

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Northeast Ohio Legal Services

Personal Experience

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JO ANNE FORD

Interviewed

by

James B. Callen

on

May 8, 1992

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JO ANNE FORD

INTERVIEWER: James B. Callen

SUBJECT: Legal Services, Trumbull County Law Office
private attorneys, intake procedures

DATE: May 8, 1992

C: This is an interview with Jo Anne Ford (now known as Jo Anne Streets) for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Northeast Ohio Legal Services, by James B. Callen, at Warren, Ohio, on May 8, 1992, at 9:55 a.m.

Jo Anne, could you tell me a little of your background, where you were born, where you grew up?

F: I was born in Newark, New Jersey. When I was approximately two and a half years old I went to Pennsylvania to reside, where my grandparents continued to raise me. I graduated from Altoona Area High School in 1962 with my major as business.

C: Jo Anne, how did you end up in this part of Ohio?

F: My former husband became employed by General Motors in Lordstown and in 1966, we moved to the Salem, Ohio area, eventually moving to Vienna and then going into the Lordstown area.

C: Do you have any children?

- F: I have two children. I have a daughter, Marilyn, who resides in Connecticut and I have a son, Edward, who resides in Virginia.
- C: Prior to coming to work for Northeast Ohio Legal Services, where did you work?
- F: At one point in my life, I was employed by Packard Electric. After I found out that factory wasn't where I was supposed to be, I went back into business. In the last, about thirteen years, I have been involved in the legal field. I have worked for Attorney Scala, I've worked for Judge John Stuard. I worked for Judge McKay. Then, approximately five and a half years ago, I came to Northeast Ohio Legal Services.
- C: How did you get a job at Northeast Ohio Legal Services?
- F: I answered an ad that was in the newspaper looking for an experienced legal secretary. I did my interview and I fortunately got the job.
- C: At that time were you working as a legal secretary?
- F: No, I was between jobs at that particular time.
- C: Can you describe what you do at Northeast Ohio Legal Services?
- F: Well, I do a little bit of everything. I answer the phones. I am involved with some legal assistant work in the area of preparation of packets that we provide to low-income individuals for visitation, for child support, for custody, for grandparent rights. I do domestic intake for private attorney involvement, pro bono work. I do the legal pleadings and basically I guess, just all around legal work.
- C: Could you discuss how your work with private attorneys compares with what you do at Legal Services and how it's different?
- F: It's different in the aspect that... I'm sure everybody is aware that private attorneys charge fees and we don't. Private attorneys are more interested, I guess, in what they are going to receive than what their client is going to receive out of a particular case. I find them much harder to work for in the private sector than I do at NOLS. As far as being employed by them, they have a much different attitude than the NOLS attorneys and I think they are much more demanding than what the NOLS attorneys are.
- C: Could you discuss a little bit of the different attitude that you mentioned?

- F: They don't seem to have the respect for their staff people that we do here at NOLS. The demand is much greater for your time. They tend to, I don't want to say, be more particular, that's not the right word. They just seem to have a different outlook toward what we need as employees as far as benefits go, as far as what the amount of work we are required to do. Some of them, a lot of them, don't even respect their own clients. I think at NOLS, what I've come to learn is that the attorneys have much more respect for their clients than in the private sector.
- C: How is that demonstrated both at NOLS and in the private bar, the attitude towards clients?
- F: Like I said, the private bar, if you don't walk in with some money in your pocket, most of them are not going to see you. Of course, that's the first question they ask. They don't ask what your legal problem is, they ask how much money you have and then they determine whether it's something they're going to handle for you or not. Of course at NOLS, we don't accept fees so that makes a big difference when it comes to... We take priority in what the case is, we ask what the issue is, not how much money do you have.
- C: Do you see any difference in the types of clients you have had experience with as a secretary in a private law office as opposed to Legal Services?
- F: The difference in clients, of course, is that most of our clients are low-income, less educated. I'm not saying clients that come into private law offices aren't the same, or that you don't have similar clients, but the majority of the clients that come into the private law office, are clients who naturally can afford a private attorney in most cases. I believe that everyone deserves to be represented, and whether they're poor or whether they're not poor, really shouldn't make any bearing. But private attorneys don't enjoy doing probono work. So, the majority of them get clients that can afford to pay.
- C: From your experience both in working with the private attorney and with Legal Services, what is the attitude of the private bar towards Legal Services? What is your impression of that?
- F: I'm familiar with a lot of the attorneys in the Trumbull County area. The ones that I have knowledge of and the ones that know I'm employed with NOLS feel as though NOLS is a good program. Especially, Judge McKay, Michael Scala and some of the attorneys that are in different higher positions than just being a private attorney, feel that it is a well-deserved program and

that we do a good job. We don't do enough, some of them complain, in various areas of law, but the majority of the ones that I have talked to, feel as though NOLS is a worthy program, but that we should do more. I think the general population in the Bar, as far as attorneys go, don't like our services, because we are taking business from them.

C: When did you first hear of Legal Services? When you were working with private attorneys, or was it not until you came into Legal Services?

F: It was not until I came to Legal Services that I knew that this program existed.

C: You've been here about five years?

F: Five and a half years, yes.

C: Have you sensed any change in attitude over those five years towards Legal Services, or has it been pretty much the same?

F: I think it's been pretty much the same. Actually, I haven't seen a big change in any attitudes toward Legal Services since I've been here. It's kind of status quo.

C: How long have you lived in Trumbull County?

F: Since 1968.

C: What changes have you seen in Trumbull County over the last twenty-three, twenty-four years?

F: Well, some of the changes when I first came to this area... They did an urban renewal in downtown, where they took a lot of housing out of one section of Warren and built new businesses and the downtown has been renovated since I've been here. Some of the old buildings have been restored. Of course, the one we're in and the old Robbins Theater was a restoration. As far as Trumbull County itself goes, I don't know that that much has changed. In Trumbull County, other than your government changes and the renewals, I really don't see that much of a change in Trumbull County. In the Mahoning Valley itself, probably the most devastating change was when the steel mills closed their doors to thousands of employees leaving them with no jobs and no jobs to go to.

C: Have you seen any change in the practice of law over those years?

- F: I've seen an increase in the amount of attorneys that have come into Trumbull County. I think it's up to four hundred-some now and I believe when I started, it was two hundred-some. Basically, it has almost doubled in the amount of the attorneys. So, of course, their philosophy is none of them are making any money. So that would be the change that I can see in the legal field, here.
- C: How about changes in the way you do your work as a legal secretary. What have been the most significant changes over the time you have been involved in that profession?
- F: We are becoming a computerized world. We have increased our skills in, of course, computer work. I came from the old school of "lets use the typewriter", so I was real adverse to learning how to use the computer. I don't think you are allowed to take my computer from me now. I don't really think a secretary's work basically changes. It kind of stays the same. I've been doing it (I won't tell you how many years) but it really has never changed as far as the general way that you operate as a secretary. The changes are in all of the modernizations that they've done within the system, but not as your duties as a secretary, they don't really change from year to year. I don't feel as though they do anyway.
- C: With the modernization and computerization that you mentioned, how has that impacted you? What has it meant for your job responsibilities and duties?
- F: It's made them easier, as far as the computer goes. We can accomplish doing things much quicker. Actually, I guess you could say that the computer itself, maybe, added additional work because now you can put documents out, or whatever, in a lesser time than what it used to be. So I think production increases at that point when you can produce more in a shorter period of time. I think it has just been an all-around change for everyone from using the typewriters into the computer world.
- C: What do you use a computer for, typically, today, that causes you to do things differently than you did before?
- F: I don't know if we really do things differently than we did before. I use a computer for virtually everything.
- C: Such as?
- F: I do all my pleadings on the computer. We can basically do everything on the computer that we did on the

typewriter at one point in time. So almost everything that we do now is done on the computer.

C: How about keeping track of cases? How do you use the computer to do that?

F: At the moment, it's done on our central system in our Youngstown office. We have a case management program that we put all cases on the computer and it is kept in our Youngstown office for any future references that we might have. Every case that comes through has been put on the computer within the last four or five years, I guess. We also do our timekeeping, which is keeping track of the hours we put into cases in this office. This is done in the same manner as how case management is done, so that attorney hours and staff hours can all be computed to find out exactly the amount of time that's being put into any particular case in this office.

C: Describe for me, if you will, what happens when a client calls with a problem.

F: When a client calls, of course, I get the first call. I'm the one who takes the call. First of all, they're screened to determine whether they have a problem that we can do through this office and if that, in fact, is something that we handle, then they're screened for if they qualify for their type of income. Then our process is that we do intake on particular days of the week, and if they qualify and the problem is something we do, they are told to call back at those particular times when we do our phone applications. Then they speak with an attorney at that time once they call back in.

C: What happens after they talk to an attorney?

F: They have a weekly case review where all the attorneys get together and discuss the cases that have been taken through the office within the last week, mostly within the last week. My understanding is that those attorneys decide, at that particular time, whether it is a case that this office will become involved with as far as are we going to open a case and see it through to the end, or are we going to give them advice only, are we going to tell them that it is something that we don't handle, that they'll have to seek a private attorney. That's how it's determined if it's a case that we accept or not.

C: Do clients ever come into the office?

F: Oh, sure. We have a lot of walk-ins in the Trumbull County office just sent from court or from private

attorneys. But clients come into the office quite frequently to bring documents in or to have a personal interview with the attorney and sometimes, they just come in because they need help at that particular time.

C: How are they handled when they walk in if it is a new client?

F: They are given an application to complete and basically, if it's an emergency, we try to take care of them immediately as far as looking at the case. We do a lot of eviction work, so sometimes you have a lock out or utility shut off and if that's the case, if there is an attorney available, it's usually handled as soon as possible, to at least get the utility turned back on or the lockout, get them back in. But if it's something that is not an emergency, it is handled on the same basis as a phone intake and determined at a case review if it's something we are going to handle.

C: You mentioned you do a lot of housing. What other kinds of cases do you handle here?

F: This office does defense of civil actions meaning consumer problems, loan installment problems. We help people at Welfare hearings with medical cards and ADC cuts, GR cuts. We do limited domestic through this office, meaning we take cases for domestic that have physical abuse, and they must have drugs or alcohol involved in order for us to file in court for that person on domestic cases, which we do a lot of.

C: Over your time here, have you seen any change in the type of problems or the frequency of particular problems coming into the office?

F: I think domestic violence has increased tremendously in Trumbull County. Those are some of the cases that we take. I think we have seen an increase in more tenant issues on evictions and we've just gone through a major GA cut, so we did have a little influx of trying to get people straightened out and their benefits straightened out here in Trumbull County.

C: Are there any particular clients or problems that have stood out in your mind over the time you've been here?

F: I think what bothers me the most in here are the domestic violence cases, myself personally, that come through our office. In particular we had a lady come in one day needing a civil protective order and one thing led to another and she finally broke down and said that her husband had abused her children, abused her, and she was abused as a child by her parents. At that point I just kind of stepped aside and let the

attorney take it, because there are some cases that are hard to deal with in domestic violence. It's not always a pleasant thing to have to watch somebody go through that part of their life. It's real tough to watch it sometimes. So if you can't handle it, you give it to one of the attorneys and they take it for you.

C: Do you know how that problem worked out?

F: I think it was custody-involved, too. I don't remember... For some reason we could not take it. But I believe that Chris Legow who is our managing attorney, spoke with her and advised her what she should do on that particular case. So, I really don't know what the end result was.

C: Are there any other cases that stand out in terms of either the particular clients or the problems?

F: We had a landlord-tenant problem where the people had lived in the house for years and had never paid any rent. It was a relative or something that had owned the property. Then when the relative died, the heirs came in and wanted their rent, which these people weren't financially able to pay. It ended up they did get evicted, and they did get their stuff set out on the street. It was a daughter and her father was what I believe it was. They ended up living in motels and hotels and wherever they could find a place to live after that. I don't think any of us like to see anybody put out on the street, no matter what the reason.

C: What has been the attitudes of the clients towards this office and towards the attorneys and people that work here?

F: I think primarily, most of our clients, their general attitude toward everyone in here is that we are providing a service and that we are doing it to the best of our ability. No matter what the end result is, it is not that we haven't tried to help, it's just that sometimes we can't help. I guess I get flustered sometimes because I get a lot of the blunt of someone's anger on the phone, especially if it's a case that we can't really get into or help them. By the time they've gotten to this agency and they have been told to call forty other ones before they get here, and they are getting told, "No" by all these agencies, "they can't be helped," the anger is just tremendous by the time they get to this agency sometimes and then I have the sad task of telling them, "No, we can't do it either," and there is a lot of anger there. Why can't we, but you know, we can't do everything.

- C: What do you think the attitude has been towards the type of service that they get from this office when we do deliver service to them?
- F: I think, even in some cases that we lose, that the general attitude wasn't anything that we did it was simply, there wasn't any other answer. The general attitude is that we are providing a service and that they're generally satisfied with the end result. Everyone isn't going to be happy, but I think the general consensus is that we tried, if it worked, that's great and if it's not in their favor, then it's not because we didn't try, it's because we couldn't change it.
- C: Has there been any increase in the last four or five years in the number of people seeking service?
- F: Oh, yes. We've had--I don't know what the final figure was for our office last year--but in the last year, especially, we've increased in Trumbull County tremendously the amount of cases through this office, whether it be cases that we simply open, advise and close, or refer out, it's still an influx in even the referrals and the cases that we are opening and taking in this office.
- C: What was the office like when you first came to work here?
- F: We had a different attorney at the time, Attorney Mondok was employed with our office. We were in a different building. We have moved since I've been NOLS.
- C: Where was the office when you first started?
- F: At Pine Street on top of the Automotive in downtown Warren. We had two attorneys, one of which is still with us. We still have two attorneys. Pat Duricy is the replacement for Attorney Mondok in this office. As far as changes go, I don't really think we've changed how we do things. It's kind of been the same all along. We still have two attorneys and one Support Staff.
- C: What were the facilities like back then?
- F: In respect to...?
- C: Just the physical surroundings, what you had available to you to work with, what they looked like, what kind of equipment you had.

- F: For myself, I know we had a 1902 Computer. I had the old wooden desk. The offices were not very modern. They were, I think, probably put together a long time ago. They didn't change a whole lot. When we decided that we were going to modernize our offices, so to speak, we decided that we were going to make a change and a move for the better. We now are the proud owners of two new computers and we are not using the old one anymore and we've upgraded the reception area and our new offices, we've made a big change in the appearance, the physical appearance. I think that our office now presents a very modern-day office atmosphere. We are all well-satisfied with it.
- C: Do you think that has had any impact on the attitude of the clients towards Legal Services?
- F: I don't know. We've had a lot of clients comment at how nice the office is and how nice it appears and that they were nicer than our old offices. I have not heard anything derogatory about the move or what we've put into a new office area.
- C: Since you've been here what do you think have been the most significant events that have happened?
- F: To NOLS?
- C: To NOLS, to the office, the most significant things you've been involved with. What things stick out in your mind?
- F: The things that stick out in my mind: we had some problems a few years back with some office stuff, that we had a big change and turnover at one point in time. I'm not sure if I should give any details, but we had a change a few years ago in our office, in our Youngstown office. That was one of the significant things that I remember being involved with. We had a lot of meetings and a lot of stress and a lot of aggravation. But we all managed to get through that. I think that the office staff is more involved in decision-making as far as how we've formed a lot of different committees that involve things within the office, the inter-office. And I think the communication between the Mahoning County office and the Trumbull County office, as far as being involved with one another has increased. Because I understand at one point in time, there was not a lot of rapport between the two offices. I feel as though I maybe contributed significantly to that, that part where Mahoning and Trumbull County now have a good relationship between the office staff members. I did become involved in the Mahoning County office and the people that worked there.

- C: Do you remember anything else significant, anything else that stands out in your mind in terms of cases or things that have happened?
- F: I don't think so. It's hard trying to remember when you have so many cases and so many different situations. It's hard sometimes to pin-point one thing and say, "This is where it was," or "this is what it was," there are so many things that go on anymore, that it's kind of boggling sometimes.
- C: Could you describe a typical day that you have here? What do you do?
- F: A typical day consists of starting about 8:30 a.m. You can't say that there is a standard routine because we really don't have a standard routine because things change from hour to hour. You can have an emergency walk in, the phone calls are numerous on most days, and you just get right into it everyday. You do the work and you handle the clients and you just do a standard work day. There really isn't too much of a break because you don't have a lot of time to go between cases. For me, it's pretty steady from 8:30 until 4:30 everyday.
- C: What made you decide to get into law profession?
- F: As I mentioned before, I was without a job when I came to NOLS and I was without a job when I went into the legal profession. Attorney Scala was the first attorney that I was employed by and when I answered the ad. He basically said that he would hire me for two weeks. If I worked out then we could see how things went from there and perhaps he would consider putting me on permanently. But he was so far behind in typing, that he had lost his secretary, that he didn't really care about anyone who had "legal experience" he needed a typist and he needed work typed and that's basically how I got into the legal field. I just stayed in it.
- C: Have you had any special training?
- F: No, it was kind of a "learn-as-you-go" experience. Other than that taking business in school, as far as the legal profession goes, no. I learned as I went along. I used to say that everything coming in was a learning experience since I didn't know anything about it. I have acquired a lot of knowledge over the last thirteen years.
- C: What do you enjoy most about it?
- F: About the legal field?

C: About the work that you do?

F: I think it's seeing the end-result. Seeing or knowing that you've done the very best you can to help someone even though it's not what the outcome may have been or what you had hoped the outcome may have been. But seeing the end-result is the most important thing. Especially here, because most of these people don't have the funds available to them to make a lot of changes. If we can keep somebody in a house or we can keep somebody from being abused or we can keep somebody from losing their Welfare benefits, then we've done the job that we are supposed to be doing.

C: What changes, if any, would you have made over the past four years, or would you like to see made?

F: Within our office?

C: Within our office, within the community?

F: Changes within the community, what I would like to see is the attorneys volunteering more probono time to people whose problem doesn't fit into our services, or private attorneys donating to our services so much per year to help contribute toward helping our clients. If they don't want to provide the probono work, then provide us some funds to help clients that need the help. I guess that I would like for the attorneys to understand a little bit more about (not our attorneys, but the outside attorneys) what our services are all about and what exactly we do in the community. I've had occasions where an attorney had said to me, "You're taking business from me!" Well, that may be true, but I don't think under the circumstances, that attorney is going to do it for free and so how they can justify that we're taking business from them is just beyond me. I think they need to be educated more in knowing what our services are, and like I said, even volunteering to do some of those services outside their own private practice. That's what I would like to see.

C: How do you think that could be done?

F: I think this organization needs a person that can speak one on one with attorneys, explain exactly what our program is, and someone that can actually convince those attorneys that the work is there, that the clients are there, and they should provide a service, whether they are rich, poor, or whatever; that everyone's entitled to that and they should provide that service. If it is for one client out of six months, it is still a client that would go unserved otherwise. My idea is, I guess, like a probono coordinator that

can speak one on one with attorneys in the Bar Association

C: Are there any other things that you would like to see changed or improved?

F: I would like to see an additional staff attorney in the Trumbull County office. I think that the need is there to increase our staff and at that point, maybe we can do some areas that we are not doing. If we had the increase in the staff here. That's basically a change I would like to see for all offices. I feel we are understaffed and we all have a large task to perform and I think it is sometimes really hard when you don't have the means by which to do that.

C: Is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important or that you'd like to talk about?

F: Not really. I don't have much more than that to discuss.

C: Okay. Thank you.

F: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW