we were defined by the automobile industry. You could work with that. You could fight it. But that’s who we were and we all thought of moving to New York because that’s where it was unadulterated art. The museums and the galleries were there. And a number of the Cass Corridor artists did go there. I remember saying to myself, “As soon as I get my master’s degree, I’m going to New York to be an artist in New York because you can make your name in New York.” Evidently, I didn’t go to New York for a lot of reasons and they were good. I’m very fortunate these things happened to me to keep me here. Certain anchors began to attach themselves to me, or I attached themselves to me, or attached them to me which kept me from going there. And I don’t bemoan them at all. I don’t. I made the right choice. But we still thought that and it was because, it was still like, I don’t want to say, it was a wilderness in many ways. Because you had to fight to— there’s not many galleries here—so like right now, the young ones, I’m so proud of them. They want to show their work, they just start a gallery. That’s what the Cass Corridor did. They had no place to show so they contacted Bob Cobb of Cobb’s Corner Bar, and he said, “I got the space.” They did the gallery. That’s one gallery. Then there’s Artist Market, then there’s few others but not ever enough exhibition spaces to support the number of artists. And so, like with the Willis Gallery, its artists run and then it was, it didn’t turn into it, but the offshoot was the Feigenson-Rosenstein Gallery. Jackie Feigenson, she had a gallery in the Fisher Building and what Jackie’s point of view was, that okay, you all have had the Willis, I’m going to help and make a commercial gallery and bring you all up to another level of awareness for the community. So there’s another gallery. And then Suzanne Hillberry did that too. Suzanne especially had a direct connection to New York artists. She was at the museum. She knew the artists. She had them in her gallery. And she’d show Cass Corridor people.
So it tied together. Just like in Mr. Duffy’s house, here’s the Brach, and here’s the Sestock in her gallery. She’s having people like Ron Gorchav and Egner, and Lyla Kadash, and she’s putting them together so that people would be educated about, okay our art in this area is just as important as this art from here.

I still wanted to go to New York because New York is exciting and the galleries, the museums. So I was out of here and then something happened; I fell in love and the person I felt in love with was not going to New York with me. I even said, because he’s an actor, I said, “Look, we’re going to New York, I’ll get a job as a waitress, and I really didn’t want to do that but, probably an easy job to get. I’ll get a job to as a waitress and I will support you in trying to move your acting career up because actors in New York? Oh yeah, let’s go. And I was not acknowledging the fact that he had a life here already. He was involved with a theater group. He’s a lot older than me so he had his life set. So I had to make a decision. Do I go there by myself without him? Or, do I stay here and begin to make a life? And I had to ask myself, can I make a life as an artist here? And I had to sit down with myself and I finally came up with a conclusion that, you make art wherever you are and you can send your work elsewhere and you can be located here. And so that’s what I did. I began to put down these roots. Making sure that I got my work out. I wanted to make sure that my work was seen by as many different constituencies as possible. And I began to realize how important my family was in general and I didn’t want to leave them. And possibly if I’d gone to New York I would have been quite lonely while I created another community around myself. Why should I leave my community? I’ve got a really great community here. Cass Corridor, the educational community, my friends, my family, the very large African-American arts community. So I was able to plug myself into all these communities and then get my work out. One of the reasons I was able to do that, especially with this group called the National Conference of Artists; I began to be involved with them. It was run by Shirley Wilson Reed and Edsel
Reid and a whole bunch of wonderful people. And they told me the same thing: Here are some avenues that you can investigate to show your work because that’s our goal. Here are catalogues that you can get your work into. Here are exhibitions that we do and we send all over to have your work seen. And I found another set of paths and so now I'm so glad I didn't go and live there [New York]. I saw that the arts community is quite multi-faceted and something I wanted to be part of. [Silence]

I thought we just scratched the surface. There is so much that as I’m going over this I'm remembering things. I'm remembering and remembering things. One of the things that I keep revisiting is the importance of documentation which is what my work is about, but also understanding the strength of community and how (whispers inaudibly), how that community grows and prospers by the input of its members. I learned that at Wayne State. Egner, and there’s other instructors, I’ve got pictures, up there on the bulletin board, everything they did was—as I remember—we were taught skills but we were also taught to share information about sources of supplies, books or places to show your work. Information was something that should be given freely. When I got involved with the National Conference of Artists that was reinforced.

What I also realized was that I didn't know a whole lot; that I needed to continue my education. Because when I was at Wayne in terms of art history, we weren’t told about a lot of African-American artists. That was a part of my education that I had to take charge of. Kind of interesting. My class structure, the people in my class, I was I was in school at that time with a lot of African-American artists in my class. We’ve all gone in different paths, but the one I talk to a lot now is still Saffell Gardner, we talk all the time. And we very often will reminisce about our classes we took with Egner and all the rest. And he and I say the same things: they didn’t really show us a lot of Black artists. Conclusion? Because they didn’t know very many. They knew Ali McGee because Egner took us to
his show, and Charles McGee. But they didn't know here are all these Black artists in the city, that you should know by name because that was not a part of their society. Cass Corridor was not just an artist group it was a social group. And what I mean by that is they all live in the same area. I must have mentioned this earlier. It was about this place where they lived in the same building. They all are students at Convention Hall and they were each other's reinforcement. That’s who they were. So I don't blame them for not teaching me or showing me all this stuff because you can only teach what you know. I made it my business to become much more aware personally. And then when I talk to people I can say I know these artists here I know these artists there because I’ve become a part of those groups. If I ever give a party I can't invite everybody I know. It might be fun, all these different groups. It’d be like the effing United Nations, and even more so now because I work with a whole lot of young artists at CCS. And sometimes I tend to relate to them. I keep forgetting I’m like 35 years older than they are. When I first started teaching at CCS I was their age because I was 25 when I first started teaching there.

That’s an interesting story I should tell you about how I started working at CCS because it’s related to all of this networking. The artist Aris Koutrolis, who was a Cass Corridor artist, he is in the Kick Out the Jams catalogue. He was the head of the Forrest Department at CCS. Egner taught painting and they were good friends. They both have studios in New York. What I heard was, what Egner told me, they were driving to New York going to the studios, whatever, and Aris says to Egner, “I need to know, I got a space for, a slot for an adjunct instructor,” And Egner says, “You should call Gilda. She’d be good. She’s been teaching graduate at Wayne. We still get her a couple of classes,” I’m paraphrasing because I wasn’t there. Anyway, Egner tells me, “Gilda there’s a job over at CCS possibly, why don’t you go see Aris.” So, I put on my best blue jean skirt. I had a very short [a]fro then. I had my slides, it was back in the dark ages when we had slides in my portfolio, and I went over to CCS. I met with Aris
Koutrolis because I wanted that job. I thought if I can get part time here, I was already teaching part time at the Heritage House Museum School for Youth. I had my class at Wayne State, and I was doing something else. I had like five jobs. I wanted in at CCS because it was the only place I didn't have a job. It was intriguing. They had just built that new building not long before.

**Marshall:** New building?

**Snowden:** Well the building that they have now the, Tinker Toy building, was built in I think ‘76 and this was ’82 so it’s still a new building relatively. So I said “here's my portfolio, my slides and my work.” And he says “I don’t need to look at this! Egner says I should hire you,” (laughs). And I’m thinking “oh my God this is kind of like the exact opposite of my experience with that J. Walter Thompson internship,” and so I got hired part-time. And I will never forget the first classes I taught were figure drawing. My work was not about figures. I was doing constructions so he went “We have a lot of figure sections, you’re going to teach figure drawings.” Because they have so many sections, I taught figure drawing not in terms of an anatomical direction, because they have other people who did that, Tony Williams, Russell Keeter. They taught figure and they did it very tightly. So I did it expressionistically. And I taught figure drawing as a part-time instructor for three maybe four years that's all I taught. I didn’t teach painting. And it began to imprint itself on me putting a figure back in my work. That’s when I started doing the silhouette drawings, my self-portraits. I began to include more obvious figure back into my work because I was teaching it all day, every day. In 1985 Aris says to me, “I have to talk to you about something.” I said “What?” “Would you consider making your career here?” And that’s when I really had to make the final decision. I said “What?” He said “I have a slot for a full-time instructor.” Now a full-time teaching job is what, it’s like Valhalla. It’s what you look for. And so I said “you’re offering me a full-time job? Yes, I will make my career here, on one
condition.” And he said “What’s that?” I said “I’m an artist first, and a teacher second.” He said “I wouldn’t have it any other way, all of us here, as you’re well aware of, all of us are professional artists. In fact, you have to be a professional artist to teach. I have to keep the studio and I have to keep my job.” So that’s when I started full-time [inaudible]. And I’ve been there ever since. What I had to do though is I had to give up on my other jobs because most art instructors who were adjuncts they’re working at, they got a horse you know they go to all these places which is always kind of hard on me because I don't drive. So all of my jobs were within like close proximity, Wayne State, Your Heritage House which is no longer in existence, CCS, and then I still had my telephone sales job. I was able to give all those up because I had this full-time job. And since my standard of living was quite low, I put everything into my art. I didn’t wear good clothes, fancy clothes. I didn’t have a car. So everything I made went right into my art. Studio, rent, art. I had a studio. Well, it was a flat and my rent was only $165 dollars which was cheap even for the early ‘80s, that was beyond cheap. I was there for 10 years and everything in my flat was in my studio. So I was at CCS when they still called [it] Center of Creative Studies and they changed it to College of Creative Studies. I moved up the ladder there from instructor to full professor.

The reason I was so anxious getting that job was that Egner told us when we were in our classes. He says, “Don’t think about getting a teaching job. There are no teaching jobs. They’re scarce. Few are far between. If you want to be an artist you got to support yourself, but don’t look for a teaching job. I’ve got something else to tell you. There’s 30 of you in this class, 10 years from now only 3 of you will be making art.” He’s telling us all this stuff to kind of like to discourage us, but not just to discourage us, but to tell us the truth. Because being a creative worker is a very challenging, difficult life because you’re not, there’s no guarantees that you’re going to be able to support yourself. So he wanted to make sure. He said, “I got my job, but will you get a teaching job? Don’t hold your breath.” And so we
are all sitting there thinking well, he says, “In ten years there’s going to be only three of us, I’m going to be one of those three.” And we all said that—we were all thinking it. “I’m one of those three.” Now what happened to a lot of them? I don’t know. I’m still doing it. My friend Fel is still doing it. And I can’t remember who else was in that class. But those kinds of anecdotes are coming back and just capped our experiences as how we defined ourselves and how we lived. I knew that if I was going to do anything I had to be aggressive because my father said, “I don’t care what you do, just be the best.”

I didn’t want to disappoint him. I wanted to make sure that my choice was a good one. I thought for him to see, and my mother, and I’m really happy that before they both passed away, they saw that I was alright. But some things happened to me that showed them that I was alright. (Silence)

I gave a lecture. I would come home and because I’m still living at home, I would give them news about what was going on in the art world. At this one point, I was asked to do a lecture and my father said, “Oh that’s good, you’re going to lecture. What are you going to lecture on?” I said, myself. He says, “But are you getting paid?” (laughs) I said, “Of course, I’m getting paid 500 dollars.” He said hold up, “You’re getting paid 500 dollars to talk about your damn self?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Daughter, I’m so proud.” (laughs) He got on the phone and he called his brother, who is also a dentist. He says, “Hey man, guess what? Gilda is getting paid to talk about herself.” I made a bridge, and I still haven’t gotten paid yet.” And they both laughed. My father was real proud. He just chuckled. He chuckled. And so whenever I did anything, I made sure I knew about it. I said, “Look here’s another step up that ladder.” I’m paid to talk about myself. I sold some artwork. He said, “What? They bought that stuff? They bought that stuff you drew?” I said, “Yeah daddy.” He said, “C’mon on, they bought that stuff?” I said, “Yeah.” “Gilda, why would anybody want to buy that stuff? You know, it looks weird, it looks strange!” He said, “Gilda, it’s just a gimmick. You know you put all this stuff together, and pour some stuff on top of it, and then you put it on the wall? It’s a
“gimmick!” I said, “Daddy it’s not a gimmick, it’s my style.” He said, “No, no, no. It’s a gimmick. You and Egner and all those people you got your gimmicks and you put some fast ones over these people that buy it.” And then he looks at me and laughs because he’s, he was playing the devil’s advocate. He always did that to kind of like stir me up. All he had to do was say what I did was gimmicky, and I’d say style. He says “style-gimmick-style-gimmick, that’s all you artists say. Style...gimmick...what about that big piece of asphalt you showed me with the yellow line on it, gimmick! Egner with his wood pieces in the slats, gimmick!” I said, “Daddy no it’s his style.” “Yeah, yeah, yeah...yeah.” But he always came to my shows. He knew Egner and he liked him. He knew all of my friends. And my father was doing that to make me stronger in my resolve. Father was real smart as he knew that if he just went along with me I wouldn't fight. He kept stirring my passion, I didn’t realize that at first and I’d just say “oh you know it's not a gimmick.” He says “Yes daughter I know, but I had you going didn’t I?” He said, “Look, you’re selling it. People believe in it, that's great!”

And I got my first [whispers inaudibly]… Yeah the state of Michigan used to give art grants. They don’t do it anymore for a whole lot of reasons. I’ve got my first grant in 1980 for $4000. My parents were so happy. I think that was when they exhaled about my choice of being an artist because I got this. And when you step up these runs of the art ladder, and this was a real tangible one that they could understand. They didn’t have to worry about me anymore and my father stopped telling my younger sister “Oh what is she going to do? How is she going to support herself? They stopped because she told me he stopped. She said she was tired of hearing about it. “Gildy, he’s always telling me how worried he is, but he never tells you! He doesn’t want to upset you. He doesn’t want to stop you.” Those were gifts that both my parents gave me. They never ever expressed any apprehension even when I was hanging out at Cass Corridor at all hours. There were a lot of things I didn’t tell them too,
but they’re still your parents, you know? But they never, they never stopped me because one word
would have stopped me. If I didn’t feel like I had their support maybe I would have. I don’t know
maybe if I stopped I wouldn’t have. Who knows maybe how these things play out. I wish say they had
been here in ‘09 to see me get that Kresge Foundation Fellowship. But you know the first one was
alright. The first one was alright. And if you believe in certain things they know, I guess I believe in
most things that’s for sure. It’s time for you to ask me another question.

[This transcription is of the first 2:14:30 of a 4:13:48 interview with Gilda Snowden. The interview in
its entirety is available in the audio file.]