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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Beverly Hood Jones
Little Rock, Arkansas
20 July 2005

Interviewer: Mara Leveritt

Mara Leveritt: This is Mara Leveritt. I'm with Beverly Hood Jones. We are in the new, beautiful library at Philander Smith College. The date is July 20, 2005. [We are conducting this interview for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat*.] Beverly, you were at the *Arkansas Democrat* in the mid-seventies [1970s]. We will ascertain a little bit later what the beginning and ending dates were, because you were there twice, right?

Beverly Hood Jones: Yes. Absolutely.

ML: Jerry McConnell hired you?

BJ: Yes, he did.

ML: How did you come to be at the *Democrat*? What was your background—in journalism or . . . ?

BJ: I was about to graduate with a degree in journalism and a minor in advertising from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. I got a call from Mr. McConnell

stating that I had been hired at the *Arkansas Democrat* because I was referred there by my professor over [at] the department at that time, Cliff Lawhorn.

ML: Lawhorn. Yes, I remember him.

BJ: I had not applied, I was just called and told that if I wanted a job, I had a job on the copy desk.

ML: How old were you then?

BJ: Right out of college, so I guess I was twenty-two.

ML: And you returned to—you were born here in Little Rock.

BJ: Correct. Born here in Little Rock.

ML: What did your parents do?

BJ: My father was a brick-layer, or I think some people call it a mason. We were told he was a brick-layer. My mother was—she worked before my birth, but she was not employed when I was growing up, that I know of.

ML: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BJ: Yes. I had a sister and two brothers.

ML: And where did you fall in that line?

BJ: I'm the third oldest. There were four in total—third oldest.

ML: So you went to all your schooling here in Little Rock?

BJ: Yes.

ML: And your college at UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock].

BJ: Yes.

ML: What made you incline toward journalism when you got to college?

BJ: Well, I knew that--at least as sure as I could be as a seventeen or eighteen years old--that I wanted to go to law school, but I knew that I wanted a degree that

would allow me to become employed in case I didn't go to law school, because we didn't have—we were a minority—we didn't have any—well, there was no guarantee that I would be going to get a further degree, so I wanted a degree that would allow me to still be employed if I did go to get a JD [Juris Doctorate in Law]

ML: Of all the things that you could have gone into that would have offered employment, why journalism?

BJ: Well, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to be before I started college. One of the things I wanted to be [was] an oceanographer, of all things. I went to the library to look it up. Knowing I didn't have any money, I knew that you could not do that locally. Then I thought about being a pediatrician. I figured out—I'm a pretty logical person—that I didn't have the aptitude and didn't think that I might, over time, get the aptitude for the sciences and math and statistics for being a doctor. And I liked to write pretty well. I was on the yearbook staff at Horace Mann [High School]. So I think, being the person I am, that between money and aptitude and logic and logistics, I figured that I could get a degree in journalism and maybe make a living as I pursued a possible degree in law.

ML: Is that what happened?

BJ: Yes. And my minor was advertising.

ML: Were you surprised when you got the call saying you could go to work at the *Democrat* if you wanted to?

BJ: Yes. Professor Lawhorn—I don't believe he even asked me whether I was in pursuit of a job. So, yes, I was surprised.

ML: What was it like? When you went there straight from college to the newspaper,

what struck you about walking into the building on your first day or week on the job? Do you remember anything in particular about the place or the people?

BJ: Well, the only thing I kind of remember is that it was kind of depressing to walk into the newsroom. It was just kind of dark and not very well kept, as I recall—not very inviting. But other than that, I don't believe I remember feeling any adverse effects from walking in the building.

ML: What about Jerry McConnell or any of the other people there? Do you remember?

BJ: Well, you know, he was pretty friendly.

ML: Yes.

BJ: I remember that part of it—meeting him.

ML: What did they have you doing?

BJ: I was on the copy desk. I was a copy editor.

ML: Which meant what? What was your . . . ?

BJ: Well, I was supposed to edit copy and write headlines and do page layouts, which is another reason I think I picked journalism because I knew that you had to write if you were pursuing a degree in law.

ML: Okay. Did you enjoy doing the work on the copy desk?

BJ: It was pretty interesting getting the news before everyone else and being current on the events. I believe I was there when the [Boxer?] decision came down. It was pretty interesting. Sometimes it would be kind of boring, waiting for news copy or whatever. But other than that it was fairly interesting.

ML: Were you working on computers. . . ?

BJ: Oh, no.

ML: . . .or hard copy at that time?

BJ: Hard copy that would come off the wire. It was like on the brownish-beige copy paper that sometimes you could barely read.

ML: Yes, I remember that. Do you remember who was working in the slot at that time? Lyndon Finney?

BJ: Lyndon Finney and Patsy McKown.

ML: Did it feel pressured to you or hectic or loud or friendly? What were your overall memories of being on that desk?

BJ: I remember it not being friendly, and it would get hectic around deadline times. She would kind of get, I guess, stressed out—as I can imagine.

ML: Were there any big stories—local or national that you can remember from that time?

BJ: Probably. I don't quite remember any.

ML: Had your family read the *Democrat*? Had your family been subscribers to that paper before you went to work for it?

BJ: Probably they would have subscribed to the *Gazette*.

ML: Yes.

BJ: Because I think I was not that familiar with the *Democrat* when I started.

ML: Did they subscribe while you were there? Did they become interested in your work there?

BJ: I don't think they did. You know, they knew I just got a degree and got a job. I don't know that they were overtly supportive or trying to subscribe to the newspaper.

ML: Of my family, I was the first one who had ever gone to work for a newspaper.

Were you the first in your family?

BJ: Yes, that I recall. Yes.

ML: Yes. My family sort of didn't know what to make of it. [Laughs]

BJ: Right. They were just glad that I got a degree and got a job. And when I was in—I had my daughter. And we were just trying to make it because my husband was away, and I was about to start law school. No, I'm sorry. When I started—I'm getting mixed up—I was there twice. When I first started, I had not gotten married. But, no, I just got a degree, and they just knew I worked, so that was a good thing.

ML: So you stayed there for a certain amount of time and left. Why did you leave?

BJ: Because I decided to get married. My husband was going to officer candidate school in Quantico, Virginia, so I joined him there. And I also delayed going to law school a year.

ML: Then you came back here?

BJ: Right. I came back and I had my daughter. I started back--I believe I took a leave of absence--and I started back and started law school, also, in mid-August.

ML: And you were still working at the paper when you were going to law school?

BJ: Yes.

ML: You had a baby?

BJ: Yes.

ML: And law school and the job on the copy desk.

BJ: Right.

ML: What a load.

BJ: Yes.

ML: Were you working full-time or part-time?

BJ: Full-time.

ML: Full-time. And going to law school at night?

BJ: At night. Yes.

ML: Wow. How did you stay awake for *any* of it?

BJ: Well, as my people do, you do what you have to do. It was hectic.

ML: When you were at the *Democrat* that second time, was it any different? Was it the same work you had been doing before?

BJ: Yes.

ML: It was the copy desk.

BJ: Right.

ML: It was essentially pretty much the same as it had been.

BJ: Right.

ML: And then you did go all the way through the school of law and got your JD?

BJ: Yes.

ML: That's a tremendous accomplishment. But you were not staying at the *Democrat* that entire time that you were in school?

BJ: No, probably the last year or so—I had to graduate within six years, so I went to law school full-time and got out of the newspaper business and law clerked for Mr. [Richard] Quiggle.

ML: Looking back, did the *Democrat* experience, the newspaper experience, or any of your journalism education—did any of it contribute to your experience in law school? Did you see any payoff in one line of work from the other line of work?

BJ: Yes, because the writing style of journalism, which is to the point—succinct—

helps writing in law because it has to be to the point—succinct—and you have to make your point. It has to be made up front, which is what I was taught in journalism. And I still use the editing where I work.

ML: We should back up. You're working where now?

BJ: At Arkansas Public Service Commission as a staff attorney.

ML: Okay.

BJ: We had a big file on the docket last Friday, and we have to do a whole lot of editing when we file testimony of our witnesses in support of a case after we do our investigations. And that's one of the things the attorney has to do—a lot of editing of someone else's work product. So I do a whole lot of editing grammatically or conceptually. So my background in journalism does pay off.

ML: Did you like headline writing?

BJ: Yes, that was a challenge. I did enjoy that. It was a challenge—trying to write a headline that was catchy and with a certain [slant?] was a challenge. So I did enjoy that.

ML: Right. It's also—we'd have to go in and pick out what their main point is of the story, and I can see that would . . .

BJ: []. Yes. The main point of the story--and make it catchy and a certain [] of the title. It helps you be succinct

ML: A lot of people at both papers have talked about remembering that—compared to other lines of work they could have gone into—journalism was not one of the most high-paying.

BJ: Oh, for sure!

ML: But it was good enough, I gather, that it helped get you through, at least.

BJ: Yes, because I'm sure that I started out making more than my grandmother ever made in her career.

ML: Do you remember what that was?

BJ: Was it \$150 a week? Maybe. It seems like that rings a bell. \$150 a week. Of course, that was before taxes.

ML: I just remember being glad to get paid.

BJ: I think it was about \$150 a week and it was more than I'd ever made. I think then it was probably more than my parents ever made.

ML: Yes.

BJ: People told me it wasn't a lot of money, but I didn't know what to expect because I'd never had a lot of money. To me, it was an honor to be there. I never planned to stay at the newspaper.

ML: Did you anticipate that you might end up practicing the kind of law you practice now?

BJ: I did anticipate practicing the law that would help others. I started out at Central Arkansas Legal Services. I stayed five years representing battered women, dependent neglected children, [and] evicted tenants. And I did a whole lot of Social Security disability.

ML: So how old is your daughter now?

BJ: My oldest daughter just turned, I think, twenty-six in June. I have four other children.

ML: Well, if you were just sitting around with them chatting about the part of your career that was spent newspapering, and they said, "What was the story, Mom?" just one story from that time—does anything come to mind? Any event, any funny

episode, anything that was unexpected?

BJ: At this point, I really can't think of anything. I know that in our off-times, I edited the op-ed page. There were a couple of those layouts that were kind of interesting on the different pages.

ML: Did you like doing layout?

BJ: Yes, that was pretty challenging to me.

ML: Yes, it's so easily done by computer now, but not back then.

BJ: I guess I would tell them about how we'd have to meet the deadlines of the daily paper. And just the workings of the newsroom were kind of interesting. The women's side, the sports side, the city side, and the photography side.

ML: Any characters? Any of the folks around there that . . . ?

BJ: I can kind of remember the city editor in my mind. And one guy--I think he has since passed [died]. I think he was kind of a character. He must have drunk quite a bit.

ML: So by the time you left, journalism had served its purpose in your life?

BJ: Right.

ML: And you moved on. I assume you never looked back?

BJ: Well, I might have stayed in journalism as long as I had the opportunity. I knew I wouldn't have an opportunity in Arkansas—at least I didn't think I did—to be in journalism and to make a living to [satisfy a family?]. I just remember thinking that I went to college so that I would not have to have it as hard as my parents and my grandmother. So, always in my mind, it was to be able to make a decent living and not be dependent on someone else.

ML: Congratulations.

BJ: My daddy left, so my mother had a hard time. I didn't hate my daddy, but I just always remembered thinking that "You have to be able to take care of yourself." And if my parents and grandmother had such a hard time, and they paved the way, then I owed it to them to be able to do better.

ML: And you did. Thank you. I think we can probably end it there. Okay?

BJ: Okay.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]