

Bernadette Devone Interview Summary
First Person Plural
16 September 2015

Intro – Jo Blatti interviewing Bernadette Devone for First Person Plural project, in Arkansas Public Policy office, Little Rock, 16 September 2015

BD Thank you for inviting me

JB Begin – where did you grow up?

BD Hampton, Virginia – very normal, blue collar. Father, stepfather cabdriver
Mother moved me to father in Jersey City, New Jersey – raised by his mother
Very religious family
Pregnant at young age – needed to be married, had to get married

JB Not allowed to go to school?

BD Family values – you kept house. Husband minister. Became single mom – four kids
When I left husband, shelter with kids

6 min in

JB What brought out?

BD Met wonderful woman – Mary Christian
Went back to Virginia
This woman convinced me to go back to high school, got GED
Old CETA program – 2 years, school computer program COBOL, guaranteed me a job
First thing – my mentor

11 min in

Finished school state of New Jersey
Hated to work
Meantime, son in difficult school situation
Principal bad with kids and parents
Formed PTO/PTA Trenton, NJ
Never able to get rid of him – tenure
But appointed to school board – 1985-86
Horrible experience

JB What way?

BD Very political, 25, 26 years old [laughs]
Ended up resigning early
Formed statewide committee, parental advisory to schools
Got job with VISTA program in Maryland – housing authority
Moved back to Virginia, worked with Dr. Christian

JB Where she located?

BD She had 15-20 of us
Not with finances - motivation, productive in communities

17 min in

JB Her own social action mentorship?

BD I always live by her example
Remember this man who came up to car – needed Pampers
She spent \$100
I was livid
Two weeks later, man showed up with \$200 check
Type of person she was
Teach one, so will teach one

JB Heard that before in African American community

BD Doctor Christian first African American in state legislature after Reconstruction - 20 years
[civic leader, professor education, Hampton University and member, Virginia House of Delegates
representing Hampton area, 25 years]
That's my introduction to world of organizing

Her legislative assistant 5 years, she retired. I needed another job
ACORN in [Washington] D.C. hired me
D.C. I thought – turned out to be Arkansas

JB Kids at that point?

BD Grown, year 2000. Baby graduated high school, into Marine Corps
Drove to Arkansas, ACORN office Pine Bluff

22 min in

That office about two years – difficult

JB Tell me –

BD Rather not talk about it
Not where I needed to be
Bill Kopsky [Arkansas Public Policy Panel] had been calling for about a year – here ever since
Arkansas and Deep South
Little Rock more progressive – social justice
When I first moved – major culture shock – Dr. Christian always taught: stand up
Down south, more need to pick yourself up
The systems in south Arkansas, opportunities for the powers that be

Average person, that's the way it's been, always will be

Why accept?

27 min in

When I first started –

JB What teach you?

BD In south Arkansas, get them to understand, do have a voice
Start where people are
Understand where people are
There are things you can do

JB How much [that system still in place]? So many travel/television
Impact on own lives?

BD Travel with families
Social justice - without prejudice
Used control of communities
Criminal justice system as an example: no legal recourse; destroys, divides families
Most often depend on church

JB Here in Arkansas, place-based
Describe what that means –

32 min in

BD Bring black, white, community business leaders, religious leaders, these are thing
Shared vision, plan

JB How easy?

BD Very hard
Mainly African Americans to table, the railroad divides most communities physically
Church number one division, white churches awful about wanting [to collaborate]
Huttig, Arkansas – a portion of white community very upset about black mayor
At bottom, some believe blacks not capable [laughs]

JB Bill Kopsky quoted on tax research [can be right, still not win the vote/public mind]
How many Huttigs/Goulds to build a tipping point?

BD Arkansas built on history of racism
Just a way of keeping people down
Really about economics –not educating people
Using the churches to send that –
Urbanites think we solved the issues in 1960s
New Jim Crow is incarceration

35 min in

Our work is not done

JB Go back to your own? Legislator who got you involved?

BD Family doesn't understand –
Five of us, I'm second to oldest, more aggressive
They laugh at me

JB Kids?

BD Four boys: only parent on school board
Son gave a speech, learned to run meeting
Oldest son incarcerated young age, getting together

40 min in

J.J. – minister and schoolteacher
Javan – prayer – African American men have hard way in the world

JB Grew up in another part of the country

BD Racist mentality more entrenched here
South Arkansas: that ain't going to change nothing
People have lost faith
People who do believe in change, hard to find others
All the communities go to church
Traditional – ministers would speak to social justice issues
Here – seem to avoid

45 min in

JB Do you think that has to do with disappointment?

BD Two ways:
Cultural differences – progressives want to help, don't understand demoralization south Arkansas
World views – surviving, basic needs
Expectation to stand up: that's what Doc [Christian] did for me

50 min in

What needs in north Arkansas – environmental [pig farm, etc]
Here in Little Rock - good schools
Zero tolerance - south Arkansas

Cultural issues built wedge, want to fix problem from their perspective

What is most surprising: most will say have a good life

55 min in

Bruce McMath [lawyer] did a litigation for Gould, felt like a time warp, did not realize [how tough conditions remain]

JB Let me ask – anything we've

BD More about Panel work – treat everybody fair
Social transformation, work within government
Respect all people within the community
Distribute wealth within the community
Promoting diversity

Attack social injustice
Bring 10-15 people to the table
Begin to develop a plan

JB Have you succeeded in redistributing wealth in a community?

BD No – what we try to do is show people they have the power
Discuss credit cards, banking, small business, finance

60 min in

[interruption]

JB The model might be invite a second bank in?

BD Yes, example - Magnolia workshop

JB How does a community – 'We're here!'

BD We do, we're not the leaders. We're here: what to you what?

JB Nobody's turned you out?

BD Let me show you – Montrose mayor –

JB Framed plaque – 'We don't need outsiders'

65 min in

BD Put this on everybody's – Lake Village –
Out of thirty communities, in ten

JB Tough batting average-

BD Hesitant about interview
Huttig, bad road
Ten years in Arkansas
Here to help other people
We see more Confederate flags in Arkansas
Don't like African American press, outsiders

Extra careful –

JB We're a quiet project
Do appreciate this caution
Threatened?

BD Indirectly
Arkansas Public Policy well known, not easy

70 min in

One of my drawbacks GED, didn't graduate [college]
30 years experience
Not the most articulate person
Down south I relate well

JB If can say in plain English -

BD If people really understand what's going on -

JB Outro with thanks –

73 min in