Blenda Wilson
June 12, 2013
interviewed by Susan Resnik
for California State University Northridge
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Transcribed by Jardee Transcription

SUSAN RESNIK (SR): Today is Wednesday, June 12, 2013. This is Susan Resnik. I'm in Savannah, Georgia in the lovely home of Blenda Wilson, former president of California State University Northridge. I'm about to record her oral history as part of the university's Campus Leadership Project.

Dr. Wilson has enjoyed a distinguished career in higher education leadership, and is a nationally and internationally-known speaker on higher education policy issues. She earned her bachelor's degree at Cedar Crest College, Allentown, Pennsylvania. Her master's is from Seton Hall University. Her Ph.D. is from Boston College. She began her career in higher education as the assistant provost and assistant to the president of Rutgers University in 1969, and served Rutgers until 1972. She then served as associate dean at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for ten years. From 1984 to 1988, she served as executive director of the Colorado Commission on Education, noted as a tireless advocate for service to diverse populations, as well as for organizing higher education efficiently. She led the commission and staff in drafting a reorganization plan for public higher education in Colorado that became law in 1985. In 1988 she became the chancellor of the University of Michigan Dearborn, the first woman to head a four-year higher-education institution in the state.

Her tenure at the California State University Northridge began in 1992. She served as president until 1999. While there, she not only enacted a strategic

plan to better serve the diverse populations of the San Fernando Valley, but courageously and effectively led the university's recovery from the 1994 Northridge Earthquake.

She served as director of Union Bank Cal Corporation from 1993 to 1999, and at Medco Health Solutions from 2004 to 2012. She is a former chair of the American Association of Higher Education, and was the first woman to chair the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, where she served on the board of directors from 2003 to 2006. She served as the first president and chief executive officer of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation from 1999 to 2006. The foundation is New England's largest public charity, devoted to improved academic achievement for underserved communities. Over the years, she has published widely and accrued many honors and honorary degrees from twenty-seven colleges and universities.

Honored uniquely by her alma mater, Cedar Crest College, she was asked to serve as acting president in academic year 2007. In her commencement address there on May 16, 2009, she stated that, quote, "The privilege of education at Cedar Crest, plus the love of my parents and family conferred upon me a life of purpose and fulfillment that exceeded any expectation of what I was capable of at that time." Rather than my continuing to quote President Wilson, at this point I'd like to ask her to share her own life's story. Good morning, President Wilson.

[00:03:59]

BLENDA WILSON (BW): Good morning, Susan, and please call me Blenda.

SR: Thank you. I'd like to ask you about where you were born, when you were born, your parents, your family, and your early years.

[00:04:19]

BW: Feels like long ago since then! I was born and raised in Woodbridge, New Jersey—actually born in Perth Amboy, which is a city nearby. I am the second of four natural children of my parents, Horace and Margaret Wilson, and one foster brother. But I call myself a middle child because my older sister was three years older than I am, then me. My brother and sister are twins, twenty months younger than I, and my foster brother was their same age. So I consider the three of them a pack. My older sister, the real older child, and I declare myself a middle child.

My parents, I read recently, went to a talk about the migration of southern blacks to the North in the thirties, and my mother is a part of that migration. She grew up there—this is stunning, by the way—she grew up in Brunswick, Georgia, which is just south of Savannah. And I'm sorry she passed before she saw me in Savannah, because I was *never* going to live in the South—never, ever, ever! And she moved to a place north of where we grew up, in Hackensack, New Jersey. You would know that, Susan.

SR: I do.

BW: As a domestic, having finished normal school here in Georgia, but once she went north, normal school credentials were not accepted in the schools in New Jersey, so she became kind of an au pair and general housekeeper and helper to a household in Hackensack. Someone actually directed her to that particular house because they were known by people in the South. And when you read that history, I'm thinking of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, the book that really shows the migration of Southerners to the New York-New Jersey corridor, the Chicago

corridor, the California corridor. That is my mother's history. She met my father, who is a native of Woodbridge, born and raised there, and my father's history is interesting because his was one of the families that had been in Woodbridge, which is an overwhelmingly white community—was then and still probably is. But they'd been there a very, very long time, and he went through Woodbridge High School, went to technical school thereafter and trained to be an electrician, and of course was not allowed into apprenticeship, so he was never able to use his trade. When my father was eighty years old, we gave a birthday party for him, and I sometimes envy those people who grow up and stay in the same community. His childhood friends, all the people he worked with over the years, the neighbors from his old neighborhood and any neighborhood we lived in. It was a wonderful, wonderful party.

So a family of seven people lived in a house that I think is about as big as these two rooms. When I used to go home I'd say, "How did we manage five kids and two adults in this little tiny house?!" But both my parents worked. They worked all of their adult lives, my mother in white-collar jobs. She was an elevator operator, she was a cashier at Sears-Roebuck, she worked in a medical facility—a *very* able woman. If she'd had the opportunities I had, Lord knows the world would be *really* different!

My father worked most of his career as a presser in a dry cleaning establishment. The five of us went to school. Then I should tell you about my foster brother. He joined our family when he and my brother and sister were about seven. My brother made friends with him at school. He was one of thirteen

children whose mother died, and the father could not take care of them all himself. So they went into foster homes, but he would not let them be adopted, and he always related to all of them as a family, and so did we. So my foster brother and *his* family became a part of our family gatherings, if you can imagine.

[00:09:15]

SR: That's marvelous.

BW: It was wonderful, really wonderful. And remember my mother said…. My brother's called Buzzy—that's because his name is Horace, and if your name was Horace when you're a young boy, you want to be called anything else! She said Buzzy came home one day and said…. Wesley was my foster brother's name, and *his* brother lived with an older family, and the older brother had some difficulty with the male in the family. So Buzzy came home and said, "Wesley came home and told me he was really sad because So-and-So had a problem and he might have to move. Can he stay with us?" So that's how we got five kids. And I admire that about my family.

SR: That's wonderful.

BW: And there's a part of this whole migration business that tends to be a theme now in my mind, because it was also true that anybody from Brunswick or Saint Simon Island who was coming to New Jersey or New York, people would say "Cousin So-and-So," cousin twentieth removed, "is coming through. Can they stay with you until they get a job?" or whatever. And it was a pattern of just extended family generosity, helping people until they got on their feet. And my parents were that, they exemplified that. So they were a *profound* influence in my

life. And I remember…. What happened? I guess maybe when I got one of the last honorary degrees—this is when my parents had passed—and the institution did a very elaborate kind of honoring, and pictures and whatever. And I remember saying to myself, "Oh…." In my former life, I would send this to my mother and she'd tell the whole world. Who am I supposed to send this to now?! Who's supposed to brag about me now? But they loved their children, there was never anything that anybody did that wasn't a source of pride for the entire family.

[00:11:28]

SR: That's so wonderful.

BW: It really was. It really, really was. And my foster brother died about eight years ago, but I have two sisters and a brother. One sister lives in North Carolina, my other sister still lives in Woodbridge. My brother lives in New Jersey. And we are very close, given the kind of parents we had.

The important thing about living in Woodbridge, New Jersey, beyond that, was that we lived in a community that was a white ethnic community. If I said to you our neighbors were Sasso, Meggo, Zizma, Salaji, Koochi, Sadlowski, Horvah [all phonetic spellings]—we're just going down the street—German, Italian, Polish, Irish … and us. And it was one of those kind of lower middle-class neighborhoods where all of the kids were about the same age, we all went to school together, the kids of those families and we. And I think it gave me and my brother and sisters a sense that it didn't matter where you started, because *all* those people came from lesser circumstances. The psychological part of it was to

say we were then Negro, and then became black, and now we're African American!

[00:13:17]

SR: I'm well aware, yes.

BW: But they were something else too. They were all something different from one another. So I don't think we inherited, at least initially in Woodbridge, the sense that being black was the only different thing to be.

SR: Yeah. That's very interesting. Now did you, as a small child, find the parents of these other kids welcoming?

BW: Oh, absolutely.

SR: See, that's also a very good experience.

BW: Oh yeah. Yeah, we were a neighborhood. If somebody's parents weren't home when they got home from school, they'd come to our house. When we did parties, we had all kinds of ethnic food in our back yard. It was a healthy childhood. And the schools, which again were overwhelmingly—I say white, but white in that sense of diverse national and geographic backgrounds. The teachers were very supportive, and they were *good* teachers too. So the idea of using your mind, accomplishing something, doing well in school, being well behaved, being a good Christian child—those are just where I come from. That's what the world looked like to me.

SR: And it sounds like, as you said, it was a good childhood, you had fun. Do you remember particular things you did with other friends, or things you can remember?

[00:14:58]

BW: Oh yeah, there are two or three things. There are two basic things. One is the church. My paternal grandmother was a *very* religious lady, and was convinced that her grandchildren were going to do all the things that they were supposed to do in church. We grew up Baptist, and my father is Baptist. The church was the expression of our heritage. The community we lived in wasn't. Sunday you go to church, and it was a black Baptist church in Perth Amboy, where from the earliest days we went to church every Sunday. You went to Sunday school, you took your little quarter so you could put it in the collection plate. You memorized verses to say at Easter and Christmas. When you got older, you sang in the choir. I mean, it was a lifetime obligation. I'd forgotten this! In addition to that, we all went to church, we had supper, which is what it was called, Sunday afternoon at my grandmother's house, because then she was goin' back to church, so you had to have a meal in the middle of the day. And each grandchild…. She had a parlor, honest to goodness. She had one of those big houses and you'd go in the front door and there was this parlor.

SR: The front room. I can picture it.

BW: Yeah. And then you'd go upstairs and there were bedrooms, and then the dining room and the kitchen. Each of us individually had to sit down with my grandmother every Sunday and she would say, "Give an accounting of yourself."

SR: Oh my!

BW: Oh my! And it was related to How did you behave, How did you treat your parents, Did you do the things you were supposed to do? Are you a good

Christian child? And there were times that you knew that somebody had told her beforehand that your accounting was not going to be particularly good. And she would say in her way, "Your behavior is your responsibility. And how you treat people is your responsibility. And God loves you anyway." So it was like you were frightened more about disappointing her than about her being displeased.

[00:17:33]

SR: And she wasn't harsh, it sounds like—not harsh.

BW: No, never. Literally never. As a matter of fact, none of my parents were harsh. My mother was the driven, get everything done…. But when I think about her life, to work all day, have five kids, come home, cook and clean and do laundry at night, no wonder she was thin, she did pretty well. No, Nanny was quite an influence, and the church always has been in some way important to my life socially. And my faith has been important to me as a psychological strength. So that's one.

Then the civic side of me is I was a Brownie and I was a Girl Scout [unclear].

SR: And here you are in Savannah!

BW: That's right, a Goody Two-Shoes.

SR: I was too, by the way.

BW: A total Goody Two-Shoes, I really was. But again, Patricia Reckminzer [phonetic] was a school friend whose mother and father together ran this Girl Scout troop.

SR: That was unusual.

[00:18:49]

BW: Very unusual. And we did the things that Girl Scouts are supposed to do. We did camping and whatever, and of course I was the only black kid.

SR: Win badges?

BW: Curved bar badge. Wouldn't you know? This overachieving person right here.

SR: I can totally relate to it.

BW: And what you learned there, besides your own ability to learn different things and to do different things, again, reinforced the way my community—the way I experienced the community where I lived, which was it was okay to be who you were, and to expect to be accepted, to expect that people would just value you.

SR: Did you have any other friends who were black, or as you said, at that time, Negro? Were there any others?

BW: Yes. There were exactly two other [families]. There was a family that actually was a parallel going to school with us. We knew her, we were not friends. The family we were friends with, interestingly, my husband's last name is Fair, and the Fair family was my longest childhood friend, and her two brothers. And my mother and her mother were in Eastern Star and some other groups together. So that was it. She was actually a little older than I, and graduated a year before, but she and her brother were the only black graduates of their high school class. And I and the woman from the first family were the only [black] graduates from my high school class. This is 1958, a New Jersey town. It's inconceivable!

SR: Well no, actually. I graduated in 1957 from a high school where I think we had three black students.

[00:21:03]

BW: That's just the way it was.

SR: It's the way it was.

BW: You know, and it raises the question kind of in your mind, How do you make sure that people who are not advantaged, not only obtain the education and the skills, but the psychological armor and sense of self to be able to do whatever they want to do? If there's anything that's been the struggle of my professional career, it has been the mission of trying to make that kind of ideal possible for others.

SR: Well, you're such a role model for that.

BW: I think so.

SR: Clearly! And I think a lot of that is just modeling the behavior and mentoring others probably.

BW: Precisely. Yeah, I think so. But you think about education today, and the ideal is so far from real. And that kind of nurturing environment is so difficult to see for disadvantaged communities. But I'm sure that whole sense of purpose and obligation to my grandmother and my God and my parents….

SR: And what about, as you said, you thought you had good teachers. That formed another part?

BW: Yes. The funny stories that the family shares are what's coming to mind for me. I learned to read before I went to kindergarten because my sister was in school, and so I learned everything she knew. So I went to kindergarten, and in my sweet kind self, decided I would help the teacher teach the other children. (laughter) So I got kicked out of kindergarten and promoted—they called it promoted.

Basically I was disruptive, I'm sure of that. And her name was Mrs. Lichty [phonetic]. But when I was not happy in kindergarten—this was a K-8 school at the time—my sister was in third grade, and her teacher's name was Miss Mulvaney [phonetic]. All of them were "Miss."

SR: Most, right.

BW: [unclear] yeah, right. So I would just leave the kindergarten class and go to Miss Mulvaney's class—just, you know, sit there. Then they'd call my parents [unclear]. When kids played with dolls, I played with blackboards—school—and made my brothers and sisters learn what I wanted them to learn. It was just the way…. I loved school. I *loved* school. My brother and sister who followed me in school *hated* school and were *not* good students. And they blame a lot of their sadness in school on the fact that they followed me, and I was the Goody Two-Shoes kid. But I loved it. And I really felt valued [by the] teachers. You know, this is another theme of today's feminism. If women, *when* women became able to be everything else other than teachers and nurses and social workers, who replaced those dedicated, brilliant, wonderful women who were my elementary school teachers? And I could name them. Even as an adult, I would go back to Woodbridge from wherever I was, and I would go to see Miss Van Slyke, who was my English teacher in high school. She was as demanding as anything. Most students hated her. And I found her the foundation of my entire professional career.

SR: Isn't that a marvelous thing?! And did you ever get a chance to express that to her?

[00:25:10]

BW: Oh, absolutely. I went back and taught in the high school and *she* was the head of the department!

BW: How great.

BW: Absolutely. Or Mrs. Norman who was a history teacher. Anyway, when I say I had an advantaged childhood, from my parents and who they were, my grandmother and her role, the neighborhood I lived in, the church I could go to for religious and emotional support, and the school—I had a really good childhood. Very few bumps. Very few pains. And the friends that I had as Brownies and in Girl Scouts were also the friends I had in school, in high school. So it was that kind of a narrow world, I might say.

SR: It sounds wonderful, and then it reminds me, because we are contemporaries, of those years. And I'm thinking of the historical context as well, and how I often look back at what I didn't learn in my history books in high school, et cetera.

BW: Exactly.

SR: And I imagine that, again, it's so different now in terms of everything: the history that includes what happened to African-American people. I mean, that was just not present when I was in school. And I'm Jewish, I didn't even know concentration camps existed until I was older. It was not discussed in my home.

BW: Right. Yeah, and we had my mother's side of history, because while my grandfather was still alive, we would come to New Jersey and we would drive from New Jersey to Georgia every other summer. And the experience you have

when you're doing that from New Jersey, is that you had to pack food in New Jersey because you couldn't stop anyplace.

[00:27:33]

SR: That's right. I was going to ask you if you ever had that experience, because I have friends, and also have interviewed…. Do you know Professor Shirley Webber from San Diego State University?

BW: No.

SR: Well, I did her oral history, and she grew up in Arkansas, and then took a trip with her parents. They moved to California. Her father was a sharecropper, and she started African-American studies at San Diego State. And she's incredible. Anyway, that's what she talked about, that experience.

BW: Oh yeah. It was profound. But anyway, we had to drive straight through, New Jersey to Georgia, five kids (chuckles) and my parents in a car, because there was no other alternative, except you'd stop off in Washington, D.C., because we knew some people. We'd stop there and go to the bathroom and wash or whatever, and then drive straight through. Maybe it was like….

SR: Do you remember sort of accepting that, that that's just the way it is as a child? Or did it get discussed? Or it just sort of….

BW: As a child, I think ironically there were polar, opposite reactions. One was being very clearly envious of the boys, because they…. (laughter) Really! This is my first encounter with how there really is an advantage to being a boy in that circumstance, than being a girl. So we always had to find…. And there were more girls than boys [in our family]. [We] had to find places where we could go

outside, literally, away off the highway—which was demeaning and embarrassing, and we knew that. On the other hand, when we *got* to Georgia, the section of Brunswick that was black when my mother grew up was called Arco. I have an aunt who still lives here. I have to figure out what happened to that section. But anyway, it was like the black section, and *everything* was black. And for me and my siblings, coming from New Jersey, this was like nirvana.

[00:29:59]

SR: Oh yeah.

BW: We got our own section in the movie theater, which was way up at the top. (laughter) We actually thought of it as just kind of a….

SR: Wow.

BW: Yeah! Wow! A new kind of experience, if you can imagine. But it also was not—when you went to Arco, you didn't experience a colored water fountain and a white water fountain either. So you had to be in Brunswick or out before *that* version of segregation was evident. For us, it was just like going to church on Sunday. So you'd go to Arco, Georgia, and everybody there was black. And everybody—it didn't seem painful to us—we liked it, actually. I guess had we been older, maybe we would have understood.

SR: And questioned.

BW: And questioned. But no, it was great fun. My grandfather was also an extraordinary man. He was a fisherman. I don't really know his background—we need to figure that out—because he was an island person. And he just was so loving and so interesting.

[00:31:16]

SR: How *nice*.

BW: Yes, [unclear].

SR: To experience that.

BW: It was wonderful.

SR: And so did you do that through high school, or mostly the younger years?

BW: No, mostly the younger years. I think he passed … oh, I don't know, I was probably just entering high school, something like that. And of course the other thing about my mother's progression is all of her siblings—she was the oldest of thirteen children, I think—all of her siblings—no, eight—except for a brother, came north after she did. So my aunts and cousins on my mother's side are people we grew up with too.

SR: Oh, nice.

BW: Yeah, very, very nice. So it's a good family.

SR: Very. And then as you went on in high school, was that different? Did you go to another area? Tell me about high school.

BW: No, high school was a continuation of the same school system in Woodbridge, but someone asked me once, when did I experience blackness as a disadvantage? And it was seventh grade. I know that, absolutely. And the reason was, for most of elementary school I was a friend with the daughter of the town's pharmacist—Jackson's Pharmacy in Woodbridge, New Jersey—and Judy Jackson was my friend. And she would have a birthday party. They were what we would call wealthy. I'm not sure I'd call that wealthy now, but anyway…. She would have

a birthday party, and it was a *big* doggone deal to get invited to Judy Jackson's birthday party. My aunt, my mother's sister, was a hairdresser, so I had to get my hair curled into whatever, and I had to have pretty clothes to go to Judy Jackson's. And I would go in a *taxi*.

[00:33:34]

SR: Oh!

BW: (whispered comment, inaudible) If you can imagine! I *loved* that. And of course it was me and all the rest of the kids in her class. But it was a way of feeling accepted again. In seventh grade, just before her birthday party, she told me that I could not come to her birthday party that year. (phone rings, recording paused) What she said was her mother had told her that I could not be invited anymore, because this was the year that they were going to allow boys to come. I didn't realize, all of the earlier years, her parties were just girls. In seventh grade, I don't know if that's….

SR: It *is* pretty much the time when you start—at least I recall at that time my first boy-girl party was in seventh grade.

BW: That was true in Woodbridge too. And I was devastated. I was truly devastated, because there were boys in our class all along anyhow, and boys didn't seem particularly *anything*. But my mother attempted to explain this, the rationality, to me. I've never understood the irrationality of racism, and I didn't understand that either. But it was just painful.

SR: Of course.

BW: It was a rejection for no good reason.

[00:35:17]

SR: Right. Absolutely. And Judy Jackson didn't question it, or she just sort of stated it to you?

BW: Well, I think she was terrifically excited that she was grown up enough to have boys at her party. So no, didn't have anything….

SR: That's interesting.

BW: Yeah. I don't think she questioned it.

SR: Or didn't ask her parents, or say, "She's my friend."

BW: Oh no. No. No. (laughs) No. And I don't think I blamed her as much as I blamed her parents.

SR: Of course.

BW: So that was the end of that. And then high school *was* different. In high school issues of competition arose. You just had a sense that girls were growing up, boys were growing up, and we're going to have to go offline because…. (recording paused) Yeah, the seventh grade revelation—to put it *that* way—really was a precursor to the way things were in high school. And again, I was on the student newspaper…. My high school was a split session. I don't know if you experienced that in New York.

SR: No.

BW: Because it was crowded, the early session was like twenty of eight to something or other, around twelve, and literally, the students who went in the morning did all their classes then. Then another group of students came in, in the afternoon, and they did all their classes. But if you were in the morning session, or either

session, you could do other things in the session that you weren't assigned to for classes. So you could join all kinds of clubs and be in all kinds of organizations, and I did a lot of that. We were tracked, so I was in the college prep track. Did you have that? Or did you know?

[00:37:22]

SR: Ninety percent of our graduating class went to college. (laughs)

BW: Oh—so you were *one* track. (laughs)

SR: One track.

BW: We were tracked. So there was college prep and whatever the other was. And then the students who really hoped they could get out. There were three tracks. When I went back to teach….

SR: I have heard of that.

BW: When I went back to teach at that same high school that I graduated from, they were called "R," "S," and "T." The "R's" were going to college. The "S" were kind of "C" students, which would do fine. And the "T's" prayed that they could get out before they were whatever age they didn't have to come anymore. And I remember it because *my* students, who were tenth-graders when I started teaching, would say, "They may as well just call it the Fruits, the Vegetables, and the Nuts." (laughter) "R," "S," and "T" is what they called it. It was tracking. Anyway, that meant that the smart kids were my classmates in most of my classes. And the courses that *I* took, including all kinds of math and chemistry and things like that, were not required of the other students.

SR: Oh, interesting.

[00:38:41]

BW: That's ancient history, I suppose, in the way schools operate, but I'm not sure. Anyway, so I had a group of friends that were also in these clubs and whatever, and that was the nice part. The bad part was that they also had social contacts with one another *outside* of school.

SR: And you did not.

BW: No, I did not. I was a cheerleader.

SR: Wow.

BW: Oh, there's a story. This may be for you—I don't know if it's for the tape. I wanted to be a cheerleader. Oh, leave [the tape] on. They announced when you had to go for tryouts, and it was like, oh my goodness, it was probably like a six-week period. What everyone did was to practice. So I would go out to the football stadium and watch the already cheerleaders practice, and then I'd practice myself. I wasn't a particularly good athlete. I mean I was okay, but I wasn't a great athlete. I could not walk down a set of stairs while I was practicing for cheerleading because I was so sore every day. Anyway, you had to have a short skirt for the tryouts, and I asked my mother to hem a skirt—my mother could sew very, very well—to hem a skirt for me so that I could go to the tryouts. And she didn't. So *I* hemmed a skirt. I had to look like God knows whatever [unclear] skirt. But I did, I sewed the skirt, and I had these *big* hem stitches. And I went to the tryouts, and I made the squad.

SR: That's terrific!

BW: And that was another very good social thing while it lasted, but it didn't extend into anything. The only black male in the school was my friend's brother, Bobby Fair. So whenever there was something that was a school thing, if the truth be told, Bobby had to take me. I know him still to this day. I went to his prom, he went to my prom. Bobby was my guaranteed only possible date. And he was a football player, so that was nice.

SR: Yeah.

[00:41:18]

BW: Years later, when my mother was in an assisted living facility—this is in her early eighties—she talked about that—not hemming the skirt for me.

SR: And what did she say?

BW: Because she was sure they wouldn't let a black girl be a cheerleader. And she thought if I didn't have a skirt I wouldn't try out and I wouldn't be disappointed. It was unbelievable. But anyway, I was a cheerleader, and I graduated, and went on to college and whatever.

SR: Did you think about becoming a teacher all along?

BW: Oh yeah. Yeah. One of my role models was a cousin who grew up in Hazlehurst, Georgia. She's still alive, though she's almost comatose. She has Alzheimer's and is just in that state. But she would come to our house in the summer to work, so that she could make enough money to go to college. And she was going to be a teacher. Her name is Abby. She was important to me. The thing I remember, she would come every Sunday, and she'd teach me big words. This was when I was *much* younger than high school. But from her and that experience I always

wanted to be a teacher. And frankly, I had no conception of being able to do anything else—other than be a nurse, and we had nurses in our family, and we had teachers. I *knew* I didn't want to be a social worker. And I didn't know that you could think about being anything else. As a matter of fact—we're gonna probably zero back in on Cedar Crest—in my junior year, when you're supposed to be planning to go to college, and when the guidance counselor's supposed to be helping you do all those things, the guidance counselor in my school did not. I won't say her name, but I *could*. Miss Evil! So the only thing I *knew* was Trenton State. You know, Trenton State College was nearby, and people knew about that. And I don't know why nobody talked about Rutgers in those days, because Douglas was the women's college at the time.

[00:43:51]

SR: I remember.

BW: Anyway, I was riding on a bus and I heard a group of ladies say that women's colleges were giving scholarships to Negro girls who had good grades. I thought, "Bingo!"

SR: That's one of these incredible moments.

BW: Exactly. Right.

SR: You just happened to hear it, riding on a bus.

BW: Just happened to hear it. So I went to the library and I got information about women's colleges and I applied to women's colleges. I applied to *all* of them, like Smith and Sarah Lawrence and Bryn Mawr [unclear]. And my mother was sitting over my shoulder saying, "Make sure you apply to Trenton State."

(laughter) *Again*, because she didn't think they'd go. And more than that, I had to get a four-year scholarship, because there were still three kids at home. My sister was in nursing school. They didn't have any money. And nobody assumed that a residential college experience was something you had to have anyway. If you go to Trenton State, you can [unclear].

[00:44:55]

SR: Commute, yeah.

BW: So I got accepted. My grades were really good. My SAT scores were good.

SR: I imagine so, yes.

BW: And they'd offer me a year's scholarship or a half year's scholarship or whatever, and I'd write back respectfully…. This is the evidence of my *amazing* chutzpah. The idea that I'd write back to these schools and say, "Thank you for your offer of admission, but I require a four-year scholarship." And I did that, and everybody fell out except for Cedar Crest College.

SR: Isn't that interesting.

BW: I was admitted, and they offered me a four-year scholarship.

SR: That's wonderful.

BW: And a job. And book money.

SR: Wow. Good for them!

BW: Now of course I was the only black student there! (laughs) No, that's not true, I was one of two black students there. There was a junior when I went, and me. But I'd never been there, I had no idea you were supposed to visit colleges before

you went. But that's what Cedar Crest meant to me, gave me an opportunity that I had to have, to think about the life I wanted to create.

[00:46:15]

SR: That's a fascinating story, it really is. Now Cedar Crest is in Allentown, Pennsylvania?

BW: Uh-huh.

SR: I've been to a lot of places in Pennsylvania, [unclear] Allentown, but I have not been there. It was mining in that area?

BW: Allentown and Bethlehem, mining communities. The Pennsylvania Dutch, Lehigh Valley.

SR: Okay. Right.

BW: I had no knowledge of any of that either. It was just that Cedar Crest, Wilson, Skidmore—when you think about those days and the plethora of women's colleges there really were.

SR: Oh, there were! Those are the only ones I was allowed to apply to!

BW: Exactly! And I didn't want to go…. I was looking in the area where I could get home reasonably, so Pennsylvania was good. And actually, the northeastern colleges would have been fine too, if they'd given me enough money. So that's how I got to Cedar Crest. That worked out fine too.

SR: That's really good.

BW: Cedar Crest, as you know, is in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The good part about it is it's close enough to Woodbridge that I could get home regularly. Also, it was a women's college, so it spared me the continued pressure of not having an

acceptable social life with my friends in high school. A part of the women's college attraction was people used to say, "Well, you work all week until Thursday, then you get ready to go out on dates over the weekend, and if you're not going out on dates, you can go to fraternity parties anyway, at Lehigh or Lafayette." And if you live close to home—this is *my* thought—you can go home to avoid all of that. And when you were talking about your high school with three black students, I believe there were a total of four black males students at Lehigh and Lafayette *combined* at that time. I knew three of them quite well. But guys can go to parties, it doesn't really matter, they just go—particularly one of the guys that I thought was really something, was a football star. And he'd just go. He'd go wherever he wanted to go. So there were women who did not go home and did not go to fraternity parties. I would go to fraternity parties after my sophomore year, because I had a car, so I could take Cedar Crest girls to parties and drive home, so I was a more popular person than I would have been just on the basis of whether or not I was dating or not. It was protective, in a way, I guess. As I reflect about it, it meant that it was just a stress you didn't have to add to trying to do well in school, making sure you kept your scholarship, keeping track of being home.

There was a time I paid a visit home, and I was talking about something that I'd read in college, and I was talking about it in my pontifical way, and my father pulled me aside. My father was a quiet, gentle, loving man. And he said, "We want you to be successful, but we don't want you to be so different from us that you behave in a way that is not consistent with our family."

[00:50:06]

SR: That's a wonderful message.

BW: Oh yeah. And of course I was [unclear]. That just entered my mind as something that I think, for one thing, for my father to pull me aside and say *anything* about my behavior was a really big deal. But secondly, it helped me think always about how I treat people who, as my mother would say, don't have initials behind their name, and don't live in big houses. And I think it may have framed in many ways how I interpreted the benefit of my education going forward, because I did *not* go directly into higher education. I taught for a while, but I went into community action. Did you know that?

SR: No.

BW: Ah! I graduated from college in '62, went back to Woodbridge and taught school. And about the end of 1965, the mayor of Woodbridge got a grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity—this is all Johnson era history—to create a Head Start Program for Middlesex County, New Jersey.

SR: Okay, I did see something about Head Start. Okay.

BW: And he knew me because two of my uncles were policemen in Woodbridge. So that's how you get to be known. And he asked me if I would write a grant, compete for the competitive grant from OEO to create a Head Start Program for Middlesex County, New Jersey. And I did. Wrote the grant, negotiated the grant, set up the nine centers, hired teachers and the health professionals, negotiated with churches for facilities. I mean, it was like…. Create a Head Start Program! And in that I became an administrator.

[00:52:24]

SR: I was just going to say that that must have given you the confidence to know that you could be an administrator.

BW: That's right. I just became that. I became a grant writer, an advocate with the federal government, an interpreter of the principle of the War on Poverty and maximum feasible participation of the poor. And I was devoted to the idea that we could actually tackle poverty in a profound way.

SR: Yeah, I can so relate to that. I did some consulting work with Head Start and loved it.

BW: I would go around to the centers once they were set up. If there's anything that's foundational in my belief about education, it was seeing the way children grew exponentially over a short period of time. There would be kids that were almost nonverbal—three-and-a-half-year-old kids that were almost nonverbal. They'd make sure they were healthy, they gave them food, made sure that they could hear, that they had eyeglasses if they couldn't see, and you could see those kids just sprout up. It was an amazing experience. I loved it.

SR: That's terrific.

BW: Yeah, it was quite good. So what I'm saying is that while I trained in a traditional way to be an English teacher, secondary education teacher, and did that, this kind of side stepped…. And I took a leave from teaching. I thought I'd negotiate the grant and get it set up and then go back to teaching after I was away for a year, and of course I never got back to that. But it was connected in the sense that this was another way of thinking about opportunity, and another way of thinking

about how you give people a chance. So I did that for several years. One of the board members for…. Well, I ended up being the executive director of the entire agency, by the way, and that was because the executive director under whom I worked initially, a man named Milt Zatinsky [phonetic], came out of the labor movement, and was one of those bigger-than-life *devoted* labor guys. I'd done Head Start, and then I started doing the education programming across the board, including Mainstream and Neighborhood Youth Corps and those kinds of programs, and each time he promoted me to something. At one point he said, "This organization should be run by somebody who's black, and you're it." (laughter obscures comment) And that's what he meant, "I'm gonna do this and this and this. I want you to do this, this, and this, including do a presentation in front of the freeholders, including sitting with welfare mothers." I mean, he literally kind of sponsored my promotion. And he told me when he was going to resign, and that he knew I had the votes on the board to become executive director.

SR: That's exciting, very exciting.

BW: It was awesome. I was what, twenty-seven?

SR: Yeah.

BW: And I was head of a five-million-dollar agency!

SR: Your parents must have been so proud of you.

BW: Well, yes and no. Throughout the time I was the head of the Middlesex County Economic Opportunity Corporation—MCEOC it was called—if somebody asked my mother, she told them I was a teacher. And it was because she both was

nervous about the aggressiveness of the War on Poverty, and I think she was embarrassed when I would be sitting-in. That kind of role was not admirable to her. Now, they knew that I was making more money (laughs) and they knew it was an important position. But the essence of it was kind of uncomfortable. So when the member of my board at MCEOC asked me to talk to the president of Rutgers about creating a position there that would help Rutgers respond to its urban locations in a better way than it had—which didn't take much, because Rutgers up to then really kind of behaved as though it were Princeton. So I had two interviews. One was with Mason Gross, and the other was with Karl Metzger. This is going back into my memory bank! Mason was the president of the university, Karl Metzger was the secretary. Mason Gross—I'm missing a piece—was a television authority at the time. There was some kind of a show that was like a talent show: people had to answer questions, and he was the authority in the back of the television on the right answer. A philosopher by training, six-foot-five patrician. And he said, "This university *has* to relate effectively to its urban communities, and we don't know how to do it, and you have carte blanche to figure it out and do it."

SR: What a nice thing!

BW: What a nice thing! And it wasn't hard to do. In the environment of that time, once you started recruiting faculty members who had a sense of wanting to work with those kind of issues…. This would have been a "U" at that time.

SR: That's right.

BW: If you could get *them* in, then you could create programs, you could get money. So we recruited faculty, including the first *real* numbers of African Americans. We created a program called Urban University, which was essentially a developmental education transition for students who didn't have the qualifications. This is like 1969, I think, I went to Rutgers. There isn't a single thing that's happening in higher education in terms of financial aid, admissions, education of disadvantaged students today that wasn't present in 1969. And we thought we solved it, and then we went backwards. And then we thought in the late seventies we'd solved it again, and then it went back. This country has just not been able to overcome the fact that elitist liberal arts higher education will no longer be the pathway to national hegemony in the world—it just won't. But anyway, that's my current soapbox. But in those days, resources were generous, we recruited students, we did transitional year programs, Rutgers put out more money, we set up satellite campuses around Camden and Newark—New Jersey centers of whatever's going wrong with cities they get there first. It was just terrific. It was really, really good. And by the time I left—it was a very short time—but by the time I left, we had the academic foundations departments in every part of Rutgers. The Urban University program was thriving and well. The leadership of those efforts was perfect.

[01:01:07]

SR: That's marvelous.

BW: I went back to Rutgers, let me see…. I don't remember when Mason Gross left. His predecessor's name was … I want to say Bernstein. I'm getting it wrong, but

I knew him. And they invited me back—it had to have been eight, nine years later—and awarded an honorary doctorate.

[01:01:35]

SR: Nice!

BW: Isn't that cool?

SR: Yes, very cool.

BW: Very, very cool. So then here I was, I was in higher education, I had learned the systems of financial aid and admissions, and how to work with faculty, and how faculty really were the important element in academic programming, and how to get champions of an idea to then spread it to their peers. I mean, I learned what I know about higher ed administration in those three years, I swear.

SR: Isn't that interesting.

BW: I think so.

SR: Yeah.

BW: And it was fun.

SR: Yeah. (recording paused)

BW: As I reflect on the ways in which the Rutgers opportunity made sense to me, I think it was because in the early sixties, though I wasn't old enough to vote, I joined the Young Democrats of the Lehigh Valley and supported President Kennedy. The only way I thought I would have any power in that, other than working with other young people in the valley, was to make sure that I proselytized with every adult I knew—my parents, my aunts, uncles, godparents—they all got Kennedy literature. And of course since I was now a

college student and therefore was very smart, they should listen to me, and they should vote the way I wanted them to. But again, the ethic of that time, and subsequently the implementation of that ethic, through the War on Poverty, as wonderful as John F. Kennedy is in my mind as an ideal, it is Lyndon Johnson that took those ideals and put them into programs and money and political clout.

[01:03:32]

SR: He did. Right.

BW: And I believed in the effort. And I believed that the United States had the wherewithal and the will to really try to make this society better for everybody. There's so many profound kind of experiences, though. I remember two I'll recount to you. One was the night that Martin Luther King was killed. Again, I directed this agency, we were responsible in that sense for a community of people in New Brunswick, New Jersey, that were most affected by that, most pained by it. And this is a time when my mother was really scared for me. Our staff went out and stood on the highways, Route 18 and 1 in New Brunswick, stopping cars and telling young people, "Don't come into the city. Don't get involved in something." You know, they wanted to riot, they wanted to tear up the town. And standing in the middle of the highway [was not] the least dangerous thing. But it was a way to say it's horrible right now, everybody knows it's horrible, but we can build programs, and we can make things happen that are positive out of this tragedy. There was rioting in New Brunswick, we didn't prevent it, but I think we prevented it from being worse. And then, of course, the political activity

around that afterwards, and the kinds of things that those communities had been asking for and they didn't have. It was scary and important.

[01:05:26]

SR: Very intense.

BW: Oh! *Terribly* intense. I'm switching, thinking about that time. The friend I mentioned to you, my high school friend, she and I went to the March on Washington. That was another thing: buses and buses coming in from everyplace, all of us. All of us [calling] "Black Power!" out of the window.

SR: Right.

BW: And when was the Martin Luther King Memorial? Last October?

SR: I think it was October.

BW: It must have been. Because of MEDCO, Louis and I—my husband and I—went to one of the programs that was done at the time the memorial was *supposed to* have been [dedicated], but there was a storm. I don't know what storm it was, but anyway, they postponed it. Louis and I went to the activity that had already been established. I got a replica of the Martin Luther King Memorial, and sent it to my friend who lived in New Jersey, and did a hand note about how much we have shared over these whatever years.

SR: Oh, that's nice.

BW: She died a month later, and I didn't know she was sick. She sent me a thank you note. I didn't know she was sick. She had massive cancer. So you had human stories, you had the sense of a group of people trying to take care of other people in a difficult time, and you had some successes. You had freeholders or

legislators who would change their mind and actually put their clout behind programs that helped people, and you had institutions and leaders like Mason Gross at Rutgers who literally just said…. The students…. This is not related to Martin Luther King, but there was some student protest about something at Rutgers. And the center of Rutgers is Old Queens—it's one of those old beautiful buildings with all kinds of carpeting. It represents the elegance of *the* state university. And the students came in, they brought in these huge tins of peanut butter and jelly. My mother's instinct was to say, Don't let these kids spill this stuff on these beautiful carpets in Old Queens! And the head of the state higher education system was going to have the students arrested, and Mason Gross said, "I've invited the students as my guests, and I and my senior team will stay with them all the time they're in Old Queens." And we did. We stayed there three days with the students. It was amazing.

SR: And quite different than many other institutions.

BW: That's exactly right, yes. "These students are my guests, and I and my staff will stay with them." So all of that came together, if you think about the Office of Economic Opportunity, the inspiration of a Mason Gross, the chance to try, the chance to do things that were always targeted towards those less fortunate, and the belief that we could be a society that really exemplified our ideals. And that's been my entire career. Whatever I've done since then—truly—whatever the title, whatever the place, the personal life's mission has been helping disadvantaged populations, through education, achieve for themselves and make the society what it ought to be for everybody.

[01:09:33]

SR: That's a wonderful mission.

BW: That's what I do. That's what I'm about.

SR: That's what you do—and beautifully!

BW: Well, maybe not.

SR: With excellence.

BW: Maybe not always, but there's no other center to the energy I bring to the roles I've had. That is the center.

SR: Right. (recording paused)

BW: The question all of us have to face at one point is whether we're going to stay in our current job or go to something else. It's often assumed in higher education that individuals who are going to be educational leaders go from being assistant professor to a professor to a department chair and so on. That was *not* a route I was going to take, because I had already been assistant to the provost, assistant to the president, and an associate dean. So I was an administrator from the earlier community action days, and I was at the time forty years old, and that didn't seem to me to be the time to go back and get a subject matter doctorate and try to go up the ladder that is the more traditional one. So the question for me was how to understand myself, my abilities, and the opportunities in the world. So I went to the Johnson O'Connor Research Center and did a battery of tests which I found interesting and fascinating. I've relied on that, or at least recalled that, very often when I'm thinking about what attribute I need to apply to a certain circumstance. I recommend it to people. I've recommended it to women in faculty positions

when they're trying to figure out if they want to go into administration, for example. There must be other ways of doing it, but it's basically to have somebody play back to you where you're going to be fulfilled because of your innate abilities. What it led me to, because of the advantage I had of the contacts at Harvard, frankly, was to go to work in Washington, D.C. for Independent Sector, which was John Gardner, the former HEW secretary's latest version of trying to put our society together *right*. He had done Common Cause, and he'd done Model Cities. Independent Sector still exists. It was a way of taking the major national charities and the major national foundations, bringing them together in a way that would express not-for-profit initiative and that piece of American character that is so unique. (recording paused) The Independent Sector effort was the first of its kind. The core message within it was leadership. John Gardner believed that not-for-profit executives could have a greater impact on the moral compass of the society, because they weren't elected, in the sense of government; and they weren't committed to dollars and wealth as in the business community. So Independent Sector was developed, I'm going to say, probably in the late seventies, early eighties [1970s, 1980s].

[01:13:18]

SR: I do remember it.

BW: And I joined them as the vice-president for effective sector management. It was my first real involvement in understanding governance, not from the corporate point of view, but from the ways in which boards are put together and are supposed to have a sense of trust and strategic direction for organizations. I have

to say I've done a lot of board work in higher ed, and I think there's a great need still for clarity about how to get boards to function well. But the real essence of that experience—I stayed there for a couple of years—I set up John Gardner's schedule of visits throughout the country with nonprofit executives. We'd go to St. Louis and we'd have a table of, let's say, fifteen people, all heads of organizations, and he would talk about leadership. That became the theme of his last publications, and I just listened. It would have cost a lot in tuition had I had that kind of exposure to that mind and background. So I did that for about a year and a half, and that's when I got the request to be in the search to go to Colorado to head the Colorado System of Higher Education, which in itself was my—I wouldn't have thought I'd go there, but state policy makes a difference in higher ed—it does now, it did then. So I thought that would be interesting to do. And by then I was comfortable that higher education was going to be my career path, period, and that's actually the way it worked out. So John Gardner had had such an important impact on the Johnson era as well, thinking about cities as opportunities for real growth, and for citizens to express their democracy. I admired him a lot. I thought, by going to Colorado, with Governor Richard Lamb—I don't know if that's a name you're comfortable with.

[01:15:36]

SR: I remember his name.

BW: Yeah. He was one of those governors who had been seen as the education governor, for one thing, and he kind of tripped over his own words when he was trying to describe the fact that we care for people more expensively at the end of

life than we have the resources to do, and it got interpreted as, You have a duty to die. That's the way Dick Lamb was characterized in the press. And I remember my mother calling me and saying, "Don't you work for that governor that said we're supposed to die and get out of the way of younger people?" Well, he didn't quite say that. Anyway, that was a good four years. It was a political taut time to try to accomplish something during one governor's term. I did not know whether he would run again. He didn't know when we started. And as I reflect about it, it's an interesting understanding of politics when people have *one* term left, or one term of six years, versus when you have two-year terms, and then by the time you get halfway through, you're politicking for your next two-year term. There's something about our structure—I haven't analyzed it deeply—that places reelection ahead of accomplishment. And Dick was very clear that whatever it was, we had to move it fast enough so that it would be done before he left, before that term was over. I enjoyed the experience. It also made me much more respectful and sympathetic to public office. I did not admire the far-right ethic of Colorado at the time, in terms of my own values, but I saw how hard people worked for what is really little monetary reward. Now they get power and they get status, and people, I guess, pay attention to them, but I don't anymore believe that people go into public service *just* for that. I think they really also are expressing an ideal about democracy and representation, that even if they don't have my same beliefs, I'm far more empathic than I would have been otherwise, without that experience. So I stayed there for four years.

[01:18:18] after that, there's a point in time when you don't look for something, you kind of choose among the things that are offered up to you. And I say that just out of my experience. So when a search firm would come and say, "Would you be a candidate for this?" you ask questions, you either say yes or no.

I went to the University of Michigan. I competed in that search. And I did because the University of Michigan *is* and *was* one of those great public universities, had two campuses whose role was supposed to be helping students who were not Ann Arbor qualified, if you will, move so that they *could* go to Ann Arbor. They called it a regional campus, rather than a satellite. And the degree was a University of Michigan degree. So I could go and talk to black parents in Detroit and say, "If you have a choice, don't try to get your kid into Ann Arbor. Send your kid to Dearborn. We will make sure that they are ready for Ann Arbor or any other place. Because if they go to the *big* place with the incredible competition, they may not last." I was saying to you before that a part of the way I think about my work is how do you help *under*advantaged people not only have the education, but have the confidence and the self-esteem? That's what I thought Dearborn did for students who wanted to go on to Ann Arbor or any other prestigious university. You kind of give them the emotional tools as well as the educational tools. So that was also a good experience. And when I was there, the issues were two. This is too much history to put into this interview, but because of Ford Motor Company, Dearborn and Detroit had the kind of relationship historically that if people thought about it would have been associated with Cicero and Chicago. Dearborn was the bedroom community of Ford executives, and the

people who did the work lived in Inkster. People would say, "I'd never drive through Detroit," or "I'd never drive through Dearborn." It was really serious racism. The mayor of Dearborn was an out-and-out racist. So the idea that a black woman would be the head of the campus on which the Henry Ford Estate sits is kind of ironic. And I remember so many people saying, "Henry Ford's turning over in his grave. I know that." But again, history has to change, and you change it kind of one *visible* way at a time.

[01:21:38]

SR: That's it.

BW: It was a good experience. I thought it made a powerful statement. I admire the University of Michigan educationally still. They set the Michigan Promise, they took on the affirmative action issue. Michigan is a credible and admirable institution. So I still stay associated with that, in a way, as well.

What else?

SR: That's interesting. While you were there in Dearborn, did you ever experience any kind of racism?

BW: Yes and no. The racism that you experience in Dearborn—and I would say subsequently I experienced the same thing again in Boston when I went back years later—is not directed at you as an individual, but it's directed at African Americans or women as a class, and you know it because you look around and there are two of you or three of you, or maybe rather than all of you have achieved the kind of positions that should entail recognition. It's a very odd thing to go to a breakfast meeting at the Economic Club in Boston, for example, where

there's going to be a major speaker from Boston College, let's say. And it's for business people, it's for professionals. You walk in, and there's six women and two blacks among four hundred people. So that's not directed at me, I'm *there*. But I know what it means is that the efforts to raise all boats didn't raise the boats of the people like me, both females *and* minorities. What was important at the time in Michigan was the pride of the black community in Detroit about a chancellor at the University of Michigan who would work with them. I joined the board of Project Hope. I was on an ecumenical council on race relations, and similarly with the Arab-American community, which was *very* important to Dearborn. It's the largest, I think still, Arab community in the United States, and during the Gulf War we on the Dearborn campus told the community to come to the campus to make sure if they felt nervous or unwelcome, come to the U. of M. campus. And we did a lot of demonstrations around that, burying hate. I can just see on one of the knolls they had all these coffins with signs on them [saying] "Bury Hate. Bury Discrimination." You know, students can be very visual and very clever about raising consciousness without exacerbating what would have been potential problems. So being in the microcosm, because of Dearborn's history, and being between the unmet needs of the black community in Detroit, and the *new* and politically challenged needs of the Arab community in Dearborn, again, it was like being at the start of the civil rights movement or the War on Poverty, and seeing again a campus, an education opportunity as the mechanism for having people work through that in a positive way. It was a very good experience.

[01:25:45]

SR: Very, very interesting. So then when did you decide to leave Michigan?

BW: I didn't decide to leave Michigan. I did leave Michigan, but I didn't decide that. When I was in Colorado, I think there were two other women who were SHEEOs. Do you know that term? S-H-E-E-O.

SR: No.

BW: State Higher Education Executive Officer.

SR: Okay.

BW: It doesn't have anything to do with "she," actually. I think I was probably the first, certainly the first African-American, woman SHEEO. And Molly Broad was the SHEEO in, I'm going to say New Mexico. I'm sure that's not right. There was another woman who was the SHEEO in another state, so there were three women SHEEOs. And Molly went to Cal State in the central office as the executive vice-president, and called me and said, "You've had a good-enough run at Michigan. This is the place that represents everything you care about in higher education." The master plan was in effect, the system was huge numbers of community colleges with the *right* and the *priority* for the students to go from the community colleges to Cal State, *or* to the University of California. The CSU, Cal State University *System* was the entry institution to a great university. And if you think about this, when was this? This was in '88, and California was *the* top of the higher education pecking order. And the campus that I was being asked to come to was two or three times the size of Michigan. And at the time, Barry Munitz [phonetic] was the president. I went out and talked to Barry, and I had

met him in panels and things like that, and thought he…. He also was a Clark Kerr [phonetic] devotee, so I was convinced to do that, knowing that Michigan was fine anyway, until much later. But to be able to take what was then a *part* of the Cal State System but hadn't raised its identity to the level of some of the other Cal State campuses, was just intriguing to me. I knew I'd be working with people that I knew and respected, so I went to California.

[01:28:44] I have to tell you, looking at California this past decade has been horrible. California *was* what we needed, in every, *every* respect. And to squander that resource, oh! But I guess California's got a lot of money now. But we need to know you can't destroy the guts of something and then bring it back in full color. I've just *mourned* the difference between when I went there and what it meant, and what's happened.

SR: I know. I've heard it referred to as the Golden Era.

BW: It *was* the Golden Era. And we did those things that the Golden Era would do. But by the time I left, the crack in that was very evident. I remember literally sobbing in a regents' meeting when whoever it was—I guess it may have been the board—was going to restrict the percentage of students who needed developmental courses that we could admit to our campuses.

SR: I read about that! I have read through your "Letters from the President's Desk." We have all of them here.

BW: Did I speak about that?

SR: I get started reading about that, and I think, "What *is* this?!"

BW: A student spoke to the board of regents, a Latina—her name, her family, what she had done to get there, she'd gone through the community college. She would say things like, "I did not have a good elementary and secondary education, and it was not my fault. But I've tried and I've worked and I've done this and I've done that. How *dare* you deprive me of the courses I need to go forward?" I just sat there [and cried]. It was very bad. The presidents had met with the chancellor, and I and some others had said we thought that was very bad policy—we *were* supposed to be the open door. And all we had to do was show that we could make sure that students came *out* with the kind of qualifications they should have—not that they came in with them. But it was *very* painful.

SR: Very hard. (recording paused) Tell me about Northridge, and I think that we want to look at this before the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, and then again after.

BW: Well, it's like before 9-11 [i.e., the attack on the World Trade Center in New York by Islamic extremist terrorists] and after, or before [Hurricane] Katrina and after. Before those things, the pace and priorities of the university were, rightly or wrongly, pretty much internal—the norms of whatever higher education institutions were doing at the time were the norms that defined the bulk of our activity. We were doing much more in strategic planning in the CSU. We were doing much more in trying to *really* do good research on the achievement of students based on where they came from. And that's an area that still interests me today. If our institutions could say, "We are able to test a student coming here and know where their deficiencies are"—this is actually what we did—"and then define a course of study for them—not that they choose, but that we say, 'Here

are your strengths, so take these two courses where you'll be comfortable and can get through. Take *this* developmental course where it'll be hard for you,' and give them the support for the hard course." We believed—Louanne and I—the people who talked about this a lot, that we could demonstrate that students who came in with deficiencies could achieve at the same rate as students—like I say, native students—as students who had started and were fully qualified when they came in. And that would have validated the CSU mission. So we worried about that. We did a lot in the early year and a half or so with articulation agreements between the surrounding community colleges and Cal State North, and not just articulation agreements, but really thinking about partnerships with those institutions. And Valley State—if that's the name of it—was one of the institutions I remember.

[01:33:49]

SR: I believe so.

BW: Yeah, I remember we really did have a nice relationship with the president and we could develop collaborative programs. In looking at the composition of the nine colleges within Cal State Northridge, for the first time in my early tenure, we created an advancement function. There's a story behind this. Presumably, because of the master plan that had been so touted nationally and internationally, the presidents of campuses at that time were told that they should not do private fundraising because the private universities needed to have access to that source of wealth. And they, the public campuses, were *always* going to be taken care of by the State. So there was no foundation, Cal State Northridge Foundation.

There were no development people on each of the campuses. There was no grant writing, there was no alumni solicitation system in place when I went to Cal State Northridge in 1992. We built that. And now I look at the foundation board, and there's still some of the people that I appointed.

[01:35:11]

SR: Awesome.

BW: It is awesome. But *no* institution—small, large, private, or public—can afford in these times not to have a committed group of people who will help them get the resources to do the kinds of things that State money and awful increases in tuition cannot afford. So I would say those were the major things that occupied us. The strategic plan was an overlay for all of that. And in a campus—what was it?—I'm going to say 3,400—not the student body, but the number of faculty and staff. It must have been 3,400—to create a planning process that gives people the sense of participation, was a quite elaborate design. I would say without question that in these times, that level of process and design would destroy the ability of an institution like Cal State to be as nimble and flexible as it needed to be. But in those days, where there wasn't the huge external threat, there was pretty much security about the financial resources and the support of the State, it was a way that helped create a common core of understanding about the direction of the university. So I think it was a good process in that limited way.

So as I was looking back over the kind of notes we had on the strategic planning process, it really did consume a lot of our attention, along with these practical policy areas. The thought is there must be a way for a university

community to come together and get on the same page about what's most important. But I'd have to say a more immediate way of doing that is to have an earthquake. (laughter)

[01:37:34]

SR: There you go!

BW: That's right! You don't have to have 150 people on a committee and meetings and whatever. You have an earthquake, and suddenly people can get it, that whatever goal we're going to have, *if* we're going to have a university, it has to be single-mindedly get a campus back, get students back, get courses back, in the quickest time possible. I had, for reasons I'm not quite sure of, Susan, I had had a conversation at some point in my first years there, probably because I didn't know the degree to which the campus had to plan for disasters. If you go to California…. We had a hearing on the campus at one point, and one of the congresspeople who was there, said something like, "Well, I don't know why we should take this earthquake so seriously, because California is a disaster theme park: you have earthquakes and mud slides and fires and whatever." Like we should just throw our hands up and say, "California is a disaster!" But because of that sense that I did not *know* how to do disaster planning, I had talked to the people in San Francisco, and this was years after Loma Prieta. They still had not had all of the repairs they needed to have—San Francisco State—nor had they received all the funding they needed. So their advice, just in that pre-Northridge Earthquake conversation, was that if the leadership of the campus doesn't know, to get the funds *rapidly* and have them coming in so that you can *move* while

you're receiving money, you'll be eight, ten, twelve years without the ability to repair. Now theirs was only a piece of their campus. Ours was the entire campus. So the critical element in having people understand that point, that's all we're going to do. We're not worried about all the other politics of our normal community. And that meant I could get people together who spent all of their time, every day, on communicating with students. I don't know how many things happened, I just know that they did. But I can see the tent where two people, staff in my office, got together, and they found mobile phones from someplace, and they had this big whiteboard, and they'd write on the whiteboard, "So-and-So called. Can we call back?" This was before, unfortunately, i-pads and mobile phones, but mobile phones didn't work really well right *after* the earthquake because the airwaves were too congested. It's such a jumble.

[01:40:46]

SR: Tell me your remembrance of the earthquake, and what happened, and what you did, and where you were, and how it unfolded.

BW: It was January 17, 1994, 4:31 a.m., and my husband and I were in what we called our mountain house. We had a cabin just south of Bakersfield. It was called Pine Mountain Club, and we had gone there for the weekend, fortunately—very, very fortunately. And fortunately in terms of Los Angeles and Northridge and the surrounding community. That hour of the morning the shopping center wasn't open, it was [winter] break on campus, so that we didn't have all students in residence, or faculty, or anyone else. If you're going to have one of those things,

do it when it's not *hugely* dangerous because of a lot of people being in places where they would have inevitably been hurt—hurt badly.

[01:42:03] I woke up and felt … whatever. This is about an hour and twenty minutes north of Northridge. It was felt all the way up to Big Bear and below. I did like this to my husband, "What's that?!" "Oh, it's an earthquake. It's probably Big Bear." He went back to sleep, which he can do in an instant. And like twenty minutes later our phone rang. The people who knew we were up in the mountains were our best friends in Atlanta and my brother in New Jersey. Our best friends in Atlanta were calling to say, "You've got to get up and look at the television, see what's happening with Northridge." "What's happening with Northridge?" "An earthquake!" "No!!! No. No." So we got up, and like everyone else, got *glued* to the television. And to be able to see the familiar things of your campus, the science building burning, the library falling apart, the parking structure flattened. I don't know how long it took me to get articulate and dressed that morning. Anyway, I couldn't get into Northridge, but I could get into Long Beach, so I called Chancellor Munitz and said, "I have to find a way to get to the campus." The north-south road that we took to the mountain was broken. And actually, Route 10, which was the east-west road, was also broken. So we went up to Bakersfield, north, got a helicopter from Bakersfield, to bring me down to Long Beach, rented a car, and drove up north to the campus. And I'll tell you, there are lots of vivid things, but I came up Nordhoff and faced the parking structure as I was coming onto the campus, and it was *flat*. I lost control of my limbs. I pulled the car over and was just like this. "Because," I thought, "if that's

the way the entire campus looks, this has got to be hopeless, *hopeless*. But everything wasn't destroyed, everything was just kind of damaged—if that makes a difference! And from that point on, there really was a great comfort in Louanne being there. She was staying in the dorms at the time, and she was with the students who were there, the few students.

[01:44:45]

SR: Right. So she said.

BW: They were outside. And it was like, "Blenda's here!" And I'm going, "So?! Oh yeah, right. That should make *you* feel better." So then we started just strategizing. It was as many hours as you could stay awake a day from that, trying to get some communications. The CSU, as a unity, was fabulous. They sent us physical plant workers from Fullerton. We had horseback police people from several campuses. We had mobile phone units, which were really horribly big things in those days. All the surrounding campuses just called. Munitz was the center of communications, so I'd call him and say, "We need…." And he'd call somebody and they'd get it. So those first days, we were protected on the periphery by police, because they were worried about looting, and they were worried about all kinds of security things, as well as the earthquake itself.

SR: Of course. I don't think I discovered this: Were there any students or faculty killed?

BW: There were two students who were killed—not on the campus—they lived in an off-campus apartment that had been a four-story structure, and it collapsed down to two.

[01:46:17]

SR: That's amazing.

BW: Absolutely amazing. The timing—for the school calendar, and the time of the morning, and that it was a holiday weekend—was a real blessing. It would have been a horrible scene otherwise. I went home…. We had, at the time, a golden retriever, our dog. So I left Louis up in Pine Mountain, and he had to figure out how to get down, with the dog, around and about and avoid the highway. So I don't really know how he did that, but that was *his* job. And I went to our house, went across to a neighbor, and asked him to go in with me, because I just didn't know what to do. And as it happened—I was on like a cul-de-sac—we all pulled blankets or pillows or whatever we had, out, and we slept out in the street that night, because there were aftershocks. You never knew when an aftershock was coming or how strong it was going to be. And to be in the house when things were falling down and breaking…. Somebody said, "Did you lose anything?" I said, "Everything that was breakable, we lost—everything." But that's what an earthquake does. So we slept outside in the clothes we had, and just waited until things were kind of calmed down.

[01:47:44]

SR: About how long did that go on, the aftershocks?

BW: Probably two weeks.

SR: I didn't realize it was that long.

BW: Oh yeah, they weren't as heavy or as frequent. Once we got a kind of order on the campus—and that was two days later, a *kind* of order—what we just said is,

"Everybody who's here at 10:30, come to this place and we'll talk about what's happening and what we can do." Our error, my error, as it happened, was in thinking that the most important thing in the early stage was to have the seismic engineers examine the buildings and figure out if we had *a* building in which we could stage our recovery effort. It took us almost a week to figure out that it wasn't going to work that way, because they'd go in, they'd inspect it, "This building's fine," there'd be a 5.6 aftershock, and the building was no longer fine. And Louanne and I, almost simultaneously at one point said, "This isn't gonna work." And that's when we began building the temporary campus with trailers and Quonset huts.

[01:49:03]

SR: That's remarkable.

BW: It *was* remarkable. There were people who literally were on the phone with dispatchers, with the state transportation authority, to let us bring those doublewide trailers over the highways, *in wind*. It was a phenomenal effort. It was just so incredible. So every day at 10:30 and at 4:30 anybody who was around, they came and we told them what was happening, where we were going, and what our goals were. The fun part got to when a contractor would say, "Okay, what's first?" "First is the library. That's the center of an intellectual institution, that's what we need to have. How long will it take?" They didn't always know that right, but they'd say thirty-six days. Okay, fine, in thirty-six days we're going to have the library back.

Oh, this is an important point, because we've done some disaster planning and a tape for other institutions. In a public setting like ours, if you have the support of a full campus, it may be easier. But I was on the board of the Commonwealth Fund, I was on another board, and the campus was given two million dollars to do the things that I could not spend State money to do. So we get a building like—our library's going to be finished by whatever. Every day the construction people would have a number down—it was thirty-six days yesterday, it's thirty-five days today, it's thirty-four days the next day. And they'd wear these tee shirts. When the building came up, we did pizza and beer parties like you've never seen.

[01:51:01]

SR: That's great. The spirit, I can really relate to that, keeping up that momentum and spirit.

BW: Absolutely.

SR: And you have that kind of energy. And you must have been such an inspiration. Louanne expressed that as well. I mean, it's just….

BW: That's right. People would say, "Oh, I want to get back in my office, I want to get back…." There's no reason you should *ever* go back! An educational institution *never* goes backwards. We're going *forward*. "Not Back—Better!"

SR: I've heard [unclear] said that.

BW: We got that. And then the Los Angeles mayor *stole* our saying from us! Not Back—Better! We had to be going forward, and yet you had to give people a way of facing their understanding of what it would take. After about, I'm going to say

a month, month and a half, we just got congratulations all over the place because we opened within a month of the earthquake, in all these trailers and whatever and whatever. I like to tell the story about the faculty who designed something like 5,300 classes, and had them published the day before we started, by the local newspaper! The *Valley Times* published our catalog for that semester. So it wasn't just us, it was a lot of other people who helped. And we started. Every member of President Clinton's cabinet, including him, came to the campus during that time. And my *secret* claim to fame was Al Gore was coming one day, and his advance people came through and said, "We need you to clear that building for the security check." I said, "We have classes scheduled in that building, and we're not cancelling them for *anything*. All of this is *about* getting these students their classes. Don't tell me they have to be cancelled so that you can do a security check!" He came anyway. It was okay, it was fine.

[01:53:22] And when we opened, boy, we had bagpipes, and we had all kinds of things. But I really do think people have to believe. And if you can't show the momentum and help them understand how much patience they have to have…. So then we did a series, we did define what would come next: the science buildings were next, because you couldn't *do* science at borrowed facilities very well. It was a plan that was out loud every day. Sometimes it changed, but when we set it in concrete, we just drove toward that plan.

Another astounding story. There was a department—I'm not going to name it in this—but there was a department where—it's hard to not talk about. The chair of the department came to me and said, "I'm sorry, my faculty says they

cannot do their work in this environment. It's just totally impossible. We don't have the equipment…." I'm making up just a little to protect the department's [identity]. "We don't have the facilities, we don't have the air conditioning," blah, blah, blah, blah, or the whatever. I said, "We've got partner institutions down the street, we can make do, I know you could call some of the other departments in other institutions." "No, no, no, we can't. You've got to come talk to them." "Okay." So I go, and I say, "I don't have the expertise to decide how these courses can be taught where. So you *are* the experts in this. I just would plead with you first to think of alternatives: borrowing space, borrowing equipment, going down the road." Many faculty in other areas brought their SUVs onto campus and met students there, they took students to their homes, whatever.

[01:55:18]

SR: Absolutely creatively managing this, right.

BW: But they just were stoic. I'm doing this because my image—I don't know if it was true—but it felt to me like they were all sitting on their hands and saying, Uh-uh [no], we're not doing this." So I said, "Okay, I accept your judgment. I don't have any other choice. We can make sure that we note that the courses will not be offered this semester. But before we do that, I think you might want to go home and talk to your family, to make sure they understand what they will have to do without your salary. It's just not fair to make that decision by yourself." That's what I said. And you could hear (gasp). Now the CSU had already granted everybody—everybody, carte blanche—a leave, an administrative leave, until

they were ready to come back—because there were people whose homes were hurt. But that was now over a month. I expected everybody to be back. And we didn't make a big deal of it, but most people did. So I was saying, "Talk to your family about the implications for them before we take that decision further." And chins dropped, and people started looking around. And I just left. And guess what?

SR: They managed.

BW: They were able to figure out all *kinds* of creative ways of keeping their courses. But it was just that….

[01:56:54]

SR: The rigidity.

BW: Yeah. And also, I think it is really hard for people…. It's like saying to a doctor who's practiced at Boston, in a big, big, big resourced hospital, to go out into the field of Iraq or India or….

SR: Indian reservations.

BW: Exactly. So they may think it's a good thing to do, but everything they have says, "I can't do it right in that environment." That's what I think it was. Off the record…. (recording paused) So what we found was that there were different levels of capacity. There clearly, Susan, were different emotional capacities. Most of the faculty came back. The faculty that did not come back in some numbers were young female faculty members who were afraid that something like that would happen, and they could not get to their children. They really had a vulnerability that was in addition to whether or not you were bothered by the floor

moving underneath you. And the other big area of vulnerability where we lost a good number of faculty were the scientists, to some degree—yeah, a good number of scientists—who had been there for thirty and thirty-five years. They were people who would have stayed and not retired without this, but they couldn't see themselves rebuilding thirty years of their research and their background. We celebrated them as best we could, but really understood that that was…. They helped us through getting the campus back. They didn't leave. But after that, they would have retired, or retired early, because their careers had really been truncated by *that* level of loss—research projects that had been in place for twenty, thirty years. So there were some of those great downsides in the midst of incredible accomplishment.

I believe, to a person, everybody who was there through it, felt proud of the campus, the personnel—grateful to the students that came back—and positive about a future that we could place our energy into. So it ended up to be a great blessing. For one thing, *my* job, with my finance people, was to get money pouring into the place so that we could keep going. We never, ever stopped. We didn't *have* all the money in hand, necessarily, but CSU could pay our bills and carry us until we did. And we documented *everything*. We took pictures of every piece of the campus. We documented the contractors' costs. We had a staff that did *nothing* but keep track of FEMA money and the rationale for why we spent what on what. It was a *herculean* task, to build that capacity.

So there are two references I would make to other people learning. One, you need a staffing capacity that is not drawing your regular resources, if you're

going to manage a disaster. You just do. The private money gave *me* flexible money on the campus, to do those things that were *spiritually* important, but they couldn't compensate for FEMA in building a building back. And I don't think that's widely understood. And I don't think, you know…. A friend of mine was the president of Dillard. Actually, she had been in the CSU at Stanislaus when the Northridge Earthquake occurred. Then she took the presidency of Dillard in New Orleans and Katrina occurred. So she had a kind of sense of disaster preparedness better than most people there. But Dillard is a private university, and they had to go through—they probably still are—the hassle with the insurance companies. If you don't have the money, and you're depending on somebody to make a decision, and you know they don't want to pay you the whatever millions of dollars, you're really stuck. So we were fortunate, both with the CSU, that our San Francisco colleagues had told us, "Go and document and get the money, and be willing to have something go awry, but by then you've already accomplished the task of rebuilding the campus." And that's what we did.

[02:02:07]

SR: Well, it's remarkable, and that positive spirit is still remembered, and that's a good thing.

BW: I think that's right. I really do. I think we did something. It was a miracle, we created a miracle. We had a disaster, we created a miracle on top of it.

SR: So superimposing all of these layers of what must have been going on, do you remember any of the other years following for the rest of your time at Northridge, do you remember other particular projects or accomplishments?

BW: I'm sure I could if I were coached. But the truth of the matter is—and this is a sore point, kind of a sad thing in my own heart—once, I'm going to say six weeks, or maybe seven or eight, certainly once the media leaves, when the president and his cabinet go, and when students are back at school, and not only are they back in school, but it's not raining, it's not muddy, the electrical systems work, it isn't that people aren't used to temporary facilities, that's been true in lots of places—everybody says, "You did a great job! Cal State Northridge is back, you did a wonderful job." And it's like *"Sayonara!"* But the truth is that I spent another five and a half years in earthquake recovery. That was my *job*. Because there was always a plan, there was always a contractor, there was always a punch list, there was always "did we document it enough?" was FEMA gonna give us trouble? I can't say we weren't doing the other work, but I must say I believe that the greatest vulnerability for that campus was to end up having spent $420 million, or something like that, and have FEMA say we spent a hundred illegitimately or wrongly.

[02:04:22]

SR: That was huge.

BW: That *was* huge. Yeah, it was huge. (recording paused) When I think about those years after the earthquake, the commitment in *my* mind it had was making sure the campus *could* be rebuilt, that the money was there, that it was going to be finished. So the underlying question is, other than that, what did you do?

I tried to build upon that sense of real purpose and the sense of empowerment that faculty had achieved by getting up and running again, by

taking what I called the strategic commitments of the campus and decentralizing their implementation. For example, we had agreed in the strategic plan to do more with technology—technology for learning. But it wasn't a strength of the campus. And this is my theory of how you can take an educational institution and really change it without great grief. You find the people who know how to do that, and like to do it, and like showing off that they do it, and like telling people about it. I called them the champions--[unclear] first adopters [unclear]—I called them the champions. And you give them modest resources to be able to create a conversation with their colleagues. We did that with technology, we did it with service learning. I'm blocking on names, but I can see the faces of the faculty champions who were responsible for doing that. We did it with a new commitment to—and this is Louanne's area—that research around remediation and documenting what we could do with students. We did it with a planning committee, small, that worked to make sure that academic affairs and student affairs responded to the needs of students in a greater way. Once you have the mindset that students are the reason you're here (chuckles)—and if students didn't come back, we would *not* be here—it really did open up a conversation about the other needs of students, besides the learning needs. So those became—there probably are more things like that, that I'm remembering, but *my* sense is that *I* behaved in a way that pushed decision-making and authority in a decentralized way, to a greater extent probably than I had before. I think that also, hopefully, strengthened the campus ultimately. But it wasn't conscious. I didn't go to leadership school and learn to do that. I did it because I knew *I* had come to trust

the abilities of faculty and staff to do what needed to be done if they understood it and believed in it. That was the change in *me* as well as the change in the way we operated. So it was a hopping campus, I tell you! It really was, for those years that I stayed. And it was hopping because people took ownership and had a sense of really making a contribution and being successful.

[02:08:16]

SR: That's marvelous. So then, what happened next? What was after Northridge?

BW: (chuckles) This is a Jennifer Cole[1] quote—we were someplace, I don't remember where, and she was to introduce me, and what Jennifer said was, "God allowed the Northridge Earthquake to happen, and as a result of that, God gave Blenda the Nellie Mae Education Foundation." It was like my gift, or consolation prize, or reward for getting through that.

[02:09:06]

SR: [Your reward for getting through] the earthquake was the Nellie Mae Foundation.

BW: Was the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. And it was a very apt quote, partly because to be starting a foundation—and I don't remember what the corpus was at the time—a lot of money—whose only purpose, only explicit mission, was improving education for disadvantaged and minority students was like somebody giving Blenda money for her thing. And that's what happened next. It came at just the right time. I was tired. I really was tired. Louis can tell you I was tired. I went to a January meeting of the board of regents and presented the plan for the last post-earthquake building, which was the administration building—that being

[1] Sounds like narrator is saying Janetta. Internet research shows a Jennifer Cole associated with Nellie Mae, but no Janetta.

my decision, that was going to be last, I don't care whatever else got done. We could accommodate. It was faculty and students and staff that didn't have to. And I said that, "This is the last post-earthquake building for your approval. The money is in hand." And I got a standing ovation! (laughs)

SR: That's something!

BW: I mean, it was like, "Whoa!" And I hadn't thought about it *that* way. It was really quite funny. And that, having been able to say that, my personal compass changed. I would never have left that campus before I could say that, because you couldn't leave it broken. But it was going to be whole again, and therefore I could go off and do something else. And it was, I don't know, a couple months later that a search firm came and asked if I would do Nellie Mae—or at least compete for that position. So that's why Jennifer said God caused the earthquake…. And then *she*—God—gave Blenda the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. (laughter) That's the way Jennifer puts things. And it really was, it was like…. For one thing, besides the fact that there's just so much you can pour out in those many years of trying to keep everything moving. So there was *that* weariness. The second was you can string out the good feelings and the good leadership and we love you and you got us back, for two or three years, but you can't string it out forever. Then it goes right back into the normal. What did you do for me lately? The third was that I really had very serious disagreements with the policies of the CSU at that time, including the remediation policy and how monies were allocated, and had lost respect for the chancellor—who, by the way, *never* came to the campus post-earthquake. Never. He was *not* the chancellor

when the earthquake happened, Barry was still there. But he never, ever came. Zap! I should take that out. I don't know. Leave it in.[2] I guess this has to be a history…. (recording paused)

So Nellie Mae was a wonderful way of thinking about all of the places I had been in education. I started teaching middle school, and then high school, then went into higher education. I worked with community colleges collaboratively. And if you're thinking about a New-England-based foundation to improve the educational opportunities of disadvantaged and minority communities and students, one of the ways of thinking about that is to create greater partnerships and greater understanding between K-12 education and higher ed.

[02:13:33]

SR: Right.

BW: And so we did a good number of those grants. But we also worked with programs in adult basic education—*adult* basic education, because New England needed to have a work force that was better educated, without any assumption that everybody would get a college degree. So we did a series of programs, we worked with content providers, technical assistance providers, and gave, I think during the time I was there, about $80 million in grants, to programs and institutions that were doing this work. We didn't create our own theory of what to do, we looked for those organizations that were doing it and supported them in doing it better. And if we were the Ford Foundation, then we can come up with

[2] Transcriptionist votes to leave it in—after all, she didn't name the individual.

new ways of seeing the world. It was an important culmination of my career. I enjoyed it a great deal, and I liked the idea…. Oh, the other thing is, contrary to most foundations, we gave five-year grant commitments, so that when we identified the program that was doing the work, we may have said, "We want you to do it better, or document your success, and we'll give you resources to help you do that." But we did not do annual grants, "Do this, pretend you've accomplished the world, and come back to us next year for the next little bit of money."

SR: I am very familiar with what you're saying.

BW: That's right. I just thought that was so *awful*, the way foundations…. You know, they encourage institutions to be duplicitous about results. So we changed that. So it was five-year grants, it was a series, we brought all the grantees together so they could learn from one another. We provided technical assistance across the board. It was my view of how, if a foundation was going to help *me*—let's say, at Cal State, Michigan, or anyplace—accomplish some of these student achievement goals, what I would need from them, besides their money—but the money too—would have been intellectual resources that I didn't have, and time—time to really go from where we started to where we're trying to get. So I'm proud of that too. I'm proud of what the foundation was trying to do.

[02:16:17]

SR: It's great. And you were in Massachusetts?

BW: Yes.

SR: I've worked a lot in Massachusetts, and I always liked….

BW: I love Massachusetts.

SR: I loved it. And I remember hearing a lot—I don't know if it was on a stamp, or am I just imagining that?—the sense of excellence. There was just always the sense—I've worked a lot across the state, with different clinics, et cetera—of this pride and excellence in doing things well.

BW: We got there first! We started out with Boston. We are the center of everything. Philadelphia might disagree, but it's also in the private sector sense, the birthplace of exquisite higher education.

SR: Yeah.

[02:17:14]

BW: So there is a sense of great pride. And not just the educational institutions: think about the hospital system.

SR: The hospital system is what I work for.

BW: I was on the board of Partners for several years, and wherever best practice was being created, they were at the top.

SR: I wrote grants with them. The person who I was working with, who became medical director of the National Hemophilia Foundation was from Massachusetts. Originally we were working, writing grants, and I had that sense. I was curious about that.

BW: Oh yeah, absolutely. Massachusetts and Michigan, in my mind, always kind of had that sense of—Massachusetts in the private arena, and Michigan in the public arena—Michigan and Wisconsin and a few others. But it's a very important ethic within the greater Boston community.

SR: Exactly. Yeah. So in addition to and after Nellie Mae?

BW: This phrase was given to me by the women who are on the board of HERS with me: After Nellie Mae, Blenda is pursuing her retirement career. (chuckles) Because I would say, "I'm retired," and they would say, "Ah, then you're doing this and this and this." So I am pursuing my retirement career, which means that I don't know how *not* to be continuing an interest in some of these things that I've thought about for so long. So I serve on several boards. As I may have told you, I stepped out of retirement for sure to be acting president at Cedar Crest for almost a year.

[02:19:14]

SR: Yes. That was an honor to you.

BW: It was an honor, and it was an important commitment, and it was a jarring change in direction as I planned my retirement. But I'm glad I did it. I serve on the board now. I was there for about nine months, they conducted a search, hired a wonderful new president. I left the institution, period, for a year. I said, "No, I will *not* be on the board for her first year. That's just not fair. I know too much." On the other hand, to her great credit and my delight, I offered as a sounding board, whatever assistance, and for those things that were really difficult decisions I hope I was helpful to her during that year. So I didn't feel any conflict with the board. Now I'm on the board, and this is a women's college in the Lehigh Valley, strongly committed to the liberal arts, costing over $40,000 a year, in competition with wealthy, wealthy, wealthy institutions. So the strategic issues there are compelling and hard. So I care about and Hope I can make a

contribution to that. And I serve on several other boards. I do what comes up, Susan! (recording paused)

It seems to me that when you're about to retire—and by the way, HERS is beginning to think about some segment, some webinars or seminars or something, for women administrators who are transitioning into retirement. So I'm playing in my own head what it meant to me. One is that you don't want to fall off the edge of the earth. You've been engaged and energetic, and you still have ideas and contributions to make, you want to do that. But you don't want that to be a replication of every day being responsible for an institution and other people. So part of what you say to yourself is, how could I be just responsible for *me*? My parents had passed in 2000 and 2001. And one of the reasons the Nellie Mae job was important to me was it got me back to the East Coast. So during that period of time I was home—home being New Jersey—every week, and in touch with my siblings, and managing my parents' last years. My father died first. My mother died about a year and a half later. My father died three days before their sixty-fourth wedding anniversary. Can you imagine that? But they were cared for in the most loving way, and I'm comfortable about that.

[02:22:37]

SR: That's a great feeling, I know. It's important.

BW: Yes it is, yeah. And we talked about things, and it was just all done right. But I told my mom that when I retired I would volunteer with hospice, because they were *wonderful*—not only to my parents, they were wonderful to us. So that's a part of this commitment. I'm speaking to my mom and reliving my commitment

every time I go, to hospice. The idea of hospice as a place where people die is, in my judgment, and in my emotional reaction to it, just the opposite. It is the place where people *live* in as comfortable a way as they can live in their last time on earth. And every time I go there, the life *affirming* part of hospice is so powerful, and it transcends not just from the caregivers to the patients to the families of the patients, but it's true of how we treat one another in the organization. It's a marvelous sense of giving, just pure giving.

SR: It's a wonderful thing, and it's wonderful that now so many medical students are being given an orientation to that. I know they are in San Diego. That first semester of medical school they all go through a hospice experience.

BW: Right. And there are nursing students and nursing interns that work in our hospice all the time—public health and nursing students. So I committed to that, and that's one of the things I do. I joined the church, and I joined my church choir. I used to sing in the choir when I was young—before college, I guess. No, I sang in the Cedar Crest Concert Choir too. And then, as you do other things, you lose it. So I'm now singing again, which I like very, very much.

SR: That's wonderful.

BW: And then, Louis and I belong to the South Coastal Jazz Association. We're a sponsor of the Savannah Philharmonic. I'm a member of the Telfair Art Museum, and we are sponsors of the Savannah Jazz Festival.

SR: I love jazz.

BW: I love it all! I love it *all*. And it's partly to say this little town has such resources we want to support them. We want to go, too, but it says people like Susan should come and live in Savannah because it's a great, great city.

SR: Well I'm loving it, being here this week. It's charming.

BW: We do love it. We truly love it.

SR: That's terrific.

BW: And being part of a church, being part of a southern city that has enough transplants like me….

SR: That's important.

[02:25:43]

BW: That's very important. That you don't feel different, you feel like there are others around like you. Our criteria, we needed a university hospital, we wanted a university community. Louis wanted temperatures of fifty degrees or above most of the time. I wanted a sorority—I'm a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, which is my sister sorority, and that's some activities. What else did we want? And we wanted diversity. We wanted to be able to live in a community like this one, where you'll see retirees, people by themselves, you'll see babies, you see new families. It is a fabulously rich, diverse community, and that seems to be what we've been trying to get all of our lives.

SR: Well that's wonderful, and clearly you're continuing to contribute so much in every way. I just so admire you …

BW: Well thank you!

SR… and what you have done, what you are doing, and it is such a treat to make this journey.

BW: Well, we want you to enjoy our city as well, but I greatly value the contribution this can make to your students understanding the CSU in each era, through different eyes, and different voices.

SR: That is the point of this Campus Leadership Oral History Project, and thank you so much.

BW: You're so welcome!

[END OF INTERVIEW]