

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Northeast Ohio Legal Services

Personal Experience

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SHARON A. ECHOLS

Interviewed

by

James B. Callen

on

April 1, 1992

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: SHARON A. ECHOLS

INTERVIEWER: James B. Callen

SUBJECT: Experiences as a new attorney, experiences as
an African-American Attorney in Youngstown

DATE: April 1, 1992

C: This is an interview with Sharon A. Echols for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Northeast Ohio Legal Services Project, by James B. Callen, at 700 Metropolitan Tower Building, Youngstown, Ohio, on April 1, 1992, at 1:00 p.m.

Sharon, could you tell me a little bit about your background, where you're from, where you went to school?

E: I'm from Cleveland, Ohio. I went to school at the College of Wooster, which is in Wooster, Ohio. I went to Law School at Cleveland State University.

C: Why did you decide to become a lawyer?

E: You said this wouldn't be an interview. It sounds like an interview question. Why did I decide to become a lawyer? Well, I've always enjoyed doing the things that are required in the legal field. I enjoy research, I enjoy reading. I always wanted to do something, whatever my chosen field would be, I wanted it to be something where I was helping other people. That's the case in the position as an attorney, you are helping other people. I guess that is some of the reasons why.

- C: Could you tell us a little bit about how it came about that you took a job in Youngstown?
- E: It wasn't intentional by any means. I was just looking for a job after graduating from law school, and going through the placement center at the law school, they had listings of jobs and I sent my resume to several different places. The position at Legal Services seemed interesting to me so I didn't really think about where it was, that it was actually in Youngstown. The job being in Youngstown didn't make it more appealing, but it also didn't make me think, "Well I don't want to take the job simply because it's here," but I didn't purposely choose to work in Youngstown. I chose Legal Services more so than Youngstown, Ohio.
- C: Why did you choose Legal Services?
- E: Well, after the initial interview and just learning more... Because I didn't know a lot about Legal Services, a little bit about legal aid, but not a lot about the Legal Services corporation. After their first interview, and just looking at what they actually do in the office and the people that they help and what would be required of me in working here and the things that I would learn working here at Legal Services, that's why I chose the job.
- C: How has been practicing as a Legal Services attorney compared to with what you expected it to be?
- E: I think it has met my expectations. I expected to learn a lot of different things, to be exposed to a lot of different people that I hadn't been exposed to before, and that has happened. I expected to learn a lot of things that I did not know before, and that has happened. I expected to learn a lot of things in regards to the law in a lot of different areas, and that has happened. So I think being a Legal Services attorney, my expectations have been met, in those respects.
- C: Is it what you envisioned lawyering being when you were in law school?
- E: No. Some of the problems that we have to deal with, especially when you have to deal with problems that aren't actually legal problems, or you have to deal with clients that aren't very cooperative and you're doing something to help them and it is because of other problems that they have, I didn't expect to have to deal with things like that, and being an attorney.
- C: What kind of problems do you concentrate on?

E: Basically, housing problems.

C: Can you describe what you do for clients on housing problems?

E: Well, we have clients that contact us with several different problems. Several clients are being threatened with evictions or have problems in regards to their subsidized housing, but a variety of problems. Problems with landlords as far as the landlord is not complying with the law, turning off utilities, or locking the clients out because of nonpayment of rent. So, I represent clients in regards to several different or a vast variety of problems they have in regards to their housing, be it private housing or subsidized housing.

C: In what courts do you practice in?

E: Mostly municipal courts and county courts.

C: What has it been like practicing in these courts?

E: That aspect of it hasn't met my expectations. When I was in law school, I didn't expect to deal with some of the things I've had to deal with in some of the courts. For example, if a certain law applies to a case or a certain case applies to a situation that a client has, I just automatically assumed that the judge or the referee would look at what we have and look at what the law says and make a decision that complied to what the law says, but I didn't realize in law school that you had to also consider what the biases were or what the personal opinion was of judges or referees. I guess that is something that is not taught in law school but you just have to realize once you get out there.

C: Have you had any memorable experiences in court that stick with you or have made an impression on you?

E: Especially when I first started going over to court even before I passed the Bar, I had been mistaken for clients several different times. I won't forget that. I guess that is one of the main things that I remember.

C: Why do you think that is that you have been mistaken for a client?

E: Because I'm black.

C: Have you had any other experiences while you have been a Legal Services attorney that you think could be attributed to the fact that you are black?

- E: Could you reword the question, maybe that would help me some.
- C: You've mentioned that one thing that made a strong impression on you was being mistaken for a client when you have been in court. You thought that that was at least in part attributed to the fact that you are black. Have you had any other experiences, positive or negative that you could attribute to the fact that you are a black female attorney?
- E: I just thought of one. I'll give you a positive experience. I think in some cases with some of my clients I have a better rapport with them or they seem like they're more relaxed with me, or they are kind of pleasantly surprised when they see that they are going to be represented by someone that's working here that's black and female that is an attorney, or that is going to represent them. That is pleasant and I think sometimes I have a better rapport with some of my clients because of that.
- C: What has it been like just in terms of living in Youngstown as a young black professional?
- E: Not good. There are not a lot of young black professionals living in Youngstown. I think that is one of the drawbacks. I've met some people but not a lot that are young and black and professional living here. I don't think it's an advantage or I don't think that is one of the positive aspects of working for Legal Services, the city, in the fact that there are not a lot of black professionals living here. It has been difficult sometimes.
- C: What is your typical day like, if you have a typical day at work?
- E: Lately because I'm getting more hearings and getting in the court more often, my typical day probably would, entail at least, drafting at least one motion because, I have a hearing coming up. It is usually over in Youngstown Municipal Court and it's usually an eviction hearing, some type of housing case. I'll usually have at least one appointment with the client, it is usually a client I have already had, not an initial interview. It just involves trying to keep up with my cases and receiving numerous phone calls from different clients. It usually entails phone intake which means answering the phones, people call in with legal questions, filling out the information on the intake sheet. If it's a housing case, then that's another case that is added to my case list. I don't think you can say that there's just one typical day where the same things usually

happen, there's usually something different everyday.

C: Looking back over the year or so that you've been practicing, is there anything that you would have done different or anything that you would like to have seen changed to make it easier or help you perform your job better?

E: Nothing that I can think of that would have made it easier. I can't think of anything.

C: What is the greatest need that you see in this community as far as your clients are concerned, the people that you deal with?

E: Well, I was going to say when you first started to ask the question, was better housing. But I think the problem goes further than that as far as our clients as a whole, and I think the greatest problem is a lack of education. If educational needs are met with our clients as a whole, I think it would help them and they wouldn't actually be in the situation that they're in. So I think the biggest problem is a lack of education with the people that we serve.

C: Do you have any ideas on what could be done to help improve that situation?

E: Increase funding in public educational systems because that is where our clients are receiving what little education they get. I don't know how this office could do anything to improve that. I don't see that we can.

C: How do you think low income people are treated in general, by the legal system and in the courts in this community?

E: Like they're second class citizens. I think that even the people that represent low income people aren't given the same respect that other attorneys are given in the courts.

C: Can you think of any specific examples of experiences you may have had that demonstrate that?

E: As far as I'm concerned, I guess because I haven't been practicing as long, it's just small things. But like even if you call over to the court and talk to the clerks, unless you get somebody that you've talked to before, or that's nice, they'll say things like, "Legal Services is on the phone" -things like that. They're not as helpful as you would imagine they would be with someone else. But then, in just talking to other attorneys, I was talking to an attorney the other day and they were talking about a judge and they were

saying that they had a good relationship with the judge before the attorney started working for Legal Services. The attitude changed once she started working for Legal Services. There's got to be something

C: Can you think of any other examples, personal experiences you've had? How do other attorneys treat you?

E: Now, that's different. Most attorneys that I've had contact with, except for one, have been very nice and pleasant and I enjoy dealing with them in regards to trying to negotiate with them for one of my clients. They've been very receptive and very nice and respectful.

C: You mentioned that sometimes you feel that you can relate better to some clients because you're black. Overall, how do you feel that the clients view Legal Services, and view you as a Legal Services attorney?

E: My clients?

C: The clients that you come in contact with.

E: I don't know. It just seems like to me that most of them are just so happy to be receiving any type of help with the problems that they are getting. They're just happy to get any type of help. I haven't run into a lot of clients that have had any type of complaints about...I haven't run into a lot of clients that have had complaints about Legal Services. Most of them are just really grateful and happy that we're helping. So, of the people that I run into are happy about Legal Services and the services that we're offering, and happy about me as an individual representing them; most, not all.

C: Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we may not have covered here?

E: No, I don't have anything else to add.

END OF INTERVIEW