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VALERIE BELL INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Valerie Bell: Valerie Bell.

Blanche Touhill: Talk a little bit about your parents or your siblings or your relatives and who really put you in a direction of some career. Was it an elementary or secondary school teacher or was it all of the above? So talk about your early life.

Valerie Bell: Sure. I think that I would have to credit my parents for really instilling in me this notion of always do and be your personal best but "the sky is the limit for you because we feel that you have been blessed and touched with great intelligence, with ability and so therefore we think that you have a very promising future that should be shared with others." Very interesting circumstance: My parents married very early and, sadly, my dad passed away at the age of 38, leaving my mother with four children, the youngest of whom was seven months old and so my mother had a really interesting game plan. It was an interesting game plan that she had developed with my dad. She was only 37...38 years old by the time I went to college but she made sure that I was really prepped and ready to go off to Princeton University. I would have to say, though, that the example that my parents set at all times, before my father's passing and my mother subsequently, really conveyed to us that...and when I say "us," I had three siblings, two sisters and a younger brother, and they all were given the same sort of things and I don't say this with any sense of pretention but my mother single-handedly got all of us to the Ivy League. I went to Princeton and my brothers and sisters all went to Harvard, even the youngest one who was only seven months old but there was a certain kind of aspect to our upbringing that really instilled in us this sense of, "You've been blessed. God has really favored you in many respects and you have things to do in the world and you should never, ever shirk from

that responsibility.” It just was very interesting that at the time, that opportunity was becoming available for women. I happened to be born right at that time-frame where the doors to great opportunities were really opening and Princeton University was in the cusp of going co-ed and so I had the opportunity to really take advantage of that and what a special, special experience that was. But certainly the wings under all of us were our parents, and there were teachers along the way. I went to Catholic school for 12 years. Sister Mary LaSue told me in the fifth grade that I would always be able to do anything. She said, “I think you’re going to do something really special in the world and I think that you are going to make a really big difference,” and I don’t know whether she would be disappointed today or not but there was just a supportive cast but really led by my parents, who, again, as young parents, really young parents, had the foresight and the wisdom to place all of their children, including me, on a track that led us to think and conclude that we had work to do in the world.

Blanche Touhill: Did the death of your father, did it just give your mother more determination or did it knock her off her course?

Valerie Bell: Yeah. She, to this day, is our role model because the way she marshaled her personal strength...at the time my dad passed away, she was 34 years old with four children. As I said, I was 15 and there was a 13-year-old, 9-year-old and this new baby which had been such a blessing because it was kind of, “What a wonderful surprise” and then my dad found out he was sick and passed away but my mother said to us, the day he passed away, she gathered us all together and said, “You know, he’s gone but we had a mission for you kids and I’m going to see it through” and she really...now that I’m an adult and I’ve raised my children and my siblings and I all look back on that. We revere our mother so tremendously because we recognize the extent to which she sacrificed so many things as a young woman, to ensure that we all were on the right track. And so we kind of consider her the miracle worker because nobody was in trouble. You hear so many things about children of single parents and how they’re challenged and it’s so hard. It never felt hard to us but we were kids and so she made it very plain to us that we, again, had work to do and that there were so many blessings in our lives and that we had this hitch with the loss of our dad but that, hey, we’re the Team Bell and everybody’s going to make it through and pull the one behind.

Blanche Touhill: And were you loyal to one another?

Valerie Bell: Oh, my gosh, as I said, Team Bell. I was the oldest and I have to say, my mother has said to me as a grown woman, she said, "Val, you know, I counted my lucky stars every day that for some way, we were able to give you, the lead kid, the right sense of thinking about things and as a consequence, you set a course that the others wanted to follow," and she said, "I have thought in my life, what would have happened had the lead kid been a different kind of kid? Had that child been disruptive or not towing the line, off on a boondoggle or something," but I did feel very responsible because a few days before my dad passed away, he said to me, "You've got to help Mom because I don't think I'm going to get through this and I think you...I'm really counting on you to help Mom" and I took that very, very seriously, very seriously because it was the last thing he ever said to me. One of the things he said to me was, "Don't try marijuana and don't do drugs; promise me that" and I remember saying, "Dad, I promise," and I never have; neither have my siblings because, again, as the oldest in the group, I made it my responsibility to kind of say to them, coming behind, "Mom's had her share of heartache. I think we can all do well by her by kind of following the steps that they've laid out for us" and so extremely close to my brothers and sisters, to this day. We're all close with each other's kids. We just recognize that we were given special parents and a special bond and so, to this day, those are my best buddies. Those are my best buddies and I really respect each of them for what they've accomplished in life because they've all done great, great things, tremendous things.

Blanche Touhill: What have they done?

Valerie Bell: Well, my sister was the founding director of the Goldman-Sachs Foundation...the founding president, not director, founding president, among many other things. My brother has been very big in the whole economic development field and investment banking field in Wall Street. My younger sister is a managing director for IDEO, but all of them were, like myself, fortunate to have the force of great education. So I went to Princeton and Harvard Law School and the Kennedy School of Government. My sister, Stephanie, went to Harvard undergrad and the Kennedy School of Government and Harvard Law and then my younger brother went to Harvard undergrad and then Harvard Business School

and then my younger sister, the one that was just a baby, went to Harvard undergrad and Harvard Business School. So I think each of us, in respect of our many, many privileged opportunities for education, have felt that responsibility to go out and use it not just for our own personal gain but as a pay forward. You have to pay it forward. So each of them...I have witnessed and observed each of them use that sort of launching pad of education to go out and do other great things.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your elementary and secondary school. Was it a good school?

Valerie Bell: The elementary school...this is interesting...went to a Catholic school in Brooklyn, New York. When I was about 11 years old, my parents decided to move us out to Long Island, New York and went to Catholic schools there and I'm a little chagrined to admit that where I was growing up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the Catholic school was 100% African American kids. I mean, there were a few kids of other backgrounds but it was largely African American. Well, when we moved to Long Island, I showed up on the first day of school and the school was all white. My sister and I were, like, the fifth and sixth kids of color in that elementary school and I was so surprised, I ran home and told my parents, "I can't believe it. There are all these white people and they're Catholic and they're in the school" and my folks said, "Well, yes, of course," and I said, "I had no idea. I thought all black people were Catholic and all white people were..."...because we grew up in Crown Heights, a very Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. I thought all the people that were white were Jewish and so at 11 years old, which is kind of crazy, I learned, oh, my gosh, there are all these Catholic people of Irish background, of German background, French background, and so that was a really big lesson but it was a very important time because it began what I call a pioneering period. We integrated that school and I began to learn that life is very interesting and it was then because it wasn't as receptive as one might have thought but nonetheless, I made my friends; I did what I had to do and I certainly achieved academically, went off to a high school setting in which I was the first and only African American girl my freshman year of 1,600 or 1,700 kids. It was a Diocesan high school and I remember showing up the first day and standing up in the assembly and saying to a nun who was nearby, "Am I the only Negro girl in this high school?" and she said to me, "Oh, you're Valerie Bell. The faculty met and Father Mullen told us that you were coming today" and there were six black boys in the school and

myself. So that began, for me, a real important period in my life. I think that was the discerning time for me. It was very pivotal because my first reaction was to run home and tell my parents because my dad was still alive. He'd passed away when I was a sophomore. I said, "I don't want to stay in this school. This is going to be too hard" and my father shared that he had had a similar experience at a Catholic high school in Brooklyn when he was growing up and he said, "You can do this. You can do this. This is a superior education. You can do it." So I made the determination at that time that I was going to go in and succeed but I also had to make a personal decision: how am I going to conduct myself? Am I going to be a person who is aloof and alone or am I going to plow in and become very involved and just take the bull by the horns, and I chose the latter and that became a defining period for me because there were some kids who were very prejudiced. There were nuns who were very prejudiced but I continued to kind of forge ahead on this: be collaborative; work with everybody; learn about them; share what you are, and by my senior year, I was voted president of the student body. So I think that was the first real underpinning of my leadership, a recognition that this is something I really need to do because I never sacrificed who I was but I started teaching these other kids that, you know, hey...and this is 1969 to 1973, so it's right on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement. I felt that I had the opportunity to teach kids that "you don't have to be afraid of me. I am who I am and you're different from me but we have things that we can learn from each other," and so it was a banner senior year. We did great things as I headed student government and the student body and I just had a recent 40th reunion and so many people...my husband was really...he said, "Val, you really made a difference" because so many people shared that, "Val, you were the first person that I knew who was black and in working with you and spending time with you, it kind of changed some of the things that I had learned at home and it changed the way my perspectives had been" and it was just an interesting opportunity. People were bringing their spouses over, "This is the one; this is the girl..."...so it was a very, very important experience for me, both academically and personally and developmentally.

Blanche Touhill: And the school was a good academic school?

Valerie Bell: Oh, in fact, you had to take a test and the Diesis sort of culled the people from the top.

Blanche Touhill: So you were in the bright school?

Valerie Bell: I was in the bright school and did well academically there because that sort of seated the foundation for me to move on to Princeton but I was very well prepared when I got to Princeton and all the nuns that followed me for many years said, "We gave it to you. We showed you how to really..."

Blanche Touhill: What was the order of nuns?

Valerie Bell: There were two orders, which, we used to call them "the blue nuns" and "the white nuns." It was the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters out of Scranton, Pennsylvania and the Dominican Sisters from Amityville and one other little aspect of my experience there that obviously didn't go in a way that I thought is in my senior year, I thought very strongly about entering the convent and so there were nuns with whom I had become very friendly who were anxious to sponsor me. So I went and looked at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters and I went and looked at the Dominican Sisters and I actually became an affiliate of the Dominican Sisters of Amityville and got a special dispensation to go to Princeton because they wanted you to kind of stay local. But it was a non-committal thing but you were really discerning a potential vocation and, given that Princeton was just on the cusp of becoming co-ed, there were vastly more men than women and I think I learned quickly in that first year, I don't think the convent is for me. I decided to pursue my ends in other ways because I said, oh, no, I think one day I'm going to want to get married but I stayed in touch with some of those nuns and that was a very special experience too because I had to come back from my early days at Princeton, once a month, to spend time with that community. But it was an important part of my personal growth and development.

Blanche Touhill: Well, the Dominicans were always known for their speaking ability. Did you learn how to speak from the Dominicans?

Valerie Bell: You know, I think they certainly had us tested there at Maria Regina High School and public speaking was a big part of what we were required to do but I was a big talker, I think, before that.

Blanche Touhill: And did your brothers and sisters follow you in your path through the high school?

Valerie Bell: My sister did. My sister, Stephanie, came right behind me. My brother, Gordon went to Chaminade High School. There are three Chaminade: there's one here in St. Louis; one in Minneola, Long Island and one in...I forget the town in California but he went to Chaminade -Minneola and then our much younger sister, by the time she came along, she was pursuing her own cause but she went to Sacred Heart Academy which was sort of a competitive school but they all followed in the same general direction of the strong Catholic education, being obviously well prepared academically because everybody went to Harvard and did really well and, in fact, our youngest sister, while we all had some sort of honors or something, she graduated, like, Magna Cum Laude and told us it was the Sacred Heart influence that had prepared her the best.

Blanche Touhill: I heard you talk one time about doing your homework around the kitchen table.

Valerie Bell: Oh, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Valerie Bell: Yeah, keeping in mind, during this period, it's after 9th grade, for me, or even in elementary school, when we would come home from school, my mother would be in the kitchen preparing a meal for dinner and all three of us, she said...you know, because we had places in our room, my sister and I shared a room but we had a place where we could work up there but my mother said, "Oh, no, everybody to the kitchen, to the kitchen table and let's see what's happening. What did you learn today? What did you learn today?" My dad would come home from work right at the time that the meal was almost done and homework was almost done. He'd look in and say, "Okay, what's going on? How's it going?" And this continued all the way through our school days and that period when my dad was sick, I will never forget it. He was sick and he was home from the hospital at different points. He would say, "Bring me the homework. Let's see what you're working on" and so they clearly gave the message that education is the great equalizer. It is your ticket and this is what you must pursue, no pressure though, no pressure to be the best. It was, "We want you to do and be your personal best." That's what they would always say and then my dad and my mom would say, "And you've had the good fortune and sometimes you may think it's not so good but the good fortune that we expect A's because we see that that's your capacity and

so don't bring me a C or a B because you're not doing and being your personal best." But those messages were very loud and clear, that those were priorities: homework; getting your academics in order. We were always encouraged to do other extracurricular things but first and foremost, it was, all of that extra-curricular! You are to attend to your academics first and foremost. And so that kitchen experience...you know, so many family memories. We would always joke about how my mother would turn her back for a second and we'd do something crazy and mischievous but that kitchen setting was really inspirational, I think, for all of us.

Blanche Touhill: Who suggested Princeton?

Valerie Bell: Now, this is another crazy story because I think God has plans for us that we don't necessarily know about or think about but if we're open to them...once I was the first African American girl in my high school. The next year, a couple more girls came and one of them was the number one person in our class. She graduated number one, although they did not allow her to be valedictorian/salutatorian. That's a whole other story which was an unfortunate product of the times. But she was the baby in her family. She had three older sisters and they had all gone through college. She was a very, very, very bright girl. She's still my best friend today. She said to me, "My parents are taking me down to Princeton University this week for my interview. Why don't you take a ride with us" and I said, "Ah..."...this is shortly after my dad passed away...I said, "You know, I don't think so." She said, "Just come and just take a ride" so I drove down with her family to the university and it was just gorgeous. It was like something about of a novel or a book or a movie or something and she went in for her interview and when she came out of the interview, Dean Franklin Moore, who had interviewed her, said, "So, this is your mother and father and who is this person?" She said, "This is the girl I told you about in my interview," and he reached into his pocket and he said, "I want you to apply here" and he gave me his card, which I said to him, "Oh, I don't think so. We just had a big loss. My mother doesn't have money for this" and he said, "Well, just give me a call. We'll talk about it." Well, being 16 and dumb, I took the card, I tossed it away. I said, I don't even want to put this on Mom's plate. I'm not even going to worry about this. Well, about a month later, I came home from school one day and my mother said, "Dean Franklin Moore called here and he

spoke to me” and she said, “Val, he’s going to give you fee waivers and things like that.” She said, “I think you should apply.” So I applied to Princeton, Swarthmore, Tufts and a couple local schools and I can only tell you the shock, the day that letter came and said, “You’ve been admitted to Princeton University” and the other fine schools as well and it just...Frank Moore single-handedly commandeered that whole situation for me to apply and when I had the very good fortune to get in, it turned not just me, but my entire family on its ear in the sense that this now became a possibility and it became a reality and it was pivotal because it not only set the course for my life but my younger sister who was always a friendly competitor, said, “Oh, well, if you’re going to Princeton, then I’m looking at my options and I’m thinking Harvard,” and then one after the other. But again, that lead kid kind of thing is what my mom referred to me as. It’s like the lead person was on a certain course and that made the others just kind of fall into place. For me, Princeton, again, following up on an extraordinary time in high school, it set the tone for a life that I thank God every day I’ve been privileged to have.

Blanche Touhill: Were you in one of the first classes of women at Princeton?

Valerie Bell: Yes, I was. I wasn’t in the first class. I was in the fifth class of co-education at Princeton and I have to smile when I say that because a year ago, they had a conference at Princeton called “She Roars.” For the first time...and it’s kind of crazy; it was way overdue...but all the women of Princeton were asked to come back and just coalesce, collaborate, talk to each other. And in the course of the weekend, they said, “We have something very special planned for the pioneers and we’re going to ask all of the women here, everybody who was in the class of 1973 to 1977...” ...I graduated in ’77...”to remain seated and the rest of us are going to toast and salute you.” So I looked to my cohort and my classmates and we said, “Oh, my God, we’re the pioneers.” We were just...I mean, it was kind of shocking that we were in the cohort of people that kind of led that move into co-education and we were just chagrined a little bit because it was kind of like, we didn’t think of ourselves that way. We were like, yeah, we were the early classes, but to have all the young women saying, “Thank you so much for your time here and thank you for laying the foundation,” I just felt so old that day, but, yes, it was a really, really special time and we were pioneers. I remember, I was very active on campus, very involved.

Blanche Touhill: So you followed the same policy you did in high school?

Valerie Bell: The same exact policy. I was very active with students of color, being on the inaugural board of the Third World Center which was something students of color had fought for and gained from the university. So African American students elected me one of the three leaders to kind of represent that constituency in making the Center a reality but I was also very active in general student affairs, general student government, which, again, this is a theme that's pretty consistent throughout my life: you're always collaborating, always working together, always bringing people and things together. So I was elected vice president of my class when I was a sophomore, stayed heavily involved in student government throughout, in addition to trying to lead the African American and Third World community but then by my senior year, I decided to do something that had never been done at any Ivy: I said, I'm running for senior class president and that was a job that was very unique and special because, in addition to a lot of work serving on the honor committee which is at West Point, you have the power of expulsion or suspension or whatever, but the important part was, the senior class president presents the graduating class to the alumni and to the board of trustees on graduation day. So when I announced that I was going to run, oh, my gosh, that really stirred up the campus because it was like, as one old alum told me, "You're black; you're Catholic and you're a woman! I'm not giving another dime to this university," and so it stirred a lot of sentiment both for and against among alums, the student body. I mean, it was crazy but I made a decision to go and visit each of my classmates and speak to them personally about my candidacy. That was just so illuminating for me. When I won, it was really...I received roses from every president in the Ivy League because this was the first time this had happened in the Ivy League and I have to say, it was a defining time for me at Princeton because, fortunately, I had done well academically. I had been very involved extracurricularly and I felt like I really made my mark and as a consequence of that, graduation day, I learned that my class had voted me the Detweiler Prize which is the outstanding graduate as chosen by students in the class. Then I received the Frederick Douglas Award which was the outstanding student of color who has really tried to bring the traditions of Princeton to all constituencies and to bring those constituencies into Princeton. I felt like I had accomplished the goals that I had always set forth for myself, which is: Be the best you can with

everyone, bringing people together. So the fact that my white male class voted me one prize and then I was recognized with the Frederick Douglas Award, I felt like, wow, this is a big moment for me because I accomplished what I had set out to accomplish.

Blanche Touhill: Did the women have trouble with the eating clubs?

Valerie Bell: Oh, yes, because there were some clubs...most of the clubs were all male. Now, I mentioned earlier that I was vice president of the sophomore class. Dumb me, I didn't research and this was a real important lesson for me, I didn't research out what my specific responsibility was. I was asked by two guys to run on a ticket and I said, "Sure, okay, because I'm a student government type of person so I'll do this." Well, once I was elected, I learned that the specific job of the vice president of the sophomore class is to run the Bicker process. The Bicker process is the process by which students find their way into an eating club. And so here I was, an African American woman, running Bicker. That was pretty historic.

Blanche Touhill: Were you in an eating club yourself?

Valerie Bell: No, because, at the end of that street were all these big houses that were dedicated to these clubs, was this little rinky-dink place that the Third World Center, we were working on getting that up and running. So you'd have to walk down Prospect Street to get to the Olden Field House which is what they gave us at that time as the Third World Center. There were very, very, very few, an infinitesimal amount of African American students or students of any background other than white students in the eating clubs. So I had the distinction of running the process and along with that usually came...because it had never been a woman before...the opportunity, that person got to kind of place himself in any club and so people were like, "Oh, my God, so now we have this woman who's running the process. Suppose she makes a big flap?" so I think people were silently like, "Ah," they breathed a sigh of relief that I had no interest in a club which carried with it extra expense and everything else. And, you know, I was a scholarship student and so I said, I can't even entertain this, even if I wanted to but I ran a good process, if I could say that, and the committee that was created to take care of that, we did a good job but it was an interesting thing that all of a sudden a woman, and a person of color, is running the entire Bicker process and it's like, people

were just waiting with bated breath to see what happened with that. But the process went on as planned and I continued to focus on the Third World Center.

Blanche Touhill: Now, go on to Harvard. Why did you choose law?

Valerie Bell: You know, when I was growing up, my dad always wanted to, he said he wanted to be a lawyer and that kind of inspired me. Then, an amazing thing happened: when I was in high school, we were all asked, in my sophomore year, to do a report on a person who we thought was going to influence the future and I was determined to always at Maria Regina present part of my culture to the group and I did my research and a name came out to me that I said, I'm doing my report on her, Frankie Freeman, and Frankie Freeman became the focus of my sharing with my classmates. So I researched, she was on the Civil Rights Commission and I said, boy, she's a lawyer and I think, given my dad is saying that "This is a great thing to do and I see this African American woman who's doing this," that kind of set the tone for me and all the way through high school, and then college, I was kind of focused on law. Just as a quick aside, when I had the privilege of giving Frankie Freeman the Brotherhood-Sisterhood Award from NCCJ and they said to me, "Tell a story about Frankie," I had a great story to tell because I knew her only through the books when I was in high school. What a privilege it has been to become a friend, a colleague, a link sister, and to know her very personally. But that said, she inspired me along with other inspirations I had along the way so that when I was at Princeton, my major, I was in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, which I had to be selected for because you couldn't just say, "This is my major." They had to pick certain people and I was fortunate to be picked for that but that really, again, laid a great foundation for the whole notion of, I'm going to try to do law school. But I never do it easy. I never do it easy. Once I started looking at law school, I said, but how much more effective could I be if I do public administration, public policy, those kinds of things as well, and so my focus shifted from just law school to programs that had a joint degree. And so that's what I did. I applied to a number of schools: Columbia; Harvard; Michigan, there were a number of schools that had joint degrees. You would apply to the law school. You would apply to, like in the case of Harvard, I had to apply to the Kennedy School of Government, get admitted to both of those schools and then apply to

the program. So, one, two, three, I was fortunate to get into the law school. Then I was notified I got into the Kennedy School and then I announced my intention to apply for the JDMPA and I did that and it was, again, a continuation of sorts, of the same kind of perspectives I've always had, from that early start back in that elementary school, moving out to Long Island but constantly refining and honing and sharpening skills that I thought would be of use to others in future times. And so the Kennedy School and Law School have been immeasurably important.

Blanche Touhill: Were you the first or one of the first African American women to get into this program?

Valerie Bell: Well, you know, it's kind of interesting with that because the law school was just becoming integrated and so, of the relatively small number of people that we have in a class, like 550 people, I think there were 13 African American females in my class. At that time, when I did the joint degree, I was the only one to be in that joint degree program but then my sister came behind me a couple years and did the same program. So we overlapped just a hair. But at that time, everything was pioneering. It was ground-breaking because the doors had really only opened up at the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s and so I was the beneficiary of all the hard work and toil and sacrifice that people had made and that has been very influential for me in this concept of paying forward because I can't pay them back but I've gotten what I've gotten because of them and so I have to figure out how to use it.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, absolutely. So there were 13 African American women in the law school class and there was 1 in the program, the Kennedy School and the program, yourself...

Valerie Bell: Right, right.

Blanche Touhill: And then your sister followed a couple years later.

Valerie Bell: Right.

Blanche Touhill: When you get out of law school, what happens?

Valerie Bell: I had the wonderful fortune to meet my life-long partner, best friend, best buddy, he's still my best buddy, at Harvard Law School and we took the bar exam in July of 1982 and got married in August of 1982. So we

were joined in our efforts. He's from Seattle; I'm from New York. I negotiated my first deal...I guess two first deals, one, I'm keeping my maiden name and he was shocked and ultimately came around once I said, "Why don't we hyphenate both our names" and he said, "Oh, no, okay, you can keep your name." So I won that negotiation. Then the second was, I don't want to live in Seattle. I would rather stay on the East Coast and he said okay. So I won both things. So we went to New York and we were both practicing in big corporate law firms. I wanted to be and had received an offer to be in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department but they put a moratorium on the hiring and so they said, "Well, probably best to get another job" so I was forced to go in-house at a large, I guess a prestigious corporate law firm, Senator Edmund Muskie's firm, Chad Warner Park where I had, again, God put you where you needed to be to do certain things: I was the first person as a young associate, as one or two years, to have my own client, the New York State Council on the Arts became my client because the partners felt that with the law degree and the public administration degree, that I could handle that work and then, in other words, we could do a kind of pro bono effort on behalf of the state. So that was kind of unheard of, for somebody that young to have her own client. But that is what was entailed in my legal practice. I had some very positive things happen there and some that were really not positive at all, I guess in the sense that I really looked at that as the opportunity to sharpen skills but there were experiences that were so denigrating. I once was asked to come in on a Good Friday to do work over that weekend so I missed Easter Sunday with my family and I turned in the work that was asked of me on Monday and was feeling pretty proud of myself. The person who had required it was one of the top people on the letterhead. He was one of the most senior partners and he said, "I knew I could count on you to do an excellent job. Thank you." Well, later that day, I got a phone call from one of my colleagues, one of my peers, a guy, a white guy who said, "I'm in a meeting and I was told to ask you about something that's in this document I have," which I had written, and as he asked the question and as I answered and the two of us started figuring out, he said, "Oh, my God, is this your work?" and I said, "Yeah, it is," and he said, "Val, I didn't know. I'm so sorry" because we both realized, they had taken my name off of my work, given it to this white male and he was there presenting my work because what they had said to him is, "How quick a study are you? You need to come up to

speed on this and learn this right now.” So later that day, I was incensed, of course, but I tried to calm myself down and I went into this top of the letterhead partner and I said, “Is there anything wrong with the work I submitted?” and he said, “Oh, no, no, no” and I said, “Well, then, I have a question for you” and he said, “What is that?” and I said, “Why wasn’t I at that meeting to present my own work?” and he was so flabbergasted. He was like, “Oh, I guess I didn’t think about it” and I said, “Well, I don’t know if you’ve gotten to be number three or four on the letterhead not thinking things through.” I said, “I think I know what happened here and I truly am telling you, it will never happen again.” Oh, geez, that brought all the partners meeting with me. I think they began to become concerned about, “Oh, man, this is really discrimination.” So that was sort of the negative side. There were a number of experiences like that in that setting but there were also extraordinarily supportive people. I’m sorry to report, the women were not the supportive people. There were two female partners at that firm and they were supportive in some things but the day I shared, after getting a really stellar review, that I was pregnant, the two women came to my office and closed the door and said, “What are you doing?” They were not supportive and, in retrospect, I certainly don’t hold any grudges but you look at it and you say, both of those women were single women that made their career their lives. They had been...one, I think, was at Yale Law School in the 1940’s. She sacrificed everything to be a partner in this big New York law firm. The other was a similar type of background. So I think their view of things was very different and they could only be a product of their experience but at the time, I was so stunned because I said, the support I’m getting is from the guys with whom I’ve worked and the women really were, like, just annoyed. They were just, like, angry because I was the first female attorney in a firm of 400 people to actually get pregnant while I was practicing law. So I was the test, another pioneering case, another test case and it was just an interesting experience. So I had a good experience.

Blanche Touhill: How did the firm treat it?

Valerie Bell: Well, because I was pretty strategic, once I knew I was pregnant, I knew I had a review coming up and some of my mentors in the firm had said to me, “You’re doing really well. This is going very well. Just keep staying on track.” Something told me, don’t share the pregnancy part until after you

have the review. So in that meeting, three partners are telling me, "You're really on a great track. You're one of the top people in your class. You're doing extremely well. We're so proud of you. Now, give us some feedback. What do you think?" and when I said I was pregnant, the look on their faces just told me, it was like, oh, my gosh, and they said, "Well, congratulations, but, wow, we'll have to figure this out."

Blanche Touhill: So how did they figure it out?

Valerie Bell: They were extremely gracious, extremely supportive of me because I had just gotten this good review. What else could they do? They were very accommodating in terms of time off. I had six months, almost six months of paid leave and then I extended it because I said, I want to be home for a year and I can't say shame on me, but at the end of that time, I concluded that I wasn't able to go back because the pull in my life...no one could tell me; at Princeton, nobody could tell me; at Harvard, what it was going to feel like to actually have your child and given that I was billing 75 hours a week and my husband was billing 75 hours a week, it really came to me that, you know what? In some sense, Princeton kind of sold us a bill of goods, that we were going to be the gals who could do everything. You cannot do every single thing. You have to make adjustments. You have to be flexible enough to say, how do I shift gears a bit, and for me at that time, because I knew we were going to be in the family mode, I concluded that I will not stay at this firm but I will go in-house someplace else where the hours are a bit more flexible and I have a better sense of control over my time. And so that's what I did but the firm itself, I have to say, was extremely supportive of me. I would have to give the P.S. that right after everybody found out how I was going to be treated, there were three more pregnancies and then when I left, none of them were treated the same way I was treated. They tightened it up tremendously because I guess they said, "We can't have this, people coming in and we kind of treat them a certain way and then they move on." So it was an interesting thing and as a woman, I felt really torn.

Blanche Touhill: Did any of the women return to the firm after?

Valerie Bell: Yes, some of the others did.

Blanche Touhill: So they felt that there was some accommodation?

Valerie Bell: Sure, sure, sure.

Blanche Touhill: Then what happened? You had three children?

Valerie Bell: I had three children, had moved and after each child I took a year off but I had found an interesting way. Again, you are a creature of habit and necessity. You say, how do I make this work? So I went in-house at the New York State Urban Development Corporation, became senior counsel but this was under Mario Cuomo. We were appointed by Mario Cuomo's office and there were other like-minded individuals. Those were some of the most fun years of my legal practice because I was in the trenches with other women and men. We were all similarly situated. Everybody was having kids so literally, there were days where somebody would have to bring a child to the office and everybody would pinch hit and say, "You go do your closing; I'll take care of your baby." Then another time, I would have to bring my child in and I'm in a meeting and it's a window like this here and it's open and the person would come by and say, "Time to eat; time to eat." It was mad cap. We should have done a movie series or a TV series on how we made that work because we had to have outstanding product, always the outstanding product but we were all juggling and supporting each other and just this past summer, because I go back to New York every summer and stay for the whole summer, we had a reunion of all the gals who played this role for each other and we were laughing because all of our children are all grown up now but we were saying, "Weren't those some fun days. Those were really, really fun days" because we were getting the work done but we were chopping it, mixing it, blending it, however we could to make sure that we got the work out but to backstop each other.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have daycare or did you have the person come into your house?

Valerie Bell: We had a person come and take care of our kids initially and then a really good friend of the family said, "Well, I'm going to be taking care of my granddaughter so if you can bring her over, then the two girls could grow up" and those kids are all still friends but one blessing that I had was, we were living in New York still. I lived back in my old neighborhood. My mother was around the corner. My aunt was up the next street and there was a constant influx of family. So I always felt I could very comfortably leave the kids with these other folks because Grandma was there; Auntie was there.

Blanche Touhill: So you had an extended family.

- Valerie Bell: We had an extended family.
- Blanche Touhill: So how did you come to St. Louis?
- Valerie Bell: This was a move that my husband, Kelvin Westbrook, it was his initiation and I told him, "You owe me for the rest of your life" because I was on a maternity leave with my son, Brent, who is now 20 years old but I was...that same job. I was on maternity leave for the year and Kelvin comes home and says to me...by this time, he has made partner at Paul Hastings, his firm and he was the 25th African American to make partner in New York City out of 7,000 partners. So that was a really big situation, but he said, "We're in the family mode. You have to have the babies so I need to keep things moving" but he had represented a lot of telecommunications companies, had actually gotten known nationally for that practice and some of his clients were here in St. Louis and they said, "We're going to start a new company and we want you to come to St. Louis to do this, to help us, not as our counsel but as kind of the fourth business guy" and it ended up, he said to me, "I think this is an important move because I think we could really take care of our kids' college educations. I think we could really set ourselves up for the future," and I just was like, "Oh, my gosh," but for the good of the whole, I kind of acquiesced and it ended up being the very, very right thing to do and the company was Charter Communications and that laid a whole groundwork for him and what he's done subsequently but it brought us to this community and at that point, our kids were 9, 6 and 1 so we were a new family, kind of still a young family in sort of a whole new environment and we had to kind of dig in and get with this community and it's been...
- Blanche Touhill: But you did what you did before, you sailed out to make friends?
- Valerie Bell: Oh, yeah, yeah...
- Blanche Touhill: And partnerships?
- Valerie Bell: And I started thinking strategically. I said, you know what? We have no support system here so I'm not comfortable just turning my kids over to anyone. I just can't and as the mom, this was a big sacrifice in a sense because I said, this is not the trajectory I necessarily saw for myself but how do I take a situation, be flexible and come to some resolution about what it is I can do and should do but at the same time, be front and center with my family? And it was at that point that I said...Bill Danforth

got in touch and said, "You're new to the region..."...we had met at a Princeton gathering and he said, "I'm going to be likely appointed the settlement coordinator for this school de-segregation case" and he said, "I'm thinking about this." We had a great conversation..."I'd like you to be my lawyer." What better thing could...education is my number one thing and so I said to him, "I will do it on one condition" and he said, "Well, what is that?" I said, "I have to volunteer to do it. I don't want to be paid" and he said, "Oh, I'm really touched. Oh, Valerie, I'm so touched" and I said, "Well, don't be touched because what that enables me to do is give you my unbridled, honest opinion and sometimes you might not like it but since you're not paying me, I feel totally in my bounds to tell you exactly what I think" and he laughed and that began a relationship where...I can't even begin to tell you how important and special that has been. So I was his lawyer throughout the de-seg case.

Blanche Touhill: And that lasted for years.

Valerie Bell: That lasted for three years, because I asked him at the beginning, I said, "Well, Bill, how long do you think this is going to take?" He said, "Oh, maybe a year" and as the years piled on and I continue today. He asked me to remain with the task force that is overseeing the implementation of that and so I continue as an appointee to that task force. But I began to realize that there were other aspects of the passions that I felt in my life around education, around race and race relations and economic disparity that were existing here and I said, I have work to do. I have skills sets that I think are needed by this community and if I can be a volunteer and do them, I have work to do.

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask you a couple of questions: If you had been born 50 years ahead of time, what would your life be like now?

Valerie Bell: It would be completely different. I almost can't imagine what it would be like because I know...and I'm not in any way discrediting the choices that women had back then...but it would have been a completely different thing. I'm sure I would have been probably a homemaker like my mom was. I may have found my way to teaching but I think what would have been clear is that the options would have been much, much narrower. I think I would have always been a contributor but I think the options would have been much narrower and therefore, I think the reach that I could effect would be much, much slimmer. You know what I'm saying?

And so, again, I think the fact that I was born in that window where the doors were just opening was very significant.

Blanche Touhill: How did you join the IWF?

Valerie Bell: There were some gals here in St. Louis with whom I have become friendly because, as you know, I've been very, very involved in the community in lots and lots of different things and one of the outgrowths of that is that you get to know people and, as one person said to me, "Boy, I know what you bring to the table" and so I was approached and told that "We've actually tendered your name for nomination and want to make sure that you're with this" and I said, "It would be an honor. It would be an honor to be included in a cohort of women who are known for their strength, for their insights, for their wisdom." It's just totally flattering and so when I was told I was nominated and then was voted in, it was a moment of great pride and joy for me.

Blanche Touhill: How has St. Louis worked out?

Valerie Bell: You know, if someone had told me 20 years ago that this is where you are going to raise your family; this is where you are going to do most of your pitching in, I would have said, "You're totally off the mark. I'm a New York girl," but I think, again, God knows what He's doing all the time and this has been the place where we have chosen to raise our family, to pursue our passions and our interests and for me, this size pond where I can actually see and feel the effects of what I'm hoping to pay forward. This has been just an extraordinary ride and so I have to admit, June, July and August I spend in New York. That was the third negotiation, is, "If we're going to go to St. Louis, this is your move, I got to know that I can get back to New York whenever I need to" and so we have a place there but this is where we call home and this is where my kids were raised. My son even has a Missouri accent. The girls kind of have a blended...I have two daughters. They have sort of a blended New York/Missouri accent but our son, hands-down, is a Missouri guy, a St. Louis guy and so this is home and we're grateful for it.

Blanche Touhill: The St. Louis public schools, are they going to be okay?

Valerie Bell: If I have anything to do with it, as you know, I am chair of the board of the St. Louis Public Schools Foundation. I've just finished being CEO because we hired a new president about which I'm very, very excited but

I see great potential. I see a great deal of positive movement and I think if this community can rally in the right way, we've done a lot of research and I've been out visiting five different cities and if we can sort of adopt some of the best practices I have personally witnessed elsewhere, I think we can get on a trajectory that will make a tremendous difference for St. Louis and so I'm throwing my weight behind that.

Blanche Touhill: Do you want to talk about any awards you've received, one or two or three that you really thought were wonderful?

Valerie Bell: Well, I mentioned those early awards, the Frederick Douglas Award at Princeton and the Detweiler Prize. Those, again, were tone setters for me but here in St. Louis, it's been such a pleasure and such a joy. I always feel guilty when people call up and say, "We want to give you the Brotherhood-Sisterhood Award" or the "YWCA Racial Justice Leader Award," or "Woman of Achievement" or "African American Citizen of the Year." You know, there have been lots of things that both my husband and I have been acknowledged for or recognized for but, to us, it's about doing the work and I feel very proud of the awards, even Princeton gave me a community service award because our mantra at Princeton is "In the nation's service and in the service of all nations" and so I was very honored that my Princeton colleagues felt I had lived up to the creed but it's not about awards. I think if everybody could do just a smidgeon of the work, boy, what a difference we could make and I think women, in particular, bring something special to that task and so it in the spirit of sisterhood, collegueship that I look to my female counterparts and say, when the chips are down, if they get a group of women around the table, the job is going to get done, like in this recent deal with our government. It took the women to come to the table and clean it up. So that's how I kind of see it.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much.

Valerie Bell: Thank you very much, Blanche. It was really an honor. Thank you.