

**STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
JUNE 4, 2013  
BETH STROBLE INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL**

Blanche Touhill: This is June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Beth, why don't you introduce yourself and talk about your early life and your family and your home town and your school, who influenced you and what direction did you get from that kind of family?

Beth Stroble: Okay. Beth Stroble and I go by Beth even though my formal name is Elizabeth. I think I was named for two reference points: the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth as well as Beth, a favorite character from Little Women that my mother enjoyed. So I lean more towards the Beth character than the Elizabeth. I grew up in the Chicago area but I was born in New Castle, Wyoming. My parents had met as pen pal correspondence when my father was in World War II and they were both in Tennessee, sort of based there at that time. My mother had grown up in Texas. So I grew up in a profoundly Southern family but when my father ended World War II service, he and my mother married and they had heard that the oil fields as they were opening up in Wyoming, were a wonderful opportunity. So they went west to seek their married life. I was born, I'm not sure exactly how long they had been there at that point, but after I was born and about a year old, they said, "We really need to be closer to grandparents. This is a little remote." So they moved from New Castle, Wyoming to the Chicago suburbs. My father's parents at that point had moved to the Chicago suburbs to work in the automotive industry. So you can see some American themes here in the growing up experience I had. We were very much a working class family. My mother stayed home during the time that I was growing up. I have one sibling who's six years younger than me, a brother. So we lived out in the country. We went to wonderful public schools. We didn't have much financial means but we had a wonderful, loving family. I spent summers on my grandmother's farm in Tennessee and every Sunday afternoon, I remember us going to my father's parents' home and having all the brothers around the table. So I grew up knowing what Southern family life and hospitality looked like. When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I had an influential teacher...6<sup>th</sup> grade, I guess, and he was a Social Studies teacher and I remember him wanting to meet with my mother and this obviously makes you quite apprehensive and the message he gave her was, "Your daughter is smart to go to college and you need to figure that out." Well, I knew that my family didn't have much financial means. My father, who had

worked hard labor, drilling water wells in the Chicago area, outdoor work, long hours, ultimately decided that that wasn't his future and so they pooled their savings and opened a little business where he started doing home remodeling and things like that. So whatever savings there had been were invested in making our lives better, and certainly his life better. So that kind of set it in my head that, okay, well, I hear that scholarships are how you go to college so I just set my mind to the fact that I would over achieve and do whatever it took to get a scholarship to go to college and that guided my whole growing up period, from that day forward. I had wonderful teachers in public schools and they were all very supportive of that kind of ambition and those goals. My mother then, when my brother started grade school, started going back to work. So initially, she had a job working for the dean of students at nearby Lewis University so I got a little taste of what college life looked like. After she did that for a while, she went to a bank and started working in the drive-up teller window. She had actually gone to college in Texas, had gone to Kilgore Junior College where the Kilgore Rangerettes made their reputation, I'm sure in, like, business or clerical office systems, something like that and she had done bank work as a young woman. My father never finished grade school. Now, sometime during my adults years, he went back and got a GED because that was important to him. But they were not people of significant education. She was smart and she's still with us, although quite infirm. She was mentored by a fellow that she worked for in the bank and so by the time I finished high school and was in college, she had moved up from the ranks of drive-in bank teller to being president of the bank, with an Associate Degree. So that will tell you something about who she is and was as a person. And so my first acquaintance with the importance of opportunity for women and sort of speaking to the rights of women came directly from my mother, no question about it. So she has been my role model, my mentor virtually all my life.

Blanche Touhill: She was also a model, wasn't she, a business person, a professional woman, wife and mother?

Beth Stroble: Oh, absolutely. I mean, she really did all of this and she had a great sense of humor. Now, I will say that was tempered a bit when she became a banker and she had very strict requirements for how my brother and me were to be dressed when we came in the bank lobby. She cared greatly about appearances and protocol and etiquette and those sorts of things, but at home, and in family life, she was just pure fun and in church work...this was sort of another formative experience for us...as a young person, my family just dropped me off at the Methodist church for Sunday School and for vacation, Bible school. They had absolutely no relationship with the church but I did. Well, when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, you can see how this was kind of a big year for us. The Swedish Lutherans in town did a door-to-door evangelism campaign, truly remarkable. I mean, I've never heard of that from a Swedish Lutheran congregation but they did and my

parents were converted to become Swedish Lutherans. We had no Lutheranism in our background and certainly so Swedes in our background but we embraced this full force. So my mother became the church secretary; my father did the custodial work for the church; I joined the junior choir. I eventually was the choir director there. So we just kind of became Swedish Lutherans on a big scale. Well, this was sort of my first opportunity to feel that a community had adopted me and that I had adopted a community. So when I look back now at why it is that I'm somewhat at ease and comfortable working across international boundaries and ethnicities and communities and geographies, it really started there. So when I got ready to apply to colleges, I applied to Carthage College in Wisconsin and Augustana College in Illinois and I was lucky enough to get a national merit scholarship and the Lutheran Church in America paid my way. So that Lutheran identity proved extremely helpful to me in achieving that college goal and I discovered, as I went to Augustana College, how you can have a strong faith tradition as a believer, but also see religion and theology as topics of legitimate academic intellectual inquiry, because that's what Augustana did. So it was an amazing liberal arts place too, to get my start.

Blanche Touhill:       What was your major?

Beth Stroble: History, and then I did English as a minor and there you could not major in education as a secondary education person. You did the certification and I thought I would go on to do museum work or archives work or something like that. I did an internship in archives in Chicago and discovered that I actually was much more social than I'd given myself credit for and I didn't think it was a good fit. So my parents, who had just sort of insisted, "You've got to get the teaching credential while you're doing this so that you have something that's employable." I did my student teaching in the next to last quarter and had had great education courses and they were quite formative for me but it really wasn't until that student teaching experience, that I discovered my love and I've been an educator ever since.

Blanche Touhill:       Did you go onto graduate school right away?

Beth Stroble: I did not. I wanted to go teach. So, because of the money circumstance and just the job market then...this was 1973 when I graduated from college...I thought that if I finished in February, at the end of the second quarter, went back and lived with my parents and did substitute teaching during that spring, that would give me a head start on the job market. It didn't make any difference. The Chicago area was saturated with people that wanted to be History and English teachers. I liked middle school. I had student taught middle school and that's where I wanted to be. So I wound up substitute teaching all spring. I found a district close by that ran in the summers because of crowding so I substitute taught all through the summer but it was not looking good for a job. So I saw an

ad in the Chicago Tribune that was run by a fellow who did an employment agency for teachers and the ad pretty much said, "If you're willing to move, I can get you a teaching job." Well, this started a lifetime of, boy, am I willing to move? Sure, I'm willing to move. So I applied, I gave him my resume and he called me up and said, "I have two jobs at Vandalia, Illinois, way down in the southern part of the state. If you're willing to drive down there and do the interview, I think that these are real openings." So I drove down. They offered me a job that day. I figured out where I was going to live and, a month later, I started teaching.

Blanche Touhill:       What level were you teaching?

Beth Stroble: High school. There were two openings, a middle school...the middle school job required being in charge of the school paper. The high school job required...and these were both English...required being in charge of the speech and drama program. I definitely had more background in speech and drama because, as a high schooler, and even in college, I had done debates and I'd done plays, so I felt like that was a better fit. So I took that job and stayed 10 years. I was the only new teacher at the high school that they had had in a very long time and this is a town of 5,000 and that...I always saying jokingly, is if you count the prison...so it's not a big place. But, very quickly, if you were community-minded, which I was...that kind of came from my dad's side of the family; he was very social...I just kind of made myself known and I knew all the sophomores. I taught every single sophomore in the district and so I knew my students and I knew their families and I was, of course, active in the Lutheran church there and just fully embraced it. Well, sort of a turning point happened in my life, part way through this time period, when I was asked to start teaching GED classes for the community college district. So I team taught one with the Chemistry teacher and one young fellow who was in the class certainly sort of took a shine to me and we started seeing each other and he was a local farmer and we fell in love and got married. He had had an interesting history which was why he was in the GED program. He had had childhood leukemia when he was a teenager and this, of course, would have been in a time period when that was a death sentence. His family took him to Barnes and so I've known St. Louis for a very long time, and he got experimental therapies that pulled him out and put him in remission for 10 years at the point we married. So he was really a miracle story. So we married and about two, two-and-a-half years after we married, he began to have recurrences of the cancer which we now know were the results of the experimental chemotherapy. So a brain tumor, difficulties with his spine, and over a period of two-and-a-half years, he had many treatments and surgeries, ultimately a bone marrow transplant that was not successful. So I spent a lot of time traveling back and forth to St. Louis. I would come stay overnight with him, two or three nights a week in the hospital room and then get up early and go back and teach the next day. So, if I look at points in my life that have shaped my

character and who I am, that is one. He died and at age 31 I was a widow in this little bitty farm town. So I really evaluated it at that point and said, this is not my future. I've got to figure out what I do with this horrible circumstance but also this opportunity to redefine who I am and what I'm about. I had already done a Master's Degree at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, in History, because I was worried that teaching English, I was going to lose touch with that academic base. I decided that the best thing I could do right then and there was to get a year's leave of absence, which I did, and go back and do a second Master's Degree in English full-time, a gift that was wonderful, full-time, a year: reading, writing, being part of a smart community of other men and women, and at that point, I kind of got my head on straight and said, you know, graduate school and maybe doing a PhD is what I want to do now, haven't been about that but now I can. I regained kind of my academic confidence and my sense of direction. At the same time, my first husband and I, in this little town, had a few friends and one of our most faithful friends was Paul Stroble. Paul Strobel, who had been my student when I first started there as a high school student, quite a bit younger, but he and my first husband had both gone over to Greenville College and were taking college courses together. So that's how they met. He had gone off to Yale Divinity School and he came back to Southern Illinois and was doing three little Methodist parishes down farther south in the state. He and I got together as friends just to commiserate our loss and we sort of looked at each other and said jokingly, "You know, we may be the only two single educated people in this part of Southern Illinois" and we started kind of doing things as friends. It turned into a romance and we said, "Well, let's get married and go off and do PhDs." So that's what we did.

Blanche Touhill: For the Master's, you went to SIU...

Beth Stroble: Uh-huh, for both, uh-huh.

Blanche Touhill: You got the doctorate there too?

Beth Stroble: No, I did the two Master's Degrees there.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, one in English and one in History?

Beth Stroble: One in History.

Blanche Touhill: And was it Carbondale or...

Beth Stroble: Edwardsville, an easy commute and high quality programs.

Blanche Touhill: And then where did you go for the PhD?

Beth Stroble: University of Virginia. We applied places. He wanted his in Philosophy/Theology combo; I wanted mine in Curriculum and Instruction because my goal was to be a teacher/educator. And we had to find places that would accept both of us. There were two: Northwestern; University of Virginia, and I said, "You know, if we're going to move, I want to move someplace new. I already know Chicago," and he did, too. So we said, "Let's go to Virginia. We've never been to Virginia," and so we started our marriage off being full-time PhD students and it was a wonderful way to start a marriage but it was good that we had been friends for, like, 10 years before that. So I did my degree in three years. I got credit for the Master's Degrees and I'm always rather driven. When I set a goal, I just want to kind of work and get it done. So I did that and then we started to look for jobs. So the job that I was successful in getting, kind of like my own parents, was out west, so we moved to Northern Arizona and taught there for four years and at that point, our daughter was born and we both looked at each other and we said, "We love it in Arizona but it's too remote. We're too far from grandparents. So we need to kind of get back..."...we thought, east of the Mississippi. It was also interesting to discover that professionally, when you're that far west, your professional orientation and community starts to be California and it's very difficult to stay connected to people in the eastern part of the country and all of our contacts were on this part of the country. So it was not just the personal; it was the professional. I found a great job. University of Louisville had a job for teacher educator and they worked very closely with urban schools. So most of their teacher ed courses were offered right in urban schools. It's what exactly I was looking for and the State of Kentucky, the year before, had just gone through this first of the Supreme Court battles that ruled their whole education system, was corrupt, bankrupt...

Blanche Touhill:       What year was that?

Beth Stroble: 1990, so we made the move there in 1991. So this university and this school of education were at the forefront of saying, House Kentucky Education Reform going to Inform Teacher Ed Programs and how will we help to our school partners? It was exactly the work I wanted to do. Now, in Arizona, the work I did there was in the school of education, although I had close partners in the English Department and while I was there, they started a state-wide writing project. So I was the associate director for the writing project and worked with the English Department. So I did a lot of work on the Navajo Reservation and the Hope Reservation but to do that, was, like, a 300 mile drive one way. So, very difficult to do that kind of community-based work and Louisville gave the opportunity to do that right in the same town. So we moved there and our daughter kind of grew up through pre-school and elementary school and that's when I moved from faculty member to administrator.

Blanche Touhill:       Now, how did that happen?

Beth Stroble: Ah, that was kind of a funny thing. I was head of the Curriculum Committee and I was on some accreditation committees because we were getting ready to do accreditation and our associate dean, whose purview that was, went on sabbatical for a year and came back and said, "I'm not coming back. I've taken a dean's job at Cleveland State and, Beth, I've nominated you to be my replacement." This was not in my thinking at all, and he said, "Well, you at least need to go meet with the dean and have the dean tell you what the job is." So I went in and met with the dean and he said, "Well, the job is really making sure our curriculum gets through the process and everything is kind of taken care of from a procedural point of view but..." he said, "...the real big job is, in a year, the accreditation team shows up and we want to do well." Well, as I kind of analyzed my background in curriculum and teaching and how kind of organizational inclined I am, I thought, this actually does sound like a job I would like to do and I think I would do a good job. So I did it and I began to make my name as someone who really understood accreditation. We did very, very well and I got a lot of consulting work from it and that's really how I moved on. But I finally decided that being a dean was what I wanted to do, associate deaning is hard work. So our dean decided to step down from the deanship. He had been a dean for 16 years or so, probably the longest sitting dean of education in the country and he told me, he said, "I think you ought to get this but there's no guarantees," and I said, "I know that." The university had a track record of going outside and not doing internal promotions but I put my name in. This was another sort of defining moment in my life. It came down to two of us who were finalists: me and the outsider and several days before this was going to be announced, who was going to get the job, I was called by the provost and the provost said, "Your dean has been stricken by what seems to be a stroke while he was playing golf and we don't know how this is going to go. It looks serious. In the intervening days, we're going to need you to kind of keep things going," so of course I said yes. I was told probably three days later that they had hired the external candidate and I would not be the dean. So, I had to just sort of deal with a defining moment and I said, these are tests of character. How are you going to deal with this? And at the same time that I had been in the search there, I wisely put my name in other searches because I thought, if I don't get this, I want to have an escape plan, and at that moment, I knew that my college was going to need me so I withdrew my name from all the other searches and our dean died several weeks later and so when the new dean arrived, I met with him and I said, "I don't know if you know that I was competing for the position but what I want you to hear from me is, I'm totally loyal to you because I want you to be successful because I care, first and foremost, about the college, but what I hope you'll do for me is help me get out in a year so that I have my own deanship." And that was exactly the bargain we struck. He was a great friend and a great mentor. He knew how to get a deanship and he was a great reference for me. So

that's how I came to the University of Akron. I went there as the Dean of Education.

Blanche Touhill: How did Akron compare to Louisville? Were they in [inaudible 25:15:0] too?

Beth Stroble: You know, not nearly so much.

Blanche Touhill: Did you take them into the schools?

Beth Stroble: I did. Akron had had a distant relationship from the schools. It wasn't hostile, which sometimes it is. They were just absent from each other's lives. So it was an interesting thing. I knew that my calling card could be building this relationship with the schools because I knew what it looked like. So Akron had gone out for the dean search one time before and it had failed. They reopened it and this time, the president was the chair of the search committee, truly unusual, and the ad said that the reason the president was chairing the search committee was that this search and this college was so important to him as a strategy for the university and I thought, who wouldn't want to be part of that? And not only was he chairing the search committee, he had the local school superintendant on the search committee; he had the state superintendant of instruction the search committee and the state chancellor of the higher ed board.

Blanche Touhill: Did they have a plan or did they just want to do something?

Beth Stroble: They didn't know what they wanted to do. They just knew they needed somebody that could help carry it forward. So I understood the powerful network of support I was going to have if I got the job and what that was going to do to position my college for success and I was just delighted when they offered it to me.

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask you: Did the dean that took over at Louisville, did he continue that outreach?

Beth Stroble: No, and he lasted a couple of years and then moved on and they've had a succession of deans ever since.

Blanche Touhill: But Akron then built it?

Beth Stroble: Akron built it. They've kind of fallen on some budgetary hard times now and one of the real difficult choices I had when I was at Akron was, I had been dean for three years. We went through another accreditation review and did well. The provost who had hired me along with the president, started looking for jobs around the country. He got the provost job at Central Florida and he said to me



one day, he said, "I'm leaving and I've nominated you to take my job." I thought, oh, here we go again, and I pretty much knew provost wasn't what I wanted to do. I had seen enough of how that was working and I thought, no, I love my dean job. Well, after about a month of back and forth with the president, I ultimately decided that saying yes to him was the right thing. So I agreed to do it for five years and then hired a replacement for myself. I clearly lost an opportunity to keep building what we were doing in the college.

Blanche Touhill:       What did you do as provost at Akron?

Beth Stroble: At Akron, I really furthered the school relationship so I was able to do that from that platform. We actually opened with the school system a jointly operated middle school that focused on (STEM?) so that was a great thing. We started an early college high school. We really advanced scholarship and research funding and built a first year college program in some important ways. So, I just played on a larger platform and was much more involved in state level initiatives. It felt like a different platform for leadership and it was much more difficult for my college then to move things forward but they moved it forward in a context that was more favorable because clearly teaching and learning was my focus and partnership with schools and other agencies.

Blanche Touhill:       That was early for partnerships, wasn't it?

Beth Stroble: It absolutely, I think, was, yes. Partnerships really developed, in my thinking, during those Louisville days and I've carried that forward. So it's a big part of what I do now.

Blanche Touhill:       When did you decide to go for a presidency?

Beth Stroble: Oh, that was probably about four years in and I decided, with the president, that I needed to go for this. It took two years of searching. So several searches and I would typically be the finalist but not the successful candidate and I was approached by a head hunter about Webster. What intrigued me about Webster was this history as a women's college, how it had redefined itself over the years so it looked a little more nimble and entrepreneurial. I'd really sort of wearied of state level bureaucracy and in Ohio, all the constraints were coming on, not only your resources but the required outcomes and the room to innovate was just being squeezed out. So as I started to look for presidencies, I really looked primarily in the independent sector.

Blanche Touhill:       What did you want to do at Webster?

Beth Stroble: I wanted to have the various assets and opportunities that Webster has come together and be mutually reinforcing, whether it was the international campuses

or the military mission or the conservatory and the strong arts focus here in St. Louis. It felt to me like those pieces and parts weren't really seeing themselves as part of one university and I also thought that Webster had become a bit disconnected from its local community here and strong partnerships. So I've made it my business to be seen as a true member of the St. Louis community and this region.

Blanche Touhill: How are you doing that?

Beth Stroble: Showing up. Everywhere that anybody invited me to that first couple of years, I was present always and joined every group or board that I was asked to be a part of and we sponsored galas and tables and did the things that just show that you care. So investment of time and resources and lots of lunches and dinners and coffees with individuals where I would say, "What would you advise that we do? What would you hope Webster would do?"

Blanche Touhill: How large is your board?

Beth Stroble: Thirty-five members, very large board. Another constituency that was important to reconnect with was the Sisters of Loretto who had founded us and over the years, that had been either a very close relationship or a distant one. To me, it felt important to embrace your history and let that be educational to the leadership and to the members of the community about the values you began with and how you were carrying those forward.

Blanche Touhill: Where is that community? Their Motherhouse used to be in Kentucky.

Beth Stroble: It is, it still is and I have visited there, near Bardstown, Kentucky, but they have a center right behind Nerinx High School where a number of the local members of the community would live because they still operate Nerinx.

Blanche Touhill: Are there any Loretto nuns on the faculty?

Beth Stroble: I don't think that there are any full-timers. There are certain adjuncts and it's a very close friendship, we feel.

Blanche Touhill: The Loretto nuns were always sort of pioneer...

Beth Stroble: Oh, definitely because they were an American-based order, not a Rome-based order, that's right.

Blanche Touhill: So, does that still linger, that...

Beth Stroble: I think so.

Blanche Touhill: ...women have to take their place in the American society?

Beth Stroble: I believe so and I think it's partly why I felt that Webster would be harmonious to a woman president, even though it had been 40 years. Jacqueline Grennan left 40 years ago.

Blanche Touhill: Did she ever come back...

Beth Stroble: She came back for an honorary doctorate and I think maybe a couple of times over the years and I did get to meet her in Florida before she passed, still a dynamo. So I felt there was sort of a feminist ethic still at work in the place that makes it a good place, not just for women but for people who might not feel included in a majority environment.

Blanche Touhill: How did you react the international focus?

Beth Stroble: Oh, loved it, and you know, I've thought a lot about this, is, why was there comfort for me in that and I talked about these Swedish Lutherans as a young girl but when I was at Louisville, one of the things that happened at the university was a renewed focus on international degrees being offered in foreign countries. We had a colleague in the school of education, Everett Eganton, who was a Latin Americist and so he helped us start a Master's Degree program in El Salvador for employees of the Ministry of Education. I was part of that because when they would come to campus, I would teach about Kentucky education reform but in this one, this very unusual circumstance, the dean was not able to go on the trip to El Salvador to get this started so Everett said, "As associate dean, are you willing to go?" This was, like, three days' notice. My passport had expired. We got it renewed and I was off and running. I mean, it's again like, are you willing to move? Absolutely. Are you willing to go? Count me in. It was a formative experience, not just because of El Salvador but spending time with Everett, I saw how he just embraced that local culture and became at one with it and never sort of brought this ugly American thinking to his interactions with others. So this past week, just to close that circle, (NAFSA?) was in town, the international educators group, 8500 people and Everett was there, which I figured he would be. He was head of NAFSA in 2008, long after we were, neither one, at Louisville anymore, and last week he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from NAFSA. I didn't realize it at the time but I learned about international education by working with him, from someone who was a true master. So I really had that experience with El Salvador. We also, while I was at Louisville, went through accreditation of all those international programs and I was part of the team that was in charge of making sure that programs in Egypt and Singapore and El Salvador were all being conducted according to (SACS?) regulations. But over the years, I had had many graduate students from China

and Japan and Korea so it wasn't unfamiliar with me, to interact with individuals from other countries.

Blanche Touhill: The Civil Rights Act passed in '64 and then the reauthorization in '72 and then you have the Title Nine. Did any of that affect you directly that you were aware of or was it just the culture was changing and you were moving around the country and you find openings?

Beth Stroble: Yeah, I think, to greater and lesser extents, certainly the Civil Rights legislation, much more so, because the Chicago suburb where I went to school was a racially mixed high school. During that time period, we dealt with racial tensions in the school. I was in the first class that ever had the choice of taking a course in African American history and that was the year I was a senior in high school and was on the speech and debate team. My original oratory that I wrote and competed with was "Who is the real American?" and I made the argument that African American history needed to be incorporated in American History classes and not be an elective choice. So I think early on, I was excited by the ideas of thinking about how the mainstream would become hospitable for a diversity of viewpoint.

Blanche Touhill: Then, did Title Nine, especially in the universities that you...

Beth Stroble: Not that I recall. I mean, certainly when I was at Akron, and at one point did the search for the athletic director position, I became more well versed in the requirements for funding and participation of women in sports because this was an issue we had to address in the hiring of the athletic director. But, no, I can't say that that was a topic very much on my mind.

Blanche Touhill: Well, when you went around the country and you got these jobs, you were often...or when you volunteered, you were often probably the only woman in...

Beth Stroble: Clearly, and still am, in many ways.

Blanche Touhill: Did you get along with the men?

Beth Stroble: I always did, I always played in a guy's world, even as a high school teacher. I was the only female often among the men faculty or in the English Department and I was teased merciless as a kid by my father's brothers. So I just kind of knew how to give and take and do that and it never really bothered me. I've always taken the point of view that Beth, because I've changed my name and my titles a number of times, that Beth and who Beth is is just plenty good enough and I don't have to be a guy. I can be sort of this mix of identities. I really love Joss Whedon's commencement address at Wellesley that he gave last week where he

says...I guess Wesleyan...not Wellesley, Wesleyan, where he says, "Be all of your selves and quit thinking that any choice you make is going to give you some kind of peace. The only peace you have is if you accept the fact that you're torn lots of different directions, that you want to be a mom, you want to be a good wife, you want to be a good neighbor, you want to be a great worker; you want to embrace all these selves and often they're in conflict with each other, so quit thinking it's going to get easier and just live it and love it."

Blanche Touhill: Now, your husband and child, they moved with you?

Beth Stroble: Yes, they did. I have wonderful family. When I was in Louisville, starting that administrative career, my parents had retired from Chicago area and moved there and my mother was certainly key in kind of helping me deal with the challenge of a young child. My husband who, at various times, has been a parish minister...I'm Methodist now; I embrace that as I married him; it didn't make sense to stay a Lutheran, so I'm also able to cross boundaries in religion apparently without much difficulty...he had done parish work; he had done teaching and writing. As I went into full-time administration, he decided that teaching and writing was a better fit, just to keep the household together, than doing full-time parish ministry. So that's been an accommodation. If he weren't willing to sort of cast his career as an adjunct faculty member and as a writer, this would be much harder.

Blanche Touhill: And how about your daughter?

Beth Stroble: My daughter is okay with this. Now, she has grumbled at different points in her life. She had gone off to college at Seton Hill near Pittsburgh at the point that we moved here. So when she finished freshman year, she didn't have Akron to go back to. I would say, I don't know that she really wanted to go back to Akron but she did feel a bit like we picked up and moved the rug out from under her. But it's interesting, when she was getting ready to go to college, quite methodical about this: "I want to go to a liberal arts college; I want theater programs; I think I want a Christian school and, oh, by the way, I want to be in Pennsylvania because that would be my next state. I was born in Arizona; I grew up as a little kid in Kentucky; I've gotten through high school in Ohio and I'm ready for my next state now." I will say that she has now fully embraced St. Louis as a wonderful place because she's a theater kid and there's great theater and arts here so it's turned out okay. But I think I've timed my moves when it felt like it was the right timing.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about the International Women's Forum. As you talk about your support group in the academic world and your family support, have you always been with women's groups that have...

Beth Stroble: Not necessarily but I guess, even as a high school teacher, I was inducted into a women's honorary then that were clearly defined as teachers in the system and I began to sense what that was like, to have a network of people who were balancing the home and work and life balance with a seriousness about their career that I shared. And so they were role models for me, because previous generations of teachers didn't have that choice. You know, the women who taught me when I was in grade school probably had to decide not to marry if they were going to keep their jobs. So those women were pioneers in a different way. As I've moved into more professional circles, generally it's been mixed gender groups that I've been part of, certainly whether it's provost groups or presidents groups. So that's what makes International Women's Forum such a privilege, to be invited to join. Accomplished women, across generations, across many different career paths and there's a lot to learn there. I enjoy the company; I enjoy...like, last fall when I got to interact with Laura Liswood because of the International Women's Forum, it's opened up a new way for me to think about my role and I'm much more intentional this spring about speaking and writing about what the unique challenges are and what I've learned from being a woman in this role. When I first was woman president and even woman provost, because that was the first for Akron then, I worried when people would say, "Well, what's it like to be the woman provost?" or "What's it like to be the woman president?" and I said, "No, I'm the President of Webster. I am a woman but I'm not the president just for women at Webster. That wouldn't be the way I would think about it and I don't want anybody to think about it that way." But now that I'm four years completed soon, I feel like now I have a better platform to speak from and I actually think it's an imperative. I'm worried that we're losing ground in diversity and my thinking about the challenges of being a woman, give me the lens to see what the challenges are for people because of ethnicity, birthplace, all the variations of the human condition that mean that people are excluded rather than included.

Blanche Touhill: How can women or how can the society in general help diverse groups, including women, make their way in a path that will fulfill their potential?

Beth Stroble: I have been reading a lot from this organization called Catalyst, that's a business women's organization and they talk about the difference between mentoring, and I do think mentoring is quite important, and sponsoring and the distinction that I read in a recent article is that a mentor works with you when you're present. They advise; they counsel; they coach; they give you information; they give you access. A sponsor advocates on your behalf when you're not in the room, a different level of advocacy and opening up a door and I think sometimes mentoring doesn't translate to sponsoring and it's the sponsoring that often men will have working for them and so Catalyst research would indicate it's a mistake to think that mentoring alone will get the job done for making sure that people are in positions. So think about my two opportunities: to become the associate

dean and then to become the provost. It was because of men who, while I wasn't in the room, said to the hiring person, "Here's somebody you ought to look at."

Blanche Touhill: Do you think the International Women's Forum has those aspects of mentoring and sponsorship?

Beth Stroble: I think it certainly can. I'm a little new to it, having just been a member about a year, so I'm not quite tuned in well enough yet to see that but I think so.

Blanche Touhill: I think so, too. I hadn't approached the organization in that way but I know the conversations that take place and I think there is a mixture of the mentoring for someone who needs that but at the same time, the sponsorship outside of the organization. Let me go back and ask you: What do you think has really carried you through? What was it in your background that really made you willing to be adventurous, made you willing to say, "I'm happy to move," to marry a man who's willing to move with you or a child who embraces it? What is it in you that...

Beth Stroble: I think, growing up, it certainly was the example of my parents because that was who they were and I grew up never feeling totally at home. I had a Southern accent and grew up in a Chicago suburbs at the same time period at the Beverly Hillbillies came on TV and remember a lot of teasing about being Southern and I never kind of totally fit in. So I had to kind of, like, make Beth who Beth was and figure out my way and eventually I kind of figured out the things that made me different were my trademark and my signature and I needed to just make the most of those and not worry about whether it fit anybody else's mold. So a little bit of the, make your own way here because it's not like there's a built in community that you fit into and so when people ask me, like, "Where's your home?" it's wherever I am now. That's it. It's not some reference point of someplace that I was because my family, they moved to Louisville, to be closer to us. My brother suffered through tremendous winters in Northern Illinois and finally said, "I'm fed up" and he moved to Las Vegas and said, "I'll never shovel snow again." So my family, small as we are, all tend to have sort of this strike out and love of adventure; love of new experience.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get through bad parts of your life, and you've had several?

Beth Stroble: Bad parts, yeah, and I have had several and continue to. I mean, these jobs, as you know, are not easy. For me, it is a life of faith and prayer. So when I am asked "What's your identity at your core?" child of God, and the fact that I'm married to a minister is no coincidence. So we share that interest in religion from an intellectual point of view as well as from a strong faith commitment and prayer, prayer and community.

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask you: If you envisioned yourself growing up 50 years ago, when your mother and father were really courting and starting a family and making their way in life, what might have happened to you?

Beth Stroble: What might have happened to me? It's hard to imagine a different life, isn't it, but certainly my life has been a series of kind of coincidences and happenings and actually active choices. Hm, I suppose that that first thing that could have gone very differently was if they had decided just to stay put in Wyoming. It would have been a very different life. I never went back to New Castle until about four or five years ago and it's still a tiny little frontier town. You can kind of imagine it being a little bit like Northern Exposure and there actually were elk wandering up and down the main street. So it was kind of hard to imagine what it must have been like for them in that young married life. But I guess their feeling of needing to be close to family outstripped their desire for the adventure and for me, I've been fortunate to be able to balance those a little bit better. My family's been able to go with me on the adventures and that's a huge blessing.

Blanche Touhill: Is your daughter ready to face the world?

Beth Stroble: Yeah, she's getting there. She graduated from Seton Hill last spring. She's kind of getting herself ready to apply for MFA programs in costume design. She has great mentors here at the Webster faculty even though they weren't her faculty, they mentor her. So I'm sure eventually she's going to be off and running again. I'm anxious to see whether she picks up the spirit of adventure in the ways that I have felt, and I hope she will.

Blanche Touhill: But you feel that she'll get through whatever comes?

Beth Stroble: I believe so. I think she has a good, solid head on her shoulders. I think that one of the challenges for daughters of our generation of women is that sometimes they look at our crazy lives and say, "Why would I want that? I want it to be simpler than that. I don't want to have that ambition; I don't want to have that have it all kind of mentality." I think it's just a reckoning of things over time that makes you realize that doing this or doing that is really sort of a false choice and as a contemporary woman, you have to do it all; you just have to figure out how you do it all.

Blanche Touhill: Would you tell me more about your relationship with the Sisters of Loretto and how they have helped to shape women's education in this area?

Beth Stroble: Certainly. The Sisters of Loretto, because they were this American-based order that started in Kentucky, they've been in place for 100 years before they came to



St. Louis. So the Catholic leadership in St. Louis, when they wanted to start more schools and more teaching, particularly focused on young women, sort of did a search to say, where's there an order that's known for great teaching and they invited the Sisters of Loretto to come here. So that's how that happened and then they set up mostly academies but they set up Webster as really one of the first colleges west of the Mississippi to offer baccalaureate degrees for women. What I came to understand about nuns, but particularly the Sisters of Loretto because I'm not Roman Catholic, is that it would be a misconception to think that women of Jacqueline's generation went into being in the order to cloister themselves or to remove themselves from life for sort of the contemplative life. To the contrary, this was a leadership opportunity for young Catholic women who saw a future for themselves other than family with many children. They wanted to have careers and joining the order gave them careers. So it was very natural that they were passionate about leading and they were so important in Vatican II and during that reconsideration of what women meant to the Catholic Church and it was really that defining issue of, can you be a Catholic university and be who Webster was, and they decided, no, the two didn't fit, that, if you were going to have the vision and mission that Webster had, and the academic integrity that they wanted and the ecumenical outreach and the engagement with community, then we can't keep our Roman Catholic identity. We needed a broader identity. So that's what I've really learned about their ability to embrace a broader and more inclusive identity, even though they were strictly Roman Catholic and faithful to the faith, they understood that an academic environment required something broader than that and they are still all over the world. We're opening a campus in Accra Ghana this fall. They have a partnership there and there are sisters in Accra Ghana that I've now met. So I look forward to having the experience that, wherever you go in the world, Webster is there but the Sisters of Loretto probably are too. So we come about this global mission honestly.

Blanche Touhill: Is there anything else you want to add here?

Beth Stroble: Hm, I think just how fortunate I feel in my life. Certainly my character and my gumption and my persistence in life has been shaped by not only the things that have gone well but the things that have been really, really hard and living your life and still feeling quite optimistic about your own future, the future of your family, the future of your institution, the future of your community, that's what's important to hold onto and the real good fortune for me of being where I am right now is that I feel all of my previous life gets tapped and prepared me for the opportunity to lead where I am right now. So I feel very fortunate.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much.

Beth Stroble: Thank you, thank you.

