

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Northeast Ohio Legal Services

Personal Experience

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LYNN A. KREMIN

Interviewed

by

James B. Callen

on

April 22, 1992

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
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INTERVIEWEE: LYNN A. KREMIN
INTERVIEWER: James B. Callen
SUBJECT: Working in a law office, school experience
Mahoning County, Legal Services
DATE: April 22, 1992

C: This is an interview with Lynn A. Kremin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Northeast Ohio Legal Services, by James B. Callen, at Youngstown, Ohio, on April 22, 1992, at 3:30 p.m.

To begin with, Lynn, could you describe your background? Where you were born? Where you went to school?

K: I was born in St. Elizabeth's in Youngstown. I went to school in Struthers.

C: You graduated from high school in Struthers?

K: Yes.

C: Did you have any other education beyond high school?

K: I went to YSU for a few years for secretarial studies.

C: How did it come about that you started working at Legal Services?

K: I sent in a resume. I was called in as a temporary, and then I was hired.

C: When was that?

K: Fourteen years ago.

C: 1978?

K: That's probably close.

C: Had you ever worked anywhere else prior to that?

K: I worked part-time for Attorney Clemente while I was going to college, in Struthers. That was all.

C: Could you describe what it was like when you first came to work at Legal Services?

K: The place was little. A lot of people were just in one room. You were given a typewriter. There were just boxes and boxes of files. There was filing to do. You just did odd jobs. I can't remember when we got big, maybe two years after, or something.

C: When you say little, what do you mean specifically? What were the facilities like?

K: I think there was just a couple typewriters with maybe Hazel, Mildred and Bertha. I think we were all in one room, maybe two rooms, but I just remember one room. The attorneys might have had a room, you and Bob, I think that was it. I'm trying to remember that far back, but I just know it was little. I was told to stack these files and put them all in some sort of order, and I did them all wrong or something, so I had to do them all over again. I think I did them in the wrong direction, I really don't know what I did. Anyhow it was fun. The people were nice.

C: What were your responsibilities when you first started working?

K: I think I was called in mainly for filing and doing some typing. I think Bertha and Mildred at the time might have already been paralegals working with clients. I'm not quite sure if Hazel was a paralegal yet, or if she was a typist. She could have been a paralegal because she was the first one here. They might have all been paralegals and needed a typist. I was just called in for typing and filing.

C: Who was working there at the time besides Mildred, Hazel and Bert?

K: That's it. And you and Bob, is all I can remember. I'm not sure if Fred Culver was there or not. I just can't remember real well.

C: Besides the filing, what were your job responsibilities?

K: Whatever anybody told me to do, just like now.

C: What did you do mostly?

K: I'm pretty sure I typed. They might have started sending me here and there, for filing and for different things. I was only eighteen.

C: You worked for a short time in a private law firm in Struthers?

K: Yes. I can't even remember how long. It was part-time.

C: How did working at Legal Services compare to that?

K: Legal Services is better. No matter where you go, you are always told what to do. There was a lady at the other law firm, of course, that was full-time, and was there for a long time and basically, she was just handing me stuff to do. Filling out some tax forms or type this or do that. Nobody was not nice or anything like that. I was just a young person and told what to do.

C: Does anything stand out in your mind during those first few years in terms of things going on in the office?

K: No, the office was nice. It wasn't good-looking or anything. It was just a couple old rooms in the building. But the people were nice.

C: How about anything that was going on in the office? Did anything stand out during that period?

K: No, not that period. No.

C: What are some of the major changes that you've seen go on here since the time you've started?

K: I think it's better now. It used to be better before, too. It was good. It's nice now too. It's better with more people and more attorneys and more staff.

C: What major changes have occurred in your job responsibilities over the last ten or twelve years?

K: Well, not much, because I've been on part-time for ten years. So, basically, I've just typed for the same people, did things for the same people, except now, I do more typing and I still do inputting and time sheets and everything, even though I don't have to. I don't

do as much filing at the courthouse or anything. I'm supposed to keep up with the typing.

C: How about changes in the way you do the typing and your work?

K: I really don't have a problem with it.

C: How has the computer and the word processing affected how you do your work?

K: That's real good. That's a lot better than a typewriter. The only thing is since I got back from having a baby, I've got to go into the legal assistants' offices to get work, where before, there were baskets out. I guess it doesn't matter.

C: How has the computer helped, or changed what you do?

K: Well, it has helped a lot. Right now, I just finish repetitive letters for Don. It has just helped a lot in every aspect with the time, with the cases, with everything. I probably couldn't work without a computer, nobody here could. Not anymore, anyway.

C: Have you noticed any changes in the types of clients or the types of problems that we handle today as opposed to when you started?

K: Probably, the clients are a little more... I don't want to say "normal" but I don't have another word to describe it. Maybe when I first started, we used to get most of the people who were just walking around downtown with not a whole lot to do. We have a lot of people now that the steel mills closed. I could lose my job, or Tom could lose his job, or our insurance benefits, and I can be poor easily in just a matter of one month. All those people now, everybody is losing jobs and coming in. I'm not cutting down the other people we had before. I just think we used to get more people who would come in for a cup of coffee, or to sit down with somebody to talk to for awhile, compared to the amount of people we're getting now, who really need the help real bad, because the people are so poor. I think a lot of us here would be real poor real quick, too.

C: I think you're right.

K: Do you know how much I pay for daycare for one month?

C: No.

K: \$400. That's part-time for my two kids. Isn't that a lot?

C: Yes. Has that affected at all how you interact with clients or the work that you do?

K: What?

C: The change in the types of clients?

K: I don't have that much interaction with the clients other than answering the phone and someone who would walk in. To me, the clients are nice. These young men come in for their child support packets or whatever and you don't look at them and say, "Ooooh, who's that?" They're nice people. Sometimes I think some of the people might feel embarrassed coming here. Some of the ones that might have lost things and everything and they know they're going to Legal Services. I get the feeling with the expression on their faces that they're embarrassed to be here. One day somebody came in that was related to me distantly and I made some copies for him, and the whole time I pretended like I didn't know him and he pretended like he didn't know me, just because I didn't want to embarrass him. He looked kind of embarrassed to be here. I knew he recognized me but I didn't say anything because I was working and he wasn't.

C: Have you noticed any change in the attitude of clients, when you deal with them on the phone or when they come in to the office, as compared to the way it used to be?

K: I can see not bringing them all into the office because we have just too many. Even as far as the phone calls, you get your clients that you can't get calls back to that get mad or whatever. One thing the client should do and doesn't do is write down who they spoke to. They should do that all the time. I think actually we probably need about two or three more attorneys and a couple more support staff. People to do automobile accidents, bankruptcies, more consumer problems than what we do now. If these people go to a private attorney, it just costs a lot of money. It costs a fortune. I couldn't afford a private attorney for anything. Absolutely nothing. Not that we want to take away all their business. We don't want to take away the private attorney's business because that's tough, but the people can't pay them.

C: Do you get a sense when you answer the phone and when you are talking to clients of any change in their attitude either towards Legal Services and the types of problems they have?

K: No. The only ones you get on the phone are the traffic tickets and the criminal. That is because you tell

them to get a court-appointed attorney or to call the Bar or whatever. But we can't do those.

C: Do you ever get any idea when you talk to them over the phone how they view NOLS?

K: I think they expect to just call anytime any day and just have someone available. I think most of them are satisfied. Almost all of them are. Any kind of help we can give them at all will make them happy, because they are getting something. They're getting some help.

C: Since you've been here, what are the major changes that have taken place, as far as you're concerned?

K: Just a lot more staff, different staff, too. We have the new boss. He's fine too. I haven't figured him out completely yet, but I'm getting there. One of these days.

C: What changes would you make, or would you have made over the years if you had the chance?

K: That's kind of tough. If I was really dissatisfied with my job or really felt bitter about anything, I probably would have a lot to say, but I like what I do. I like working part-time, I like coming in and doing what I do and just keeping busy all day and getting things done and going home. I can't think of that much that I would change.

C: Not necessarily because you don't like it, but do you see other things, even if they're not connected with what you do directly that you'd like to change?

K: I can't think of anything. I really can't. Even as far as attorneys go, I can't think of anything.

C: What's it like being a working mother and having your kids in daycare?

K: It's not as hard as I thought it would be. I had a problem this morning with my three-year-old. He decided he didn't want to go and he wouldn't get into the car seat and then he wouldn't get out of the car seat and then he wouldn't go into the building and then he screamed for a half hour at the top of his lungs and the whole place could hear him all over. The little one is real good. She doesn't give me any problem at all at home or anywhere or in the car or nowhere. I feel like mostly all I do is work and clean and take care of the kids. I don't really, what you would say, have any fun. Isn't that terrible? Even on the weekends. I have a husband that works six days a week with

only one day off and it doesn't leave a whole lot of room for that much fun. Plus in between you've got all the doctor's appointments and all that stuff on my days off. It takes a lot of my money, but I still have to work.

C: What's a typical day at work like for you?

K: For me, it starts at 8:00. For the life of me and I can't figure it out, I can't seem to get here any later than that, no matter what I do in the morning. We just have a routine. We all wake up, we all get ready, we all leave the house and we get in the car. I drop the kids off and I'm here at 8:00 a.m. and I can't help it. So I have the whole office set up and a lot of the work done before anybody else even shows up. I can't get here any later than that. The first thing I do when I come in is set up the whole office and make coffee and turn all the lights on and turn everything on, turn on my computer. Then I do everybody's filing and the filing cards in everybody's baskets, and then I go through all the typing because there is nobody here so it's a good chance for me to get through all that and put things on my desk to do. Then I go upstairs for five minutes and then I come back down and there is still nobody here. Of course, I keep the doors locked, and then I just start doing some typing or doing whatever, until an 8:30 person shows up.

C: What's the rest of your day like?

K: From then on I really don't do much. I don't talk much so I can't really say... I think maybe if I worked full-time, like five days a week, maybe I would sit and talk more, talk more to the attorneys or even the support staff. But being here three days a week, you really don't have that much time to sit around and talk. It just seems with five days a week, you have more time. So I don't talk much. I just do my work. I make one phone call. I relieve for lunch and I go to lunch. You talk, but you can't really go in somebody's office and really get to know somebody or get to talk to somebody unless you are having a problem. Like today when I had a bad day with Dan, I spoke to someone to make sure that that was a "normal" reaction for a child because I don't know anything about that stuff--if anybody else's kid did that or anything. Because I didn't know. I do always have that fear of them calling me. They did one time, because he had the flu and I had to leave early and I had to go home. I just got back to work off of disability and they're calling me and they're telling me I have to pick him up. It was just awful. He was real sick though. I had to pull over three times on the way home. Then you have to worry every time you're here that they are going to

call for one or the other and tell you that you have to pick them up. So you can't take vacations either. You have to save all your time. But when you're part-time, you can vacation on your days off, I guess. The rest of my day. I go to lunch and I relieve on the phone and I do some typing. I always feel good at the end of the day, except for days that you get a headache from like doing timesheets half of the afternoon or something. Everybody gets those. You feel good. You feel as though you have got a lot of work done. Everything is all nice and neat and everything is out for the day. I don't leave feeling dreaded like, "Oh, geeze, when I get back, I got this and that and everything else to do." I leave knowing that I've got everything done for that day.

C: You said you went to secretarial school down at YSU. Did that prepare you to be a legal secretary?

K: Well, kind of. I learned how to type really well. I did know shorthand too. I can't quite remember it now. I didn't have any computer training. I don't think computers were that big at the time, so I got all my training here. It made me confident enough to do what I was doing when they first called me in to be a temporary. So I can't say that it didn't do anything for me because it did. You have to know the skills in order to be able to do anything. But you got a lot of on the job, too.

C: What kinds of courses did you take at YSU?

K: There were a lot of general courses that you have to take and those were all taken. You have to take the psychology courses, or maybe I just wanted to take the psychology courses. There were a lot of typing courses, a lot of shorthand courses, business communication. Just a lot of business and secretarial, whatever they had at the time.

C: Has being a legal secretary been what you expected?

K: Yes. It has. If it wasn't, you could find another job. Even though you are a legal secretary, who's to say you can't work for a doctor or something?

C: What was it like back here in the late 1970's when the office was involved with the steel plant shutdowns? Do you have any memories from then?

K: Yes. That was really hectic. I remember coming in on weekends and staying late and really trying to get a lot of work done on that and watching the news. It was a real hectic time. I was married, but I had no children. That made it a lot easier. I just remember

doing a lot of typing, plus we'd have different computers and you'd have to learn the different computer. I ended up being here later, and somebody trying to help me out with the computer, to get things done, and all of us rushing around trying to copy things, and jumping in the car and getting where they are supposed to go. I thought it was exciting though. I did. I think that was probably the most exciting time here.

C: Anything else like that since?

K: No. It's not that what you are doing isn't exciting. Well, maybe it isn't all that exciting. You're doing typing, it's for a lot of different things. But when everyone worked on that steel case, everybody kind of worked together. It was just a lot of fun to see what was going to happen next and it was really exciting. The steelworkers were coming in all the time. It was a nice time. You probably really felt as though your work was appreciated at that time. You felt a little closer and everything. Now, I guess, when the office is a little bit bigger, things can be a little more distant, a little more "just every day stuff" without that much of a thrill.

C: What do you remember most from that time?

K: I remember going to the courthouse to some of the hearings. I really thought that maybe something could be done to keep some of the people working. I really did. Now, I think around here, even more stuff is going to shut down.

C: How about the way that the office has been operating? Is there anything that you thought has been particularly good or particularly bad?

K: At first, I felt uncomfortable because I was part-time. Well, then a lot of other people went part-time. So that put a lot more part-timers into a group where you didn't feel so insignificant.

C: What has the relationship been like between the support staff and the attorneys over the years here?

K: I think it's good. It's good right now. The female attorneys we have right now are really nice and the male attorneys are basically the same. I think the female ones we have right now are real nice too. I think for a while there, when we were having that bit of trouble, I think we all got very close and everything. I think it seems a little bit more distant now and I don't know why. I don't know if there is just not a lot of get-togethers or if people feel like you have to work twice as hard now because you might be

being watched or something. I don't know. People aren't as close as we were there for a while. I guess you can't stay that close forever, not unless you have something to stay close for. So there is a little more distance. Everyone is so busy. Everyone is running around here and their door is shut taking all these phone calls, and things like that.

C: How about the way decisions have been made in the office over the years in terms of how they affect people. Do you have any thoughts on that?

K: How long has Don been here?

C: Probably two and a half years or so.

K: He tries to scare you. He tries to tell you, "This and this and this is going to happen, this is what I want." You can usually get him to back down a little bit. I think. Even with the smoking issue. It's good the way it is now. It's actually even better than before. I don't know how many people would say that they are smokers. Before when everybody came into your office you felt guilty or you felt like you had to wave your hand, you had to keep the smoke off of people. You had to watch how much was going up and make sure you weren't all smoking at the same time. Now you can take five or ten minutes, you can go upstairs, you can put your feet up and you can have peace and quiet and nobody will bother you and nobody will say anything about your smoking or get on your back and then you come downstairs and you finish your work. It's really a lot better. So I actually like the arrangement better than being able to smoke at your desk. So that worked out real well. Don did work that out at least until we move. But as much as we talk about moving, I don't see that happening too much in the near future. We could be surprised, but I still don't see that happening real soon. Just with other issues too. With the benefits, "we're going to have to cut these," or "get a terrible policy," we all try to work out different things but we usually can agree.

C: Have you felt over the years that you've had an opportunity to get involved in the decisions that affect you?

K: Yes.

C: Why do you say, "yes" ?

K: Because there is always meetings. Everybody can talk during the meetings. People around here feel so strongly about different things that they do talk. Everybody cares about the work and the office and

really they do. Everybody has an opinion on just about every issue.

C: Including you?

K: Yes.

C: So if we put you in charge today, what would you do differently?

K: Maybe we could get a fund-raiser in here like Don wanted, eventually.

C: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important?

K: No, like I said, I think everything is okay. You'd have to talk to somebody who wasn't happy with it. I think it's fine. The work is good and there is a lot of it. There is just nothing else I can say.

C: Thank you.

K: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW