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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM PROJECT

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ANN COVINGTON INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Would you please introduce yourself.

Ann Covington: I'm Ann Covington and I live in Columbia, Missouri.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your early life, where you were born, your parents or your grandparents or cousins or siblings. What was your life as a child like? What was your elementary school? Was there somebody who all of a sudden said to you, "You really have ability and you can do more or less whatever you want to in this world. Just go about and do it."?

Ann Covington: I was very fortunate in many respects in that way in that my parents were completely supportive of anything wholesome and hard-working that my brother...I have one sibling, my brother, Jim...and I might want to do. I remember that from an early age, particularly though, as a very young child. I was excruciatingly shy so I needed more encouragement to reach out to others, not to be afraid, really, than I think lots of children did. I was lucky in that my parents seemed to be sensitive to that and led me to a point where I was more comfortable, pushed me some but also protected me a little and I think that strain which still resides in me, though I have now obviously learned fully to at least mask, has made my gratitude for my parents even greater than it would otherwise have been because I, in retrospect, understood that they wanted me to extend myself but at the same time, seemed to understand where the line should be drawn. As I went through elementary school and then ever after, they never indicated to me anything other than I could do whatever I wanted to do. I think I was fortunate, also in retrospect, to have grown up with friends who were girls but also, in particular at that

point, with friends who were boys. We lived in a neighborhood with lots of boys that were my contemporary or my brother's...my brother is two-and-a-half years younger than I. So I became a tomboy at a very early age, just to be able to involve myself in what was going on. I think that was another aspect that was healthy in that I was able to learn early on that when one gets knocked down, one picks oneself up, pulls the socks up and goes and tries again. So it was not until, I think, almost 7th grade that my mother said, "Well, Ann, it might be time for you to stop playing tackle football in the sandlot down the street." That was one of the few prohibitions and I, of course, had picked up some things on my own by that time but still enjoyed that kind of participation. Also, my grandparents, both maternal and paternal, never gave any indication that any of this was anything different other than, if you work hard and are an honorable person, then pursue what you want to pursue and you can do whatever you want. It wasn't really until many, many years later that I came to understand that being a girl was a bit different. I was born in 1942 so that sets the stage in some ways.

Blanche Touhill: Were there other children in the neighborhood, boys and girls, who played with your group?

Ann Covington: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: So you all played together?

Ann Covington: We all played together and we continued to do that, really. We had, I think, again, a real fortunate situation and there were lots of good families. I don't mean good families but I mean, families with a good sprinkling of ages of children so that we were exposed to certainly people in college when we were younger, but also many contemporaries with whom we played and stayed friends throughout, some to this day.

Blanche Touhill: Did those girls go on to college?

Ann Covington: Every one of my friends went to college and almost all of them on to graduate school. The town in which I grew up was a town of about 30,000 and there was a state college which was then a teacher's college, in our town. Our closest city was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania which was, at that point, two-and-a-half hours. Now it would be an hour-and-a-half drive with the interstates having been completed through West Virginia. There

were, yes, people with whom I was friends, almost without excep...every one of them went to college and many went to graduate school.

Blanche Touhill: Did they go into the more traditional [inaudible 05:55:3].

Ann Covington: I have two friends with whom I really am close who went to seminary, one a Presbyterian, one a Methodist and so, at that point, that was certainly not traditional. Another very close friend, when she graduated from the university, had a degree in French and she went to work for the NSA in Washington. A couple of people who went on and did PhD's became professors which, even then, also was not all that, as you well know, Blanche, not all that usual. Some people married and never did work outside the home; some became teachers; a few, nurses. It was a very good environment in which to be raised.

Blanche Touhill: And how was high school?

Ann Covington: High school was the same. By that time, I had learned to pretend not to be shy so it was easier for me to interrelate and we had an excellent education in Fairmont, West Virginia at Fairmont Senior High School. At that point, of course, given, again, my age, most of our teachers were women, not all, but almost all, and they were excellent as were my elementary school teachers. There was much encouragement in high school, in particular by a couple of people, one whose influence was through a musical group in which I sang, but her focus on excellence and her encouragement, of all the people in the choral years, boys and girls alike, was quite extraordinary. Then I had an English Literature teacher, in particular, in my senior year who provided the same combination of a demand for excellence and encouragement that, "You are great and you can continue to be that way." And I was very involved in many activities, both in junior high and high school and, again, was kind of pushed out of my...oftentimes, I would call myself, having sort of been pushed out of my shell, not that I took myself out of it but somebody gave me a nudge. I ran for governor of West Virginia Girls State and was elected that, after my junior year in high school. So having been in student government locally, I sort of then extended to the Girls State and other things led to other things.

Blanche Touhill: Did you hold office in your high school or your elementary school?

Ann Covington: Yes, I did. We didn't have, as I recall, any really formal offices in elementary school but in junior high and high school, yes, I did. I was involved in student government in both places and then National Honor Society, I think I was president of that and we did other extracurricular...the Key Club and the Keyettes were big deals then. So I was officer in that as well, the Keyettes. That was a Kiwanis-sponsored service club and it was one of those things that one was chosen to be in. So there were those kinds of things. I feel that I'm blushing even now.

Blanche Touhill: That's a wonderful name.

Ann Covington: Yeah, Key At, that's like a judgette.

Blanche Touhill: So then you decided to go to college.

Ann Covington: I did.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you go?

Ann Covington: I went to undergraduate school at Duke. Again, that's thanks to my parents and to having known girls who were three or four years older than I whose families were friends of my family, one of whom went to Duke, the other of whom went to Smith. My parents had encouraged me not to go to West Virginia University which was very close, in Morgantown, not that they were opposed to West Virginia University but they wanted me...and my brother...to experience other places and, in particular other people who had come from different kinds of backgrounds. So I would confess that I went to Duke probably because I knew Carol Bell and Carol Bell went to Duke. When I went to Duke, I was almost deterred from continuing with my application when I went to visit Duke in the summer after junior year in high school because the director of Admissions...and then Duke had, by the way, a separate women's college. The campuses are unified but it was a great arrangement because the men's campus, Trinity College then, was about a mile west of the women's college. It was called the Women's College at Duke University, which had its own campus, its own student government, its own dining halls, its own libraries. We had classes with the men and, of course, interacted socially but when we applied to the Women's College, there were just a little...maybe 1,200 women so doing the math, it's 300 women admitted per year and the director of Admissions said, "Well, we would rather have a C student from XYZ High School..." ...and let's just say,

Winnetka, Illinois...Wilmette, Illinois "...than an A student from West Virginia." So, that was, I think, prior to my having taken the SAT but I thought, I don't think I want to be here. First of all, I'll probably never get in and if I do, if this is the attitude, I'm not going to be comfortable. But I did apply and I also applied to Smith because another friend whose name happened to be Carol Smith, went to Smith and those are the two places...oh, and my mother had gone to Dennison and I applied to Dennison just to do that. So, in any event, that's what happened. So I did apply to Duke and went.

Blanche Touhill: How many total students were there in the freshman year?

Ann Covington: Well, there were about 1,300.

Blanche Touhill: So there were 300 women and 1,000 men?

Ann Covington: That's about right, yes. Now, again, I entered in 1960 and I know that sometime in the late '70s, I believe, when other institutions of higher education were also gender-integrating, Duke did the same.

Blanche Touhill: Did you get a Duke degree?

Ann Covington: Yes, oh, definitely. There was no distinction. Once one was there, it was simply...the theory was, and I believe it was very good, particularly for those days and maybe even for now...that the ability to have one's own student government to kind of rise to leadership in that environment for a woman was probably much greater than had we all been mixed in the same pot. Again, this is 1960 but I found that to be a good concept. It was the same women's college concept that existed elsewhere but not in such close proximity as the two campuses at Duke.

Blanche Touhill: Did the women at Duke have an athletic intercollegiate program in those days?

Ann Covington: No, it was only intra.

Blanche Touhill: Intra, okay.

Ann Covington: Yes. So I had played basketball in high school and continued to play at Duke but we were not permitted to. Not only were we not permitted to cross the center line...remember the old days of basketball?

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I do.

Ann Covington: But also, we didn't have intercollegiate athletics for females. I could be wrong. There might have been for tennis or swimming but I don't recall.

Blanche Touhill: I know generally, in higher education, it doesn't really come until Title Nine. Before then, it was mainly you're playing each other and then it becomes intercollegiate and the scholarships begin to come.

Ann Covington: Right. I think, though, considering the time, that I couldn't have had a better...just by accident, as I said, I went because I was forced to go elsewhere and because I knew somebody else who had gone there and I was able to get in but, as it turned out, what a wonderful experience because I think those of us who participated at Duke in that way then had the best of both worlds.

Blanche Touhill: People speak so highly of Duke's academic programs.

Ann Covington: It was very, very rigorous. In fact, I thought while I was there and continued after a little interruption, after my graduation from Duke, I wanted to do a PhD in English Literature and ultimately did almost a Master's at Rutgers because we were then living in Princeton and Princeton did not admit women but when I went to Rutgers which had a very fine graduate program in English Literature and Literary Criticism but I found it much, much, much easier than my undergraduate studies at Duke where I worked very, very, very hard to be on the Dean's List and try to do as well as possible.

Blanche Touhill: So after you graduated from college, then where did you go? You went to New Jersey?

Ann Covington: Well, I met someone whom I married after graduation. He was already in seminary at Duke. He had gone to undergraduate school there and so Jim and I married and we went to Oxford where Jim did a D-Phil, a Doctor of Philosophy for two years and so I had the two-year experience at Oxford during which time I secured a job without having any credentials because they were desperate and so was I, at teaching the first three grades in a two-room school in a little village outside of Oxford.

Blanche Touhill: You should write about that.

Ann Covington: Well, it was a wonderful experience. It was a thatched roof, two-room school. Again, this is 1963 to '65. I went through Duke in three years so I

could graduate at the right time. In any event...and I would like to circle back to one person at Duke who was a great influence on me, if I might.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, please.

Ann Covington: Before I forget. The profound influence on a person with whom I still remain in contact, a professor whose name is Ann Firor Scott, professor of History. I sort of had a double major in English and in History. Ann Scott was the first person whom I saw up close, so to speak, who was an accomplished professional and also a wife and mother. Her husband, Andrew, was a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I think they lived in Chapel Hill but she was a full-time professor at Duke. She had had two children and was having another during the time I was at Duke and it was she whom I saw and thought, you know, here's a person who does everything, and while I had had wonderful role models before, this is the first person who sort of fit in that category. I made it, in my little, again, reticent way, tried to get to know her a little better and she encouraged me. It was not only by her example but by our continuing friendship while I was there. She encouraged me to think beyond what I was already thinking and that was, she came to me and said, "Ann, what are you going to do after graduation?" and I told her that I was going to be married and we were going to Oxford and I would be working and she said, "Consider applying for a rotary fellowship," she went through a list of things. Well, at that time, I just thought, yeah, right. I'm not going to, but that stayed with me, not only because it was a bit unusual for me to think in that direction, though my parents would never have discouraged it, but also because it was Ann Scott who was saying it. So I want not to leave the topic of Duke without particularly acknowledging her.

Blanche Touhill: Well, she was a remarkable woman because, for that period, to be at Duke, were there any other female teachers at Duke?

Ann Covington: I think there were but not very many and not many who were full professors. If she was not full by then...I believe she was and she was quite young. She may have been...

Blanche Touhill: So she was published?

Ann Covington: Oh, definitely and she may have been an associate professor at that time. I don't know. She went on...

Blanche Touhill: But she was there.

Ann Covington: She was there and she went on to influence, I would say, now, in generations of people and she's still very involved. We e-mail and professionally, she sort of set the stage, I think, for me even though I didn't follow in the direction then that I thought I would. In any event, back to England, I taught there because this little village school had nobody. There was a head mistress who taught the upper three grades and she was a retired sergeant major for the British Army who had served in Egypt and then she had gone to the east end of London to be a police woman and then she sought more security, in a sense, and had become certified to teach and ended up here in this little village called Lewknor that's maybe 10, as I say, or 12 miles south of Oxford, a little country village where there was the school and the church with the vicar and then most of the parents of the children worked at British Motors in Oxford and they had not been anywhere but their acquaintance with the outside world really was television and those children, I never, ever succeeded in convincing that I was now a cowgirl because Bonanza, Big Valley, those kinds of programs were their understanding of what America is. I mean, it was a delightful time and because of the town gown and the social strata experience that we were having in Oxford, I wouldn't have had an opportunity to meet these wonderful people and their children had I not had that experience teaching.

Blanche Touhill: How many were in the class?

Ann Covington: Oh, my! Well, in the three grades, I would say there were probably 30 children and, as I say, we had an open coal fire and went outside of the school house itself to the bathroom facilities. So it was rather primitive, even for a country village in England in the early 1960's.

Blanche Touhill: Well, it shows they were creative to hire an American, doesn't it?

Ann Covington: Well, I'd say they were desperate. I applied when I got there because I happened to become...my majors at Duke were pure majors but, at that point, one could get a secondary certificate by just committing one semester, half of which for some fuzzy little education, and I don't mean that unkindly but they were, considering what else we were taking at Duke, courses and then practice teaching. So you could be certified to teach in high school. So I did that because I was always brought up,

particularly by my father, to say, you have to be able to make your own way. But they didn't need me and so I signed up when I got to Oxford but they said, "Oh, no, we have to fill all these jobs first with a British citizen," and therefore, I drove down almost all the way to London for a while to substitute teach at an Air Force base, an American Air Force base outside of London and in the Christmas season, worked in the toy department at the major department store in downtown Oxford but right about that time, the school called and said, "Will you do this?" I said, "Well, I guess I can learn." So I did. Back to New Jersey, that was my children's father and my husband's first job, it was at Princeton after finishing at Oxford. That's how I got to Rutgers.

Blanche Touhill: Well, Princeton is a beautiful town.

Ann Covington: It's a beautiful town and it was a lovely place to be and to live. Jim decided, after a while, that he didn't want to do the publish or perish rat race, so to speak, but to concentrate on teaching so we did not remain there. We were there three years but that was a great experience and we made wonderful friends there as well.

Blanche Touhill: And so where did you go next?

Ann Covington: To Columbia, Missouri where the head of the department at Princeton was a good friend of Seymour Smith who was then the President at Stevens College and Jim thought that that would sort of be an interim place while he kind of decided a different direction. So in 1968 we moved to Columbia where I continue to live.

Blanche Touhill: You went to law school then?

Ann Covington: I did. After our younger child was in pre-school, I went to law school but that was by default. I really wanted still to get my PhD in English Literature and had worked toward that when I was at Rutgers but in assessing the situation in the market then through friends that I had continued to maintain in the academy, it was evident that, particularly being landlocked, but even not, that having a position after a PhD at that point would have been almost a pipe dream. So I went down the list of things, what could I do instead, and maybe even get in by the back door to the academy. I crossed many things off because of not having a strength in science or particularly in math and went to law school, as I say, by default, having no idea why I was going to law school except that I

wanted to go to school; I wanted to do something to be involved and I thought maybe I could get in the back door of a campus if I had a law degree which turned out to be ridiculous.

Blanche Touhill: What's interesting is you have ended up on the Board of Curators so you have been [inaudible 27:26:5] in a way.

Ann Covington: And I've had all of the associations throughout my life with my spouses that's been another blessing, yes.

Blanche Touhill: How was law school?

Ann Covington: Law school was the first time that I had any idea that I was different from other people in terms of being a female because it just really...I hadn't been confronted with the situation. There were so few of us. There were, I think, 10 women, perhaps 11, in my class.

Blanche Touhill: How many were in the class?

Ann Covington: One hundred and twenty and there were two of us who were mothers. Each of us received, upon our admission, a letter from Dean Eckhart saying that though we had been admitted, we might want to consider not coming because nigh on to impossible doing both things, being a good family person and also being an effective and a successful law student. Then we had many classmates who still at that point seemed to...not only seemed, they expressed...not all by any means...but expressed an attitude of, "What are you doing here, taking a place of a male who will really be a lawyer?" I have many times in having to speak, particularly while I was on the court and some afterwards, recalled the fact that there was a student lounge at Tate Hall in Columbia but the real term was men's. It was a very big, comfortable room with a TV and lots of easy chairs and I think even had some very fine Oriental rugs on the floor but there was an implicit understanding that women were not welcome. That was my view and the view of a preponderance of my classmates who were women. I think there was one person who felt very comfortable or went in there from time to time but the women's lounge was, in fact, a little ante-room off the restroom where we had...and I've recounted this story many times because people seem so much to enjoy it so I tell it again...but we had two chairs, a sort of vinyl loveseat kind of thing and that's it. The actual Ladies' Room was immediately adjacent but people just crowded in there and that was a time when most people were

smoking. So it was the Women's Lounge and that's where we got together when we had time but that was law school. Law school though, I don't think I noticed, except from Joe Covington whom I later married, any particular discrimination from the faculty and Joe's was not gender-based. It was more my age. I was 10 years older than my classmates and I happened, in my first year of contracts, to have made a grade that was not satisfactory to me at all. It wasn't failing; it was the equivalent of a C but I went to see him and asked, could I talk about my exam and he kind of growled at me and he said, "Come back later, after people who have done really poorly have had their chance to talk with me." So a couple weeks later, I circled back and we talked a bit about the exam and he said, "All right, aren't you a good bit older than most of your classmates?" I said, "True." He said, "Well, history teaches that you're not going to do very well here in law school." Otherwise, any note of our being female was not overtly expressed and that was, again, not...that was age rather than gender from Joe, who turned out to be very open-minded as to women as I later learned. But, in any event, law school was different.

Blanche Touhill: Did you join a firm then afterwards?

Ann Covington: No, I went to the Attorney General's Office in my third year of law school. I was looking for some work and was hired to work there part-time while...I was carrying a full load in law school but could do the work from the law school library and at home. I was drafting appellate briefs, as it turned out and then interviewed to remain there, which I did then for the first two years after I graduated from law school.

Blanche Touhill: So that was a wonderful experience?

Ann Covington: It was a perfect experience because there it's sink or swim. Here's your agency represent them and again, coincidentally, I represented not only the Department of Natural Resources and the Solid and Hazardous Waste Division, but also the Department of Higher Education. So those were great experiences, and again, there were great mentors there but the experience of having front line responsibility early on was invaluable and quite confidence-building because I left law school...everybody in law school, of course, cannot be in the top 10% of the class. I wasn't. I did quite respectably but I left there with my ego a little bit cracked.

- Blanche Touhill: But the experience that you go really made the difference then?
- Ann Covington: Yes, and not just there. Even today, I still would freeze up internally, worry a lot. I go argue a case in front of my old court, butterflies in the stomach at the same level that I would have had when I was 10 years old. Experience does help though.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, a lot of lawyers who rank in the top 10 never get to go to court; never get that kind of experience and you got it which really makes a difference.
- Ann Covington: I was very fortunate and in another way as well, in that there were, not a majority, not even near a majority but there were a number of other females practicing law in the Attorney General's Office, most of whom had been out of law school only four or five years longer than I but, yes, great lawyers, some of whom, again, I remain in touch with. Annette Lowry, who is currently a federal judge on the United States District Court in the Western District, formerly a professor at the University of Missouri Law School in Columbia, was in law school at the same time as I, two years ahead. She was there and other people who are not any longer in Missouri. All of them, as I, sinking or swimming and it was great to have other women there.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course, it was.
- Ann Covington: It was Jack Danforth and then John Ashcroft, both of whom I worked under, who were hiring us.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. I became Chancellor under John Ashcroft.
- Ann Covington: That's right, you did.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Where did you go then?
- Ann Covington: I entered private practice in Columbia.
- Blanche Touhill: By yourself or with other people?
- Ann Covington: With another woman who was already practicing in Columbia but had been a year behind me in law school but she went directly to a firm there and she and I had become friends and each of us was sort of interested in trying this new thing. Now, I would say that Rosie...her name is Rosalie Myer...Rosie was more interested in it than I. I was interested in getting

into private practice, have that experience but there were very few firms in Columbia then, many of them very small. One needed to be at the right place at the right time in order to be hired...and big firms where the hiring cycle is pretty predictable. So I wasn't having very much success in finding a place and through our friendship, Rosie and I just thought, "Well, let's give this a try." So we opened an office, Covington & Myer. This would have been 1979. We were very lucky because we did well and that was thanks to relationships with other lawyers who sent us business when they had conflicts and to our interactions otherwise in the community.

Blanche Touhill: Did you specialize or did you take everything?

Ann Covington: We took pretty much everything, although, after the first year, Blanche, I decided I was not going to take another criminal case because I was very gullible and was so disappointed a couple of times by what I was told by people which turned out to be completely without basis, that I bought pretty much hook, line and sinker, believe it or not. Why I wasn't like that in everything, I don't know. But in any event, I did a little bit of everything, a terrifying experience but that was not unusual for a town...Columbia was then maybe, what, 50,000, 60,000, if that and there was no law firm that did just a few kinds of things. As I evolved, however, because of the people who came to me, I developed a very strong practice in family law litigation and in probate matters and in small business, representing small businesses, both men and women. I found it very interesting in that I had a number of male clients who came in controversial situations with spouses who seemed to think that having a female attorney would be more effective, quite the contrary to what one would have expected. Anyway, as time passed, then I also had an extremely large bankruptcy practice. Again, it evolved from representing people who came in. Now, this is in the early '80s when times were very tough and there were many, many people in small businesses and farmers who were not able to make it, who had gotten too far in debt, in the good times, over leveraged themselves and it was very, very sad. I did a lot of that but as I did it, then I became sort of, not co-opted but more and more of the business entities asked me if I would represent banks and other corporations. So that kind of practice led me into the corporate side of bankruptcy as well as into more corporate work.

Blanche Touhill: Then, how did you become a judge?

Ann Covington: Again, sort of almost by accident in that it was because of my relationship with then Attorney General Ashcroft, having worked with him, that I believe that I became a judge in that there was much talk about, it was time for a woman. There were very, very few women in the judiciary and none on the appellate bench, none, in the year 1986, first. Someone, it was not then Governor Ashcroft at all, but someone who apparently had been thinking about, it was far past time for a woman, and I think the women in St. Louis and in Kansas City by that time also, were organizing a bit to send messages, I know in St. Louis and too, maybe a little lesser extent but also Kansas City. Karen Tokars, Professor Tokars was writing and other professionals here were putting some pressure on the appellate judicial commission and I'm sure on the governor's office. So it was suggested that I try to do this and I thought, oh, you've got to be kidding. I'm out of law school 10 years. I don't think I'm ready for that. I never considered this but the first time I was asked to consider it, my younger child, my son, Paul, was heading into his senior year of high school, Paul was always an adventuresome boy and I thought, hm, I don't think I would like to leave town even for a weekend, not to mention be in Kansas City at the Court of Appeals during the week even though Joe Covington, who was my husband then, was perfectly able...I was just afraid to even think about it but a year later, another vacancy came in the Court of Appeals and three or four people, again, who were thinking about this issue, called again and said, "Will you please consider doing this?" With Joe's strong encouragement and that of some other friends, including Chip Robertson, with whom I had served in the Attorney General's Office, he and I had offices immediately adjacent to each other and Chip had stayed close in government. I thought, okay, I'll give this a try and I did.

Blanche Touhill: So you were the first woman on the Court of Appeals?

Ann Covington: I was.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful!

Ann Covington: Well, it was.

Blanche Touhill: It was a celebration, I'm sure.

Ann Covington: Well, among some. I'm sure it was a shock in many ways. There were 11 judges in that Western District Court of Appeals. There were 14 in St. Louis but 11 there and I'm sure for some of them, it was a shock and required a major adjustment. They were lovely people and, as I got to know each of them, I became friends with each of them. There was a celebration among a lot of people but among other people, I'm sure there was, at the very minimum, some hand-wringing, if not worse.

Blanche Touhill: Let me change the topic for just a moment or two and let me go to the question of, if you had been born 50 years earlier, what would you be doing today instead of the judiciary and legal career?

Ann Covington: I would bet, though I'm not sure, my best guess is that I would have been as my mother, who was really smart, a person whose relationships were very important to her, who threw herself into everything 100%, and who was in the volunteer arena, extremely involved and a leader and I thank her and I look at her as having been an inspiration to lots of people. She was. I hope that I would have been like my mother. Whether I would have thought about teaching or nursing, I don't know, but my best guess is that probably that's what I would have been doing but I don't know.

Blanche Touhill: How do you enjoy the International Women's Forum?

Ann Covington: I enjoy it very much. I have regretted it since I have no longer been in St. Louis and before that, while I was on the Supreme Court, I had many more opportunities and responsibilities in St. Louis. In recent years, I have regretted being geographically removed to the point...and otherwise involved that it's been more difficult for me to be involved but I knew some of the people, was barely acquainted with some of the people who were in the Forum when I was first invited to participate and to be able to have gotten to know them better and then to become newly acquainted with and form relationships with such accomplished women who have such varying backgrounds, who have involved themselves professionally and in the community, and then as support for each other, has just been an inspirational and wonderful thing, not only to see but to have been able to participate in for those years.

Blanche Touhill: Is there some award or a group of awards that you have received that you really are very proud of having obtained, to have been recognized?

Ann Covington: I can't really particularly identify any. I laughingly say that what's happened to me is, because I've been in the right place at the right time in so many respects, other things that I've been recognized for have been, I think, because I sort of had a label after my name. I will say that I was honored, the American Bar Association has sponsored a project called Women Trail Blazers and they are doing something similar to this for a repository in the Library of Congress and I was asked to do this and did, three or four years ago, for a period of almost a year, off and on and, again, just because I was the first and was in the right place at the right time really, is why that happened. That was so meaningful to my mother, in particular. My father wasn't well enough then to understand and he died during that time but she was always our best cheer leader and, for whatever reason, she thought that was just the best. So I'm particularly thankful for that.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your move into the Supreme Court of the State of Missouri and I know that you were the first woman to be appointed to that wonderful position. Would you talk about that?

Ann Covington: That was another adjustment. I had been at the Court of Appeals, really, only about 14 months when I went to the Supreme Court. The people on the Court of Appeals, my colleagues, had probably just barely gotten used to me and then came another group, this time only six colleagues, but who had..."Oh, my goodness, here she is." I would say I felt a lot of pressure, Blanche, that I had not...I felt it at the Court of Appeals but there's a wonderful level of anonymity for a judge on the Court of Appeals that doesn't transfer to the Missouri Supreme Court, not that everybody in the world knows who's on the court, but for the judiciary, at least, and for the legal profession, there's a spotlight and while I had felt similarly in Kansas City at the Court of Appeals, I felt to a heightened level, the responsibility that I bore because I really didn't think about it so much when I went to the Court of Appeals but, once in Jefferson City, I had come to understand that my being the first woman was very, very, very important to lots of other people. I did not ever want to make a mistake. I didn't want to embarrass anyone. I wanted never to let anyone down and I felt that, as I say, at a heightened level that was pretty excruciating sometimes and you know these kinds of things. You've been in the same position. I was attuned to that severely. Being Chief Justice then, which I became in '93, it's a rotating position on the Missouri

Supreme Court, I felt the same level of responsibility and felt always, as I had from the time I was born, I'm not up to this. I've always felt that at everything I've ever done: I'm not up to this. At the same time, I got my pace and I would want to put this in the context of, again, as being a woman, a first woman, so to speak, with respect to other women, there are such divergent views of what is expected. So there are a group of people whom, from the moment I got there, hoped that I would turn the world upside down and another group of people, I'm sure, who thought, "Oh, my goodness, now what?" So, I had, by that time, learned, I think, to be myself and to stick to my own comfort level but was very conscious of the fact that some people were hoping that everything would change overnight as to women. At the same time, I was living with a group of people who went a year after I went to the Supreme Court and suggested that perhaps the rules of civil procedure, which were, at that point, in 1990, read all completely in the masculine, could be made gender-neutral. So it would be "the lawyer" rather than "he." Well, for some persons, that would just turn the world upside down: "Oop!" So there was that tension that existed throughout my experience there. So I hope that incrementally, I was able to do a lot and I was gratified to be able to involve many more women in court committees that were of great importance because, not only was there not a woman on the court, but there weren't women represented in some of the most important aspects of the court's life in managing the judiciary and the bar. So that was a great opportunity and I just sort of tried to do that gradually and somewhat quietly and if people raised an eyebrow, I just tried to ignore that. Another opportunity that was quite special was getting to know some other women appellate judges throughout the United States. We were so rare and there was enlightenment at that point that was coming...

Blanche Touhill:

Appellate or...

Ann Covington:

Appellate...well, any court, but particularly at the Appellate and Supreme Court levels, very, very few of us, including the federal judiciary. So we were invited to participate in all sorts of things that haven't been, right now even, with many, many, many more women in the judiciary. I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity, nor would have Linda Newman in Iowa or Elizabeth Lacy in Virginia or Mary Schrader from Arizona, just great people. We were on bar committees; we were

involved in American Bar things; we were very lucky, all of us and each of us, again, so different in many ways and different personalities but so focused on trying to do as well as we could do and not to stand out as women; at the same time, to be as effective as we could possibly be. So, I could name many others...well, not too many because there weren't many others actually, but that was an opportunity that I think all of us from around the country valued extremely. Some of those women had stay-at-home husbands to be dads. I, by that time...my children were in college but that was another new world and people were figuring out how to do it and it was great for me to learn that, bring it back, share it with people in Missouri. So, yes, as to the women in the judiciary and the Bar in Missouri, I hope that I handled things to their benefit but we should never have...I never lost sight of the fact...I was standing on the shoulders of men as I progressed through because there wasn't a Sandra Day O'Connor on the court when I did all this and it was through the encouragement and support of men that we women were able to start walking.

Blanche Touhill: Are the women in the pipeline today in the judiciary?

Ann Covington: Yes, increasing. I don't know that there's 50% representation. I'm sure there's not. There is in law school.

Blanche Touhill: Now?

Ann Covington: Yes, but among law faculty and in the judiciary, not 50% but, yes.

Blanche Touhill: What about the federal courts? Are the federal courts more difficult for the women to...

Ann Covington: I don't think so, no.

Blanche Touhill: That's coming along too?

Ann Covington: It's coming along. It's coming along. There are still mountains to climb. They're probably just not quite so high but definitely coming along.

Blanche Touhill: Can you name any particular case or instance of something through a committee that you did that you're very proud of, that you did sort of under the radar? I mean, were you able to change the language from...

Ann Covington: Oh, we did change...lots of that happened, that we changed the code of conduct for lawyers and for judges, to become gender-neutral and that happened early on.

Blanche Touhill: Was there more of a sweep early on than there is today?

Ann Covington: I think today, those kinds of things are taken care of and that was my experience...I don't think there's very much, if any, overt discrimination, so to speak, in terms of the publications and I think there are, at this point, probably as many females on Supreme Court committees as there are males. I think that there's no comparison, none. In the practice of law, there is still quite a way to go.

Blanche Touhill: Now, today, you're on the Board of Curators, I know.

Ann Covington: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: That's where you wanted to end up, isn't it, with the higher education commitment?

Ann Covington: I don't know. That, again, was not a plan. I'm delighted to be involved, yes, but I didn't ever seek this. As with everything else, it sort of came out of the blue but when I was invited to do it, in fact, I hesitated a minute because I wasn't sure that I wanted to go through the...

Blanche Touhill: Why do you think you're on people's lists, Democrats and Republicans, of promotions or honors?

Ann Covington: Well, I would say that I'm on the Board of Curators, by the way, submitted as an Independent. When the governor's office called, I...

Blanche Touhill: Well, it doesn't matter...Republican...Democrats...

Ann Covington: Why I'm on the list? I don't know.

Blanche Touhill: Is it your shyness that you've overcome?

Ann Covington: I don't know.

Blanche Touhill: Are you somebody that I think people think they can work with?

Ann Covington: Probably that. I think...

Blanche Touhill: And experienced.

Ann Covington: And experienced and I think I would say...this is a little immodest...when my friend, Annette Lowry, whom I mentioned earlier who's now a federal district judge but been a close friend since law school, spoke at my swearing in the court, she likened me to being a steel fist with a velvet glove. I think sometimes, maybe as people have described me to me, that they believe that I will stand up for what I think is the right thing but that I will do it in a way that maybe achieves a result rather than to maybe try to force it more blatantly but I'd say that, in the same way that, when people sometimes ask, "How were you received when you went to the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court by all of those men?" I'd say, "Well, you'd have to ask them," and I sort of feel that way. I don't know. I would never have dreamed of being on the Board of Curators. So maybe I'm the least offensive or something, I don't know.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I think it is that you have your principles and that you can accomplish the goal in a way that people can accept.

Ann Covington: Thank you.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much. I enjoyed it immensely.

Ann Covington: Thank you. Thank you for taking care of me, really.