

1 Frank Miata, interviewed by Karl Grossman at Planting Fields, Oyster Bay, New York on
2 May 28, 2011. Additional questions from Carol Quirke.

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4 Karl Grossman: Frank, Why did you come to Old Westbury, and what was your
5 background?

6 Frank Miata: Oh, okay. Well I grew up on the South Shore of Long Island, working class
7 family. I was the first of my family to go to college, and when I first started school I started
8 at the State University at New Paltz. Then we had a number of demonstrations around the
9 war and Vietnam. I got arrested a couple of times. Then I was assaulted by the police in jail,
10 and when I came back to the campus at New Paltz I just was kind of disgusted with being in
11 school, so I left and became a regional organizer for SDS in upstate New York. I did that for
12 about a year in '67 and '68. A year on the road I was tired, and at that point they were
13 trying to draft me into the military.

14 I was applying to Old Westbury as this experimental college, so I could go there and
15 rest up; I thought of college as sort of R & R for me. So what happened was I got out of the
16 draft, apparently they didn't want me. I showed up on the campus I thought of it as really
17 this nice quiet place to go, as a refuge from the crisis that was happening all around. Of
18 course it was an illusion on my part that it was going to be a restful place because all of the
19 social conflicts that were in the society at large were being played out as the college began
20 to unfold in its first year. That's the way I got there, sort of this circuitous route through
21 another school, and my career in the SDS and my need to find a nice quiet place to be in a
22 while.

23 Karl: Let's just jump to the political chase here, the famous quote of Frank

24 Miata that, "paranoia is true perception." Paranoia is true perception, what was all that
25 about and what were the circumstances?

26 Frank: What it really was about was in the early sixties, having grown up with President
27 Kennedy becoming president and him sort of giving this youthful notion of empowering
28 young people to try and change the world. There was in the air the idea that we were
29 entitled—not only entitled but we were obligated—to try to change the world for the
30 better. My generation of students actually had the idea that the government and the power
31 structures in society were not evil; they were not totally benevolent but they were
32 amenable to change. That you could reason with people in power, and that they would
33 change based on reasoned argument. This is a classic liberal perspective and many college
34 students had that perspective.

35 Then two things happened. One is, a lot of people went South on the freedom rides
36 and found out that they weren't getting supported by the federal government initially. The
37 power structures in those states and the federal government were in collusion to keep
38 things as they were in the South. The inequality and the terror that was being perpetuated
39 was not being counterbalanced by the Feds against the states, they were in fact in collusion.
40 Then those kids came back to the campuses and started sort of questioning what was going
41 on in their own areas. In 1964, when I was a sophomore in college, Berkeley blew up in
42 December of '64. That was the template for us kind of looking at, this is what's going on;
43 intolerance is not a personality disorder, racism was a structural, social, embedded,
44 ingrained part of society.

45 And that is when I started thinking about it, as, if you think the society is
46 misunderstood and mistaken, you're wrong, you should be totally paranoid about what is
47 going on, because it is even worse than you can imagine. It was going to political science
48 classes and professors saying, "Lobbyists don't buy votes", and then of course having
49 Watergate happen and seeing bags of money were actually being carried from one place to
50 another to bribe criminals who were involved in criminal activity to be quiet. Hush money
51 was there, in paper bags. I mean if you had written a novel saying that Republican
52 politicians would be carrying bags full of hundred dollar bills you would say, "What an
53 exaggeration." If you were an investigative reporter and you had written that and you
54 know, as a supposition, you'd say that guy is out of his mind. Meanwhile, here we are
55 watching this stuff going on.

56 I was sitting having this argument with Harris Wofford one day, about the difference
57 between liberals and radicals. That's when I came out with it. He was saying that we were
58 much too suspicious and much too critical, and that's when I said, "No Harris, paranoia is
59 true perception." It stuck in a lot of people's minds because I don't think it was in any way
60 an exaggeration. It's only come to the point where, I think it's almost like a Weberian
61 principle of social analysis. I start from that position and then work my way back to maybe
62 the person is benevolent and ignorant, or ignorant or benevolent, whatever it is. Most of
63 the time I start from the position that people who have power didn't get it from being nice
64 guys.

65 Karl: So it turns out that Old Westbury wasn't an R & R facility, it was a cauldron for
66 various thinking, political and social and otherwise?

67 Frank: [8:38] Yeah, it was a perfect kind of attractor for all of the social and political issues
68 of the day. Everything from participatory democracy, students wanting to take their
69 destiny into their own hands, to the kind of racial tensions that existed in society were
70 reflected in the conflicts between the white students and the black students, between the
71 administration and the students and faculty. It all got filtered through the discussions and
72 eventually the explosion that occurred on May 19, when we had a state of the college
73 meeting at which point, I got up and basically told Harris he was running a plantation and
74 not a college, and that we weren't going to put up with it anymore. I took the students out
75 and we took over a couple of the domes for a week.

76 Karl: And that sort of really marked the beginning of the end?

77 Frank: Yeah, in a dramatic sense. It was leading, you could see that there was not a real
78 sense of purpose and community any longer. People were going their own way. Harris had,
79 he was losing his ability to sustain any kind of—his legitimacy. Even though he certainly
80 had the authority to do things, he didn't have the sense of cooperation that needed to
81 happen.

82 Karl: Was there a fatal flaw in the legislative direction that students would have full
83 partnership in this new college?

84 Frank: No, you know I think people make too much of that phrase that was in the
85 document. The whole purpose of that college if we're to look at it from let's say a paranoid
86 political point of view—the whole purpose of the college was to co-opt student radicalism
87 that had in fact infected the country at that point. It went from the West Coast and came
88 east. This was supposed to be a laboratory to see if it could be contained and turned back

89 into simply a set of reformist recommendations for how to do interdisciplinary studies or
90 other kinds of modest tweaks to the system. We were not into modest tweaks to the
91 system, there were just too many of us who had been through too much and we were too
92 disillusioned with the slowness of change and the very limited nature of what was being
93 discussed. A lot of us were not simply talking about educational reform we were talking
94 about social and institutional change.

95 So when Danny the Red, in '68, [Dany le Rouge, a leader of the May 1968 student
96 revolt in Paris that turned into a general strike. Daniel Cohn-Bendit is now a Green Party
97 legislator in the European Parliament.] talked about the march through the institutions,
98 that in fact was what a lot of use were talking about. We were thinking about the university
99 as a platform to launch into societal change as a whole. So when you think about a college
100 president trying to convince students that they should essentially have very limited focus
101 and goals in terms of changing the institution and they're looking at essentially social
102 change on a much more fundamental scale, you just have this tremendous disconnect.
103 They were trying to reform us, give us reformist solutions and we were giving them radical
104 critiques.

105 On a personal level, I had this conversation with Harris, Harris was a great walker
106 across campus so he'd take you for a walk, and now this is in the middle of February, so
107 we're walking across the middle of Planting Fields across the golf course. I said, "Harris
108 you're a really nice man and you're a liberal person, but I'm not a liberal. I am a radical.
109 Which means, Harris, you are trying to co-opt me into the system and I'm not going to let

110 you do that.” And he looked at me and he said, “Of course I’m trying to co-opt you into the
111 system. I believe in the system.”

112 I thought I don’t have a tape recorder here. I should have a tape recorder because
113 this is exactly what we’ve been saying about this whole educational reform movement from
114 the beginning. It is nothing more than simply trying to take the head of the movement, the
115 brightest organizers and put them into a nice little place and then tinker with them,
116 experiment with them. As they say it got to another level and it got to another level pretty
117 quickly.

118 Karl: What about you personally, what happened to you after Old Westbury?

119 Frank: [14:45] Well, I never read Harris’s book, *Kennedys and Kings*, but according to him I
120 went to jail. According to me what happened was I got a job right after undergraduate
121 school teaching in the Poli-Sci department at Adelphi University, Alan Wolfe recommended
122 me to the chairman, and the chairman hired me. About a year later when I asked him why
123 he had hired me he said, “I had hired you because you were young and sexy.” And I
124 thought, “Hmmm?” But you know it was not the answer I was expecting, I was expecting
125 because it was my brain. I stayed there for seven years. I did not finish my doctoral
126 program I just got disgusted with it.

127 Went on to the City University for a while and realizing there was no future in being
128 a teacher, I became an administrator. I went over to the dark side. A colleague of mine had
129 become a dean at NYU and he asked me to join him as his special assistant so I went there
130 and was there for eight or ten years and then I went to Pratt as a dean.

131 Karl: I mean here is this person challenging authority, a radical who couldn't stomach
132 liberals and you end up as a major academic authority in these various universities.

133 Frank: Well, you know I like to think I exercised my authority by not exercising it. In my
134 experience of watching things like sexism and racism operate in the university, that I gave
135 people opportunities to develop and grow and I got people resources that they wouldn't
136 have been able to get, because of my commitments—my social commitments. I found
137 myself in situations that I thought were absolutely both reprehensible and morally
138 compromising. Institutions put you in those situations and you are forced to make choices.

139 At one point I was actually working at Katherine Gibbs, the faculty were organizing
140 a union. The lawyer for Katherine Gibbs came in and the president of the institution was
141 giving him a sort of bullshit line about why his faculty were organizing. And I just stood up
142 and said that's a lot of crap. I gave this guy a litany of the things she had done over the last
143 two years to make the faculty into an organizing machine. Two weeks later I was fired, I
144 consider that one of the greatest things that's ever happened to me. I even got a drink out of
145 it from one of my colleagues. I've always had a bad attitude there was no doubt about it.
146 The academic world was the one world I thought I could actually function in at a
147 reasonable level because I really, really felt if you were with a lot of bright smart people,
148 there was less likelihood that people would be doing harm to one another. But people in
149 academia can be pretty vicious in a lot of ways. I got my dings along the way but I got out of
150 it alive, and I'm very happy.

151 Karl: What did Old Westbury mean to you in forty, fifty years of work after Old Westbury
152 and life after Old Westbury?

153 Frank: What it meant to me was the commitments people had to racial equality, to social
154 justice, to equity for women in the workforce and other feminist issues, those were all
155 there. We talked about that stuff constantly, not only were we talking about it but we were
156 acting it, we were working it out in our relationships so that when I had my child, actually
157 my wife had the child, but when we were raising my child I did at least half—sometimes
158 more—of the child rearing. I would get up and do those things. It worked into every little
159 detail of our lives, those types of issues and commitments and they went on.

160 The people that are out there, if you look at them and you look at what they've
161 accomplished, their commitments, these commitments come out of their social and political
162 and ethical concerns that were right there when they came to Old Westbury. That's why
163 they came here; they came to transform the world and in the process transform
164 themselves.

165 Karl: Do you still feel what is necessary is fundamental change, radical change, or do you
166 feel that perhaps that less of a liberal approach might be acceptable?

167 Frank: [21:25] Incremental change is going to happen and it's a good thing. It doesn't
168 happen just because you want it to happen, it happens because of the struggles that are
169 going on. I want fundamental change but I believe that the non-violent kind of struggles
170 that Martin Luther King was waging is the only way to take on a sophisticated,
171 technologically-organized society like this. Violence in the broadest sense plays into their
172 strong suit. King found a way of undermining that, as did Gandhi when he was fighting the
173 British. I thought King was a genius and it has grown in my perspective over the years.

174 I always argued that incrementalism is going to happen when political leadership of
175 either political party gets frightened enough, then they try to defuse the force behind the
176 change. They're going to create another crisis. The question will be if there will be people
177 to respond to that crisis in an intelligent way.

178 That's my real fear, that there is not there is not an organized, sophisticated political
179 opposition in this country. The labor movement's been wiped out so who takes the lead
180 when the next crisis comes. The financial crisis, nothing's been solved really, we'll have
181 another one. We'll have another war after these two have more or less petered out, you
182 just don't know. Will it be Europe first, will they have their crisis first, will we have ours
183 here, will the Chinese have theirs? Who knows? We carry on a tradition there are people
184 out there of struggle and historical kind of concern. That's what that is, the documentation
185 of this group of people, we are not going away. But who's behind us, where's the next
186 generation of folks, that's what I wonder about.

187 Carol Quirke: I was curious if you clearly were a leader with the May 19th events that you
188 described, who were some of the other student leaders on campus and what were the kinds
189 of things that they did?

190 Frank: There was Pat Sweeney. Amongst the black students we had Pablo Guzman, Rick
191 Davis was the elder statesman of the group. Rick was around forty years old, he was older
192 than all of us. Mickey Melendez, Paul Guzman, Denise Oliver, Roberto Ortiz these were
193 important leaders. Berizen, I'm trying to think of her first name, Judy Berizen, was an
194 important student leader. That's pretty much those —Oh Jesse Weiner— Jesse was a

195 really, really smart, bright guy. Those were the people I remember as being fairly
196 outspoken.

197 Carol: Can you describe some of the activism, it sounds as if, we've heard people mention
198 it, but not fully flesh it out. It seems like a lot of the activism you were involved in was
199 around thinking about the issues of students and faculty, university and students, the
200 power of education the politics of education. Were there other issues that stand out,
201 particular events that stand out?

202 Frank: Well, there were particular events; there were a number of them. The teachers
203 strike in New York City in '68 that was a fundamental turning point for a lot of students.
204 That's where kind of the rubber hit the road as far as we were talking sociology, we were
205 talking racism and politics in the classroom, then the students went in to teach against the
206 teacher's union, crossing the picket line. Most of us would have thought that was not a
207 good thing to do under most circumstances.

208 There are people going into classrooms, then finding out that these kids going into
209 classrooms were so ill-prepared. There were no resources. The parents were at just at
210 loose ends. They didn't know what to do to try to get their children an education in this
211 city. They would come back to campus, the students would come back and say, "You can't
212 believe what is going on in these schools and what's going on in these communities." Some
213 of these students were living in East New York and living in parts of Brooklyn that were
214 rough sections, places to live. They were being harassed on the streets.

215 Annie Ellman [founder of Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts, which became the Center
216 for Anti-Violence Education] who came here started learning martial arts in order to

217 defend herself in the schools. She's become a master of martial arts and started a whole
218 school against violence against women based on those early experiences. There were
219 issues beyond education that were you know always a part of what people were about.

220 Ghebre Selassie was refused a haircut in a barber shop in Oyster Bay in 1968—
221 refused a hair cut and we were planning to go down there and picket this place and put
222 pressure on this guy. This was part and parcel of what was going on. People would leave
223 the campus, join demonstrations against the war, stuff like that plus students had gone to
224 Cuernavaca, knew about the conditions in Mexico, I mean they got outside of Cuernavaca
225 because Cuernavaca is a fairly sophisticated upscale place, that was part of what was going
226 on.

227 We recruited students from the University of Chicago who had been thrown out of
228 the University of Chicago for a strike in 1968. We actually had two people go to Chicago
229 and recruit these kids after they had been thrown out of school. That was, you know, sort
230 of our way of sort of giving the finger to Edward Levi who was the president of the
231 University of Chicago at the time. The students—by the way all these students had 800 or
232 something on their SATS. They were great students so we were happy to get them.

233 So, you know, and then Harris went to the Democratic Convention and there was
234 a—you know, what we call, police riots in '68. And he comes back and says to me, "Well,
235 you know it was quite unbelievable." And I said, "Yeah, well Harris, what happened?" He
236 said, "Well, I went out to try to get arrested but the police wouldn't arrest me." I said, "Gee
237 Harris, no surprise. They wouldn't arrest a guy dressed in a suit with delegate badges on
238 him." "Well," He said, "I told them. I insisted on being arrested with the students." And I

239 just said to him, “Well, I guess we have our problems. The Russians are in Prague and
240 Mayor Richard Daley’s police are out there on the streets of Chicago.” I said, “I don’t think I
241 have to worry about what the Russians are doing. I have to worry about the police in
242 Chicago are doing.”

243 That was the kind of give-and-take that was going on. The school was not this
244 hermetically sealed, totally self-involved kind of place. We weren’t just trying to figure out,
245 you know, should we be doing what John Dewey says? Or should we be doing what
246 [indecipherable 31:52] says? It was quite, you know— It was quite connected to what was
247 going on in the outer world.

248 Carol: One more question. I’m curious about your own history then after the student strike
249 on May 19. What then happens to you? Do you end up finishing at Old Westbury? How did
250 you sort of ride out those transitions at Old Westbury?

251 Frank: [32:25] What happened was, that I was planning to register for the fall semester of
252 ’69 but I was told by the academic vice president that I had 120 credits because I had
253 transferred— I had 120 credits and they wouldn’t register me. They graduated me against
254 my will. So, since they wouldn’t let me back in I had to do something else. I was at loose
255 ends. Then Alan Wolfe who’s a pretty famous political scientist at this point, Alan called
256 me up and said, “There may be a job for you teaching a couple of courses at Adelphi
257 University.” And that was the beginning of my long and wacky academic career.

258 Carol: Is there anything else you’d like to tell us? Luckily you live close by, so perhaps we
259 can interview you again. But is there anything else you would like to share with us?

260 Frank: I guess that the only thing is that the sense of loss of historical understanding is
261 really—it's been on my mind because this reunion has made me go back and try to put
262 things together. And reading the threads, the various threads on my e-mails, I really see
263 that so much can get lost. So the necessity to try and keep the interpretive life—keep that
264 life going— keep people talking about those issues is really important to me now.

265 I think that several of the students who are in schools now will in their own, dealing
266 with issues, political, economical, social crisis will have to work their way through some of
267 the same things we did in terms of finding vehicles for protest in a society that's so totally
268 organized for repression that it's utterly frightening. When I was out on picket lines and in
269 the streets, there were no rubber bullets. There was no CS gas, the police...

270 Carol: Barricades?

271 Frank: The police were basically fat overweight guys. We'd always have one. That isn't the
272 case anymore. The level of sophistication and repressive apparatus both in terms of data,
273 in terms of technology, and in terms of willingness to use force is multiple times higher. I'm
274 just amazed at the courage of people to get out in the streets and go up against stuff like
275 that now.

276 Quirke: Thank you very much.