

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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LAURNA GODWIN INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Laurna, why don't you introduce yourself.

Laurna Godwin: Sure, my name is Laurna Godwin and currently I am co-founder and principle of Vector Communications Corporation in St. Louis which is a public engagement and communications consulting firm. By public engagement, I mean we bring citizens together to discuss and resolve issues that affect how they live, work and play in areas such as transportation, healthcare, education, the environment. We're the two-way line of communication between an agency and its target audience and we try to help them resolve a particular issue, discuss it, have citizens give their input so they do have a voice in things that happen in their community. So that's the public engagement side. Besides that, we also do strategic planning, communications planning, event planning but all around events that make a difference and we do media relations and video production.

Blanche Touhill: How long have you been in that business?

Laurna Godwin: I've had Vector Communications for 15 years and it started as a fluke, really. I call myself a business owner, not an entrepreneur because I consider an entrepreneur as someone who, I had this idea; I'm going to refinance my house and do whatever it takes to start this business. I sort of fell into it. I was not working at the time. I had been a broadcast journalist for close to 20 years working in TV as a news reporter, anchor and talk show host, decided that I was getting tired of that after nearly 20 years. I thrive on challenges and it was no longer challenging. I also had a very good friend...I was working at Channel 9...who died and I went through that experience with her and she died at the age of 42 and all she ever wanted to do was to get married and have children and she didn't get a chance to do either and going through that experience with

her, I'd decided that life was too short on many levels. So I had met a man at the time and we were thinking about getting married and I said, "I am not staying in St. Louis. I'm going back to the East Coast where I was born" and after going through that experience with my friend, I decided that life was too short. So once I decided to stay in St. Louis, I knew I couldn't be a broadcast journalist for another 20 years here because it's not what it used to be when I got into the business. It's more infotainment, not education and telling people about the issues that affect their lives so that they can make good decisions. So, I also decided at the time that I wanted to try and have a child which was completely different for me. I was always a professional career woman, never wanted to get married, never wanted to have children and, again, going through that experience with my friend changed all that. Well, wanting to have children was not easy. I found out that I had significant trouble having a child and my doctor at the time said, "The stress is too much. You need to quit working" because I had gone through fertility treatments, in vitro and it didn't work so I quit because the business was no longer challenging to me. I had my friend's death experience and I had fallen in love and by that time, I had gotten married to someone who's from St. Louis and has a business here in St. Louis so he couldn't move. It didn't work a second time so I was home, not doing anything and at the time, a friend of mine, she was just about to get this contract with St. Louis Community College and the Environmental Protection Agency but then she couldn't take the job because her husband got a job in Washington, D.C. and they were moving. So she said, "Laurna, this would be good for you to do" and I was home doing nothing because I was just very down about not being able to conceive and just thinking about what's next in my life and she put me in contact with this gentleman and I didn't call him because I was still in that process of really grieving, of not being able to conceive and I ran into him one day at a restaurant and he said, "You never called me." I was mortified because my parents always taught me to follow up...write thank you notes and to follow up with people and I hadn't done that. So I said, "Let me call him" and I ended up getting this contract which was through the Environmental Protection Agency, as I said earlier and St. Louis Community College was administering the grant and it was community-based environmental protection which was an initiative started by President Bill Clinton. At the time, he wanted to look at environmental protection at the grassroots

level instead of from the top down in terms of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, et cetera. So he had picked the City of St. Louis as one of six pilot cities in the United States to test this, looking at environmental issues from the grassroots level. So, I ended up getting the contract and it was called the Listening Tour, going around to neighborhoods in the City of St. Louis to find out what people's environmental issues are. That was Phase One. So I got this contract and I was like, okay, I can't do it all by myself. I need some other people and my client said, "Well, there is this gentleman who is a professor at St. Louis University in Marketing. He would be good to help you" because we had to get the people before we could even facilitate a discussion with them. Then we both decided, I said, "What's missing is a good facilitator" and he said, "Well, my sister does that" and I said, "Okay, great, I'll talk to her," brought her in and her name is Jessica Perkins. She was going through the same life transition similar to mine. She had been in corporate America, in sales and marketing with Fortune 500 companies for the last 15+ years, was tired of that, had quit and was pursuing her PhD in public policy at St. Louis University. So we met at this time...and she had her own one-woman business which was strategic planning and facilitation...so the three of us got together and did this project and it was very, very successful. It became a model for other similar projects in the United States and we got Phase Two from the EPA which was then picking two neighborhoods, one in North St. Louis and one in South St. Louis and working with residents to address a particular environmental issue. We created a manual for how to do environmental planning at the grassroots level. We also produced a video to go along with the manual. So it was a great project.

Blanche Touhill: What neighborhoods did you choose in North St. Louis and South St. Louis?

Laurna Godwin: O'Fallon in North St. Louis and Carondelet in South St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Both near parks?

Laurna Godwin: Yes. Carondelet was recycling and O'Fallon was getting rid of abandoned properties. Besides working on an environmental issue was also teaching these residents how to take initiative and be leaders in their community.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get the people in the communities to come to the sessions?

Laurna Godwin: That was the difficult...the outreach is always the difficult part in what we do and it's sort of like the marketing technique: you find the people that they respect in the neighborhood. They're considered influencers and if, for instance, you tell me, "Laurna, you should be involved in this initiative. Here's why: I believe in it; think about it." You're an influencer. I respect you. I'm more likely to be receptive to information that I receive from someone I respect as opposed to someone I don't. So that's how we go about doing it. And when we focus on particular projects, 15 people from each community were trained as leaders and to lead the project. So the project was very successful and people started hearing about us.

Blanche Touhill: Did they talk to each other?

Laurna Godwin: Yes, and we even had a group specifically for senior citizens and another group for young people. It was really great. So people started hearing about this project and calling me, because it fell under my one-man business at the time called Godwin Communications, original name, and I said, hm, more work was coming in and more work and I said to Jessica Perkins at the time, "Hey, people are calling. Let's see what we have here." So we tried it out for a year. Her brother went back to teaching at SLU. He was not involved in it. She and I worked together for a year to see if the partnership would work and then we formed the business, Vector Communications, Public Engagement and Communications Consulting.

Blanche Touhill: What's Vector?

Laurna Godwin: We picked the name, Vector because it helps clients get from Point A to Point B, that definition of Vector so that's what we help clients do in a successful way.

Blanche Touhill: Did you succeed in O'Fallon and Carondelet?

Laurna Godwin: We did, yeah. They ended up getting grants to help sustain their projects at the time. So it did work out very well and some of those people I still see today and engage and interact with them.

Blanche Touhill: Let's go back to your early days and then we'll end up with this company and what you're doing with it. Where were you born and what was your environment: did you have siblings; your mother and father or your elementary school. Was there a teacher or a cousin or a parent that really

said to you, "Laurna, you have special ability and you should really grow that ability and do something in the world as you're growing up"?

Laurna Godwin: Well, I grew up in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, which is central Jersey along the shore, about 10 minutes from the Atlantic Ocean. Shrewsbury was an all-white community and my family was the first family to move into this community.

Blanche Touhill: What year was that?

Laurna Godwin: This was in 1965 and I went to first grade. I was the only black child. It was a very, very difficult time. My parents wanted to move into this community because they wanted a good education for me and they weren't getting it where we were living. So they took great pains...a very interesting story...that a good friend of theirs who was white, bought the house for them and then sold the house to them the next day. After the neighborhood found out that we were moving in, they tried to stop us from moving in but did not succeed.

Blanche Touhill: It's the raisin in the sun.

Laurna Godwin: Yes, and we lived on the cul-de-sac, beginning of the cul-de-sac and we had one neighbor to the right of the house who would never drive past our house, would go all the way around the cul-de-sac to go out. If he was out working on his yard and my father came out and worked on it, he would go in the house until my father went back in the house. So it was a very, very difficult time and I got called every name in the book and I would come...

Blanche Touhill: Did you play with the neighborhood children?

Laurna Godwin: Not at that time, no, and I would come home crying, very mad at my parents: "Why did you put me in this school? I want to go away to school" and they were adamant about, "No, we have you straight for 18 years. We're going to keep you here as long as possible and we want you to go to this school." Whenever we studied civil rights or anything like that, everyone would turn around and look at me. It was a very, very difficult time and, as I said, I would come home...

Blanche Touhill: Did they want you to comment on civil rights or did they just look at you?

Laurna Godwin: They would just look at me.

- Blanche Touhill: Did the teacher call on you for something on civil rights?
- Laurna Godwin: No, but the good news is, by the time I was in 8th grade...because this was elementary school...I was still the only black child in the whole school so it never really integrated...that I was elected class president. So it had come a long way in those years and I'm close to six feet tall so one boy always teased me and called me "Banana." That was my nickname. So I used it to my advantage in my campaign, so the slogan of my campaign was "Vote for Banana. She has appeal."
- Blanche Touhill: Well, you were always a communicator. You were always a communicator.
- Laurna Godwin: And it worked.
- Blanche Touhill: How many were in your class?
- Laurna Godwin: Oh, that's a good question. I think there was around 25, yeah, and then there were three classes within that. But I had...
- Blanche Touhill: But you were elected president of all three?
- Laurna Godwin: Right, right, of the 8th grade class. One of my favorite teachers was Mrs. Pollack in the 6th grade. Why? Because she was just memorable in her delivery, had a lot of flair when she taught, was very nice to me and she was a great, great teacher.
- Blanche Touhill: I was going to say, were there other teachers friendly to you or were you just one of the students?
- Laurna Godwin: Just one of the students, nothing bad ever happened with the teachers. It was the students and their parents who would not let me play with their kids, all of that.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you have brothers and sisters?
- Laurna Godwin: I had one sister who's 12 years older so she was out of the house.
- Blanche Touhill: That's right, you were an only child growing up, that's right.
- Laurna Godwin: Right, and my parents had me late in life.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Laurna Godwin: And my maternal grandmother lived with us. So it was difficult but then, as I said, by the 8th grade, I was the class president, still the only black child in the whole school. Then I went on to high school, Red Bank Regional High School in New Jersey where (it was 50?). So that was a big change for me because at the time, it was really, really challenging for my parents. You know, I kept thinking about myself, "Oh, why am I here, the only child and I hate it and oh, oh..." ...but they were ostracized by white people who felt that they should not be in the community and by black people who felt that they were a sell-out for moving into the white community. So, it was a very interesting time but, looking back on it...

Blanche Touhill: Well, now, how did you get along in high school then?

Laurna Godwin: Good, yeah. I had my friends. My high school was a melding of three communities so I had my friends from Shrewsbury and Little Silver, the next town over, was like Shrewsbury and then Red Bank was the diverse community. So I loved it. It was great and I played in a band, became captain of the flag twirlers and National Honors Society, all of those things. So it was very good. What I learned from growing up in an all white neighborhood that I just appreciate my parents so much for now, is that I can get along with anyone. I'm not intimidated when I walk into a room, whether it's all white men, all Asian people, it doesn't make any difference to me, that I'm comfortable in my own skin so all those years, that paid off for me and I think it helped me be a better journalist when I was in broadcasting because I can go up and speak to anyone. It doesn't bother me. So it really has helped me in my life, helped me build lots of wonderful and diverse friendships and I think diversity is the spice of life. So it was great for me.

Blanche Touhill: How did your sister react to the...or did she go almost immediately to the high school?

Laurna Godwin: Yeah, she went immediately to high school and a different high school at the time, where we were living. So it wasn't...she didn't experience what I experienced. But again, it was a great experience and my parents always instilled in me the value of a good education. It was like, "People can call you names; people can try to physically harm you but they can't take your intelligence and your education away from you." So they stressed that. I got that from them as well as serving your community, volunteering. My parents were both well educated. My father graduated

from Rutgers University. My mother graduated from Brooklyn College and was valedictorian. In 1942, my mother moved from New York after she graduated, to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey to work for the U.S. Army Command at Fort Monmouth. She was the first female electronics engineer. My mom was my father's boss at that time. He was also an electronic engineer so imagine in the late '40s, by that time, that was unheard of but because men moved faster up the ranks than women, he eventually surpassed her. But that's how they met each other and married which was very, very unusual. My mother traveled the world for engineering and represented the Army in Britain, Australia. My father ended up becoming the executive director of the International Wire & Cable Symposium and he helped create fiber optic cables which eventually led to the internet. The government worked on that and then they went and turned it over to a private company, Corning Glass in New York and Corning took it from there. So he traveled the world as well. So they were both very...moving to an all white community, both well educated, stressed the importance of getting a good education. So after I graduated from high school, I knew I wanted to be a journalist. I had gone to one of those high school career days and I met this...it was a print journalist at the time and it just sounded so interesting, what he was doing and I love to learn about things but I knew I wasn't a 9:00 to 5:00 desk person. I like to be out and about and doing things and I liked the immediacy of TV and the collaborative teamwork of mirroring words to pictures and working together. So my heart was set on going to the University of Pennsylvania because they have the great Annenberg School of Communications and I applied to several schools and got into all of them but one was Princeton University and my parents said, "If we're paying for your education, you're going to Princeton because we think it's safer than the University of Pennsylvania" which was in the heart of Philadelphia. I boo-hoed about that for a long time but I ended up going to Princeton and I loved it. It was a fantastic experience. I entered there four years after they had accepted women so it was still a very interesting campus but I loved every minute of it.

Blanche Touhill: What did you love about it?

Laurna Godwin: I loved being with a group of people who were basically all the same, that we come from all over the world but it was like, I didn't find...because I felt...one of the reasons why I fought my parents about going there was I

thought that I wouldn't make it; I would stand out, but when you go to college, they select you so all of you are on the same level and I just didn't think I would do well there and they didn't have a communications school. But, as I said, I just loved it. I loved the ratio of two-to-one, male/female. It was a nice sized campus for me and when you're being taught by the person who wrote the book, and we had small class sizes, seven to ten people, where we'd sit and discuss the topic. It was great. Some of the best years of my life were there.

Blanche Touhill: Did you belong to one of the eating clubs?

Laurna Godwin: Yes, I did. Oh, yes, yes. That's strange because they're only at Princeton, very unusual. I belonged to Tower Club which was one of the two co-ed selective clubs on campus.

Blanche Touhill: I wondered how Princeton handled that, when they brought in the women. I thought maybe the women would have eating clubs...

Laurna Godwin: No.

Blanche Touhill: Or dining clubs, I guess...

Laurna Godwin: Eating clubs.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. So is the ratio male to female about the same?

Laurna Godwin: Now it is.

Blanche Touhill: No, no, in the eating clubs?

Laurna Godwin: Oh, no, and at the time I was there, they had three all-male eating clubs and it was just very, very interesting.

Blanche Touhill: What did you learn from that experience?

Laurna Godwin: Well, as I said, I belonged to a selective club so going through that whole process of what they call "bicker" at Princeton and being interviewed and being selected to be a part.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you don't choose your...

Laurna Godwin: No, some eating clubs you can through a lottery, but there are a handful that are selective and I was in the selective one. So, that was interesting.

Blanche Touhill: Did you do that your freshman year?

Laurna Godwin: No, it's only for junior and senior year, yeah, but even though I was obviously so glad that Princeton had become co-educational, I still loved the old traditions of Princeton. I like tradition and one of the guys I was dating at the time, he belonged to the Ivy Club which was an all-male selective club. When you walked into that club as a woman, all the men had to stand when you walked through the front door and so it was very...that was nice, respect; it was great.

Blanche Touhill: So, when you graduated, what happened?

Laurna Godwin: I went to Columbia University in New York to get my Master's Degree in journalism. It is a one-year program that is all very much practical, very little theory which I loved about it. I knew I wanted to become a journalist since high school. Princeton...what I did to satisfy my journalism interest was I worked at the campus radio station in news and then I worked as an intern at Rolling Stone Magazine in New York so I would hop the train to New York a couple of times a week and one semester I studied abroad in England and I worked for London weekend television as an intern. So that's how I augmented my educational aspirations with my professional aspirations. I was English literature and American studies major at Princeton and did my internships in communications. So I think that helped me get into Columbia University to get my Master's in journalism and I thought, one year, New York City, my favorite place on earth, well respected journalism program and from Day One, I was out on the street covering stories and I'll never forget that first day. I realized the power that a journalist has, that, number one, you pick who you want to interview; you decide what's most important about the story and then you relay it to people and I thought, I love this, love it.

Blanche Touhill: Let me just talk about a side issue. I think Missouri, and I assume all states, are having really a crisis in communication because I don't know how you can form public opinion to act as easily as in the days when we had the Post-Dispatch and the Globe Democrat and the Kansas City Star. Do you have any comment on that?

Laurna Godwin: Well, everyone's a reporter now so you don't...one thing about the profession when I was in it, we studied the craft and we wanted to get

the facts straight. That was key. Facts aren't that important anymore. It's more about persuasion to a particular viewpoint so it's lost a lot.

Blanche Touhill: What I notice...I'm on a state-wide committee and we hear about the poor in Missouri and I don't know how you get that message out. I don't think people understand that there are terrible pockets of poor in this state and I think state government does what it can. I think local communities do what they can but you need that public opinion to say, "This is a serious health problem; this is a serious education problem." It's what Vector Communications sort of has...

Laurna Godwin: Right, and that's why we look at...we always say you have to have a combination of direct strategies and indirect strategies and direct is the person-to-person, like we're sitting here talking, and getting the information from influencers, people that you respect, and then indirect is, you get a marketing piece in the mail and you see advertisements, et cetera...social media, all that. It has to be a combination of the two and it's relating it to what people go through in their lives. You know, if it's poor, imagine if you didn't have enough money to have breakfast in the morning to start your day. How would that affect you? So it's finding those people that your target audience respects and will listen to and it can be very difficult because in the past, we focus on public policy issues. It would be somewhat easy to get the media to cover it. Now, no. It's got to be something way out of the ordinary...

Blanche Touhill: Well, doesn't that affect democracy?

Laurna Godwin: Absolutely and that's why I became a journalist. I said at Columbia that I want to educate people so when they go into the voting booth, they can make informed decisions and it's not that anymore and if you can't say it...Twitter is great but if you can't say it in a few words and get people to sway to your side or to understand an issue, it's very difficult, very difficult.

Blanche Touhill: Well, go on. You left Columbia then; you graduated.

Laurna Godwin: Yeah, I graduated and then I went to Charlottesville, Virginia to work for NBC and I was one of two graduates from my class. It was 163 of us to get an on-air job so I was very thankful. I thought, oh, this is the greatest thing on earth. My parents, they were like, "We just paid for your double Ivy League education and you are working for a TV station in

Charlottesville, Virginia and making a whopping \$8,300 a year” because that’s how much I was making.

Blanche Touhill: What year was that?

Laurna Godwin: That was 1982 but it was a great experience. I was a reporter and assignment editor and the newsroom was, like, six people so it wasn’t that big. But an assignment editor means we pick out the stories that we cover that day and as a reporter, I had to go out and shoot my own stories. So I had to carry all the camera equipment which was heavy at the time, set up the equipment, interview people, tear it down. It was a lot of work but I loved it and the second year I got a raise. I made \$11,000 a year but I started looking for a job closer to home because my maternal grandmother who lived with us was very sick and I wanted to be near her because she had...my parents traveled all over the world in their business as electronics engineers so my grandmother was the one who was really home with me and we were very close. I had gotten a job working for CBS in Richmond, Virginia, which is about an hour-and-a-half from Charlottesville and the NBC station I was with contested it because they felt it was a conflict of interest. So they said, “You can’t work for six months.” I went home for six months, was with my grandmother. She passed away during that time and I met someone else who worked for WNET in New York who was a tape editor there and I said, “Well, I need to put together a resume tape because I’m not sure I want to go back to...”...it would be Richmond, Virginia, put together a resume tape and he said, “You know, you should submit your tape here” and I said, “Oh, please; no way.” I was working in Charlottesville, Virginia which was the 199th market out of 203 markets in the United States and New York is the number one market and WNET is the flagship public television station. So I said, “No way, but,” I said, “what have I got to lose?” Well, I ended up getting a job and I worked on this national TV show called Currents which was about social change and it was a half hour program, similar to Nightline at the time, so I got to travel all over the United States and produce stories. I was an associate producer at the time. I loved the people I worked with. I had a very challenging boss who was very, very competitive so he always kept a huge stack of resumes on his desk saying, “You know, if your story isn’t as good as...”...one of my other co-worker’s this week, “You see all these resumes on my desk? You can be replaced tomorrow.” All of us ended up leaving after a while and my

mentor at the time said, "You know, it would look good on your resume to get away from the East Coast and experience another part of the country." She was the senior producer of NBC Nightly News at the time. So I said, "Oh, that makes sense." So I applied. I found this particular job in Broadcasting Magazine, which was our trade magazine, to work at KETC in St. Louis, Missouri. So I said, "Okay, I'll apply for this" and I didn't get it the first time but then they called me and said, "We have a position open" so I flew out here. I had five interviews that day and I was supposed to then see the City of St. Louis but my flight out here was late so I was only able to have my interviews, never see the city but I came back and my mentor said, "Take it. Two years tops, and again, it will look good on your resume. Come back to New York City," and so I took it and that was 1987 and I'm still in St. Louis. But, getting back to what I started with earlier, I worked with this friend; we were co-workers at Channel 9...and Channel 9 was the best TV job I had, and why? Because, in public television, we had so much freedom at the time, so much freedom: creative freedom; topics that we could...

Blanche Touhill: So the environment was totally different?

Laurna Godwin: Totally different, loved it; so creative. And Channel 9 had a locally produced program on every night of the week. So my co-worker, Angela, who eventually died from breast cancer, she produced the arts show that was on Monday nights. I produced the show Tuesday nights which was a minority affairs program called Postscript at the time. Wednesday night was a public affairs show called Highway 40. That was hosted by former broadcaster, Dennis Riggs and then Thursday night was Donnybrook. So every night was something different and we all just worked together. It was wonderful. But then I got a call to come work at Channel 11 and what drove is more money. Public television was great but you don't make a lot of money and so I thought it was time to move on and I worked at Channel 11 for a couple years as a weekend anchor, director of public affairs and reporter. So, it was great, not the creative freedom, of course, that I had producing a half hour TV show each week. Doing news, you got to get the news straight and deliver it to your audience, your viewers.

Blanche Touhill: How do you choose what news you're going to put on?

- Laurna Godwin: That's a very interesting question. Everyone has a different definition of news. News is what's unusual and at the time, I produced a documentary on minorities in journalism, trying to get more minorities to become journalists. That was sponsored by the National Association of Black Journalists.
- Blanche Touhill: What year was that?
- Laurna Godwin: Oh, I'm so bad with dates.
- Blanche Touhill: That was when you were at Channel 11?
- Laurna Godwin: Yeah. It could be when I was transitioning from 9 to 11.
- Blanche Touhill: Because, in the university, we began to host the journalism summer program...
- Laurna Godwin: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: And then I began to hear that there was a, really, push to bring more African Americans onto the air...
- Laurna Godwin: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And we were talking about which students might want to take a journalism program and things like that.
- Laurna Godwin: So I created this 15-minute documentary. It's now part of the Smithsonian Institute and it talked about the importance of diversity in a newsroom because of the way I grew up, the way you grew up, it's important to have diversity in the newsroom because we all bring a different perspective. What you think is news is different from what I may think is news and the audience that we report to is diverse. So, deciding what's news, I would get into arguments with my news director at times and I remember a very heated argument at a time in the St. Louis community when there was a young white girl missing and there was a young black girl missing. The young white girl that was missing got top story, lots of coverage for several weeks. The black girl that was missing either got none or very little. He felt that it was more newsworthy that a white child was missing because of the way he grew up, than a black child: "Oh, black kids are missing all the time." So diversity in the newsroom is so very, very important because all of us

have a different definition of news. News is what's unusual. To me, both of those children being missing was unusual. To him, only the white child. So when you ask what is news, it's very...you know, people say that the news business is objective. No, it's not. No, it's not. From the time we decide what stories we're going to cover that day to going out and deciding which people I'm going to interview, it's all subjective and that's why it's so important to have diversity in the newsroom.

Blanche Touhill: And, really, journalists who understand their responsibility.

Laurna Godwin: Yes, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: That they have to be able to back these things up...

Laurna Godwin: Right.

Blanche Touhill: ...by fact.

Laurna Godwin: And that you just don't want to be a television reporter because you get to be on TV. That's what I found a lot too.

Blanche Touhill: So then you decided to...your friend died and you decided to...

Laurna Godwin: ...stay here.

Blanche Touhill: ...stay here and you formed this company...

Laurna Godwin: ...get married and stay here.

Blanche Touhill: We're now back to your company and you were talking about, you would merge community interests...

Laurna Godwin: Yeah, public policy issues and getting people involved in them. So what I actually did was, I took my communications skills and for 20 years, I reported on the news, lots of bad things because that's what drives news but decided to use my communications skills now to make a difference in the community. So the model at Vector Communications is advancing learning, dialogue and positive change. I want people to know what's going on in their communities and to have a say in it because in the past, you wouldn't hear about it until there was a ground-breaking: "Oh, this is going on in my back yard? No one told me." So that's what we try to do and it's become more and more so that elected officials know that you just can't go...it's taxpayer money. You just can't go and do something.

You have to get the public involved in it. So that's what...I have to say, I switched my communications skills to make a difference. I love it because I'm still involved in the issues and what's going on in the community which is one of the reasons why I became a journalist in the first place, and I get to make a difference in the community. When I was reporter, it was always the negative and people complaining about St. Louis and once I decided to stay here, I said, okay, what am I going to do to make a difference? I don't to be like everyone else, complaining because I think St. Louis has an inferiority complex. What can I do to make a difference? And that's the business. So we have been involved in big projects like I-64.

Blanche Touhill: What did you do with I-64?

Laurna Godwin: When it was still the planning stage, we...

Blanche Touhill: Now, that lasted three years?

Laurna Godwin: Yes, we engaged the public and then about where...the design of I-64 and then when it was decided that we would shut down one half for a year, do that. That was very hard for the public to digest so we did the outreach for that, getting the word out and explaining why this was the best way: okay, the west side, west of I-70 is going to be closed. What is the best way for you to get to work, because we had some CEOs of companies saying that they were going to rent a helicopter to chopper them down to downtown. It was mass hysteria. So we worked on that and then the telephones. We had an office at I-64. We had an office in U City where everyone worked together. So that's what we did with I-64.

Blanche Touhill: So people could call in and...

Laurna Godwin: Call, complain. The traffic, once we started constructing, any questions: "Can you help me with this?" We made over 300 presentations in six or seven months. The business, neighborhoods, you name it, getting the word out, about, this is how you get the...because people are like, "How am I going to get to work?" but companies gave flex hours. It all worked out and it was a project that came in under budget and finished in record time. It has won 22 awards: The National Transportation Project of the Year. It was fantastic.

Blanche Touhill: Actually, at the end, I think most people said it was done very, very well.

Laurna Godwin: Yeah, but the day when the designers told us, "We're going to shut down half the highway," we're like, "Oh, my gosh! How are we going to communicate this to the public and get them to understand that this is the best way to do this project?"

Blanche Touhill: But what's interesting is that your company is doing that, not the press.

Laurna Godwin: Oh, no, the press...yeah, no.

Blanche Touhill: I know that because your company has the expertise to be able to do it and the press really doesn't but it's back to my thought that the press no longer plays that role, in uniting the public.

Laurna Godwin: No. You have too many...I used to teach a course at Webster University on how women and minorities are portrayed in the media and it's so diverse now. You have 100 cable stations; you have so many radio stations. It's so diverse. In my day, there was the big networks, the newspapers here in town, just a few. So everyone got their news from basically the same places. Now I can watch one channel that is geared to my particular political point of view and never see anything else, and that's bad because you never hear differing viewpoints.

Blanche Touhill: What projects are you working on now?

Laurna Godwin: Right now we're working on City Arch River 2015 which is working with a group of citizens on what programs should be available at the Arch grounds once it's renovated. Then we'll be working on how do we preserve it in terms of finances. So, how do you engage the public over a project like the Arch that affects everyone and also the people who come to town? So we had an application process: "Who would like to serve on the community advisory committee for this?" We had over 300 applications. We selected 42. We've had eight meetings so far and it's very interesting, coming up with ideas. So that's one project we are working on. Last year we finished working on high speed rail between Chicago and St. Louis. We have also used our public engagement to work with corporations as well, to engage their target audiences. We just finished a youth violence task force plan for the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County. They're brought together, both areas but also several foundations and that plan was presented by Mayor Slay and Charlie Dooley and East St. Louis Mayor, Alvin Parks, about a month-and-a-half ago. So, we are involved in projects where you don't necessarily see us

but we've had a role in. So, again, it satisfies my journalism skills. Then, besides my business, I volunteer a lot, serving on boards.

Blanche Touhill: Where do you serve?

Laurna Godwin: Currently, I am on St. Luke's Hospital board. I am board chair of the Greater St. Louis Community Foundation. I'm on Arch Grants board. I'm on the St. Louis Zoo Association board and my term just ended being on the University of Missouri-St. Louis Chancellor's Advisory Council and I am vice-chair of the Downtown Economic Stimulus Authority and I'm vice-chair of the St. Louis City Commissioner. So I love serving on a governance board. I am a governance volunteer, not an operational volunteer. I always tell people, for four years I was board chair of the Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri and I said, I could never be a troop leader. That is not me. But, I can serve on the board and I think be very effective. I served as board chair of Blackburn College's board for nine years. I was on the Illinois State Community College board for several years. So I love that. I now do consulting in that area as well too.

Blanche Touhill: Do you meet the same people on these boards or different people?

Laurna Godwin: No.

Blanche Touhill: Different people, they have different interests?

Laurna Godwin: Yes, and that's what I love about it. It's a great way to meet people because you're involved with something that you have a shared interest and so that's a great starting point for building a relationship and I met my husband through volunteering.

Blanche Touhill: How did you meet your husband?

Laurna Godwin: I highly recommend volunteering. He went through Leadership St. Louis in 1982 so, because of that, he would get the Coro's newsletter and I became a board member of Coro so they did a little article on me and, I hate to say it, whenever he would get their newsletter, he wouldn't read it and throw it toward the trash, and this particular day, it missed the trash and when he went to pick it up, it was open to the article about me and he read it and he said, "Oh, I'd like to meet her" and he called up a mutual friend in broadcasting, said, "Do you know Laurna Godwin" and he said, "Yes," and he called me up and said, "I have this friend who

wants to meet you” and the rest is history. So he had been receiving Coro’s newsletter for about...close to eight years and read it this day and never received another one after that. So he has it framed in his office at work.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your house on the river.

Laurna Godwin: Well, you know it’s gone.

Blanche Touhill: I know but talk about it. It was your dream house, wasn’t it?

Laurna Godwin: It was our dream house. It was something that my husband and I created together because we never had children. My child ended up being Vector Communications so I always say I gave birth to something else. That’s what the Lord wanted me to do and he was living over on the Bluff, above the Great River Road, when I met him, in a condo in the area. He always loved being on the river and me, coming from New Jersey and New York City, said, “What?” because I like concrete because within three years, I moved from Manhattan to the Central West End to Alton. I’m like, “What’s wrong with this picture? It’s supposed to be the reverse,” but I had said, “Well, if we’re going to live over here, I want a house that has everything in it and people can come and stay and it brings nature into the house.” So, my husband called it...it was our vacation home that we came home to every night and it was just great. We loved it. It was private, being on the water. The eagles would come right up to the house because we had all those Florida ceiling windows 30 feet high and you watched the barges go by and boats go by in the summertime. So it was very peaceful, very peaceful, away from the maddening crowd, as people would say. So we lived there for 11 years until we lost it in a [inaudible 49:35] sink hole accident; still standing, it’s about to be demolished but all the land around it has sunk so you can’t get to the house. It’s still standing because it was built well.

Blanche Touhill: Talk to me about how you got the furniture out.

Laurna Godwin: The only way we got the furniture out is that my husband and I have great people in our lives who care about us. He owns a construction company; I have my business. Several of his employees volunteered and mine volunteered. We could not get a moving company to come because the house had been condemned and they would have had to cross the police line so no one wanted to take that risk and the liability but his

workers said that they would and it was a 93 degree day and they carried up each piece of furniture, on their backs, up the hill, because there was nowhere you could park...up the hill to waiting trucks. So the construction company has a lot of trucks and then we got some from U-Haul and that's how we did it. I thought they would just come move my master bedroom and just a few other things that were precious to me.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you had a beautiful dining room, is my memory...

Laurna Godwin: Yes, yes.

Blanche Touhill: ...and all the beautiful crystal and dishes and it overlooked the Mississippi.

Laurna Godwin: Right.

Blanche Touhill: It's the Mississippi?

Laurna Godwin: Right. They packed everything in one day and got everything out of that house. It was amazing.

Blanche Touhill: Well, it was a beautiful house and it was a beautiful setting and I know that that would be so hard to...

Laurna Godwin: Yeah, my husband has taken it harder than me but I look at...you know, we were meant to have it for 11 years. We had it for 11 years. We did not get hurt which was key.

Blanche Touhill: Were you in the house when it began...

Laurna Godwin: No, I was at Princeton at my 30th reunion having a great time until the Alton police called. A neighbor had given them a cell phone number and said, "There's been an accident at your house."

Blanche Touhill: Was your husband there?

Laurna Godwin: He was with me at Princeton.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about, if you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life have been like?

Laurna Godwin: Completely different because I say I was born at the right time. I do not think I would have done well through the Civil Rights Movement. I would have been killed because I would have opened my mouth and that would

have been it, or, I'm not sure I had the guts to do it. I was saying earlier how I integrated the school and I was the only black child there from 1st grade to 8th grade. Well, there were about 400 students in that school. That was difficult. I can't imagine trying to change the country on a particular issue. So I always say, I was born at the right time and I've tried to make a difference in my own way. I didn't mention earlier that my father was a Tuskegee airman.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, was he?

Laurna Godwin: Yeah, which I didn't know until about six years before he died. He never talked about it which is amazing because Tuskegee airmen have received so much publicity of late but he said he served and wanted to come back home and forget all about it and get on with his life which is the way many of the men and women of that time felt but I come from good stock who paved the way but they gave birth to me at the right time. So I try to make a difference in my own way.

Blanche Touhill: And what do you...I know you're a member of the International Women's Forum. Do you want to talk about that?

Laurna Godwin: Well, I love it because it is a group of professional women and I think the dine-around concept is fantastic. That is really the jewel of the organization for me.

Blanche Touhill: And talk about the dine-around.

Laurna Godwin: Well, number one, I love to visit people's houses so that's exciting for me because you just get to see how they live, what's important to them. You learn something about them. So that is great to me. And it's in an intimate setting, relaxing setting where you can just sit and talk and get to know people, share ideas. That, to me, as I said, is the jewel of the program. It's great when we get together twice a year for the holidays and then our annual meeting. But those intimate dine-arounds are so nice where you just get to know people better than the cursory networking at a cocktail party and I like that. I like that a lot.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about awards that you've gotten and recognitions over the years.

Laurna Godwin: Well, I've been very fortunate. I've received a lot of awards for my volunteer work, some that are very special to me: YWCA Leader Lunch, Women in Leadership, I received that...

Blanche Touhill: Why is that one special for you?

Laurna Godwin: Women honoring women. That was in 1990 and then I was living in Alton, Illinois at the time, 1991, I got the Alton YWCA Women in Leader award...Women of Achievement was something, because of the significance of that award in this town and I received it in 2004 in the community involvement category...Girl Scouts, as I said earlier, I was board chair for four years there at a time where we merged with another council. We moved. We had a lot of upper management changes and I received their Highest National Volunteer Award.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about the Girl Scouts because that was a time when the Girl Scouts were changing their focus to leadership.

Laurna Godwin: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Was that a struggle within the Girl Scouts, to make that change or was everybody ready for it?

Laurna Godwin: A lot of people were ready for it but, you know, as in anything, when you have a paradigm shift, people...there are people who don't like change but in order to stay current and relevant, we had to, and it's really nothing that we were doing differently. We were just reframing how we promoted it because we've always...one of the reasons why I was a Girl Scout growing up but one of the reasons why it meant so much to me to be board chair is my mom was board chair of the Girl Scouts of Monmouth County in New Jersey in the '70s when I was growing up and so I always said I did it in honor of her. So when you think about selling cookies, when I was board chair, I wanted to get away from people just thinking of Girl Scouts as camp, crafts and cookies. It's so much more than that.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Laurna Godwin: And to move into leadership, how do you take not only those three programs but the 80+ others that we have, what is the common thread in all of them? It is leadership and self-esteem.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Laurna Godwin: So that's why we say we build girls of courage, confidence and character, because that's what I got growing up, difficult as it may have been, but it helped shape me into being a leader and trying to make a difference in the community. So it's just reframing what we do.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you've really spent your life doing what you're doing now in a company.

Laurna Godwin: Right.

Blanche Touhill: You've really spent your life being a link between community needs and trying to change the society.

Laurna Godwin: Exactly, and very much I got that from my parents, not only from their moving into an all white neighborhood but they volunteered all the time. My parents took me everywhere with them when they were home. They'd say that, again, "We have you for 18 years. We're taking you with us everywhere" so I vividly remember my mom chairing boards and meetings and I would sit in the corner in the back doing my homework. That's the way I grew up so I come by my governance volunteering honestly. My mom was head of Zanta, which is the International Professional Women's Group; head of Toast Mistresses in her area; very much involved in women in education at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey and there's a scholarship named after her; Monmouth Park is a racetrack in Central Jersey where I grew up and she served on the charity ball committee there for 42 years that raised money and gave, sort of like the United Way of that area, for years. My father served on several boards as well: hospital boards...I serve on St. Luke's Hospital because my father served on a hospital board growing up; Central Jersey Blood Bank, you name it. So that's the way I grew up. It was very, very important to them for me to learn about helping others, that I was blessed to have the life that I have but it came with hard work and other people don't necessarily have those opportunities that we have had. So it's important to help others.

Blanche Touhill: Is there any other award that you received that you want to mention?

Laurna Godwin: Well, I received from the St. Louis Business Journal their Influential Women Award and I also received the Influential Minority Business

Leader Award. I attribute my awards to my parents because they raised me well and it's really...it says to them, "You did a good job." And several others. I've been honored by the local NAACP and Quest Missouri Federation.

Blanche Touhill: And I assume you're going to continue your work with Vector?

Laurna Godwin: Yes, but you never know.

Blanche Touhill: You never know.

Laurna Godwin: Things aren't meant to last forever and there's some other things I want to do possibly so Vector has made a difference in several projects, some I talked about earlier. Washington Avenue is another one. We engaged the public on the way that Washington Avenue should be, what it should have, how should it feel, and what you see today is exactly what the public told us.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I'm curious about your future and I think we'll all look for that in the years to come but thank you very much.

Laurna Godwin: Thank you, Blanche.