

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

University of Arkansas
1 East Center Street.
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Arkansas Memories Project

Donna Axum Whitworth
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford
October 11, 2007
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing
 - annotations for clarification and identification
 - standard English spelling of informal words for the first twenty minutes of the interview; thereafter, these notations are used only when necessary
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

See the Citation Guide at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php>.

Scott Lunsford interviewed Donna Axum Whitworth on October 11, 2007, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Um—first of all, I have to say that—um—
I'm Scott Lunsford. You're Donna Axum
Whitworth.

Donna Axum Whitworth: Yes.

SL: We're in the Sandy Edwards residence in Fayetteville, Arkansas.
This is the—October the eleventh. The year is 2007. And we're
here—uh—recording an interview with you, Donna, for the Pryor
Center—uh—for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. Uh—it is a
part of the Mullins Library, Special Collections Department. Uh—
these recordings will be housed in the Special Collections
Department on the University of Arkansas—uh—Fayetteville
campus. And I have to ask you if that's clear to you and if it's
okay with you that we are doing this interview.

DW: Absolutely. I give my total approval and am thrilled to be a part
of it.

SL: Well, I can't tell you what—it's—it's a great honor.

DW: And today is m—would—is my father's birthday.

SL: That makes this very . . .

DW: Very special.

SL: Very special.

DW: He died in 1970.

SL: We're gonna to talk about your dad.

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: Yeah, quite a bit. Um—let's see, Joy, is there something else I'm supposed to say? I think that's it, isn't it?

Joy Endicott: Um—releasing it—that was it.

[00:01:09]SL: Yeah, that's it. Okay. Well, I know that I—I told you over the phone that I have this belief that people kind of are set with the foundations of their life very early on in—in—in the way that they are raised. And—um—it seems to me that a lot of it happens even before the time that we can ever remember. So what I like to do is I like to start with your earliest memory, and it—it doesn't have to be particularly—you know, a great story or anything. It could be any image—um—just to kind of get us back to those er—early days, and—um—um—actually, you know what? There is something else I have to talk about. I need to know—um—first of all—um—where you were born and when, and then I'll need to know—uh—where your parents were born and when, if you—if you know that, and if they attended any—uh—what their level of education was—and what their occupations were.

DW: Okay. Well, I was born in El Dorado, Arkansas, in 1942. In fact, I was born January the third, and I was the first baby born in El Dorado that year, so I won all the prizes from the merchants. [SL laughs] January 3, 1942. Uh—my parents—uh—were born—and my father was born—uh—in Lawson, Arkansas, which is just a—a bit south of El Dorado—a tiny community. And—uh—my mother was born in Orvisburg, Mississippi.

[00:02:52] SL: And—uh—what was it that your father did for a living?

DW: After my father graduated from El Dorado High School, he started working at the Exchange Bank & Trust Company as a messenger, and that was his entry-level job. And over his forty-seven-year career, he worked up to the presidency of that bank. Mother was—um—basically a homemaker. She did work in the early part of their marriage at a furniture store.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: Hanna furniture store in El Dorado. But—um—um—all of her life, she was an excellent cook and homemaker and provider for the two girls.

[00:03:26] SL: Uh—do you remember or know much about your grandparents—both sides of the family there?

DW: My grandfather Axum—Redrick Bartley Axum—uh—arrived in

south Arkansas—uh—I am told—uh—on rudimentary type of a transportation. It co—possibly coulda [could have] been the late 1800s on a—a wagon train, but maybe it was something else. But—uh—they came from Monroe, North Carolina, which was also Union County, North Carolina. And so some of my relatives ar—are buried over there in that area. But they heard that land was very cheap and heavily forested—beautiful land in south Arkansas. And so they hitched their wagon to a star and moved from . . .

SL: Hmm.

DW: . . . North Carolina to Union County, Arkansas, and they had—they bought property there—bought it for a very m—m—m—minimal amount of money. Uh—and, obviously, they were in Lawson and Strong an—heavily, heavily forested area. And my fa—grandfather had a little convenience store in Lawson.

[00:04:31] SL: Oh, so he wa—he was a merchant.

DW: He was a merchant of sorts, yes.

SL: [*unclear*]

DW: My grandfather Wheat—my mother's name was Idelle Priscilla Wheat—and—uh—he was—uh—worked in a lumberyard. And in his early thirties was killed in a logging accident.

SL: Mmm.

DW: A logging—a log fell on him and—uh—and killed him. So, certainly, I've only seen one—one picture of him that was available in our family. Uh—obviously, smoking a pipe . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . and standing in a—in the mill yard. But—um—my mother and her mother and siblings then were—were widowed and had a very difficult time at that point. Even sp—some of the children even had to be placed in an orphanage because the mother could not afford to—to feed the children, so . . .

SL: And this was in El Dorado?

DW: It was in Mississippi, I think, where Mother was in the orphanage.

SL: Uh-huh. And—um—but your—um—mother's father—the logging accident—was that in Mississippi?

DW: It was in Mississippi.

SL: Mississippi. Mh-hmm.

[00:05:37] DW: Yes. And an interesting part of my heritage—I'm told that he was part Cherokee Indian.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: So when the Trail of Tears took place, coming from Florida up to Oklahoma—coming through Mississippi—um—somewhere along the way there is, like, maybe an eighth Cherokee Indian, which

I'm very proud of. You can see the cheekbones here.

SL: Yes. Uh-huh. That's great. Well this . . .

JE: Scott, you need to—um—spell her name. That's what we forgot.

SL: Oh.

Trey Marley: Say and spell the name, I guess . . .

SL: Go ahead. I guess we need to spell your full name—um . . .

DW: Donna. *D-O-N-N-A A-X-U-M*. Whitworth. *W-H-I-T-W-O-R-T-H*.

SL: Thank you.

DW: And Axum, of course, is my maiden name. My middle name—given name—is—uh—Idelle, just like my mother. *I-D-E-L-L-E*.

SL: Okay, thank you. Thanks, Joy. Um—well, let's get back to—um—talkin' about your—uh—dad first. Um—what do you—what's your earliest memory you have of your father?

[00:06:40] DW: My father was a very—uh—very kind, loving, likeable—uh—um—man—a very—uh—honorable man, very—uh—well, he was a deacon in the church. He was a Christian man—he was a—he was devoted to his community, his family, and to his church. And that—that was Daddy. And you would see that in the activities of his life. Um—he was a high school graduate. He went on to banking school in Madison, Wisconsin, but never went to college. Neither of my parents have a college degree.

DW: So . . .

SL: Hmm.

DW: . . . I was really the first to—to earn a degree in my family, other than my uncle—uh—so . . .

SL: Your dad's brother or . . .

DW: My—my fa—father's brother, Uncle R.—R. B. Axum, who was up at the university in the [19]40s.

[00:07:33] SL: Um—so let's see now, your parents, like my parents, lived through the Depression.

DW: Absolutely. And I w—I was reminded of that in so many ways [SL *laughs*] in th—the things that they saved and the frugality of—in which they approached life. And—um—of course, money went a long way back in the days when I was raised. Um—I can remember, for instance, my tuition was a hundred dollars a semester here at the university when I started . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . in 1959. And my voice lessons were fifty dollars a semester, which we thought were—was just outrageous. Uh—so, you know, a thousand-dollar scholarship would take you a long way back in those days.

[00:08:17] SL: Um—well, paint me a—a picture—um—of any—of an early moment you had with your father. I mean, can you

remember—um—and it could be anything—um—what were some—wh—what did your father do when he wasn't working?

 DW: Daddy loved to fish and hunt.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And so, 'course, I never did any hunting with him, but I would go with Mother and Daddy who—they both loved to fish. And we'd go down to Calion Lake as a family and—uh—fish out of a boat, and we'd use cane poles and those little red bobble things up the—at the end.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And—uh—so I learned to be a pretty good fisherwoman myself. Mother could out-fish Daddy, actually, but they both enjoyed it as an activity. Uh—I guess a fond memory with Daddy would always be at Christmastime when, after church, we would go out into the woods and cut down our Christmas tree.

SL: Oh, yeah.

[00:09:16] DW: Now, y—there were no Christmas tree stands or . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . lots where you could go buy a Christmas tree. You always went into the woods to buy a—to—to cut down your own Christmas tree. And it was always a cedar tree . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . and there was always great excitement surrounded by that. But the a—activities with Mother and Daddy were centered around home and school and—and church in El Dorado. And El Dorado was a marvelous place to grow up in. Uh—it had a lotta culture for a town that size, and—uh—looking back, I—I really appreciate particularly the arts education that I received and all of the—the choirs and the vocal instruction and the theater, because that was sort of my early training ground for my performance—uh—career and my ability to compete—uh—for Miss America.

[00:10:07] SL: Well, when was it that the oil boom was happening in that . . .

DW: 1921.

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: And—uh—I am told through history books and oral history that El Dorado really turned into a boomtown. In fact, H. L. Hunt and his family lived there for a while—uh—seeking their fortunes. And it was sort of a rowdy town at that particular point—uh—in the [19]20s, but it—uh—certainly impacted the city uh—and—in many ways. But I would say that it created—um—an affluent culture or society that was probably unique in the South in a—a—in a town of that size.

SL: And I—I would guess that that probably—uh—continued even up into the—in—into the [19]40s.

DW: Well, sure. You know—uh—Lion Oil Company was there for years . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . until it was purchased by Monsanto, and Murphy Oil is there. So oil—oil is still an—an integral part of the city of El Dorado even today . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . uh—internationally.

[00:11:10] SL: Um—let's talk a little bit about music in the early Axum home.

DW: Okay.



SL: Did y'all have a piano in the house?

DW: Yes. My sister and I both took piano—I took for eight years, and our next-door neighbor was our piano teacher—Mrs. Gilbert. And—uh—the windows were always open because we didn't have air-conditioning in those early days, and so we could always hear the piano music coming from next door and Mrs. Gilbert. And—um—Mother always used to get tickled at me—I—I didn't like to rehearse that much, but I would certainly do it. Uh—and she would put a—a kitchen timer on the piano and [SL laughs] uh—

set it for thirty or forty-five minutes a day. And I would just go sort of inch it up [*laughs*] just a little bit . . .

SL: Oh. [*Laughs*]

DW: . . . a little bit, and after fifteen minutes, the dinger would go off, and she always would know—would know for some reason that I had not completed my full practice time. But—um—I enjoyed taking for about eight years—uh, but then in the ninth grade—um—I really started singing a lot through a group called the Phyllidons—Phyllis, Linda, and Donna. [*SL laughs*] And we sang everywhere. In fact, we competed in a talent show—uh—that was—uh—countywide, called—sponsored by the Knights of the Pythias, and that was in 1957 or 1958, and we won the talent show. And the prize was an all-expense-paid trip to New York City and an audition for the Ted Mack *Amateur Hour*, which was a prelude to *American Idol* in these days.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: Uh—and it was a radio show. Uh—they said, "Don't call us, we'll call you." And they, 'course, they never called, but we—we were a popular trio like the McGuire Sisters.

[00:12:59] SL: Well, is this in—in junior high—high school?

DW: We started in the ninth grade and sang all the way through . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: . . . our senior year in high school. And, of course, then we went to different colleges. I was the only one of—of seven girls that were close that came to the University of Arkansas. The others went to—uh—Ouachita and one went to Baylor.

SL: Mh-hmm. Um—so would your mom or dad or—uh—the other parents—would—did you all travel when you were in high school going to different . . .



[00:13:30] DW: We didn't travel that much because the money was not bountiful.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: Uh—in fact, we didn't do spring break vacations. Uh—I think usually our one vacation was to come up here to the Arkansas Bankers Association [*laughs*] convention in Fayetteville, and we would drive. And we would certainly look forward to that every year and going out to the trout farms and catching the trout and bringing them back to this kitchen at Carnall Hall and having the chef prepare them, and my love of the Ozark Mountains started at—at that age—six and seven years of age. And that's when I was first introduced to the university.

SL: So—uh—the Bankers Association meetings—you—you were coming up there that early when . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: . . . you were that young?

[00:14:15] DW: Yes. Definitely. And I would bring my roller skates, which were the kind that had the little key.

SL: Yeah, absolutely.

DW: You just strapped them on, and the key—and I would get out there on Senior Walk—walk all the way up to the top to the—to the start of Old Main and strap them on and skate all the way down with my pigtails flying [*SL laughs*] to the bo—bottom of the hill—take them off—walk back up again. And I would do that over and over again. And sometimes I would stop along the way and look at all the names on Senior Walk. And you know, at the age of six and seven, I told Mom and Dad—I said, "I want my name on that walk, and I wanna come here." Well, Daddy tried to convince me to go elsewhere because he thought I was—I was gonna be a young seventeen-year-old going off to college.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And I was even accepted at Hendrix College, but I said, "No, I wanna go to the biggest and the best this state has to offer." And so I—I ended up arriving in Fayetteville at the age of seventeen in 1959 and absolutely fell in love with the area and—uh—spent some of the greatest years of my life here at the University of Arkansas.

[00:15:23] SL: Let's—let's get back to El Dorado and—and—uh—we haven't really talked much about your mom . . .

DW: Okay.

SL: . . . except that she put a kitchen timer on the piano to make sure you rehearsed the piano. [DW laughs] Um—and she was basically homemaker, ra—ra . . .

DW: Mother was an excellent cook—uh—an excellent seamstress. She would—she would often—uh—make dresses for us, and—um—she w—she was very precise in everything that she did. Um—she was not the type to go play cards or things of that nature.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: She—she loved to be with her family and to go fishing with Daddy and—and that w—that w—the family was the whole focus of Mother's life.

SL: What were some of your favorite . . .

JE: Just cover it with the foam because I can hear it.

SL: What were some of your—um—um—favorite dishes that your mom would make?

DW: Oh, fried chicken, turnip greens, —uh—st—steak with smothered gravy—uh—hot water cornbread, cornbread, fried okra, fried fish. You name it. Mother was a great cook.

[00:16:32] SL: Was the—um—was it always a—a—uh—so top of the morning, did everyone sit—come to breakfast or was it—you know, nowadays the kids just kind of . . .

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . grab food on the way out the door, maybe, but . . .

DW: No, we were a very typical—um—*Leave it to Beaver* type of a family . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: . . . —uh—back in those days in the [19]40s and the [19]50s. Now, remember, my sister is eight years older than I am, so there's a—a part of this process where she'd already left home.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And—uh—come up here to the University of Arkansas. But we were very normal in everything that we did. We grew up in a very conservative, strict household. We—we belonged to First Baptist Church.

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: And Mother and Daddy—uh—did not believe in going to movies on Sunday and playing cards on Sunday, and even when they were at church—uh—GA bunking parties at the church sponsor's house . . .

SL: GA?

DW: Girls Auxiliary.

SL: Okay.

DW: We couldn't spend the night. We had to come home. [*Laughs*]

So we were—we were raised in a really, really strict family environment.

SL: So there wasn't any dancing or . . .

DW: Oh we—we danced. Yes.

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: Yes, we danced, but—but only at school functions at the TAC House in El Dorado—teenage club.

[00:17:55] SL: Did y'all—were there—um—so basically the family did gather at the table pretty much . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: for every meal . . .

DW: Yes. Daddy—Daddy came home for lunch.

SL: . . . except during school you'd have lunch at . . .

DW: Daddy came home for lunch every day. Mother cooked . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: . . . lunch, and so Mother's whole life was focused around her family. Daddy's life was focused around his banking business.

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: The church . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: He was a deacon at First Baptist Church.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And his community activities. And—uh—Governor Faubus appointed him to the Arkansas wildlife commission, so his—his interests in his hobbies extended into service to the state.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And—uh—my sister, Mona, has a beautiful singing voice, and she was always active in school choirs and church choirs. She—and she sung in church choirs all of her life—to this day, still singing in church choirs. And that's where I got a lot of my early training, too, was in church choirs from very earliest days on through—uh—through college, actually. So it was my church and my school that provided the vocal training and the theatrical training that I received early on.

[00:19:02] SL: Um—let's talk a little bit about the high school—I—I assume the theater—high school theater was the first time that you were introduced to theater or . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: And—uh—let's talk about that program. Is this at El Dorado High School?

DW: El Dorado High School, yes.

SL: Let's talk about that program just a little bit. Um—uh—do you remember—I'm sure you remember who the teachers were and . . .

[00:19:28] DW: Well, I remember who some of the teachers—uh—were . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.



DW: . . . but—uh—the theater program was an opportunity for me to—uh—get over some shyness that I had, because I—I felt—uh—that I was—I was very skinny when I was growing up, very skinny. And so I had low self-esteem, so th—the opportunities in theater gave me an opportunity to take on a different character and to get out on stage and perform before—for people. And I knew that I had been given some God-given talents in the—in the stage and vocal areas, and when you're shy or when you have feelings of inadequacy, you really have to work hard to overcome that in order to develop and fulfill those God-given talents that you're given. So I kept working at that, just trying to better myself. Because I did enjoy both the theater and singing and performing. And William Treego was our choir director there.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:26] DW: And, God bless him, he was so influential from the junior high school through my senior year in high school in the vocal training that I received and the ability to express what I was singing facially. And he was a graduate of Westminster Choir College. Everyone thought so highly of Bill Treego that—I think it was probably ten or fifteen years ago—we had a reunion of all of his choir members in El Dorado, and he came down for that. And I remember talking to him on the phone, and I said, "I want to tell you, Mr. Treego"—I could never call him Bill. [Laughter] "Mr. Treego, how much impact you had on my life, and I just want to thank you for that. And don't ever think that a teacher doesn't have impact. You were the one."

[00:21:14] SL: They do. They have—I mean, outside the parents, that's where you learn. Do you remember the first show you did in the theater department?

DW: *Cheaper by the Dozen*.

SL: Mh-hmm. And did you have a minor role?

DW: I was one of the children.

SL: One of the children?

DW: Yeah.

SL: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm. Was there a favorite show that you did when you were in high school?

DW: I didn't do that many, actually.

SL: Mh-hmm. What about musical performances—the choral . . .

DW: They were always with the choir. And, of course, I did sing solos with the choir. And I started singing solos in ninth grade, too, at junior high school assemblies. So I was beginning my singing career in the ninth grade.

SL: Was there a favorite composer that you liked or . . .

DW: All the show tunes were favorites of mine back in those days, and they seemed to fit my voice well. But the first song that I ever sang as a solo in the ninth grade was "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," and I think it's from *Cinderella*.

SL: Were you nervous?

DW: And that was rather prophetic, wasn't it?

[00:22:26] SL: Yeah. It was. It was. That's interesting. Well, what about—let's go back to the home again. What did you all do for entertainment around the house?

DW: Well, I was seven years old before we bought our first television. And that was revolutionary, so we just, you know, played and played with dolls and toys and the things that normal kids would do back in those days—listen to the radio. But the television back in the late [19]40s came on about six o'clock, and it was all live, and the commercials were all live. And it was things like

Howdy Doody and *The Lone Ranger* and, I mean, I had the schedule memorized nightly as to what was on. So you wanted to get your homework done right after you got home from school so you could watch a little television in the evening before you went to bed. But we—it was just a very normal upbringing—very conservative home values. You know, it was terrific. It was a great training ground for me from a character-building point of view, a morals point of view, community-mindedness point of view. It was just a great time. My daughter refers to it as the happy days.

SL: Yeah.

DW: Because most of my junior high and high school years were in the [19]50s.

[00:23:50] SL: Mh-hmm. Do you remember any of the radio programs that you listened to?

DW: There were some drama programs that I would listen to on Saturday morning when I was helping Mother clean the house, but I can't remember the names.

SL: *The Shadow*, maybe?

DW: I can't remember the names of them.

[00:24:08] SL: Uh-huh. I'm just wondering where the musical fascination and influence first started for you.

DW: Well, it had to be in church.

SL: Think so?

DW: And then in the—what music programs we had in public schools . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

. . . which we did have in the elementary schools as well.

SL: Well, I guess I'm just wonder—you know, for me, when I got involved with music it was because of The Beatles. You know, they just . . .

DW: Well, The Beatles were just coming on the scene the year I was Miss America. In fact, I remember they—I was in Boston the night they kind of landed in Boston. And there was quite the thrill that The Beatles were in the United States and . . .

SL: Right. But I was just wondering—you know, I know you liked the show tunes early on . . .

DW: Mh-hmm.

[00:25:00] SL: . . . I'm just wondering if you—if there were programs out there on the radio that you heard some music and you—I mean, do you remember having favorite music off the radio back then or . . .

DW: Not really. I can't remember musical programs, per se—more drama programs that I remember listening to.

SL: Uh-huh. I wonder if that may have started you down the theatrical path, maybe, without really knowing it.

DW: I think—you know, I think we're all born with specific talents. And you're drawn to your talent area. And you want to explore it more, and you want to express yourself in those ways. And when you're given those talents, you just have to do it, and you have to sing, and you get great joy from singing and learning. And you know, I love art, and, you know, I'm very artistic-minded and love color and visuals and that sort of thing, whereas my husband's analytical and . . .

SL: Right. [*Laughs*]

DW: . . . but I think you're drawn to the things that God places in your heart to be drawn to.

[00:26:07] SL: Paint me a picture of the house that you grew up in and the neighborhood that you were in.

DW: Basically, we lived in three different houses from birth until I finished college. And the first house was a little, small house on what's called Graves Court, and there was a railroad track that ran through, and still does, runs through El Dorado—and we were on one—the east side of the railroad track, and the town and the rest of the residential areas were on the west side. And so I guess you might say we were kind of on the . . .

SL: You were across the tracks.

DW: Across the tracks. I do—it's not the wrong side of the tracks.

SL: Right. Right. Uh-huh.

DW: But we didn't know any different. But we were across the tracks. And it was just a small—it was probably a two-bedroom house. That's all I can remember of it. And we had a little dirt street that ran up in the front of it, and we played baseball out in that little street. And there wasn't much traffic, you know, up and down that little street. Because it was more or less an access to only the houses that—it must've been four houses up and down that street. But I think I was about six or seven when we moved out of that house and moved across the street from the Warner Brown Hospital, where I was born in 1942, as the first baby in 1942. And we lived there during my elementary, junior high school, and high school years, actually.

[00:27:40] SL: Now, you mentioned earlier—January third—first baby born in El Dorado that year. And there was some kind of merchant program where the first baby born got all kinds of stuff?

DW: All kinds of prizes and gift certificates—and it was me, and I was in the paper—the announcement of the first baby.

SL: So you just won coming in.

DW: [*Laughter*] I guess!

SL: You were already winning.

DW: I guess so. And I didn't have anything to do with it. [*Laughter*]

SL: I think that's neat. So the house that you moved into—maybe a little bigger—little . . .

DW: It was a three-bedroom house, yes. And a detached garage, and we lived there for a very long time.

[00:28:25] SL: Did you all have any pets?

DW: I had a puppy dog. I had a cocker spaniel at one point, and he died of distemper.

SL: Oh, I bet that was hard to see.

DW: Yeah, when I was a little girl.

SL: Uh-huh. And that kind of put the quietus on any other pets later or . . .

DW: Right, right.

SL: Yeah.

DW: But we walked to school. We walked to Yocum Elementary. We walked to our junior high school. And we walked to the high school.

SL: Did you have a favorite teacher in elementary school, or maybe . . .

DW: It's been so long ago I cannot remember any of the teachers'

names, actually.

SL: [*Laughs*] You don't even remember the ones you didn't like?

DW: But I do remember starting school at the age of five. There were no kindergartens. No preschool programs back in those days.

[00:29:13] SL: Do you remember anything about the elementary school? Tell . . .

DW: Yeah, it was a red brick school. It was built back in the WPA days, and there were lots of really tall pine trees around it and great places to play during recess.

SL: Was it two stories?

DW: It was two stories, yes.

SL: Upper grades—second floor, lower grades—first floor?

DW: Probably. I don't remember that.

SL: Uh-huh. And did you bring your lunch to school or did you just have a school lunch?

DW: No, I think there was a cafeteria.

SL: A cafeteria. That's good. Are there any friends that you had early in—when you were a kid that you still have or have kept in touch with them? Were there best buds?

DW: Some of those—what we call the regular six-plus-one that ran around together. It was a total of seven young women. Linda

Clinton moved to town later, so we called her plus one. We are still in communication—exchange Christmas cards. But we're scattered all over the country.

SL: Right. Were the other f—the other girls that you sang with in your group—were they part of that seven or . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: . . . six-plus-one?

[00:30:25] DW: Yes, definitely. My class will have its fiftieth high school reunion in 19—two thousand and nine in El Dorado. And we have been collecting e-mails of classmates for a number of years, and there probably two hundred names on that e-mail list.

SL: Wow, that's good.

DW: So we're in constant communication with most of the class all the time.

SL: That's good.

DW: It's fun. I've been to every high school reunion except one.

SL: Uh-huh. Well, that's good. I mean, that speaks well of the folks—of all those kids that you keep in touch with.

DW: The most tragic thing to me, though, is that the high school building that we attended has been torn down. And it was a beautiful, beautiful red brick building with white columns in

front. And one of the last reunions I remember going to, we got a key and were able to go inside and walk down the halls. And you could remember Mrs. Rogers's English class in this room, and—but it still had the same smell about it, you know? It smelled like school.

SL: Yeah. And you got a great education there.

DW: I did. I absolutely did, particularly in the areas of English and history and music.

[00:31:39] SL: [*Vocalized noise*] Is there any—do you remember any early conversations that you may have had with your mom and/or your dad that kind of put you on your path? You know, sometimes there's events or there's circumstances or something is said, that a light kinda comes on in your head and you say, "Yeah, that feels right. That sounds right. I'm headed that way."



DW: I think Mother and Daddy were always supportive of what I wanted to do, particularly in the performing arts areas, and saw that as an appropriate outlet for my talent, even competing in Miss America competitions. But I sort of—in their minds had avant-garde type of ideas, like this emerging industry called television. Mother always said, "Now, you need to go to college and get a degree in secretarial science or you—become a schoolteacher or a nurse." And in her mind, those were the only

three categories that women could excel in. And probably she was right back in those days. And that was in the [19]50s, early [19]60s. But I was more interested in television. And as I started winning some of these early pageant titles, I would be on the Little Rock stations. I was just fascinated by television. And so when I decided to go to the University of Arkansas, I chose radio, television, film, speech, and drama. And that was the combination of the degree. And sort of charted my own path, much to Mother and Daddy's chagrin.

[00:33:25] SL: What about your dad? Did your dad ever give you some advice early or . . .



DW: Always be yourself three hundred sixty-five days of the year—out of the year. And if you win an honor, make sure that you go out of your way to speak to everybody. I mean, he instilled that thought process in me very early on, but—and I always did that. I always tried to treat everybody the same because that's the way God looks upon us. But the more honors that you keep winning, the idea in the minds of other people is that you're gonna become better than they are or stuck up or . . .

SL: Yeah.

DW: . . . you know, that sort of thing. So he always said, "You have to go out of your way to treat people nicely, particularly when

nice things happen to you or good things happen to you or as these honors come along." Don't get bigheaded, in other words.

[00:34:22] SL: That's great advice, especially—he probably sensed that you were headed for great things and . . .

DW: Well, I will give you an example. The night that I competed for Miss America, when they got down to the top five, they—instead of asking a question to the top five, they rolled a word board out on the stage. It had ten words on it. And Bert Parks would call you up to the front and ask you to turn around and select a word that—each one of these words was a characteristic that a Miss America should exhibit. And so I looked down the words, and I chose the word "humility." And I was thinking of one of my regular six-plus-seven—my—Phyllis Owen, who was in the trio also, who was one of my dearest friends, and a member of my church, and just grew up with. And she was always the most humble person in the world, and everybody just loved her, and she had this beautiful spirit about her. And so I chose the word "humility," and basically what I said was that every person—every man, every woman—should have humility, because humility, though very obvious to others, is invisible to those who possess it.

SL: That's good.

DW: And that was Phyllis.

SL: Yeah.

DW: That was Phyllis for—to me. And there have been many people in my life who possessed—that sense of greatness about them is also mixed with a great degree of humility about their personal lives and how they treat people, and their focus on other people versus themselves. So Daddy's other advice is always focus outward and not inwardly. And that's on the tape—the videotape of the crowning.

[00:36:16] SL: Okay. That'll be good. We can cut to that.

[*Vocalized noise*] I had a question about—let's go ahead and talk about the role of religion in your life and—I'm assuming that every Sunday it was church, Sunday school, and probably choir practice as well. Baptists usually have functions that happen on Wednesday as well, so you found yourself in the church on Wednesdays. What about around the home? For instance, were—was grace said at every meal?

DW: Absolutely.

SL: And did you all take turns or was it always your father that did that or . . .

DW: Well, let me start at the beginning of that line of questions.

SL: Okay.

[00:37:08] DW: My earliest recollection of church was something called "cradle roll," where you take your baby and you enroll them in cradle roll. And so I was at church every Sunday even as an infant. And we would go to Sunday school, and we would go to church, and then as I got old enough to sing in the adult choir, of course, I was singing in the adult choir—and then Sunday night we would be back for training union, and then there would be Sunday evening church service. Now, training union was a great opportunity for me to learn how to speak extemporaneously. Because you had a lesson, you were given a part in that lesson to get up in front of the group and talk about your part or paragraph or whatever. So that was my early training in extemporaneous speaking.

[Tape stopped]

[00:37:51] SL: All right. We were talking about the role of religion.

And you were giving us the . . .

DW: And then we would go back on Wednesday night.

SL: Yeah, you went back—are we rollin'?

JE: Yes.

SL: Okay. And so went back on Wednesday nights.

DW: We would go back on Wednesday night, because there was Wednesday night supper, and then I was always in a choir, or

the trio would rehearse after school on Wednesday night with Liesel Gibson, who was our arranger-pianist, and he was the director of the choir. So Sundays and Wednesdays were just completely church. And you know, a lot of my friends—close friends—were my church friends, who were also my school friends. It's a very close, tight-knit community. And El Dorado was just terrific back in those days. If you can conjure up the big courthouse on the square, and on Friday afternoon everybody would hurry down to the square because at the pep rally would be there at four o'clock, and the band would be there, and get ready for the big football game that Friday night. And, of course, we were state champions, which meant we beat Little Rock Central that year. [SL laughs] And Garland Gregory was our coach. And life was just great in El Dorado, Arkansas, and it was a fabulous place to grow up in, and a lot of nurturing people. And it does take a village, and that was a fabulous village in which to be raised.

[00:39:12] SL: So, really, between Sunday, Wednesday and Friday nights, you were—your dance card was pretty full.

DW: Well, it was pretty full for a conservative, southern, young woman, yes, growing up. But I had my sights on bigger things.

I remember standing up in church at graduation Sunday, and the

pastor asked each one of the seniors coming up that were members of our church to say where they were going to school. And I can remember standing in that pulpit to this moment and saying very proudly, "The University of Arkansas," and couldn't wait to get up here.

SL: Well, now, let's see—you graduated in [19]58? [19]59?

DW: [Nineteen] fifty-nine.

[00:39:54] SL: [Nineteen] fifty-nine. So you were in high school the same time that all that mess at Central High School was going on.

DW: Yes, I was, and that was [19]56–[19]57, and I remember some parents sending their children down to live with aunts and uncles in El Dorado and attending the El Dorado Public Schools—not very many, but I do remember that.

SL: So was El Dorado—they weren't an early adopter to the desegregation, or was there . . .

DW: Our high school was an all-white high school. There was a black high school. Our football team was all white. It was just all white—cheerleaders, pep squad, everything.

SL: Well, were there tensions?

DW: I don't remember tensions in the community. I do know that the bus station was across the street from the back door of our

church, and I do remember that there was a black waiting room and black water fountains and a white waiting room. And that was just sort of the way it was. But it wasn't until a bit later that—when things began to change.

[00:41:04] SL: Mh-hmm. But that change hadn't happened by the time that you had graduated.

DW: No.

SL: Was there a fairly significant African American population in El Dorado?

DW: I think that there was, but I'm not sure what the percentage was back in those days.

SL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. What—did you ever hear, read, see anything about the Klan back when you were growing up?

DW: No, no. I was not aware of that.

SL: What about the restaurants and businesses? Did you ever see any . . .

DW: I never saw any controversy in any of the restaurants. What few we had. But I'm sure that the same sort of social mores were present in the restaurants as well.

SL: Yeah. Did you know anyone that knew any of the black community? I mean, were there—were you aware of any black community leaders or pastors? Were there . . .

DW: No.

SL: Never any mingling?

DW: No.

SL: That's pretty textbook as far as the desegregated lives went.

DW: Right.

SL: Hmm—well, okay—is there anything else that you want to say about your mom and dad or . . .

[00:42:37] DW: They were wonderful . . .

SL: Did you even know any of your grandparents? Did you . . .

DW: They were wonderful parents. I knew my Grandfather Axum. My grandmother died before I was born. She was Quemee Betts—*B-E-T-T-S*—Axum. And she and my grandfather met and married in the Lawson area. But she died at the age of forty, before I was born. I knew my grandmother on my mother's side—Elizabeth Wheat Tate. And mother had many brothers and sisters. I think there were twelve of them. 'Course, I never knew the grandfather that was killed in the logging accident.

SL: Right.

DW: So I didn't have much of a grandparent involvement. The grandmother that was living was in Baton Rouge, and didn't see her very often. Granddaddy lived in Lawson, so we got to see them—him quite frequently. But it—life was centered around

Mother and Daddy and my sister Mona.

SL: Do you remember any time that you had with your granddad?

DW: Every Sunday afternoon we'd drive to Lawson to see
Granddaddy. [*Laughs*]

SL: Was he fun? Was he—did he do anything to try to spoil you like
grandparents are supposed to do?

DW: Not really. No.

SL: No.

DW: He was pretty laid back.

SL: Uh-huh. Did he ever tell you any stories—any early El Dorado
stories or Union County stories?

DW: Well, I don't think he ever lived in El Dorado.

SL: Yeah.

[00:44:09] DW: When we would go down to Lawson to his house, the
things that I remembered—he'd always planted a garden out
back, and he had this deep well on the back porch, and I was
always fascinated [*laughs*] by the fact that you put this cylinder
down in this deep well and bring up the water. And that was his
water source. And he had an outhouse.

SL: Did he have electricity?

DW: Yeah.

SL: Well, that's . . .

DW: And a potbellied stove.

SL: Yeah. Well, I remember my grandma had the same setup. She would cook on that stove. Yeah. Well, is there anything else that you want to say about your mom and dad or . . .

DW: They were wonderful parents. And they gave me a great foundation for life in a great little city.

SL: So was it just you and your sister?

DW: Yes.

[00:45:03] SL: Do you wanna say anything about your sister?

DW: Mona is my role model—Mona Axum Turnham. And she came to the university and spent a couple of years up here and earned a secretarial science degree, and was homesick. So she went back to El Dorado, and that's where she met and married her husband, Bob, who was working for Lion Oil as a petroleum engineer. Mona's an excellent homemaker. She has a beautiful singing voice. She's always focused on her family. She worked for a short period of time and—but mostly focused on her two children, Robby and Donna Turnham who are now totally grown—have their own families.

SL: So, really, by the time—you probably only had . . .

DW: I think I was twelve or thirteen when they married.

SL: Yeah. What was that wedding like?

DW: It was beautiful. It was at the First Baptist Church, and I was a thirteen-year-old maid of honor. And it was in January of 19—I think—57. So they've been married fifty years.

SL: Wow. Wow. Well, okay . . .

TM: I had a question about—you talked about comin' up to the Ozarks and then kind of maybe going fishin' in some of the trout hatcheries.

DW: Yes.

[00:46:22] TM: Maybe talk about the difference between where you were from and coming up here and kinda what that was like.

DW: Okay.

SL: Okay.



DW: Well, when we would drive from El Dorado to Fayetteville for either school or to come up—in the early days—for the Bankers Association conventions—it would take all day to get here. It would take eight hours to drive from El Dorado because there were no four-lane highways.

SL: Right.

DW: And if you got behind a watermelon truck or a chicken truck on those mountain roads [*laughs*], it would take forever . . .

SL: Right.

DW: . . . to get here. But the weather was always so beautiful and

glorious up here, especially in the summertime, as compared to muggy south Arkansas, that I just loved the mountains, and I would always constantly say to Daddy at around Conway, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" You know, and I just found that this Fayetteville area was just sorta [sort of] magical to me, even as a young child coming up. And the magic has really never left for me, and I think that having wonderful, rich memories from childhood through your adult life in a location through a college experience is some—one of the things that you just really hold onto as the sweet times of life and the growing times of life and the becoming times of life. And that was all wrapped up for me here in Fayetteville.

[00:47:47] SL: I guess that trout farm was probably in Johnson, wasn't it?

DW: I can't remember where it was. It seemed like it was a ways out from the community.

SL: Yeah. I remember going to a trout farm, too.

DW: Now, that's the way to fish. I mean, you just bait your hook and throw it in and pull out a fish. I mean [*laughs*] . . .

SL: Yeah, yeah, yeah I remember that.

DW: . . . and they would just flip and flap all over the place.

SL: Mh-hmm. Well, I know Clear Creek used to be a naturally

occurring trout creek until they dammed it up for the—Lake Fayetteville. But anyway, is that . . .

TM: Yes.

SL: Yeah. Okay.

TM: Thanks.

[00:48:27] SL: So let's get you out of high school, and now you're comin' to University of Arkansas. Your dad wanted you to go to Hendrix. Your mom wanted you to be a secretary or a nurse or something like that.

DW: A teacher. Mh-hmm.

SL: Teacher. And you get up here to Fayetteville.

DW: Yes.

SL: And once you're up here, were you s—were there any surprises for you when—I mean, was it, you know . . .

DW: Well, I loved the beauty of Fayetteville. I was a charter resident of Fulbright Hall.

SL: Okay.

DW: And so my room looked right down over the stadium from that vantage point, and I just loved the beauty. I loved the independence of being in college and sort of making my own decision as most young kids do. It was a long walk to my five-day-a-week, 7:30 a.m. classes in Old Main. I would walk to

class in the dark, and I thought, "Now, next year, surely I'm going to figure out the trick, and I'm not gonna to have five seven thirty classes." But, you know, it was here that I started making all those wonderful college friends from all over the state. Now, I had met a few of them at Girls State, where I had been a delegate to Girls State.

SL: Okay, now. See, we've gotta [got to] talk about Girls State.

DW: Yeah, Girls State.

SL: We've gotta go back to Girls State when we get done with this.

[00:49:46] DW: But, you know, expanding my horizon to young women from all over the state or outside of the state of Arkansas was helpful for me. Now, I went to college with a portable manual typewriter and a hi-fi—high-fidelity record player. And everybody wanted to be my roommate because I had this large collection of the 45 records, and I loved my music. I had to have my music. It was a lot of show tunes and that sort of thing. But that was back in the days when we had nothing, and we didn't know the difference. We were happy. We didn't have cell phones. We didn't have CDs, DVDs. We didn't have any of the technology we have today. And as a freshman at Fulbright Hall, they were very strict. Of course, you signed in and signed out, but we had to be in our rooms at seven o'clock

at night for study hall, and we studied from seven until nine thirty in our halls. The halls were patrolled by our house manager or floor manager, and quiet hours—and then at nine thirty we could take showers, do our laundry, talk on the phone. At ten thirty it was quiet hours again. Couldn't go out at all during the week—have a date. But Friday night—we could date on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And, of course, we had day call back in those days, and it was, like, twelve o'clock, twelve thirty on Saturday, and eleven o'clock on Sunday, and you were in.

SL: That's still pretty late, kinda.

DW: Well, I loved having rules, and appreciated having rules and close supervision for protection as much as anything. But you're here to study. You're here to get a degree, and not to party all the time. And I never was the party-type person anyway, so . . .

SL: Yeah.

DW: . . . that was fine with me.

[00:51:40] SL: We're gonna to jump back just a little bit. You mentioned that you went to Girls State.

DW: Yes.

SL: Was that at Camp Robinson?

DW: Yes.

SL: Okay. Well, let's talk a little bit about how you got—who nominated you to Girls State, how you got there, and what it was like once you got there?

DW: Well, the teachers at the high school nominate you for Girls State as a delegate. And fortunate for me—all of the regular six-plus-one were a part of that group, and the trio was a part of that group. So we got to perform at Girls State, too. So that was great fun.

[00:52:15] SL: Did the governor come talk to you at Girls State? Did you—or was there a main keynote speaker?

DW: I'm sure there were. But I cannot remember who came to speak to us.

SL: When I went, you got to actually go to the capitol building and enact legislation and, you know, sponsor a bill.

DW: Yes.

SL: Have other people sponsor it with you. And one set would go through the representatives—the other set would go through the senate. Did y'all do that too?

DW: I do not remember doing that.

SL: You don't?

DW: No. I do remember having elections within the camp, but I don't

remember going to the capitol.

SL: So did you run as a representative or a senator or do you remember?

DW: I can't remember. I was so involved in the entertainment side of Girls State. [*SL laughs*] I—that ignited, however, my interest in politics. And to this day I'm very interested in politics and political issues and international issues.

SL: Well, of course, one of the great things about that was you got to meet a lot of kids from all over the state.

DW: Yes, I did. In fact I—one of the persons I met there became my freshman roommate.

SL: There you go. And where was she from?

DW: Texarkana.

SL: Texarkana.

DW: Mh-hmm. Becky Gilliland.

SL: [*Laughs*] Okay.

[00:53:38] JE: I have a question about that. Was it a big deal because you weren't allowed to stay at the church events overnight—was going to Girls State and staying overnight something that your parents had to consider?

DW: [*Laughs*] That's interesting. Well, I think probably I was a bit older by the time I got to Girls State, and not that there was a

trust issue. I think that they were just so conservative in their views that a bunking party—even at a church-sponsored house at the age of eight or nine was far different from being a junior in high school and going in a school bus with a delegation from the high school.

[00:54:17] SL: Right. Right. So let's talk about your performance at the—at Girls State. What was it that y'all did?

DW: The Phyllidons performed in the grand assembly. Yes, we were part of the entertainment.

SL: Do you remember what you did?

DW: No. [*SL laughs*] But one of the favorite songs that we always sang was "Sugar Time."

SL: "Sugar Time."

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: "Sugar in the morning, sugar in the" . . .

DW: Right.

SL: Ahh!

DW: "The Isle of Capri"—some of those real racy songs. [*SL laughs*]
Yeah.

SL: Oh, boy.

DW: "Laura." We had some great arrangements.

SL: Yeah. Well, so—that—doesn't that happen your junior year in

high school?

DW: Yes.

SL: Yeah, I kinda remember that. Okay. Well, let's get back up to the University of Arkansas.

DW: Yes.

SL: What—so, let's see, journalismwise, was that Kimpel?

DW: I did not take any journalism courses. It was radio, television, film, speech, and drama. So it was in the speech department.

SL: Oh, okay.

DW: It was divided up a little differently. It's not the school of communication as it might be today or . . .

[00:55:32] SL: Let's see, so who was it that was runnin' the drama department then? It was . . .

DW: Magruder . . .

SL: Okay.

DW: . . . was in scene design. Dr. DeMarco . . .

SL: DeMarco. He was the guy.

DW: He was great.

SL: He was the king.

DW: He was also our film instructor—instructor. Ken Ballenger



and—was my opera workshop and vocal coach. I was also, as a freshman, audition member of the Schola Cantorum choir.

SL: With Brothers.

DW: With Richard Brothers. And we won the International Polyphonic Competition in Arezzo, Italy, in [19]61, I believe.

SL: Mh-hmm. Yeah, there's even a brass plaque about that, isn't there?

DW: Yes, on the Walk.

SL: Yeah.

[00:56:17] DW: Absolutely. And then when the choir came back, they were presented by President Kennedy in the Rose Garden, and I was asked by Senator McClellan and Senator Fulbright to join them for that because I was out of school that year because I had been elected Arkansas Forestry Queen, and I was making two hundred and fifty-two speeches on the uses of wood and conservation. And so they invited me up, and I was standing there on the portico outside the Oval Office, and Mrs. McClellan looked at me, and she said, "Well, there he is." And I turned around, and there was President Kennedy standing there. And he came down the line and shook our hands, and I was very awestruck by his presence. And, 'course, that was the Camelot days. All of that—[19]59 through [19]63—were the Camelot days of the Kennedys and Cuban missile crisis. You know, those were the things that were going on back in those days. It was

still black-and-white television, if you'll recall. But we had a young president in the office and a beautiful first lady and young children there, and you'd extended the happy days of the [19]50s into the early [19]60s. And so that's kind of where we were when we appeared in the Rose Garden with Schola Cantorum, and I had that opportunity to touch history, which would—my path would cross again a little bit later with President Kennedy.

SL: So his presence is really a—there was something about him, wasn't there?

DW: Yes, very charismatic.

SL: Kind of the same way Bill Clinton is in . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: . . . many ways. So, let's see, that woulda been your—that was later, though. That was—you must've been a junior or senior.

DW: I think I was in my junior year.

[00:58:12] SL: Yeah, yeah. Were there any—was there anything about your freshman year that you remember that was particularly fun or exciting? I guess Razorback football game.

DW: Razorback football. Razorback football games. And, of course, we all dressed for that, and the standard of dressing back in those days was much higher for the college campus than it is

today. We could not wear pants or cutoffs or Bermuda shorts or anything across campus. You'd always have to put a raincoat over your gym shorts if you were going to gym class. We always dressed in either penny loafers or tennis shoes, but they were never clean tennis shoes—they were scuffed up a little bit because you just—that's what you did. [*SL laughs*] It was mostly penny loafers and skirts and sweaters, and you always wore your Greek letters. You never left your fraternity or sorority without your Greek letters on, because you were so identified by what sorority or fraternity you belonged to. And so we would always dress up for the game, and if you had a date for the game, you had a date for the game and for that evening after the game.

[Tape stopped]

[00:59:21] SL: So let's talk a little bit about the Greek system . . .

DW: Alright.

SL: . . . and its influence on college campuses. It was not just here at the University of Arkansas. It was nationwide.

DW: Nationwide, yes. Well, I . . .

SL: And it was a big, big deal.

[00:59:32] DW: We had deferred rush back in those days, and so I didn't go through rush until 1960. And I chose Tri Delta, and

they chose me. And so, you know, bid day was a great fun. You got your bid card and—we stayed during rush in Carnall—no, not in Carnall Hall—in Holcomb Hall. And once you got your bid card, then you would run down to your respective house, and there was, you know, great celebration, as it is today . . .

SL: Yeah.

DW: . . . on Maple Street and wherever the houses are located. And it was such an important part of my experience because of the growth and development of friendships and feeling like you belong to a group, and I think that the advantages even today are the same. Plus, the opportunities to learn leadership opportunities, especially if you're an officer—financial skills—if you're treasurer or house manager or whatever. And—but, oh, such sweet, sweet times, and, you know, having your date pick you up or all the serenades that were going on, and the candlelights, and where somebody would get engaged. And back in those days, the houses—the doors were just unlocked. I mean, probably at day call they were locked, but the doors were always open. And now, of course, because of security issues, they have to have codes to get into the houses. But I am hoping that the same wonderful experiences are taking place today as there were back in those days.

SL: I think there's been a rejuvenation here, really, in just the past several years.

[01:01:08] DW: Well, I remember my initiation and formal pledging, and coming down the big staircase at the Tri Delt house and stepping through a big Delta, and being presented as a formal pledge with my long-stem red rose, and such an intricate part of who we were as students as well as individuals. And if you looked in the annuals and opened up the annuals, the "Who's Who" section of the annuals—every person in there would have their Greek letters on with very few exceptions.

SL: I guess not everyone would be accepted into a . . .

DW: Or really had the resources to go through rush.

SL: Right.

DW: So there were the independent segment of our student enrollment as well.

SL: Now, when you say had the resources to go through rush—what resources would you need to . . .

DW: Well, initiation fees that have to go to national—housing fees . . .

SL: Right.

DW: . . . and just being a part of it.

[01:02:12] SL: Right. And so—but really, it seems like nowadays all that is really not that—there's not that much difference in what it

costs to live on or around . . .

DW: It's all relative, as I say to my kids.

SL: Yeah.

DW: It's all relative to the worst you've ever experienced [*laughter*].

But, you know, the fees have to grow and expand with the cost of living. And to maintain those houses. 'Course, we didn't have to buy all those T-shirts that they have to buy these days for every event.

SL: Right, right.

DW: A T-shirt back in 1959 and [19]60 was usually blank and white.

SL: Mh-hmm. That's right.

DW: [*Laughs*] With nothing on it except maybe your Greek letters.

SL: People just weren't thinking in color then.

DW: [*Laughs*] But there was nothing printed on it except maybe your Greek letters.

SL: Right, right.

DW: Or the event or something.

SL: Uh-huh. So some of those—did each sorority and fraternity—didn't they make their own homecoming floats?

[01:03:11] DW: We did! Yes, we did. And I remember the Tri Delt float one year was a big bumblebee, and we had to stuff that thing, you know, and that was part of our duties as pledges or

junior initiates or whatever. But that was all part of the camaraderie and fun.

SL: It was crepe paper.

DW: Yes, crepe paper stuck in chicken wire.

SL: It was crepe—in chicken wire, yeah. And . . .

DW: And then the big homecoming rally at the Greek Theatre.

SL: Yes.

DW: I mean, life was just so big and full back in those days, and so exciting. Every time I hear the drums beat in the band, memories just come floating back in.

SL: I can remember the floats lining up on Washington Avenue in historic district before they'd make their big circle around the town and the . . .

DW: Come down Dickson Street.

SL: Come up Dickson Street, yeah.

DW: And, see, when I was in school there was Jug Wheeler's on Dickson and . . .

[01:04:04] SL: Well, let's talk a little bit about Dickson Street.

DW: I remember—the most vivid memory I have of Dickson Street was the night we beat Texas. And I was up here. Of course, I did not go to Texas for the game, and it was in Austin. And kids were hanging from the li—lampposts—swinging from the

lampposts—people driving up and down Dickson honking their horns—you know, great celebration. It was as meaningful then as it is now, but maybe perhaps even more so because we were a part of the Southwest Conference back in those days, and those great rivalries that we had.

[01:04:37] SL: So, Jug Wheeler's.

DW: Yes.

SL: I'm—I remember a few memories of Jug Wheeler's, but what an icon that was.

DW: Yes, what it was.

SL: You know, it seems like I remember Jug Wheeler's used to be able to deliver beer to the campus. I'm kinda—which is—you know, you can't . . .

DW: I can't imagine that.

SL: Well, I . . .

DW: Because there was no alcohol allowed in the sorority house, and I'll talk about that a little bit later.

SL: Right. Okay.

[01:05:07] TM: What was Jug Wheeler's? I don't know what that was.

JE: Yeah, I don't know either.

SL: It was kind of a . . .

TM: [*Unclear words*]

SL: It was a burger place—drive-in.

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: It's where—I guess it's where Bordinos is now or maybe Jose's.

DW: I don't know what's there now, but it was . . .

SL: It used to be . . .

DW: Going up Dickson, it was on the left.

SL: Yeah. It used to have—what it turned into was the Holsum Bread or the Shipley Baking day-old shop. And you used to be able to . . .

DW: Yeah, there's probably some photographs around in archives . . .

SL: Yeah, yeah.

DW: . . . of Jug's.

SL: Yes. And it was a drive-up burger place. You . . .

DW: Right. It was the Sonic of its time.

SL: Yep, that's essentially what it was. Yeah, it was a great gathering spot. Well [*vocalized noise*], I think Roger's Rec was still—was there back then, wasn't it, I—the pool hall?

DW: I didn't go to pool halls, so [*laughs*] . . .

SL: Scott Hotel. I remember the Scott Hotel was . . .

[01:06:17] DW: I don't remember that.

SL: That either. George's. Was the—do you kinda remember . . .

DW: George's was there—never went in George's.

SL: Never went into George's. So . . .

DW: I was a member of First Baptist Church . . .

SL: Right.

DW: . . . and sang in the choir up here in Fayetteville.

SL: Uh-huh. So you avoided . . .

DW: Went to be at the Baptist Student Center every afternoon after class.

SL: Uh-huh. Every afternoon?

DW: Yeah.

SL: So you held true to the church doctrines and . . .

DW: I did. I did.

SL: . . . all that stuff all the way through.

DW: Yes.

SL: That's quite—that takes great strength and great faith to do that.

DW: Well, it's part of my philosophy. When you move to a new city, there's several things you need to do—find a church home. And in my case, in these days as an alum of Tri Delt, I always would find my alum group. And you'd have instant friends and roots.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

DW: And I wanted that.

[01:07:15] SL: Well—so was the role of religion in Fayetteville—was it just a continuation of what you had grown up with?

DW: Absolutely, and the expectation that I wanted to sing in a church choir. And be a part of a church family, and that was a necessity in my life. And then the Baptist Student Center was such easy access from the Tri Delt house. I just walked down the street and another group of friends, again.

SL: Well, that's just so remarkable to me that every afternoon that you would go . . .

DW: It was fun.

SL: Yeah. Well, that's another thing. You know, some—in some of the folks that I've interviewed, the role of religion—and they're very spiritual and very religious—but as children, they didn't really—you know, they weren't—they have to put on this suit or they have to get all dressed up, and it wasn't necessarily the excitement that I can sense that you had in being involved with the church—that, you know—is that you have to go and . . .

DW: Sunday morning, got up and went to Sunday school and church. Sang in the choir.

[01:08:26] SL: And—but you—it seem like—it sounds like to me you really looked forward to it and enjoyed it.

DW: Yes.

SL: And . . .

DW: A very necessary part of the balance of my life.

SL: Uh-huh. It sounds like it really was integral in you flourishing.

[01:08:43] DW: I think so. It gave me my continued spiritual base, which, for me, was absolutely a guidepost in my life as I began to step out and do things that were beyond my comfort zone. And I talk a lot about it in motivational speeches—about the small-box mentality, and growing up in El Dorado or any other small town in the state of Arkansas or Mississippi or wherever, that you grow and develop to a certain point. And then as you go off to college, perhaps your box gets a bit larger—it's a bit large-size box, and you grow to fill that box. But there's some elements that need to be in each box. And, for me, education and my church were those elements that had to be in the box. And then as I got to the point where, instantly, I was a national figure as Miss America, my box got rather large. So you can see the importance of the values and the foundation in those two smaller boxes that I had outgrown—became as guideposts for me. And in remembrance of who I was, and Daddy saying, "Never get full of yourself. Always remember to speak to people and be kind to people and focus outwardly on people." And those were the guideposts that became the mainstays for me,

'cause it's a very unnatural instant position to be in.

SL: The Miss America deal.

DW: Yes.

[01:10:15] SL: I wanna talk about—when did you start getting involved in the beauty contest realm?

DW: I first started when I was fifteen years old—sixteen years old—as Miss Union County.

SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: As a part of the Union County Fair.

TM: Oops—break for one second.

[Tape stopped]

[01:10:39] SL: We were gonna to start talkin' about the beauty pageant era, I guess, of your life. And I think I called it the pageant circuit, and you said you probably wouldn't have called it that back then. But when did that start? And what—was it just that your musical abilities and performance abilities kinda . . .

DW: Well . . .

SL: . . . had you go that way?



[01:11:10] DW: . . . as an extension of self-development, I sought out what I felt were the appropriate pageant venues for me to develop my self-esteem, and poise, and on-stage presence, and

singing ability, and performance ability, et cetera. And the first one that I entered was Miss Union County Fair Queen, and my classmates were entering that, so it was kinda the thing to do. And you just wore a little party dress and walked across the stage, and I won. And everybody was kind of shocked, including me. [*SL laughs*] But that was the beginning of it, and the next one that I entered was Arkansas's Miss Hospitality, which was a statewide competition. It was personality and the way you presented yourself. And we represented the hospitality industry of the state—Restaurant Association, et cetera, and bringing tourism to the state of Arkansas. And so all of this was like PR and marketing skills that I was learning as I went along. And that was—I was, I think, in college by then, and then the next one was the Arkansas Poultry Princess Pageant. And, again, representing one of the state's great industries, the poultry industry. And I didn't win that one. I was a runner-up to that one, but I didn't win that one. And then the next one was the National Cotton Picking Queen—Blytheville—eastern Arkansas. Again, you know, polishing my skills—came back to the sorority house with the trophy in hand and another notch in my belt, so to speak. The one that probably gave me the most experience was the one that took me out of college a year between my

sophomore and junior year, and that was Arkansas Forestry Queen, representing the state's forestry industry and the conservation of our great natural resources that we have here in Arkansas.

[01:13:02] SL: Mh-hmm.

DW: And that was run by the Arkansas Forestry Commission, actually. And it was, again, a regional contest, and it was based on your ability to speak and interact with audiences because the role of the Forestry Queen was to go to all these little schools and service organizations—Kiwanis Clubs—and talk about the importance of conservation to Arkansas's economy and the uses of wood and the importance of our industry. So I did that for a full year—eleven thousand miles in the car—two hundred and fifty-two speeches on the uses of wood and conservation, and that speech was recorded in the congressional record of honor by—congressional record by Senator John McClellan who heard me speak one time. And then I went back to the University and finished my junior year. Now, all the while, I'm still singing in Schola Cantorum and I'm still singing in the Uarkettes, which is another singing group—audition group that was very famous here at the university. And the opera workshop and performing in university theatrical opera productions and honing my skills.

And the first time I ran for Miss Arkansas, I was eighteen. I had just finished my freshman year here at the university. And although in the back of my mind I knew I wasn't quite ready vocally or maturitywise or anything else, I was just chomping at the bit to get in there. [SL laughs] Because I just really wanted to be Miss Arkansas. So I entered it, and I was third runner-up singing some of those show tunes from *Oklahoma*. But when I lost—Claudette Smith won that year—I was third runner-up—I just got more determined.

SL: Is that Claudette Hunnicut now?

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: Okay.

[01:14:43] DW: And so I just got more determined, and I sat down and I devised a game plan, and then these are the things that I felt were my strengths and my weaknesses, and I worked on my weaknesses as well as my strengths. And the weaknesses included—if you can believe this—gaining weight, 'cause I was always so slender. But by today's norms, I was not overweight or underweight, I was kinda just right. But I was very slender. And back in those days, it—the fitness craze had not kicked in, and the typical female figure was probably ten to twenty pounds on the average heavier . . .

SL: Heavier.

DW: . . . than you'd see today with the lean, muscular look and that sort of thing—in competitions—let's put it that way. So I was trying to gain weight, increase my singing potential—the maturity of the voice. I was trying to increase my capacity for extemporaneous speaking with all these things—just general maturity level, because you can't buy that like a dress off of a rack.

SL: Right.

[01:15:53] DW: Life experiences and that sort of thing. And then when I was approaching my senior year—I had finished my junior year—then I approached the El Dorado Chamber of Commerce, and I said, "I'd like to run for Miss Arkansas again. Will you sponsor me?" Because there was no local pageant in El Dorado. And they said, "Yes, we'll do that." And so I entered again, and I was successful in being chosen as Miss Arkansas. But I will tell you that only two points in talent separated me from my first runner-up. Actually, there was a tie. There was a tie for Miss Arkansas. And when the auditor went back to the judges, they took the girl with the most number of points in talent—I had two more points in talent than Miss North Little Rock, so I would've never have become Miss America had I not

kept on working and kept on training in the vocal performance area, and I was a double preliminary winner at the pageant—swimsuit and talent. And the rest is history, as they say.

[01:17:04] SL: Well, before we go on to the rest of that history, let's go back over some of these contests. The very first one was . . .

DW: Miss Union County.

SL: And what role, if any, did your parents play in getting you into that or supporting you in any way? Did—I—you mentioned earlier that your mom was a good seamstress—did—and . . .

DW: No, she did not sew the dress that I wore.

SL: She did not?

DW: No. But they were very supportive in things that I wanted to do. My mother became more reticent as I would lose a pageant, you know, and she would see how heartbroken I was but how very determined. She would say, "Well, why don't you just get out of this and just, you know, go on with your life," and that sort of thing. But I was extremely determined that I was going to proceed.

SL: Well, let's talk a little bit about the emotional side of this and—you know, I guess there would be emotional toll when you lose, and, of course, emotional . . .

DW: Well, the most devastating loss that I had took place right up

here in Fayetteville, because I had been third runner-up the first time I competed for Miss Am—Miss Arkansas—came back up here the following spring and was representing Tri Delta in the Miss University of Arkansas Pageant, and was second runner-up in that local. I was devastated. [*SL laughs*] Just devastated. And I almost quit. And once I got past that, I got to be to the point where I would say, "Okay, now, why did you lose?" Again going back to the self-analysis and rethinking what I needed to do to be better.

[01:18:47] SL: Let's talk about the actual—once you're in the event and the different stages of the events, and what about the relationships that happen with all the other girls—all the other contestants and the culture that is around the beauty pageant business. What—is it—I mean, was everyone really warm and friendly or . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: Everyone putting their best foot forward all the time?

DW: Yes. I—everyone was very congenial. You know, back in those days it was a different sort of mindset. It was very competitive, yes, but it was not the cat scratching and ruining your—pouring a bottle of soft drink down the front of your gown or anything [*laughs*] of that nature. It was just a different time. More

congenial time. So you were in there—like sportsmanship in a football game, you were in there—you were trying to be the best you could be and competitive. But I never realized any cat-scratching attitudes.

[01:20:01] SL: [*Clears throat*] As the boxes got bigger . . .

DW: Yes?

SL: . . . would you see the—some of the same girls? I mean . . .

DW: Occasionally you would, but there were not open pageants—what we call open pageants now—so whereby you could go from one local to another local around the state. You could, you know, represent your city or your college or university back in those days. And so there was not that opportunity for a young woman the same year to compete in four and five pageants, which they do today.

SL: Oh, I didn't know that.

DW: Yeah.

SL: That is different.

DW: So you kinda had one shot a year.

SL: Well, did you ever—I mean, for—is it—in the smaller boxes, was it just a one-night . . .

DW: Oh, yeah.

SL: . . . round of things?

DW: Oh, yeah. Yes.

[01:20:48] SL: And as the boxes grew, were the—did it stretch into days . . .

DW: Well, the Miss Arkansas competition has always been very popular. There were about forty-eight contestants when I competed, and I think there are about forty still. And that means three nights of preliminaries and a final night.

SL: Wow.

DW: So, yes, it's a full week of rehearsals, plus the preliminary competitions and finals.

SL: And one of these contests was at a county fair? Is that . . .

DW: Well, going back, it was Arkansas Poultry Princess Pageant. It was regionally held in different parts of the state, and my competition was at Hope at the fairgrounds. And, interestingly enough, we were judged in swimsuit and evening gown. And there were no dressing rooms, so they brought in a refrigerated meat truck [*SL laughs*] and we just [*laughs*] changed into our swimsuits and back into our gowns in a refrigerated meat truck. And, you know, that's great symbolism in today's world, but you know, we didn't think anything about it. It was just nice and cool in there, and it was in the dead of summer, so we welcomed the cool air.

SL: That's a real—kinda rubber—where the rubber-meets-the-road solution to . . .

[01:22:05] DW: And you know—and when I competed at Miss Arkansas, it was held at the Arlington Race Track, and they built the stage out into the stands, and the—they used tents as the dressing rooms. And so to get to the tents, you have to climb a ladder with all of your gowns over the fence to get backstage. And, of course, from time to time it would rain. The heavens would open up and pour down, and then had to wait until the rains subsided, mop up the stage, and the show must go on.

SL: [*Laughs*] That's—the show must go on.

DW: And then the bugs, of course, for singers it was really kinda bad. Bugs would fly into your mouth occasionally.

SL: [*Vocalized noise*] Well, this had to be fun. Was it fun?

DW: Oh, it was great fun. I loved the competition. I loved the camaraderie. And getting to compete against the best talent and intellect at that particular point among young women in Arkansas.

SL: You know, when you were talking about the forestry contest, and you had to do all that traveling to all the small places, that sounds like a campaign. Sounds like a political campaign.

DW: It does sound like a political campaign.

SL: The same sort of audiences, the same . . .

DW: Coal Hill—I mean, we went to little-bitty schools and high schools—Ravenden Springs—there were dirt roads leading up to the schools. It definitely was—all kinds of scenarios.

SL: And this was all in Arkansas?

DW: Yes.

SL: So, really, you probably could've made a fork. You probably could've become a politician at some point. Probably didn't think about it at the time, but you were . . .

DW: Not at the . . .

SL: . . . working as hard as any . . .

DW: I was working the state.

SL: Yeah.

DW: More than once, I was working the state and representing the state, or state industries.

[01:24:05] SL: Well, did you ever consider politics as a way of . . .

DW: I've always been drawn to politics. I think it's extremely important element of our lives, and those people who say, "Oh, I never even think about it" or "I'm never concerned with what's going on" are foolish [*laughs*] because it affects our daily lives. I did at one point give some thought to running for public office,

but it was just not the right time and circumstances in my life.

But I'm still—am fascinated by it—follow it closely.

SL: Well . . .

DW: Both here in Arkansas and nationally.

[01:24:39] SL: When you were touring the state like that, what were some of the more poignant moments? It would seem like to me you're on such a local level, you know, at each location, and you're interacting—surely there was some interaction with the lo—at least the local officials or the local principals or somebody in the—in each community—you had to—had some kind of interface back and forth.

DW: Well, I cannot remember any one principal or situation, but just my general impressions of Arkansas and the state of education in the state of Arkansas back in the early [19]60s—it gave me my passion for education. And because I'm such a competitive person, and I want my state to be the best, I've always felt the need to work for education and, particularly in my case, higher education. I've selected two areas to focus on in my philanthropic and civic endeavors, and that's the arts, arts education and education in general, particularly higher education. And I'm very concerned about the impact of education on the economic development of our state. And our

ability to rise above, because when I became Miss America, the state of Arkansas had a general attitude that, "Well, we can't compete with the people in other states because we're from Arkansas." And I was going to break that myth if I could, and I think that I did in some ways because I was the first Miss America to become—first Miss Arkansas to become Miss America. [01:26:39] And I'm a product of El Dorado Public Schools and a public university, but very dedicated teachers who instilled in me the thought that I could excel—just learn how to do it and grasp your talents and focus on that and focus on what you want to do with your life, and you can excel. Don't let the negative thought of "Well, I'm just from Arkansas" hold you back. Some—everybody's got to be from somewhere. That's my philosophy [*laughs*]. And seize upon the day. Seize upon the opportunity. And a lot of it has to be self-promoted and self-instigated. I mean, learning does not stop at the classroom—it's a continual process. And having an inquiring mind is important. So don't give yourself an excuse for small-box mentality just because you were born and raised in Arkansas. Think bigger, and bring it back to Arkansas.

SL: So when you were doing this tour, was there—and I mean, you gave me the general impression that people felt like they

couldn't do all that they could be. They weren't thinking in those terms. They were just getting by . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: . . . and scratching out their lives.

DW: Right.

[01:28:11] SL: Was there—in any of those visits, was there any one, two, or three that were, you know, particularly poignant to you? Or was there a moment—I feel like that that tour probably had as much to do maturing you as a contestant as anything. I mean, it sounds like that was an intense . . .

DW: Well, again . . .

SL: Intense.

DW: . . . it was intense training, but again, it was the repetition—repetition of training for me—the repetition of the appearances. But there were a lot of similarities in the appearances—in the conditions of the schools, the mindset of the students and the teachers and the principals and that sort of thing. And as I grew beyond and saw more of the world, you know, I had seen that there was more out there and better out there, and I wanted to reach back and say, you know, "Work harder because there's more up here that you can see—you get past this level." And I can't pinpoint a specific person or instance in that particular time

period that impacted me. It's just a general impression.

[01:29:30] SL: Okay. You know, we haven't really—and I don't know if we even want to go there—we haven't really talked about any of your personal relationships as far as, you know, the men go in your life as you were going through all this. Is it—I mean, it seems like that stuff was kind of put on hold.

DW: It really . . .

SL: Because you were so consumed with . . .

DW: Of course, I dated at the university and I enjoyed dating and—but I was really focused on my music and my Schola Cantorum and Uarkettes and my voice lessons and, you know, my church, and, you know, preparing. I knew I wanted to compete again for Miss Arkansas. So instead of learning how to play bridge, which I never learned how to do at that sorority house, you know, I was over there workin' and rehearsing. I was really goal-oriented, and I was goin' after it.

SL: I wonder if . . .

DW: Kind of like the national championship in football.

SL: Well, you know, it's—I think that shows remarkable strength to know—have a goal and pursue it and stay true to it.

DW: Well, yeah. And when I left for Atlantic City in September of [19]63—1963, I was as prepared as I could possibly be because

I had followed my game plan for three years. And I was ready. I was as ready as I was gonna be. And then I got to Atlantic City, and I looked around and looked at all the other contestants, and I thought, "Oh, my gosh!" [*Laughter*]

SL: "Yeah, this is a big box." [*Laughs*]

DW: "Oh, my gosh, this is the biggest box I have ever been in," you know?

[01:31:15] SL: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well, let's talk about Atlantic City.

DW: And you start lookin' around, and Miss Arizona and Miss Hawaii—"Ooh, she's going to be great in swimsuit," you know. And so, you know, your mindset can be diverted, but it's like—just like those football players approach every football game, you can't think about the loss last year or the last week or the one you're going to play next week. You have to think about which competition you're in, what you're doing in that competition, and you just filter out all those other competitors. So that's the approach that I took—mental focus.

SL: Well, tell me about the organization. First of all, what's the—what is the time period when you're competing Miss America?

DW: Well, I was crowned, like, July fourteenth in Hot Springs as Miss Arkansas, so I had just barely a month to prepare and get—and we had a live orchestra back in those days—Glenn Osser and his

orchestra—so I had to get orchestrations ready for my talent presentation and all my wardrobe pulled together, and we were off. And we arrived in Atlantic City probably ten days before the final night, because you have to go through your interview process, which takes, you know—the interviews are about a day and a half for the judges. But you have to rehearse all the production numbers. There were huge production numbers back in those days. Of course, Bert Parks was the emcee. And a lot of onstage production numbers with bands and you name it. And so that all had to be learned and rehearsed.

[01:32:49] SL: Y'all were like—almost like a chorus line, weren't you, back then?

DW: We were a live, full-production show.

SL: Yeah.

DW: On . . .

SL: I remember them.

DW: On—and I think we were on CBS when I was crowned. And eighty million people were watching this little girl from El Dorado that started out [*laughs*] in the First Baptist Church choir performing.

[01:33:12] SL: Well, what were the judges' interviews like?

DW: Oh, they had an illustrious panel of judges—Arthur Fiedler, who

was former conductor of the Boston Pops.

SL: Yes. Mh-hmm.

DW: Kukla, Fran and Ollie's star—another guy who was a Hollywood producer—Maria Martell, who was a New York fashion photographer, who did the back cover of the program book in my gold gown. And, of course, they were very heady and sophisticated as far as I was concerned, but they asked some very straightforward questions, and all of that extemporaneous speaking that I had done, all that interviewing I had done really paid off. And I thought it went well.

[01:33:50] SL: So, really, that initial interview process—you guys were competing right then.

DW: Oh, abs—that's half—almost half the score.

SL: Yeah.

DW: Yeah.

SL: And you felt good coming out of that phase?

DW: Very good.

SL: What about the rest of the girls? How much time did you have with—were the only times you spent with the girls during the production rehearsals?

DW: Rehearsals every day, you know. Sunup to sundown you're with 'em. They were nice.

SL: What happened with the church and your religious activities during that week? Was that—did they accommodate . . .

DW: There was no time for that.

SL: No time?

DW: No. No time. Just a whirlwind of activities. Between, you know, press shots and AP, UPI shots on the beach, and . . .

[01:34:45] SL: So how long was your typical day?

DW: Eight in the morning to—if it was a preliminary night, until about eleven thirty or twelve.

SL: Whoa.

DW: Yeah, long days. So, you know, you're just exhausted by the time you get to the end of the week. And it was black-and-white TV.

SL: Yes.

DW: I have a videotape of the full pageant. The first time my daughter looked at it, she said, "Mom, what's wrong with the color?" [*Laughter*] Said, "No color TV back in those days, my dear." [*Laughs*]

SL: I wonder if we should have Ted Turner colorize it for us.

DW: [*Laughs*] I don't know.

[01:35:24] SL: [*Laughs*] Okay, so the first phase is interviews, and while all that's going on, you're rehearsing every day.

DW: You're doing talent rehearsals if you're on talent that night.
Swimsuit rehearsal if you're in swimsuit that night. Evening gown—et cetera.

SL: And . . .

DW: So you rotate through each competition once a day.

SL: They, in other words, they wouldn't do all the girls in swimsuits on a day.

DW: No.

SL: They'd be on different days.

DW: You're divided into three groups of about fifteen to seventeen contestants.

SL: And so what was the next competition that you did after the interview?

DW: I was in talent the first night out. And I didn't win talent, which I thought was devastating. I was second—I found out later—but I didn't win talent. The young woman that won was Miss Virginia, and she had sung on *The Voice of Firestone*, which was a pretty heady credit. And then the next night was swimsuit, and guess what? I won swimsuit . . .

SL: Because you were . . .

DW: And I was thrilled.

SL: . . . ten pounds overweight?

DW: [*Laughter*] No, I don't know. [*Laughs*] I was about a hundred and eighteen pounds wringing wet at that point. And then I made the top ten, and I was—we were off and running again on Saturday night and—very thrilling. It's a big, big stage in Atlantic City. And huge to, you know, to run off of and change clothes. And back in those days, we had those long, leather, white gloves that had twenty buttons up the inside.

SL: Yeah.

[01:36:55] DW: And, of course, you had to get your gown on and those buttons buttoned and back on stage in about a minute and a half.

SL: Oh!

DW: Two minutes, and so—little pressure there. So you're running all night long, and you're excited and breathless. And I was able to hit that high note in my talent, but out of sheer terror. [*SL laughs*] I sang the "Musetta's Waltz" song from *La Boheme* and a jazzy version of "I Love Paris," which Ken Ballenger helped me arrange—my voice teacher.

[01:37:24] SL: Yes. That's great. What—so did you—where did you place in the evening gown?

DW: They don't announce evening gown winner.

SL: They don't?

DW: Mh-mm.

SL: So no one ever knows?

DW: No.

SL: Wonder why that is.

DW: They—well, if you were announcing the winner in all three categories . . .

SL: Then you'd know who won . . .

DW: Yeah—take all the suspense away . . .

SL: Right.

DW: . . . of who was going to be in the top ten.

[01:37:38] SL: So, now, as I remember, what we saw on TV—it seemed like we saw swimsuit, we saw—I mean, were those actual videotapes of those competitions that they put together or . . .

DW: [*Laughs*] There was no videotape back in those days.

SL: There was none? Well, how . . .

DW: It was all . . .

SL: Did the contest air all three nights or . . .

DW: It w—no, they only televised the final night. [*Laughs*]

SL: Okay.

DW: No. We all competed at the top ten in talent, swimsuit, and evening gown on the final night.

SL: I see. Okay. So it—the field had been reduced to ten by the time . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: . . . it was broadcast time.

DW: Yes.

[01:38:37] SL: And did anything change on that final night as far as—I mean, now that you had—would—did the lighting change or . . .

DW: Nothing changed.

SL: Nothing changed?

DW: Except the level of excitement.

SL: Right.

DW: And the tension. And you knew who you were—which of the nine you were competing with now. And we had two double preliminary winners and me in the preliminaries. And one of the double preliminary winners didn't make top five, which was interesting. So you can see that the interview played a big role in that. So it was an interesting scenario to see who made top five.

SL: Tell me about the emcee.

DW: Bert was wonderful, you know.

SL: Well . . .

DW: I miss him to this day. He was a great southern gentleman and made you feel very comfortable. He—'course, he knew we were all nervous as a cat up there on stage. And he was just great fun to be with in rehearsals and on stage.

[01:39:36] SL: Always seemed just totally professional and knew how to hit his mark and . . .

DW: The thing about Bert was his focus was on us and not himself.

SL: Uh-huh. There's some daddy comin' in on that.

DW: He knew the proper role for television host.

SL: Uh-huh. And he could sing.

DW: And he could sing, and he was fun, and he was comic. And he was just terrific.

SL: All right. So let's just talk about the final night.

DW: All right.

SL: What—so your—the field is ten. There's ten of you. Are you all in the same dressing room? Are you sharing a . . .

DW: Yes.

SL: . . . a space between each event?

DW: They—when the ten are announced, the hostesses backstage gather the gowns and the personal belongings of the ten and put them all together there. Each out of the contestants has a dressing table, so everything is in one locale and the dresses are

hanging on a rack nearby, and there are ten hostesses assigned. And they know what to do. It's very fast running around back there and tryin' to vocalize in the back hall. I remember stepping outside into the staircase and doing vocal scales, warming up my voice. And you know, I get nervous thinkin' about it—thinking about that night and the opportunity that was there, not only to win Miss America, but to win a ten thousand dollar scholarship. Now, in today's dollars that doesn't sound like much, but it was a lot of money back in those days.

SL: Oh, yeah.

[01:41:17] DW: Plus what I earned as Miss America. But at—the ten was narrowed to five, and we were escorted out, and we sat on gold chairs on the stage. [*SL laughs*] And we all had on the white gowns there—you know, no one wore a colored gown. And we looked like debutantes as opposed to sleek, sophisticated young women. And we had escorts that were in tails standing behind us, and that's when Bert called us over to pick out our word. And so we spoke extemporaneously—there that good experience came in. [*SL laughs*] And all the training union and church, and all those things that had led up to that moment came through in my ability to think about the meaning of that word and to speak on it. And I was told later by the

auditor that I had—pointwise—had already won the competition, but that little speech really pushed me over the edge.

SL: All the . . .

DW: This was many years later—maybe twenty years later. He told me that.

SL: [*Laughs*] That's so great. So . . .



[01:42:27] DW: Now, let me tell you what it was like sitting there, because my . . .

SL: I want to hear that.

DW: As they peeled off the runner-ups, they left and the chair was taken away, and I was sitting there with . . .

SL: Oh. [*Laughs*]

DW: . . . Miss District of Columbia, my first runner-up. We had both worn the same gown. She had on a gold gown like mine. We both had the same swimsuit. And we had sung the same song, "I Love Paris." And there we sat, holding hands as they do, like this.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And so many people have said, "What was it like when you heard your name called out?" And it was like the flashback of all that many years of training and working and preparation, and how proud I was to be representing Arkansas and the University

of Arkansas. [*Laughs*] And I tear up when I say this.

SL: Well . . .

DW: But it was just the greatest moment for my family and for my people. My people were Arkansas.

[01:43:29] SL: So, now, as I remember, they call out the first runner-up, right?

DW: Yeah.

SL: And so you're kinda left there. [*Laughs*]

DW: Yeah, you know, and my hands go like this [*Hands over Face*], you know, and I could just hardly believe it. And, you know, I get up there and I get the cra—the sa—the crown and the sash put on and the big bouquet of roses, and then the robe. They were still using a robe and a scepter back in those days. And Bert Parks sang my song, and I walked that long runway, you know.

SL: I don't see how you could've walked. I don't see how you walked.

DW: And there was a large delegation there from Arkansas, particularly from El Dorado, my hometown. And I remember seeing them at the end of the runway, and . . .

SL: Were your mom and dad . . .

DW: Mother and Daddy—they brought up on stage and interviewed

Mother and Daddy and Mona. [*SL laughs*] Yeah, they're all on the kinescope—the tape—the full kinescope of it.

SL: Wow.

DW: And my life has never really been the same.

[01:44:24] SL: Well—and it was—like you say, it was a banner moment for the state. I mean, there's no question . . .

DW: Well, I am told that there was a great celebration that broke out at the Tri Delt house. [*Laughter*] And all the fraternity guys came over to the Tri Delt house, and they couldn't get 'em all out by day call.

SL: Right.

DW: And there was great celebrating. [*SL laughs*] But the other funny thing was that there was a time delay on the telecast, and somehow the Virginia chapter knew that I was a Tri Delt.

SL: Oh.

DW: So they called the house here at Fayetteville. And they said, "She won! She won!" And they said, "Are you sure? Are you sure?" [*Laughter*] And so they all sat around the TV and, you know, waited. And, sure enough, it had happened.

SL: Wow.

DW: And I got to s—visit with lots of Tri Delts as I toured the country—two hundred and fifty thousand miles of traveling—the

whole chapters would come out to where I was, and that was great fun, too.

SL: Well, so now the box that you're in is . . .

[01:45:29] DW: The box has expanded. [*Laughter*] I remember distinctly—after being crowned, I was given a list of do's and don'ts and things you say and things you don't say by the executive director in the dressing room. My crown was readjusted, and I was taken to what they called the Toni Ball. Toni was—Toni Home Permanents . . .

SL: Yeah.

DW: . . . was the sponsor. And so they took me down the back elevator of convention hall, and the elevator door opened, and there were, like, four policemen there. And I'm standing there in my robe and my crown, and I said, "Oh, my goodness, what's happened?" And they said, "We're here for you." [*Laughs*] I thought, "Oh, my gosh, this is the beginning of a big-box era in my life." And, you know, for a year it was like that, and still is when I come home to Arkansas. You know, last night on the steps of Carnall Hall, a lady turned around and said, "Oh, hi, Donna." And they always just call me Donna.

SL: Well . . .

DW: In the grocery store—it's just Donna. And I love it that way,

but . . .

SL: Yeah.

DW: . . . to just be recognized is still such an honor.

SL: So . . .

JE: [*Telephone Rings*] Oh, there's a problem.

SL: Ah.

JE: Give me just a second.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[01:46:39] SL: So the elevator doors up—four policemen—it's starting to dawn on you that, you know, you're now kind of it. You're . . .

DW: You're a national celebrity overnight.

SL: Well, and—yeah, no kidding—eighty million people.

DW: Yeah. You're quoted in the newspaper in *The New York Times*. You're interviewed by the *New York Times*, the *L.A. Times*. You know, all of this preparation, you know, had to be there. It's just a matter of timing and life experiences in so many instances, because the next day I was whisked away in a limousine to New York, and had my first New York press conference Monday morning. And we had a suite at the Park Lane Hotel that we had there for a year. And we traveled in and

out of New York—twelve months, two hundred and fifty thousand miles—and here I was the year before, a rising senior at the University of Arkansas. [*Laughs*]

[01:47:31] SL: So what was your first trip? Do you remember?

DW: Well, I think early on I went to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, for an Outstanding Woman of the Year presentation by the New Jersey governor. But I was just off and running. My traveling companions would come on with, like, six pages of itinerary, and that would be, like, a month. And they'd switch out every six weeks. Of course, Miss America [*laughs*] just goes on the whole year, but . . .

SL: Yeah, that's right.

DW: But it was a grueling schedule. And you had to be punctual, and you had to look just perfect all the time, and you had to be just on your toes, and be pleasant all the time, and it was very draining . . .

SL: You were Miss America.

DW: . . . but it was very rewarding.

SL: Well, just as a historical note, how long had the Miss America contests been going?

DW: Nineteen twenty-one.

SL: Nine twenty-one. So by your time, they had probably developed

a template, and they pretty much—I mean, all this stuff is set in motion years ahead, I would assume.

DW: Yes.

SL: Or a year ahead.

DW: And we had wonderful national sponsors, and they had their choice of my appearances—my appearance dates well before the general public did and . . .

SL: Uh-huh. And . . .



[01:48:52] DW: . . . but shortly after I was crowned, one of the most tragic events in world history took place.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And I was a part of that, and that was the assassination of President Kennedy.

SL: Where were you when that happened?

DW: I was making an appearance at the national Pepsi-Cola bottlers convention in Dallas the day of the assassination—November 22, 1963.

SL: Were you actually—was the event that night or . . .

DW: It was a luncheon.

[01:49:21] SL: A luncheon. So . . .

DW: And I was gathering with the head table to go to the luncheon site. Must have been five hundred people there. And we were

getting on an elevator to go down. Joan Crawford was there with her husband, Mr. Steele, who was the chairman of the board, and that's when someone said, "We've just heard that the president's been shot." And of course, everybody was devastated and gravely concerned. And when we got to the luncheon site—'course, they had a program planned, but they just asked one of the local ministers to get up and pray for the president and pray for the nation. And I believe they served the meal, but everybody just sat in stunned silence and just got up and left. And I remember walking back to the hotel or being taken back to the hotel and then walking up to Neiman Marcus, actually. And the people of Dallas were just devastated that this had happened in Dallas and devastated by the whole event. And it was such a dark time for our nation. And my chaperone and I flew out of Love Field the next morning. You know, where just hours before the new president, Lyndon Johnson, had been sworn in, and the body of our president had been taken.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And I still to this day have saved the copy of the *Dallas Times Herald* proclaiming that tragedy. So I met him on the portico of the Oval Office . . .

SL: . . . a month earlier.

DW: About a year and a half earlier.

SL: Oh, a year and a half earlier. Okay, that's right.

DW: And then happened to be in Dallas, then, the day he was assassinated. And that was the end of the Camelot era. It was such a time of optimism for my generation, and the young couple in the White House and the young children and a different sort of president that we could relate to, and then it was all over. And then as we progressed a few years later, then we were into the Vietnam War, and the campus protests, and—so that was really kind of the end of it, just like a curtain coming down.

[01:51:31] SL: Did it change or would have you been aware of any changes in your itinerary from that point on? Were there . . .

DW: No, I just maintained my itinerary.

SL: And the itinerary was mostly corporate . . .

DW: It was a combination of corporate, small town Christmas parades, inland surfing at Cypress Gardens—both commercial as well as corporate or—anybody can book Miss America. You just call the office and say, "I want to book Miss America on this date," and schedule it.

SL: Wow.

DW: So I was all over the place, you know? Festivals. I was at the New York World's Fair for General Motors.

TM: Could you—did you notice any difference in the—in people, like, after the assassination? I mean, could you tell a difference in the country in your travels as far as . . .

[01:52:26] DW: I think it was a much more somber country, coming to grips with the reality of violence, and although we probably will never know what caused that assassination or who caused that assassination or the circumstances around it truly, our focus became much more international, I think, politically. I think we lived in a bubble.

SL: Yep.

DW: Americans lived in a bubble that everybody loved Americans and esteemed our president as much as we did.

SL: It did. It was not just a national thing. It hurt. It hurt everybody—it, you know, it shook.

DW: It changed the world.

SL: Yep. Well you know, to this day, you don't know if—I don't know that you ever really recover from that—from something like that. But you had this itinerary, and you, you know, you . . .

DW: And I persevered. And then a couple of months later, I had



another potential tragedy occur. I was making an appearance at the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Florida, and the early morning after the Gator Bowl, the phone rang in the outer part of our

suite—constantly. We hadn't left a wake-up call or anything. And we started smelling smoke. And there was a hotel fire in this old hotel. And to make a long story short, my chaperone and I kicked out the screen, hung over the windowsill with smoke coming up in our faces and behind our heads. And she finally passed out. Twenty-one people died of smoke inhalation that day, and I was rescued. Luckily, I was rescued, and Lucille was rescued.

[01:54:18] SL: How did that happen? How did you get rescued?

DW: The son of our public relations guy had just gotten out of the navy and had come with his dad to the appearance. And they had a corner room, and they had put the sheets—wet sheets under the door, and so he had decided that he was gonna try to come find us and get us. And he came and knocked the door in and called out our name because he couldn't see his hand in front of his face because of all the chemicals in the smoke. And I heard him and called out to him, and he found his way over to the window where we were—picked up Lucille, and I held onto him, and we went to their room until the smoke—they got the fire under control and they—the smoke had cleared out, and we walked down the ten flights of stairs to the ambulance and went to the hospital. Later, we found that there was a couple who

had stumbled into our bathroom, thinking they were going down a staircase, and had passed out in our bathroom.

SL: Oh. Did they die there?

DW: They did not die. Yeah, interestingly enough, they walked up to me at the Miss North Carolina Pageant in June, and said, "We were the couple that was found in your bathroom." But I left that hotel with a coat over my pajamas and my crown in my hand. [*Laughs*]

SL: Wow.

[01:55:37] DW: Harrowing. The thing that was going through my mind as I was leaning over that windowsill—the headlines in the paper I was sure was going to read, "Miss America Perishes in Hotel Fire—First Runner-up Takes Over." [*SL laughs*] You know, so . . .

SL: That's terrible. [*Laughs*]

DW: But it did not happen. God was good to me. He had other plans for me.

SL: [*Laughs*] Oh, boy, that's funny. Well, so you—did the PR person always travel with you all, too? I mean, was there an entourage in your travels?

DW: Generally, it's just the traveling companion. But Pepsi-Cola was sponsoring that appearance . . .

SL: I see, so it was a Pepsi-Cola. . .

DW: . . . so it was a Pepsi PR person

SL: . . . PR person. Mh-hmm. Well, I know that there was a great amount of pride, and I know that your spirit was impeccable and all that, but surely that much travel, that many experiences—surely—didn't you get run down or did it ever seem like—I mean, did you just eat it up the whole time or did you get worn out with it?

[01:56:43] DW: I loved being Miss America and the opportunities that I had to meet the people and to absorb and internalize the culture of our country and the differences of our country. It's tiring, just as if you were on a job that you had to travel every other day, practically, to somewhere in this country. And to always be your best and look your best. I learned how to take care of my body. I learned to take vitamins. [*Laughs*] I learned how to go to bed when I could go to bed and rest. You know, I learned to—I had to be my own hairdresser, my own secretary, my own everything—take care of my clothes. It's a full-time job.

SL: Now, how old were you when this happened?

DW: Twenty-one.

SL: Twenty-one. Wow.

DW: In fact, I turned twenty-two the night I was making an appearance on *The Garry Moore Show*—television show.

[01:57:38] SL: Well, let's talk about . . .

DW: And they celebrated my birthday at the—during the rehearsal.

SL: How was Garry Moore?

DW: He was a sweet man.

SL: Yeah.

DW: Yeah. He had a TV show back in the early . . .

SL: He was a little guy, wasn't he?

DW: Little guy.

SL: Yeah.

DW: Shorter than I.

SL: Uh-huh. He was funny, too, wasn't he?

DW: Yes, he was.

SL: I remember that show. Let's talk about the—I mean, you know—I know touring the state when you were the Forestry Queen the—as Miss America—it would seem like that you would meet all kinds of powerful people.

DW: I did.

SL: Politicians, industry leaders . . .

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . celebrities.

[01:58:27] DW: Yeah, it definitely puts you on a different level. And two things I'd like to say about that. It convinces you that you can hold your own on that level, too. You just apply the same principles that you applied before, and as your boxes increase, you gain the ability to keep growing. So to some extent, although I was sort of in awe of a lot of these people I was meeting, I was just kind of theatrically playing the part—playing the role that I was—I could talk to them and be on their level and have something of interest to say. And the second thing that I want to point out is I don't care who they are, they're always just very curious about what it's like to be Miss America. And to this day I have [*laughs*] senators and, you know, US senators and politicians and people of high position—they want to know about it. They have all these questions about it. So it's definitely an American icon.

SL: [*Sighs*] Did you have . . .

TM: Switch tape, please.

SL: Oh, okay. Good.

[Tape stopped]

[01:59:32] SL: Well, let's talk about—if you can remember—maybe just list off some of the folks that you met that are in that powerful realm, whether they're corporate leaders, business

leaders, or politicians or celebrities.

DW: Well, over the years—I'm not gonna just confine it to the year I was Miss America.

SL: Well, I guess once you're Miss America, there are [*laughs*] many doors that open.

DW: Many doors that open, and many life experiences present themselves. But the year I was Miss America, I had the opportunity of meeting Norman Vincent Peale and attending his church services and having lunch with he and his wife—very, very nice. I've had the pleasure of meeting and being around President Johnson and Lady Bird. The Robb girls—Lynda Robb and—with Luci.

SL: Luci Baines.

[00:00:00] DW: Luci Baines. I just ran into Luci not long ago. I met President Bush Sr.. Then I met President Kennedy. Of course, I met President Bill Clinton—the first time, back in 1979. But, interestingly enough, I could have met him at my Miss America Homecoming in Hot Springs because I was riding on my float, and the Hot Springs High School Band was behind me in the parade, and our dear president was the drum major of the high school band—the Hot Springs High School Band—in my homecoming parade in Hot Springs. And so Bill and Hillary, of

course, would be on my list of outstanding people. Bob Hope, Art Linkletter—just a lot of people that I've interviewed through my television career as well. Billy Graham. 'Course, I hold him in very high esteem. Gregory Peck, Helen Hayes, Kirk Douglas, Charlie Pride—just met and interviewed a lot of people through the years. The thing I think that impresses me just generally about people of such high stature or familiarity is I look at their heart, and I'm impressed by those people who are not full of themselves, but are genuinely committed to what they're doing for the reason that they're doing it, as opposed to what it will do for them. One of the things I like to say when people say, "Oh, I've never met a Miss America, this is such an honor," I'll just say, "Oh, we're just folks." We're just folks. And that says to them, "Don't put that plastic barrier between you and me. Let's just get to know each other and, you know, let's be friends," and pretty soon they'll drop that plastic shield and they'll relate one-on-one as a woman or as a parent or brother and sister or—the way God meant for us to relate to one another.

SL: Yes.

DW: And to love one another.

[02:03:00] SL: Well, I think that's good advice. Do you want to talk about any of those—I mean, we're kind of—I know that you met

a lot of people during your reign as Miss America, and I know that you had a career after Miss America. Is there—before we move beyond that reign period, is there other things that you want to talk about as far as just that year of being Miss America? Is there—was there any meeting or any event that was on your itinerary that . . .

DW: There were so many.

SL: Well, let's talk about just a few.

DW: There were just so many that it's hard to pick out one or two. I did speak to the National Southern Baptist Convention.

SL: Yes.

DW: About ten thousand Baptists. I think I was the first Baptist Miss America.

SL: Okay.

DW: And that was an honor to speak to that congregation. It was just so varied, and I can't pull out something out of . . .

SL: What about one of the small . . .

DW: . . . two hundred and fifty appearances forty-four years ago.

SL: What about one of the small events? Maybe something that no one would ever have heard of that they've got you—they book you, and it fit into your schedule, and you showed up, and you were there. I mean, when you—I don't know, I'm just

imagining . . .

[02:04:35] DW: Well, I went to Talladega, Alabama, for their automobile races there, and then I also was in the lead car in the Daytona 500. And that was kind of a thrill.

SL: Yes.

DW: So it was as varied as that as—in addition—and in Fulton, Kentucky, at the International Banana Festival.

SL: [*Laughs*] I've never heard of the International Banana . . .

DW: One-ton banana pudding. Pageland, South Carolina—the Watermelon Festival. There was a lot of events like this where I just got to mix and mingle with everyday Americans who were just great and treated me beautifully and were so appreciative that I came and . . .

SL: Once again, it sounds not unlike a politician's life.

DW: Exactly. National Jaycee Convention in Dallas. I mean, you name it, I did it. [*Laughs*]

SL: Well, so you had to be rubbing elbows with politicians . . .

DW: Oh, yes.

SL: . . . a lot.

DW: A lotta mayors.

SL: A lotta mayors.

DW: Gave me keys to the city.

SL: [*Laughter*] Keys to the city. Do you have any idea how many keys to cities you have?

DW: Not really.

SL: Not really? Well, now, are they yours to keep or is that archived . . .

DW: Yeah.

SL: . . . or given over to a Miss America . . .

DW: They're ours to keep

SL: That's great. That's great. Well, gosh . . .

[02:05:50] TM: You mentioned, like, people would ask you all kinds of questions about being Miss America. I mean, what were some of those that stand out in your mind that maybe we haven't . . .

DW: Well, the typical question is, "What's it like to be Miss America?"

[*SL laughs*] And I've already . . .

SL: That's . . .

DW: I've already explained to you, you know, what the day was like and—you had to be punctual. You had to be on time, and you know, meet those airline schedules, and someone there at the airport to pick you up in a car—in a—I remember one small, little town in somewhere in the South, and—it was in Kentucky. And they picked me up at the airport, and had the car and had the police officer on the motorcycle. And so we got to the motel

where I was staying—not a hotel, but a motel—and they said, "Okay, now, you have to stay in the car for a little while, and we'll come get you when you can get out." And [*laughs*] so five minutes went by, and they came and got me. And they had found this recording, I mean, a record of "There She Is, Miss America," and they had that on a phonograph playing when I walked up to my motel door.

SL: Oh, that's wonderful.

DW: And they would station the policemen outside all night long in the hall. And it was interesting to see what kinda security that I would have in the various places, and how that would be interpreted. It was great fun.

[02:07:11] TM: And so you traveled by yourself? You did it all yourself?

DW: No.

TM: Oh, but . . .

DW: I had a traveling companion.

TM: So one person, but not . . .

DW: Twenty-four hours a day. There were two of them that rotated on and off—Peg and Lucille. I was never alone.

SL: [*Sighs*] But there was always security. There was always some level of security.

DW: Some level of security when we were on an appearance, but not at the New York Hotel. No.

SL: Right.

DW: And, you know, occasionally we'd have a break. Like, we'd have three or four days and . . .

[02:07:41] SL: Well, so how was New York?

DW: New York was great. You know, I'd had an opportunity to go to the great museums and see some of the—saw Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*.

SL: Oh, boy.

DW: Oh, my gosh, was that wonderful.

SL: Yes.

DW: Singing "People." I sang "People" that year six hundred times.

[*SL laughs*] But to see her sing it and hear a pin drop when she sang it—it was just great. But it was just—my exposure to New York City was just a revelation to me at that point. All of a sudden—I'm living in Fayetteville, and overnight I'm in New York living for a year.

SL: Wow. Well, so was it—so your reign comes to an end. Is there anything about the next Miss America and that process and your role in that event that . . .

DW: Well, you know, we obviously participate in the final pageant.

SL: Right.

DW: And I sang and—sang in a production number. And then I crowned Vonda Kay Van Dyke, who was a ventriloquist. And the interesting thing about crowning your successor is that instantly you're yesterday's newspaper. And where they were clamoring after you for a quote an interview or something, you know, it's just cut off.

[02:09:04] SL: Yeah.

DW: [*Laughs*] It's just—it's over.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And, you know, the spotlight's on the next person. And that's okay, because it's a hard year.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And you're ready for a little normalcy.

SL: Yeah.

DW: You're really ready for a little normalcy and a little control of your life again, and being off that schedule.

SL: Well, but also, isn't it kind of a letdown, too? I mean . . .

DW: Well, yeah, it's a long . . .

SL: I mean, you . . .

DW: It's a long, hard week and a long year.

SL: You spent a whole year just pretty much giving yourself to

America.

DW: Right. And in return, I won a ten thousand dollar scholarship and about fifty thousand dollars in appearance fees, which was a lotta money back in those days.

[02:09:47] SL: So you come back to Fayetteville.

DW: Came back to school. Finished that degree.

SL: Yeah.

DW: Started moving on in my professional life for a couple of years, then decided I wanted to come back to Fayetteville and get a master's degree, which I did. Finished the summer of [19]68. I moved to Lubbock, Texas, and had my first television show while I was teaching also at Texas Tech University.

SL: Now, what were you teaching at . . .

DW: I was in the speech department.

SL: Excellent.

DW: And I had my first show called *A Date With Donna*.

[*SL laughs*] Public affairs show, live every afternoon at five o'clock.

SL: Live?

DW: Live.

SL: And you just had local public officials that—or . . .

DW: Or celebrities or people that came through Lubbock. I remember

interviewing Jimmy Dean one time when he was trying to get his sausage company started.

SL: Uh-huh. I loved him.

DW: Yeah.

SL: Yeah. He was great. Did—well, any of your contacts or any of your acquaintances during your year reign—did any of that continue? Did anyone—I mean, does that just all completely go away? Is that . . .

DW: It doesn't go away from the point of view of the people that you meet within the Miss America system. And many, many friends for forty-four years throughout the country that are still dear friends that have remained with the system. Some have since passed away, but those friendships are very dear to me.

[02:11:17] SL: So did politics ever enter your mind while you're doing all this national stuff?

DW: No, not then.

SL: Not then?

DW: Hm-mm.

SL: It was enough—you were pretty much at the peak of politics anyway by being Miss America. I mean, that's a plateau that . . .

DW: Well. Well . . .

SL: . . . very few people ever have.

DW: And it certainly gives you the name recognition opportunity.

SL: Yeah.

DW: But it was not the right time for me. Because I wasn't finished with my education, and I wanted my name [*laughs*] on Senior Walk. Remember that little girl that skated down Senior Walk? And I wanted it there twice, for two degrees. So that was next on my agenda.

[02:11:57] SL: So why Lubbock?

DW: Well, I had an opportunity there through a friend who was in the state legislature who owned the television station who said, "Let me check at Texas Tech and see if there are any positions available on the faculty." And so I had just finished my master's here. Left the beautiful Ozark Mountains—landed in the cotton fields and dust of Lubbock, Texas [*laughs*] . . .

SL: How long did you last?

DW: . . . and said, "What have I done?" [*Laughter*]

SL: How long did you stay?

DW: One year.

SL: One year.

DW: One year, and—but it was good experience.

SL: Did you enjoy the show?

DW: Yeah, it was my first TV show.

SL: Ye . . .

DW: And then television was what I had always wanted to do, but I felt that I needed more flexibility, and that's why I went back and got my master's, so that I could teach on the college level.

SL: Right.

DW: And I was a graduate teaching assistant here.

SL: When you were working on your masters.

DW: Right.

SL: And at Texas Tech, did you enjoy teaching as well?

DW: Yes, I did.

[02:13:00] SL: So, okay, after Lubbock, then what happens?

DW: Austin, Texas.

SL: And . . .

DW: KTBC. I had a show called *The Noon Show* . . .

SL: So . . .

DW: . . . with Cactus Pryor. Cactus Pryor is quite a notable character in Austin, Texas, in the political realm. And you know, he was the favorite emcee of LBJ and Lady Bird. And that's kind of how I got to know them.

SL: So did you get a call from that station while you were doing your show in Lubbock?

DW: No. Actually, I married and moved to Austin. And my husband was speaker of the Texas house of representatives, and so that . . .

SL: Oh, okay.

DW: . . . introduced me to the Texas political scene.

[02:13:43] SL: I see.

DW: The television show came a little bit later.

SL: Well, so, let's talk about Austin. Tell me . . .

DW: Austin is a great place to live. I lived there from [19]69 to [19]79.

SL: Ten years.

DW: Yeah. Very different place than today.

SL: And, let's see, I guess the music scene was ve . . .

DW: The music scene was coming along back in those days. Willie Nelson was a recognizable name, certainly, in [19]69.

SL: Yeah.

DW: But you know, most of the focus of Austin is politics. And, of course, LBJ was coming back to the ranch after the presidency. And this is, like, early [19]70s. So you know, that—Lloyd Bentsen—all those prominent people that were in Texas politics were all . . .

SL: Austin based.

DW: . . . a part of the scene. Yeah.

SL: Uh-huh. Well, and, of course, University of Texas, too.

DW: Oh, yes.

SL: That's a pretty big entity in that town.

DW: Oh, yes. Yes.

[02:14:44] SL: Well, were those—so how long did it take you before you had your own show in Austin?

DW: That came along about 1975, and I produced the show, and Cactus would walk in and just shoot from the hip. [*SL laughs*]

And he was hilarious. He was a comedian. And we had everybody that was coming through Austin, with the LBJ School of Public Affairs and outstanding entertainers that were coming through, and it was great fun.

SL: So as host, what were some of the things that you had to do in your role for that show? What work?

DW: Well, set up the show and book all the people that were gonna be on the show, for one thing. And then just really be the guide to guide Cactus [*laughs*] through the whole show—and it was coming on, and that's just the way he operated.

SL: Yeah.

DW: You know, he let me set it up and say—on air—well you know, it's like Kathy Lee and Regis or Kelly and Regis.

SL: Well, I'm thinkin' you were pretty much the straight man.

DW: Yes, I was Cactus's straight man, definitely. Yeah.

SL: Uh-huh. That's interesting. So—and this was Channel 7?

DW: Channel 7, mh-hmm. It was LBJ's station.

SL: What were the facilities like? LBJ—he owned it?

DW: He owned the station. They had their little apartment up on top of the station.

SL: Is that right?

DW: Mh-hmm.

SL: And they stayed there?

DW: It was their in-town place to stay, other than the ranch.

[02:16:19] SL: Well, you know, in his later years, he grew really long hair and beard and all that. Did you ever have any interfaces with him?

DW: Yes, we were invited out to the ranch on several occasions for lunch and various public gatherings. But at that point—I never remember seeing LBJ with very long hair and a beard. Never. Never.

SL: Well, I just remember photographs of him in his later years. And he'd grown that out.

DW: Well, I was, you know, kind of around him in [19]69, [19]70, and [19]71, going out to the ranch to these political functions

and . . .

SL: Now, when did he pass?

DW: I want to say sometime in [19]71. It was January, and it was very cold. We went to the burial site on the ranch for the services.

[02:17:14] SL: Did you e—I mean w—did you ever have any meaningful conversations with he or Lady Bird?

DW: Well, sure, sure.

SL: Anything that you can . . .

DW: H—well, sure. Yes, we were—just the two of us were invited to lunch at the ranch. And I particularly admired Lady Bird. She was so engaging in her conversation and the things that she was interested in. And she was a great hostess at dinner parties, and occasionally I would sit at her table. And she would try to get everybody engaged in two or three topics that she had already thought about. And I learned a lot about her techniques from being around her and her daughters. And LBJ was just bigger than life, you know? He had three or four television screens at the ranch, and he'd have 'em goin' all at one time, and he was definitely the man in control. Let's put it that way. And he loved his cattle.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And he would love to take you in his big Lincoln Continental out on the ranch and show you his bulls.

SL: I've read something about that. Uh-huh.

DW: Yeah, and he was somethin'. He would call the speaker's apartment. He'd say, "Doll, this is Lyndon. Is your husband there?" [*Laughter*] Which would kind of catch you off guard a little bit, but that was just his mode of operation.

[02:18:35] SL: Yeah. Well, you know, there's some of the things I've read about him—he battled depression, and he was—it troubled him, the Vietnam War and all that stuff, and choosing not to run again and all that. It—did you ever, I mean, did he seem fine and healthy every time you were around?

DW: Yes, yes. I don't think he ever let many people see that other side. Not while I was around him, anyway. He was very upbeat and very much in command and control.

SL: Well, you know, he may have enjoyed your company, too.

DW: I hope so.

SL: I bet he did. [*Laughs*] Well, anything else about Austin that you want to share or talk about? Is there . . .

DW: Well, it's always interesting to be so close to state politics. And we were literally very close. We had an apartment in the capitol building and lived in the capitol building. [*Laughs*] So I could

walk out of the apartment onto the house floor and listen to any legislation that was going on.

[02:19:56] SL: You have just—tha—politics has just really been a part of your life.

DW: It really has been, and I enjoy the process of—the political process, and I just like it all. There are some ugly sides of politics that I don't like, certainly.

SL: Yeah.

DW: The nasty sides of politics. And it's gotten worse as the years have progressed, but it's what this country's about, and we need to be interested in it.

SL: You know, I saw some photographs of you and Orval Faubus.

DW: Yes.

SL: How much time did you ever get to spend with Governor Faubus?

DW: Well, not a great deal. I would just occasionally be in the governor's office for a photograph. He did send me a telegram the night I won. "From the proudest people from the proudest state in the United States." And I have that in my scrapbook.

But I was probably with him on five or six occasions. He was at my homecoming in El Dorado.

SL: Mh-hmm. I've always heard he was a really smart guy—very

likable, just maybe—I mean, there's probably several different images of him that might be misleading. Did you ever—was there any—ever any meaningful conversations that you had with him?

DW: Not really. I was only . . .

SL: It was all PR-related stuff?

DW: It was all PR and meeting him on a social basis.

SL: Yeah.

[02:21:30] SL: Well, I just kinda remember that photograph and—what about—well, I know that you—this was—this musta [must have] been your first marriage, and I don't really want to go into your personal life that you're uncomfortable talking about, but I'm assuming that your time in Austin probably ended about the time that your first marriage fell apart, and you moved on, I would guess.

DW: Well, my television career was the—in Austin—was sort of the beginning of my different stage of life after the divorce. And I stayed there until I came to Little Rock.

SL: Okay.

DW: And the impetus for me coming to Little Rock to even look at this market was then newly-elected Governor Clinton . . .

SL: Yeah.

DW: . . . who sent me a letter saying, "I have been—just been elected governor of Arkansas, and I'd like for some Arkansans who have distinguished themselves to come and join me on inaugural day. Hillary and I would like to invite you to my inauguration." I'd never met either one of 'em. And so I thought, "Well, this sounds like fun. This sounds interesting. I think I'll go." And so I did, and that's the first time I met the two of them. And, you know, Hillary was—had her hair—the long, wavy hair and the big, thick glasses. And it was back in those days. And he was very charismatic and fun and intellectual, and reminded me very much of the Kennedys.

[02:23:12] SL: There was that Kennedyesque excitement . . .

DW: Yeah.

SL: . . . around he and Hillary.

[00:00:00] DW: So there was an opportunity at Channel 7 in Little Rock to do *Good Morning Arkansas*, so I moved.

SL: Now, let's see—would that have been . . .

DW: [Nineteen] sixty-nine.

SL: Jim Pitcock?

DW: No. Yeah, Jim Pitcock. No, that was [19]79. Jim Pitcock was news director.

SL: Yeah. And so you did a good morning show for them. Is

that . . .

DW: I did that for about four or five years, and some documentaries, and a lot of parades and special events and . . .

[02:23:48] SL: Do you have any—were there any shows—morning shows that you have particularly fond memories of?

DW: Well, they were certainly five days a week. I had some wonderful guests. None of them come to mind right now.

[*Laughter*] Except maybe Art Linkletter was on the Little Rock show.

SL: Uh-huh. What was he like?

DW: Oh, such a gentleman—wonderful gentleman. And just cute and sweet, and I just loved him.

SL: Well, how did you land him here? I mean, how'd that happen?

DW: He was coming to Little Rock for some reason.

SL: And he agreed to . . .

DW: He agreed to be on the show. You know, I did things like book promotions or concert promotions or . . .

SL: So what time did you have to go to work—do the morning show?

DW: I had to be there, I think—seven thirty or eight.

SL: That's not bad.

DW: It was live.

SL: That's not bad. Let's see, that would have been probably just

about the time three-quarter inch was moving to beta, maybe,
or

[02:25:05] DW: I don't know. I was not in the control room.

[Laughs]

SL: Yeah—not in the control room. I'm tryin' to think—what about
Mr. Pitcock? How was it working with him?

DW: Well, he was head of the news department, and I was . . .

SL: Did you . . .

DW: . . . public affairs. Occasionally I would go out and do a little
feature clip for the news but not too frequently. I was not really
under his wing.

SL: Uh-huh. Who did you kind of—who did you report to?

DW: Well, Dale Nicholson.

SL: Dale Nicholson. What a guy.

DW: General manager.

SL: Yeah. Well, say a little somethin' about Dale.

DW: Well, he was fun. You know, I had remembered him when I was
growing up and seeing television for the first time on the Little
Rock channels, and he was fun to work with.

[02:26:05] SL: Did you learn—what did you learn doin' the morning
show?

DW: Well, it was a lot of the same that I had done in Austin. A lot of

the same things. Well, one of the things that I loved was getting out in Arkansas in addition to the morning shows and doing the specials and doing on-location things and rubbin' shoulders with the average Arkansans and being back at the festivals and . . .

SL: Right.

DW: It's like the old Forestry Queen days, you know?

SL: Yeah, yeah, it was.

DW: I loved reconnecting with the state.

SL: Well, now, you mentioned somethin' about documentary stuff.

Did you do some documentary-style things or were they . . .

DW: We did a few things. And we did some special programming in regard to the Miss Arkansas Pageant. Like an hour-long special that was entertainment-type things.

SL: Ah. I'll bet you were—well that—kind of a natural.

DW: Yeah. Yeah

SL: I mean, what a great resource you'd be to do that—produce that.

DW: But in 1983, I met my husband, Bryan Whitworth. And we married in [19]84, and I moved to Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and that was the end of my television career.

SL: Yeah. Well, so . . .

DW: And I became a corporate wife.

SL: Yes.

DW: And continued to apply all the skills that I had learned in the corporate world.

[02:27:30] SL: Mh-hmm. Well, what was Bartlesville like?

DW: Bartlesville is small-town America, about thirty-five thousand, with an international corporation located there. It was Phillips Petroleum at that point. Now it's ConocoPhillips. And one of the areas that Bryan was over was international government relations. So that meant from [19]84 until the time he retired, we went to all the national political conventions.

SL: Right.

DW: Democratic and Republican. Loved it.

SL: Well, of course.

DW: I just loved it. It was just a continuation of everything that I had learned.

SL: Is there much difference between Democratic and Republican national conventions?

DW: A lot of similarities in many ways, but the people are the difference.

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: Absolutely. The look of the people, the style of the people, the political focus. Very different.

[02:28:33] SL: Well, I'm not gonna ask what your preferences are or which you prefer, but was there any particular national convention that stands out in your mind?

DW: Well, of course. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yes?

DW: New York. [*Laughter*]

SL: Yeah.

DW: Yeah, we were there when Bill Clinton was nominated. And we were there for his first inauguration. So that was—it was quite a celebration because his story was a great success story coming from Hope, Arkansas. It's, again, that same mentality that you rise above your circumstances to who you're supposed to become. It's sort of in your psyche. It's in your mind, and you look for opportunities to make it happen, and he did. And he's still contributing greatly to the world today with his foundation.

SL: How exciting to act—were you on the floor?

DW: No.

SL: You were—those are just delicates—delegates that . . .

DW: Those are delegates that are allowed on the floor. But we were there as a part of the corporate strata. But very interesting to watch it.

SL: Yeah.

DW: And the flavor and excitement—you know, it's like a pep rally at a football game. And to hear all the speeches and the speakers and I just love it. [*Laughs*] I do.

SL: Yeah, I hear you. I hear you. It's in your blood.

DW: Yeah.

[02:30:17] SL: Well, let's talk—so how do you—you've enjoyed the corporate wife role?

DW: Yes.

SL: You enjoyed that a lot.

DW: Yes.

SL: You felt like you were able to contribute to the . . .

DW: I know how to work a room.

SL: Yeah. Any favorite moments, outside of the national conventions in the corporate world that you partic . . .

DW: Well, I think the inaugurations and the inaugural events. The galas and the people that I've met associated with those.

And spending the night in the White House and . . .

SL: Oh, you got to do that?

DW: Got to do that.

SL: Oh, that's so cool.

DW: That was pretty cool.

SL: Which bedroom?

DW: The Queen's Bedroom.

SL: Queen's Bedroom.

DW: Across from the Lincoln Bedroom.

SL: Across from the famous Lincoln Bedroom.

DW: Yes.

SL: Wow. Wow.

[02:31:16] DW: So I—it's a connection with American history for me.

It's—the political process is so Americana. Being Miss America is such an American icon, and just—it just all works together for me to—and I just love to be a part of it and be engaged in it.

SL: Well, you know, I would guess being Miss America you really represent everybody.

DW: Yes.

SL: So you can kinda rise above the politics in a way, and also at the same time, meet, represent, and be a part of the common folk where . . .

DW: Yeah.

SL: . . . you kinda get the best of both worlds.

DW: The best of all worlds.

SL: Uh-huh. And you know, I would think that you would be fairly valuable for insight and advice and—just because of all your travels and all the events and all the people and folks that

you've been a part of . . .

DW: Well . . .

SL: . . . and meant something to. I mean . . .

[02:32:20] DW: Well, I think it's imperative that we all stay abreast of international affairs and national affairs and make some decisions—concrete decisions based on the best information that we have about politics and what's going on and what the lawmakers are doing and how important that is to our world. Our world has changed so dramatically in the last ten years.

SL: Yeah.

DW: It's not the world I grew up in.

SL: It is not.

DW: And we have to be on our toes. We have to be looking forward, making decisions. We can't be complacent anymore.

SL: So is your husband retired now? Is he . . .

DW: He is working for a law firm in New York City, Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen, and Katz. And he does work for ConocoPhillips through that law firm.

SL: Uh-huh. Now, I know that you sit on several boards, don't you, or . . .

DW: Seven.

SL: Seven? [*Laughs*] Is that enough?

DW: Too many.

SL: Too many?

DW: According to my husband.

SL: Yes. Do you have a favorite or is that not a good thing to say?

DW: Well, I've been on—I was the first Miss America elected to the Miss America board in 2004. And I must say that my heart is really in that board work, and it's extensive board work because we are very actively involved in the function of the pageant. I am also on the executive committee of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition there in Fort Worth. And Van came to El Dorado when I was a senior in high school right and played after he won that Russian Tchaikovsky Competition. So he's a favorite friend.

[02:34:06] SL: That's another circle.

DW: It's another circle. I'm on the executive board of the Fort Worth Symphony and the TCU College of Fine Arts advisory board. So you can see I select things that are related to arts, arts education, education, Miss America, and, of course, my work here with the university has been extensive—since the first campaign we ever had, the Campaign for Books. I was on that committee in [19]82 and . . .

SL: Is that right? So you got to work with Coach and Dave on that.

That's good.

DW: Yes, yes. And then, of course, we just finished that fabulous Campaign for the Twenty-First Century, and I was on that steering committee and . . .

SL: I loved that. Yeah.

DW: . . . campaign to save Old Main. My heart is in Fayetteville, and I want to continue to keep my fingers involved in things here. I want to make education great at Arkansas.

[02:34:55] SL: Well, we're on the same page on that. I saw somewhere in your résumé the Kennedy Center, also.

DW: Yes.

SL: Now, tell me about that.

DW: Well, President Clinton appointed me to the President's Advisory Committee on the Arts for the Kennedy Center . . .

SL: And . . .

DW: . . . in 1994. And I served on that committee until he went out of office. And then each new president then selects their own committee.

SL: Right.

DW: But I rotated onto the National Committee for the Performing Arts, and I have been on that since 2000. And just going off now as chairman of the executive committee of that.

[02:35:30] SL: Well, so, was that—that's got to be fun.

DW: I love the Kennedy Center.

SL: My gosh!

DW: Yeah, it's great!

SL: I mean, as centers go, that's . . .

DW: And it's the opportunity, once again, to meet people from all over the country, outstanding people who are arts patrons in their own community. And to be a part of the fabulous—the people of the board of trustees at the Kennedy Center.

SL: Yes.

DW: The nation's performing arts center—National Symphony Orchestra. I just love it. [*Laughs*] I just—I'd only do things that give me joy and excitement, and we all need that.

SL: Yeah.

[Tape stopped]

[02:36:05] SL: So we were really kind of going over your résumé of all the boards and organizations you've been a part of. And there was another one that circles back around with your religious involvement and commitments. What was that one, now?

DW: Well, my husband and I are members of Travis Avenue Baptist Church, and I'm a member of the choir there and participate

there. But also in Fort Worth is the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. And, of course, I've heard of that all of my life, and having the opportunity to live in Fort Worth gave me the opportunity to participate on their advisory committee. And so I do that, and I'm working with Mrs. Patterson—Mrs. Paige Patterson, the president's wife, to establish a women's auxiliary. And I've given a scholarship there in that regard. And also working on the centennial committee. The seminary is a hundred years old next year.

[02:37:05] SL: [*Sighs*] You know, I have to believe that you're a role model in so many ways, but this religious commitment that you have surely has to be inspirational to women in general. I mean, surely they come to you and they see . . .

DW: It just feels right. It just feels right for me. I mean, I grew up goin' to church and singin' in the choir and being a part of a church family. And there's just something missing in my soul and spirit if that participation is not there. And it's just extra joy to be able to participate on the seminary level, where the training of so many types of staff and ministers goes on, and they go out around the world—and missionaries and—it's just great opportunity for me to learn more.

SL: I remember earlier in our talk—you've mentioned that every

time that you went to another—moved to another city, the first thing you did was get affiliated with the local church . . .

DW: Right.

SL: . . . and get involved with their—and I don't think we've ever talked about any of your work in Little Rock—
what—d . . .

[02:38:24] DW: Immanuel Baptist Church.

SL: Yeah.

DW: It was the old church, which is now part of the children's hospital.

SL: Okay.

DW: And I think they tore down a part of it, which was sad for me, but Immanuel Baptist Church was my church home, and sang in the choir. I sang a lotta solos there. In fact, there was someone else that was rather famous that sang with us from time to time, and that was President Clinton.

SL: Well, can he sing?

DW: Well, certainly he can!

SL: He can? Really? He can hold a tune and . . .

DW: I'd never heard him sing. I was, of course, in the second soprano section. [*SL laughs*] But I think he was in the bass section or something, but . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

DW: . . . a baritone or whatever. But Danny Thomason would take him the choir music from rehearsal every Wednesday night to the governor's mansion, and he'd come robe up with us on Sunday morning and sing.

[02:39:11] SL: That's a great story.

DW: And W. O. Vaught was our pastor and had such a terrific impact on me, and I think on Bill and Hillary, also.

SL: So h—is he still alive or is he . . .

DW: No, he is deceased.

SL: He has passed on.

DW: He took me to the Holy Lands . . .

SL: Oh, he did?

DW: . . . with ano—with a large group from our church. Yeah.

SL: Wow. Well, how does your religious commitment mesh with the legacy of being Miss America? I mean, does it . . .

DW: Well, I think that being Miss America is a wonderful opportunity to show the love of Christ through you. Through your heart, through your soul, through your interaction with people. And there have been many fine, young, Christian women that have served as Miss America—I will tell you that—and serve there today. And I think that's part of God's plan, too, because we

touch people at all walks of life at all levels of—have lots of problems. And on many, many occasions when I would be speaking—past the year that I was Miss America, doing women's seminars—I would have women come up that were just desperate and want to talk to me, and young people. And so I felt like I was sort of put in the role of a counselor as well. And so, you know, I was certainly seeking guidance and wisdom in the words that I was imparting to these people, too, because I was certainly not a professional counselor in any way. But just kind of have to be open to the direction.

[02:41:00] SL: Well, I think you probably have excellent instinct on—in your ability to engage—read the people in front of you and pay attention to them and . . .

DW: And how important it is for us that are given this responsibility to always be looking for that opportunity and feeling that need and feeling that hurt and feeling that plea, and knowing that you need to set aside some quality time with this individual to help 'em over a difficult period. And then what an honor it is to be able to do that in any way. And, you know, and to get the letters that you get from them.

SL: [*Sighs*] Are we—well, let's just kinda—let me review in my head all the things that we've talked about. I always worry that we

have missed something major that we should talk about, and I'm just wondering—you've got to help me here. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think we need to talk about or we should talk about or that would be of interest to the folks in Arkansas or your grandchildren or—is there anything else that we haven't touched on that we should be touched on?

[02:42:20] DW: Well, I think I've led a pretty normal life. [*SL laughs*] I always [*laughter*] think of myself as a very normal person. You know, I cook, I clean house, and, you know, I do everything everybody else does. But I have just been given extraordinary opportunities in my life—extraordinary platforms to do good. And you can choose to do good, or not do anything at all, or do bad things. But the burden is always on the doing of good for other people and leaving a positive legacy. And I guess if I wanted to say anything in closing, it would be that I don't want to drop out of sight. I don't want to sit on the couch and read books and watch TV and that's all I do. I want to be engaged. I want to be out there. I want to be involved in making things better and leaving it better for the next generation—better for the state of Arkansas. Although I live in Texas now, my heart is in Arkansas. You know, you're my people. These are my roots. These are my *deep* roots. This is

where my love is. And I'm always looking for ways to improve my state and my people, and that has got to be rooted in education and our economic base. And the third part of that is it's got to be rooted in the belief that we can excel. It's that same small-box mentality that's got to grow. You know, why did I believe that I could step out with the best and accomplish?

[02:44:07] SL: Well, you know, I think it has a lot to do with your mom and dad and the neighborhood you grew up in and the environment that . . .

DW: Absolutely.

SL: . . . you were in. And I think something got planted in you—or I think you were given something anyway, but I think that was nurtured.

DW: And I'm still looking for what I'm supposed to do when I grow up. [*SL laughs*] I'm still looking for the next step—the next thing that I want to accomplish or achieve, because I think when you stop doing that, you regress. You really start to lose a little part of yourself. You lose your energy level, your joy, your sense of accomplishment. And my family will say, "Why don't you just quit some of that stuff and just sit back and relax and put your feet up?" That's not what gives me joy. You know, I have to balance that a little bit so that I have the stamina to do

that. But I've just got this burning desire to make things better.

SL: Well, by all accounts, you're very good at doing that.

DW: Thanks.

SL: Yeah. Anything else? Joy?

[02:45:22] TM: I was—you know, you mentioned about the change in the world since—you know, from when you were crowned to now. And what—you know, talk about some of the challenges that we're faced with today, and potentially any, you know, any answers or any insights you might have to any things that are—you know, the way culture or just almost anything is goin' today, that might pop out—where you might see an answer to somethin' if that makes any sense.

DW: I think we are continued to be plagued by challenges with diversity and multiculturalism within the United States. And it's no longer just trying to relate and accept and integrate with the black population, but it's all the cultures of the world—now they're at our doorstep and in our institutions and in our universities. And trying to become more internationally interactive in our thinking. We're in a global world. We have to react in a global way. At the same time, we have to preserve who we are as Americans so that we don't water down the American value system and belief system. I think that violence

is a very intricate part of our society. We see it almost daily on television. That was never an issue when I was growing up—never. Never an issue—violence in public schools. We just live in a world where we're always having to watch our backs, which is sad. But we've got to be vigilant and we've got to make the correct political changes in leadership and policy and international policy to stay in control of who we are as Americans.

[02:47:19] SL: Yeah. I—it's hard for me not to jump in, but it does seem as if the American role in the world has been—has diminished in some way—or its influence. I don't know. It seemed like we used to inspire, and I just don't see that out there internationally anymore. I'm just—I don't know if it's any one administration's fault or it's the way the world is turning or . . .

DW: I think that it's important that we continue to stress moral integrity in our country. And moral values, and unfortunately, too much of the media is exploiting the opposite. And that is the impression the world has of us as a people. That's the impression we have as a people, and how easy it is to let down our value system just one inch at a time, particularly among our young people. Who are our role models among our young

people? Can we ask that question? Who are our role models for those of us who are adults or older adults?

SL: There's a difference. That's a good question.

TM: That's some good stuff, too. Good.

SL: Joy? Are we okay? Anything that I've been neglect about?

JE: Nothing.

SL: What do you think? Are you feeling good about this?

DW: I hope I've said the right things in the right manner.

SL: Oh! [*Laughter*]

DW: I've tried to choose my words wisely.

JE: I haven't heard anything about your children.

[02:49:11] DW: Oh, that's right.

SL: Well, let's talk about your family.

DW: Let's talk about my family.

SL: Yeah, let's do that.

DW: All right. Let me sit up.

SL: Yeah.

TM: We're focused here. This stuff looks so good. I'm going to sit here and shoot all day. [*Laughter*] Okay, we're rolling.

[02:49:37] SL: All right. So we haven't touched anything about your children and your family side of your life. We've been so caught up in the Miss America, we've . . .

DW: Well, that's the normal, fun side of my life that I enjoy a great deal. I have a daughter, Lisa, who is a graduate of the University of Arkansas. She was Lisa Mutscher, and now she's Mikus. She and her husband, James, live in Austin, and have two sons that are terrific. Their names are Matthew and Will, and they're sort of the joy of my life. My son, Gus, lives in Arlington, Virginia, and works in McLean as a financial analyst. And he's a graduate of the University of Texas. His wife, Amy, is a graduate of UT as well, and they have two sons. So I have four grandsons—no granddaughters on the horizon. Cade and Andrew live in Washington with them, and so they're a great joy, too. So I have four grandsons. And my husband, Bryan, has three daughters, and together we have ten grandchildren.

SL: Wow!

DW: He has six, and I have four.

SL: And do you guys go about spoiling those grandchildren as best you can?

[02:50:50] DW: Well, of course we do, within the parameters of parental consent, you know? [*SL laughs*] But they're great fun. My grandmother name is Nana. So I'm Nana to four grandsons.

SL: That's great. That's really good. Anything you wanna say to them? Do you want to say anything—hi to them or any advice

you would pass on to them? I mean, you've already given them about, you know, a few pages of advice in indirect ways—not really addressed to them, but . . .

DW: Well, I think I would say to my grandchildren and my children as well that the importance of finding, one, your spiritual base; secondly, your—the s—your center of who you are and pursue that throughout your life, and explore the God-given talents that you have been given. Always have a positive attitude about things, regardless of what life hands you. And there are some difficult times. For instance, my daughter has been through open-heart surgery. And you know, some physical problems there, but you know, life will have its ups and downs. And it's all relative, as I always say to my kids. It's relative to the highest high and the lowest low you've had, so measure it accordingly. And I would say to them there are two things you need to know in life: what you want and what you don't want, and both are equally as important.

SL: Okay.

[02:52:23] JE: What are holidays like? Do you have big family . . .

DW: We don't have 'em all at once. No. [*Laughter*] It would be twenty, twenty-five people. [*Laughter*] There's just no way.

SL: I hear that.

DW: We rotate it.

SL: Yeah. Well, Donna, it has been wonderful.

DW: Well, thank you. I hope I have enough pictures to support the video.

[02:52:43 End of interview]

Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]