

An Interview with
Deborah Patterson

at the Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

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International Women's Forum DVD 53

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PREFACE

The interview was filmed using a Canon XH A1S A camera on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
JUNE 15, 2014
DEBORAH PATTERSON INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Would you like to introduce yourself?

Deborah Patterson: Deborah Patterson, Monsanto Fund.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your early life: where you were born, your family, your friends, your cousins, your grandparents, your elementary school, your high school, just talk in general about who said to you you had ability and you could do things and don't shy away from what you want to do and things like that.

Deborah Patterson: I'm a native St. Louisan, and my parents migrated here from Mississippi, both of my parents, and of course they came with their parents. They came as young children with their parents because they wanted a better life. I grew up in the west end of the city and I was thinking about that. It was a very insular kind of existence because we walked to everything. We walked to the Y; we walked for shopping; we walked for groceries, and it was nice. Most of the families had two parents. It was rare that there were single heads of households, but there were a lot of grandparents that watched the children, because most of the mothers worked. That would be rare too, for a mother not to work, but grandparents—and so it was really great. And I really didn't venture to South St. Louis until I was an adult. I would take the streetcar downtown. Now, I have had a library card since I was four. I started school at four, and I've had a library card since I was four, and so when I graduated to being able to take the streetcar to the big library: oh, my God, it was so exciting.

Blanche Touhill: Did you use the children's room?

Deborah Patterson: I used the children's room; I used the whole library because we lived in an apartment and there was really nowhere that you could go to be alone, and the library provided me with that space where I could go, I

could be alone, I could think, and I could envision a different life for myself through books. And that was fantastic for me. My parents didn't finish high school—well, actually, my mother got her GED at 45, but they didn't finish high school, but they always, always expected us to do better, me and my sister and my brother. So it never occurred to me that I wouldn't go to college, never, ever, did it occur to me that I wouldn't go to college. I always knew I would go. I didn't know where I was going; I didn't know who would pay for it, how it would get paid for, but that I was going, and my parents, especially my mother, expected a lot from me. I have a story to tell: One year, maybe I was in the 6th grade, I didn't do my book reports so I got an "M" which is average in reading, and my mother was like, "I don't think so because I know you can read; I know you can write; I know you can do these things." And this is going to sound cruel, but I didn't go anywhere for, like, eight weeks. The only place I could go was to the library to get books and home to write book reports [laughter]. So, after that, it was like, all right, never again will I get "average" in reading. They expected us to do our school work. They expected us to be respectful of adults. There were just high expectations of all of us, and so that was my mother and my father, and my grandmother actually taught me to read. I could read when I entered kindergarten, and my grandmother taught me to read; she taught me to cook; she taught me to sew; she taught me, I guess, almost everything because I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, as many children did, in the late '50s and early '60s. She took us to church. It was really nice. I lived in a time of a lot of racism, and really, I didn't experience it until I was bussed. Our school was overcrowded and I was bussed to Kennard in South St. Louis. Before that, I had never experienced racism, but I did at that school, even though we were in our own classrooms during recess. Kids would say mean and nasty things. But I would...

Blanche Touhill: How did you handle that?

Deborah Patterson: So, I told my third grade teacher, who was really outdone [sic, 0:06:01], and I told my mother, and my mother said, "That's not who you are. That's not who you are; they're ignorant. Pay them no attention."

Blanche Touhill: And that's the policy you adopted?

Deborah Patterson: Yes: "they're ignorant; it's not who I am."

Blanche Touhill: Do you think some of your playmates were (influenced?) [0:06:28]?

Deborah Patterson: Well, I think some of my playmates were—I don't think they were. Actually, I don't think so. I really think that our parents said, "You're more than that. You're better than that. They don't know you," because we all had similar aspirations and values. Gerald Boyd, who was the editor of the New York Times, was in my eighth grade class. So we had professionals in our neighborhood. We had people like my parents, that were hard-working people, non-professionals, but they had aspirations and expectations for their children. That was the shared value.

Blanche Touhill: And did that affect your siblings as well?

Deborah Patterson: It did. My sister's a nurse today. She's assistant manager of the Women's Health Clinic at BJC. Now, my brother loved music, and so he went for a while, didn't go for a while, but he works for Nestlé, and he got a couple of years in, but he didn't finish college, but he had that opportunity. But he's turned out to be a wonderful human being. I wasn't always sure he would, but he [laughter] turned out to be a wonderful human being.

Blanche Touhill: When you said your teacher was "undone," when you told her about it, what do you mean by that?

Deborah Patterson: When I say my teacher was undone, she was angry. She was angry.

Blanche Touhill: Do you think she reported that?

Deborah Patterson: I think she reported that. She was angry. In fact, I know she reported that, because I went with her to the principal's office. She was very angry.

Blanche Touhill: You were courageous.

Deborah Patterson: Well, you know what? I guess I learned early on about being courageous. Yes. It never dawned on me to be afraid [laughter]. I don't know where that came from, but I rarely been [sic] afraid to face a challenge or to face something that was wrong.

Blanche Touhill: That's remarkable for a third grade child.

Deborah Patterson: Yeah, well, I was done wrong: sure; I'm telling. Here's another of my...

Blanche Touhill: Well, did the principal say something to the children?

Deborah Patterson: The principal said something to the teacher, that she would talk to the children, but she didn't talk to the children with me present. She did not. But she said that she would talk to the children, and, in fact, she said that they would talk to all the children because...

Blanche Touhill: It's a group.

Deborah Patterson: Right. Well, we were in maybe four or five classrooms in the whole school, and she wanted to make sure that none of us experienced what I had experienced.

Blanche Touhill: And did she succeed?

Deborah Patterson: I never heard it again.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. All right, well...

Deborah Patterson: I never heard it again.

Blanche Touhill: Did you graduate from Kennard?

Deborah Patterson: No, I actually graduated from Hempstead, which is in the West End of the city, and during the time that I started at Hempstead and graduated from Hempstead, our neighborhood changed a lot because we had urban renewal, and they tore down Pruitt-Igoe, and there was a mass migration of people to the West End, and I would say people that sometimes didn't share the same values. So then we moved, and we moved to North St. Louis, and I graduated from Northwest High School.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes!

Deborah Patterson: Yes, I was in the first graduating class.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I was going to say! What year was that roughly?

Deborah Patterson: 1970.

Blanche Touhill: It was a spanking new school?

Deborah Patterson: It was spanking new school, and, in fact, they transferred students over from Beaumont, and then some of us that were just starting, we were the first graduating class, and it was an integrated school, which I thought was wonderful. It was so great to have friends of different color and different...

Blanche Touhill: In the same class?

Deborah Patterson: In the same class and go to each other's homes. It was really a remarkable experience, for that time. For that time, it was really fabulous. Like Kert Rosenkoetter, who was—he may still be the manager of the Saks store in Frontenac—he was our class president. So, we had such wonderful people and such a good time. We cried; we didn't want to graduate from high school. But just the idea that people get to know each other as people and the adjustment of going to work or going to college with people of different backgrounds is much easier if you have had that experience.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Were you able to walk to high school, or did you take the bus?

Deborah Patterson: We walked to high school. We'd walk home. We walked back for wrestling. We'd walk home. We'd walk back for basketball. We'd walk—it was really nice to be able to walk with your friends to the games. Now, if it was an away game, we would take the bus.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you went to the away games too?

Deborah Patterson: Oh, sure, absolutely we went to the away games, and a group of us would take the bus there and take the bus home. And it's—today, my daughters don't take the bus, but we took the bus everywhere. We took the bus everywhere or we walked. I didn't have a car until, I guess, college. I didn't have access to a car until college.

Blanche Touhill: What else did your mother do? Did she work in the community, or—?

Deborah Patterson: My mother...

Blanche Touhill: I know she had a job.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, my mother had a job. So when our neighborhood underwent this transition, we had single mothers with children, and often they didn't have enough to eat. So they're waiting on a check, or they're waiting on some man to bring them some money. My mother fed everyone, much to my dad's chagrin. She fed everybody. I had a friend come home with me as a sophomore in high school, and she never left. She graduated from high school. My mother met her mother at high school graduation. So...

Blanche Touhill: So she was the girl's mother?

Deborah Patterson: She was her mother. And my mother would share whatever she had. And it's almost Biblical in a way because we didn't have much, but there was always enough to share; there was always enough to go around; there was always enough to feed a hungry child, or, for that matter, a hungry parent. And that's what my mother did. I guess that's what my mother instilled in all of us. My sister had kids stay with her through high school, and then she saw them off to college. So I guess it rubbed off on us, my mother's caring, giving, taking care of other people really is quite engrained.

Blanche Touhill: And your father let her?

Deborah Patterson: Yes, my father let her. He let her. He better let her [laughter]. Yes, he went along, but he felt like he was a poor working stiff, and now she's (taking in?) [0:15:24], and she's just feeding the whole neighborhood. But we were never hungry.

Blanche Touhill: It was like you grew up in the small towns.

Deborah Patterson: Yes!

Blanche Touhill: The neighborhoods were the small towns.

Deborah Patterson: Absolutely, it was like a small town, Blanche. You got that exactly right. And everyone looked out for everyone. So if we did something wrong, you rest assured, as soon as my mother hit the door, she would know it. Someone would call.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and you all wanted that?

Deborah Patterson: And we wanted that. Well, as children we didn't want that...

Blanche Touhill: No, I understand.

Deborah Patterson: But my mother wanted that...

Blanche Touhill: And the community...

Deborah Patterson: And the community wanted that, and they embraced that. They embraced that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you still go to the downtown library when you got to high school?

- Deborah Patterson: I did. It was a little harder to take the Lee bus to the downtown library than it was to take the streetcar that let me off right in front, but yes. And today I'm on the St. Louis Public Library Foundation board and I am really excited about that.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, now, when did you decide, then, to—Where did you go to college?
- Deborah Patterson: I went to the University of Missouri—St. Louis, and...
- Blanche Touhill: What made you choose? It was easy to get to?
- Deborah Patterson: It was affordable. It was really...
- Blanche Touhill: You could've gone to the community college.
- Deborah Patterson: I could've gone to the community college, but it never crossed my mind to go to a two-year school.
- Blanche Touhill: You wanted a four-year school?
- Deborah Patterson: I wanted a four-year university, and...
- Blanche Touhill: Then that says it, right?
- Deborah Patterson: Right, and it was what I could pay for, and what my parents could pay for, and so...
- Blanche Touhill: And so you lived at home.
- Deborah Patterson: And so I lived at home. I lived at home until after graduation.
- Blanche Touhill: It's a wonderful opportunity, isn't it?
- Deborah Patterson: The University of Missouri—St. Louis was fabulous. I made some of my life-long friends here. Wow! (I met?) [0:17:41] my first fiancé [laughter], one of many—my first fiancé here; my really dear friend, Al Jackson, I met him here.
- Blanche Touhill: He was teaching, wasn't he?
- Deborah Patterson: He was my mentor, actually. He is really the reason I got into city government, and we remain close friends to this day. There were Lance LeLoup in the political science department; he made political science come alive.

- Blanche Touhill: Did you belong to that club they had?
- Deborah Patterson: The political science club?
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it wasn't called "the political science club."
- Deborah Patterson: No, I didn't [unintelligible 0:18:29]...
- Blanche Touhill: They just would have little lectures? It wasn't exactly a club.
- Deborah Patterson: I didn't [inaudible 0:18:33] a club but you could just go to those little lectures, yes. Yes. But he was fantastic. As a teacher, he could make politics come alive. He was just magnificent as a teacher. I remember that vividly.
- Blanche Touhill: Had you been political before then?
- Deborah Patterson: No, I had not been political. So my undergraduate degree is in Criminal Justice.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Well, that was Al. Didn't Al teach...
- Deborah Patterson: That was Al. That's how I met Al, and then I worked in the criminal justice system for a very short period of time. I was a probation and parole officer.
- Blanche Touhill: When you graduated?
- Deborah Patterson: When I graduated, and I did not like it. So I came back to school, and actually, I received a fellowship, East-West Gateway Fellowship, and that's how I paid for graduate school, through East-West Gateway.
- Blanche Touhill: And what degree did you get then?
- Deborah Patterson: Political Science. I got my Master's in Political Science.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you specialize in public policy?
- Deborah Patterson: I did specialize in public policy, and I was a teacher's assistant.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh!
- Deborah Patterson: Yes!
- Blanche Touhill: And that took two years?

- Deborah Patterson: And that took two years. I was finished in two years.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you still live at home?
- Deborah Patterson: No, I moved out. I moved out as soon as I got my first job.
- Blanche Touhill: How did your mother and father react to that?
- Deborah Patterson: Well, my mother was sad; she was sad that I was going. She understood, but she was sad. And I was like, "Free at last!" [laughter]
- Blanche Touhill: So you got your degree. Were you involved in government here? Or student government?
- Deborah Patterson: Well, I did a lot of work with Lucille Walton in Kinloch.
- Blanche Touhill: I hadn't heard that name in years.
- Deborah Patterson: Yes, well, Lucille Walton got me really interested in politics because of all her political activism in Kinloch and her community development efforts in Kinloch.
- Blanche Touhill: So you were ready on graduation to go to...
- Deborah Patterson: Well, I was ready to go to city government, but I worked for a while, before the city, I worked for St. Louis County. I worked for the County Housing Authority, for Jessie Horseman [spelling? 0:21:01]. I don't know if you remember Jessie Horseman.
- Blanche Touhill: No, I don't remember.
- Deborah Patterson: I worked for Jessie Horseman. Jessie Horseman nominated me for the St. Louis Leadership Program, and I don't know if I still hold this title of being the youngest person ever...
- Blanche Touhill: ...who went through that program?
- Deborah Patterson: ...who went through that program. I went through it the second year, and so maybe I was 24, maybe something like that.
- Blanche Touhill: What did you get out of that program?
- Deborah Patterson: Oh, my goodness, it was so remarkable, the people that I interacted with, like Michael Kennedy, who had his own architectural firm.

Blanche Touhill: He did the Student Center, his firm.

Deborah Patterson: Right, that's how I met Michael Kennedy, and I met Ron Staggio [spelling? 0:21:52], who was then with the St. Louis Board of Education. I met a lot of very smart, knowledgeable, and, in many ways, pioneers, in terms of leadership. So it was extremely good for me. I had to pinch myself. It's like, I'm among these really accomplished people, but I think I've been really fortunate in that Jessie Horseman saw that I had leadership potential. And after that, I went to work for St. Louis City, for St. Louis City government.

Blanche Touhill: What did you do for the City?

Deborah Patterson: So, I started at the Community Development Agency as an economic development specialist. This is another story: So the Deputy Mayor for Development—so all the development agencies reported to him, including the Community Development Agency—he was walking around the offices, and he said, "So, how are you doing?" So I said, "I'm bored." He said, "Bored?" I said, "I don't have enough work to do. I'm through with my work by ten A.M. I don't know why they're paying me to be here. I don't understand this. I'm not learning anything. I don't understand this." So he said, "Would you like to come to work for me?" And that's how I ended up in the mayor's office, letting my mouth—you know—telling the truth [laughter].

Blanche Touhill: Well, you understood development, and you wanted the city to prosper.

Deborah Patterson: I wanted the city to prosper, but I wanted to learn. The thing for me is, I'm idle for seven hours out of the day. I don't want to be idle for seven hours out of a day. Give me some more to do! [laughter]

Blanche Touhill: Yes. What are some of the projects you worked on?

Deborah Patterson: So, I did a lot of work on neighborhood development, a lot of the community outreach. Gosh, I learned about public hearings, community meetings, and those kinds of things.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't it hard to get people to come to the community meetings?

Deborah Patterson: Well, you know, in the late '70s, it wasn't as hard.

Blanche Touhill: It was an active time.

Deborah Patterson: It was an active time because the city was under redevelopment, and people were very interested in what was going to happen in their particular neighborhoods. Then there were all the conspiracy theories about who was going to take over North St. Louis—the Team Four Study. So there was a lot of interest and a lot of activism in the late '70s and early '80s. It was great. I tell people, “Everything I needed to know I learned the basics in city government.”

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Yes, and that never goes away, does it.

Deborah Patterson: It never goes away. I learned the art of negotiation; I learned to manage people; I learned to manage money; I learned political savvy; I learned to listen and not finish people's sentences—which is a good thing, right? [laughter]—learned to listen. All those skills that I learned in city government have transferred to every position I've ever had.

Blanche Touhill: Now, how did you end up in the mayor's office?

Deborah Patterson: I ended up in the mayor's office because, as I was saying, I was complaining about not having enough work to do. So Carl Fox, who was the development director at the time, said, “You can come work for me.” So I came to work for Carl Fox. I was the mayor's office liaison to the agency on aging. I worked with Father Lou Cervantes.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, and I remember he was very active in that time.

Deborah Patterson: Very active, and then I was the liaison with the employment and training agency. And then—that was under Mayor Conway, so I worked for Mayor Conway. And then there was a change in administration, and Vince Schoemehl came into office, and I was a hold-over.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, well, he knew you, didn't he?

Deborah Patterson: He knew me from the board, but he didn't really know me.

Blanche Touhill: He didn't know you from UMSL?

Deborah Patterson: Not really.

Blanche Touhill: You were different years?

Deborah Patterson: Yes.

- Blanche Touhill: Okay, but you knew the same people?
- Deborah Patterson: We may have known the same people, but we hadn't really talked or didn't really...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, had he asked you to hold over?
- Deborah Patterson: Yeah, he asked me if I'd like to stay, and I said, "Sure, sure, I'd like to stay," and he had appointed an employment and training director that it just didn't work out, and the Department of Labor was threatening to shut down the program. And he said, "You go fix it."
- Blanche Touhill: And you did?
- Deborah Patterson: And I did. I didn't know I could.
- Blanche Touhill: But you had confidence that when he said you could do it, you did it.
- Deborah Patterson: He was my big champion, I will say that. Vince Schoemehl took a huge chance on me, a huge chance.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you ever ask him why?
- Deborah Patterson: I did ask him why, and he said that he could tell that I was smart, that I was ambitious, and that I would get it done. He knew I would get it done. And so, after the Employment and Training Agency, he then said, "Now you fix the Community Development Agency." So they had lay-offs. So morale was low; people were coming and going whenever they wanted to. So he handed that one to me, too. So I had the honor of heading two agencies.
- Blanche Touhill: At the same time?
- Deborah Patterson: At the same time. But I had such support. I had support from Vince, but I had support from all of the—and it was mostly women that worked for me. They always, always supported me as I supported them. It was just fabulous, and, in fact, we still gather a few times a year and we're called "The Girls." So "The Girls" get together, and it was just a phenomenal point in time for all of us, for all of us.
- Blanche Touhill: And then what happened?
- Deborah Patterson: And then, Vince got enamored with running for governor.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I remember that.

Deborah Patterson: And also, to me, the administration was more concerned with how would the newspaper cover something than actually getting things done. And that really bothered me. It bothered me a lot, and so I started to say, "So, I should look for something else to do." But whatever I was going to do, I wanted to be close to the leader. I didn't want to be six levels below; I want to be close to the decision-makers. So I got a call from a headhunter that was trying to fill an emergency services position at the Red Cross.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I remember that.

Deborah Patterson: Yeah, and so he was telling me all the people he was talking to and this, and I said, "I'm better than any of them." He said, "Really?" I said, "Really." So I went to interview for the...

Blanche Touhill: But you knew them?

Deborah Patterson: I knew them! I knew them, and it was the truth. I speak the truth, Blanche. And I said—I went to see Bill Miller, and I said, "I want to run my own organization," and he said, "If you come to the Red Cross, that opportunity will come your way." Because the Red Cross had one African American leading a chapter at that point in time, and maybe they had, maybe, a handful of women. So he said, "If you come, that will happen for you." And it did and I ended up leading the chapter here in St. Louis, but there was a position in San Francisco; there were positions across the country, but I ended up staying here, which was really nice, but I wanted to be in charge. I wanted to lead and develop the strategy and the vision and everything. I wanted to have that opportunity.

Blanche Touhill: But, you know, I've always looked at that organization, and I've always thought those are really hard jobs.

Deborah Patterson: Running a non-profit?

Blanche Touhill: No, I mean, I should rephrase that: whoever runs the Red Cross, it's a hard job.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, I think running the Red Cross at the national level is a very difficult job because it was a franchise model, but there was confusion about who was in charge. So there was always that tension with national and the chapters. I think they've resolved a lot of that right now, especially

around fundraising, but I loved my work at the Red Cross. I did. I had never worked with a board, but I thought of them like the board of aldermen [laughter], so I've made that transition. But that was new for me, and I'd never overseen a full strategy for a whole organization, but I thought, "I oversaw a strategy for a department," so it was more—different kind of accountability. I think you have to learn how to be a CEO. I think the vision thing is maybe the hardest, and to enroll people in your vision. So an operations person doesn't necessarily do that, but that's what the CEO's job is. So I had to learn to do that.

Blanche Touhill: But that's a worthwhile thing to learn.

Deborah Patterson: It was wonderful and I've been on disaster assignments.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, have you?

Deborah Patterson: I have, and...

Blanche Touhill: Did you do that purposely?

Deborah Patterson: Yes, yes, and I was on one disaster, and I served—was it Hurricane Hugo?—and I served in South Carolina?—yes, South Carolina, and I had never met people that couldn't read. And I was the only person of color, only social worker, intake worker, person of color, so my line was long, because the people didn't want them to know they couldn't read. And I had never been in a trailer. It was an eye-opening experience for me: in America, there are people that can't read; in America, there are people that still have outdoor plumbing; in America, there are still people that live in trailers that can be blown away. It was just—I couldn't talk about it without crying, but I loved working for the Red Cross.

Blanche Touhill: Does the Red Cross work? I mean, does it serve the people?

Deborah Patterson: I think the Red Cross serves the people. I think, because they're best known for disaster and not the other services, that people forget about the Red Cross until there is a disaster.

Blanche Touhill: What if they've been helped? Do they always remember the Red Cross?

Deborah Patterson: They do. They absolutely do. Once someone's been helped by the Red Cross, we will get letters from people, and they might send us \$10, but they will talk about how they were helped by the Red Cross. So it was

great, the mission's great. I think I'm a mission-driven kind of person [laughter].

Blanche Touhill: Well, and it was following your mother's example, too.

Deborah Patterson: Yes. You know, Blanche, I've been in the caring about people, being in service. I was in service when I was in city government. We built housing, a lot of affordable housing. We did grocery stores where there were no grocery stores. We did a lot of good all in the service of people, community, and then that carried on through my work at the Red Cross, from disaster services to homeless services to adult daycare services, which we added while I was at the Red Cross.

Blanche Touhill: You know, actually, the Red Cross took over—they went into that adult daycare early?

Deborah Patterson: We did. We went into adult daycare early because there was one here in campus, too.

Blanche Touhill: There was one here, and I think we were one of the first in this area, but then the Red Cross did come in later, as did the Salvation Army.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, yes, but it was a huge need.

Blanche Touhill: Before people were aware that there were these adults that needed, like children, daycare. There are adults that needed daycare.

Deborah Patterson: Right, so their children could work, yes, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: As you did this, what did your parents think?

Deborah Patterson: Well, I remember the first time I was picketed in city government, and I called my mother, and she said, "Do you need me?" [laughter] "Do you need me to come down?" [laughter]

Blanche Touhill: She was ready.

Deborah Patterson: She was ready. I said, "I think I'll be okay," but she's like, "Do you need..." But they are so proud of me, not just my mother and my father and my sister, but all my family, they're very proud of me. The University of Missouri has a campaign where they feature their—I guess, their prominent alums, and my phone was ringing off the hook. My mother

said, "You're on Highway 70! You're on Highway 70!" I said, "What? I'm on Highway 70?" "It's big! It's big!" [laughter] It's a big picture!

Blanche Touhill: So you were one of the billboards!

Deborah Patterson: Right, I was one of the—"It's a big picture of you on Highway 70!"

Blanche Touhill: That was a great campaign.

Deborah Patterson: A great campaign, and so they're just so—she said, "You didn't call me and tell me you were going to be..." I said, "I didn't know when, and I didn't know..." But she was so excited, as were her friends, so it's really special.

Blanche Touhill: Then you left the Red Cross?

Deborah Patterson: Then I left the—Well, here's what happened: While I was at the Red Cross, we had the floods.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. '93 or something?

Deborah Patterson: Yeah, maybe it was '93, we had the floods. I met all of the Monsanto leadership. I met Mahoney; I met the guys that ran the ad company. I met all of them during the floods of '93. They wanted to do a rural relief program because the flood had affected the seven states that were agricultural states. And so I worked with them on this rural relief program; they raised money from their competitors for this. And then I asked if we could have a representative from Monsanto go on the Red Cross board. So we had the Senior Vice President of Human Resources on our board, and she recruited me away from the Red Cross.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. It makes sense.

Deborah Patterson: That's how I ended up at Monsanto. It was something new.

Blanche Touhill: But you went to run the foundation on day one?

Deborah Patterson: No...

Blanche Touhill: No!

Deborah Patterson: No, I went to Monsanto, and my job was kind of not yet defined. I reported in to the vice chairman, to Nick Redding, and I worked on a lot

of their social responsibility work, and then about 18 months later, John Mason retired, and they said, "Here you go."

Blanche Touhill: Oh! Oh.

Deborah Patterson: So I don't know if that was the design. I don't know if they had...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, they had you learning.

Deborah Patterson: Learning, and then when John retired, I went over to the foundation in January of '99.

Blanche Touhill: I didn't realize you took John's place.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, I was John's successor. He did a lot of good work.

Blanche Touhill: He did a lot of good work, yes, he did.

Deborah Patterson: He did.

Blanche Touhill: And I guess he retired early, didn't he? Not too early; he was older than he looked.

Deborah Patterson: I think he may have been—I think John was, like, 62 or 63, something like that.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, yeah, and he had been there for years and years?

Deborah Patterson: He had been there. Now, I don't know, John was a chemist...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I knew that.

Deborah Patterson: So, he had been at Monsanto a long time before he came to the foundation.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. So he was really a bench chemist and then became an administrator?

Deborah Patterson: Yes, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Well, have you had fun?

Deborah Patterson: I have had a ball. Well, and I continue to have a ball because things keep changing. I don't want to say I bore easily, but I like some change, and so when I came to Monsanto, we were a conglomeration of a lot of different

companies. We have been almost acquired; we have been acquired; we have been spun off. The foundation has changed as the company has changed. When I came, we weren't doing any international giving. Today, we give around the world. We went through...

Blanche Touhill: Well, you became a different company.

Deborah Patterson: We became a different company, you're exactly...

Blanche Touhill: You went from being a chemical company to being...

Deborah Patterson: ...a chemical/pharmaceutical/biogums, everything, to being an ag company. And so the founda—and being more global.

Blanche Touhill: So the foundation had to change as the company changed?

Deborah Patterson: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And you were able to make those changes. How long have you been in that job?

Deborah Patterson: I have been in this job since January of 1999.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. That's wonderful.

Deborah Patterson: It is wonderful. It's wonderful, and I feel supported. I feel supported by leadership, so it's really nice. I talk to some of my other colleagues, and they'll say, "Oh, the executives want us to do this and executives want..." I said, "It usually ends up with me, people. Go to the executives and they just say, 'Well, we have a process. You have to talk to Deborah.'"

Blanche Touhill: [laughter] It's true. It's true.

Deborah Patterson: Which is really nice. And it's really respectful.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, so they don't go around you.

Deborah Patterson: They don't go around me, which is very respectful.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, but then you communicate with them?

Deborah Patterson: Oh, absolutely, I communicate with them.

Blanche Touhill: I mean, they know what you're doing, and they approve of that.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, yes, absolutely, they approve. Well, here's the thing: At Monsanto, we have an executive team. I think there's either 12 or 13 people. Well, right now, 4 of them serve on the fund board. The president of the company was the president of the foundation board, and so I would say probably at least half of those people have been on the board of the foundation.

Blanche Touhill: So they understand?

Deborah Patterson: So they understand. As new people come on, they come on the foundation board. So we have a lot of advocates for our work, and it keeps me connected to what is going on in the business.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you know, when you talk about your mother feeding the neighborhood, and then your work with the city where you provided housing—really, Monsanto feeds the world.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, it's true. It's true. It is great to work for a company where the work they do is important to humanity, yeah. So it aligns with my values. It absolutely does. I can get behind it; I can work however much I need to work to get it done because I believe.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. You get up in the morning, and you say, "I'm going to do something good today."

Deborah Patterson: Absolutely, I believe in the company. I believe in what we do.

Blanche Touhill: Do you travel around the world?

Deborah Patterson: Well, you know, I used to travel more, but not as much as I used to because I have teenagers. But yes, I have been to a ton of interesting places and met some incredible people: India, Africa—oh, my goodness, I went to the northwest of Argentina, the northwestern part of Argentina, where many of our migrant workers live. Oh, my goodness, Blanche, people live in thatched housing, huts, thatched. And they get this worm called Chagas, and they get it from their roof. They lives [sic] in the straw. People have no idea how other people survive, how they live. I had the best time in this community. It was just—people were warm; they were lovely; they were welcoming; they were appreciative.

Blanche Touhill: Were you able to help them?

Deborah Patterson: Yes, we renovated the school and the hospital. Yeah, but it took two days in a car to get there but it was—it's amazing, people are—they weren't sad. "My conditions are tough," but they weren't sad; they were positive.

Blanche Touhill: Let me change the subject for just a bit: You're a member of the International Women's Forum?

Deborah Patterson: I have been a member of the International Women's Forum since 1992.

Blanche Touhill: So you were one of the earliest members in St. Louis.

Deborah Patterson: I was one of the early members, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And how has it proven?

Deborah Patterson: So, it has been fantastic. So when I became CEO of the Red Cross—I think that was about 1992—I had not been the CEO of a nonprofit. But there were people within IWF that had been CEOs of nonprofits, so I could talk to Marylen Mann, who started...

Blanche Touhill: OASIS.

Deborah Patterson: ...who started OASIS, about nonprofits, boards of directors, so it was a resource. I had never raised money. I was managing federal grants. I had never raised money, but I could talk to Donna Wilkinson about raising money. When I transitioned to Monsanto, I hadn't done foundation work or community relations work, but I could talk to Toni Bailey; I could talk to JoBeth Brown. I had never done a strategic plan all by myself. When I worked for the city, we had a small part, but I could call Dee Joyner, who was head of planning for St. Louis County, just tremendous resources—and I called you when my daughter was having trouble with math. I said, "Blanche, what should I do?" So the IWF has just been wonderful in terms of resources. People will help you. All you have to do is ask.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you learn that?

Deborah Patterson: That they will help you?

Blanche Touhill: That all you have to do is ask?

Deborah Patterson: I don't know where I learned that. I felt that. I don't know that I learned it.

Blanche Touhill: And it proved correct?

Deborah Patterson: And it proved correct. I felt that. The group was warm and welcoming, and I felt that. And today I'm on the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. I met Emmy Pulitzer through IWF. I'm just thinking of all the people that have, in some way, helped me. And, likewise, if someone calls me, I'm just like, "So, of course! Absolutely." And it's easy. Here's the other thing about IWF: it's easy.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it is.

Deborah Patterson: It's easy. So I've been in women's groups where they take attendance. You have to wear a certain color clothing for certain occasions, and then, there's a lot of rituals. So that kind of isn't me. I like the flexibility of IWF. People understand that everyone is busy, and if you can come, come. Give what you can of yourself. They know that when I got children, that my life changed and that my life will change again. So I really appreciate that understanding and support from an organization.

Blanche Touhill: If you had any—I know you've had a lot of awards. If there was any award or awards that you really thought were special...

Deborah Patterson: So, I would say my first award was a management award from the Red Cross. Tiffany—it's called the Tiffany Award, and I got it in management, and I thought, "Oh, my goodness, I've been legitimized," because I didn't go to school (then?) [0:51:17] be a manager. Everything I learned, I learned on the job. So I felt like I had been validated as a manager. And then last year, I was in the top 10% of managers at Monsanto.

Blanche Touhill: So, at the beginning and then 20 or 25 years later?

Deborah Patterson: Yes, so that means a lot to me because people mean a lot to me. And I want people to feel like I treat them well, I respect them and my role is to advocate for you, and so I think all those good management kinds of things are—they're very important to me.

Blanche Touhill: If you were born 50 years earlier, what would your life have been like?

Deborah Patterson: I would have been born in 1900. I can only think about my grandmother that was born in 1896, and my grandmother went to college, my father's mother.

Blanche Touhill: So you probably would have gone to college?

Deborah Patterson: I probably would have gone to college because I believe that I have the drive and ambition. I will tell you that at nine years old, I decided I wouldn't have children without a husband because I saw all these women that lived next door to us that my mother was feeding their children. I thought this is not something that I would do, that I want more than this, and reading helped me understand that I could get more than this.

Blanche Touhill: So it was the experience of your childhood...

Deborah Patterson: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: ...that you knew you would do more. So you're really saying, "If I had been born 50 years earlier, I would've gone to college and I would've been active"?

Deborah Patterson: Absolutely, and I probably would've been doing something similar. I don't know if I would've been part of some movement or something, but I know I would've done something to help people. There's no doubt in my mind, and I am ambitious, in all honesty.

Blanche Touhill: And that came from your childhood, too?

Deborah Patterson: And that came from my childhood, too. And I think there was a question about the women's movement, and how did the women's movement impact your life, and to me, I feel like it gave me permission to be ambitious, that it was okay if I didn't have a family. I could have a family whenever I wanted to have a family. And that that was okay.

Blanche Touhill: And that opportunities would come, and you would take advantage of them.

Deborah Patterson: And I would be all over them [laughter].

Blanche Touhill: I know you have two daughters, and that was another challenge in your life, wasn't it?

Deborah Patterson: Yes. In fact, I've had a lot of jobs but the hardest one has been being a parent. Because you love so much and you want—as I talked about my parents, you want more; you want the best for your children, and sometimes it looks like they're not going to follow your lead, but they do. They end up with a good foundation and good values, but it is a scary

thing, being a parent. I don't know what I thought; I don't know that I thought it would be easy; I just didn't know it would be so hard, but it is hard. It is hard to care so much about other human beings and them being successful in life.

Blanche Touhill: Of fulfilling their potential.

Deborah Patterson: Yes, in fulfilling their potential, and I didn't think I would be a parent, but at 42, I thought, I have enough stuff, and stuff won't do it for me anymore. I can't—you know, another pair of shoes or another coat, another anything, so I decided I would try parenthood, and it is rewarding, but it is hard.

Blanche Touhill: People have told me that the older the child gets, the more you worry about [inaudible 0:56:29].

Deborah Patterson: I think that's true because the trouble gets bigger, and the possibility of trouble that you don't recover from for a very long time. So that is a challenge with getting older, whereas if you're five or ten or twelve, but when you get to sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, that kind of trouble can be life-changing, put you on a very different trajectory than what was planned.

Blanche Touhill: What area are they interested in?

Deborah Patterson: So, this is interesting: My oldest daughter just graduated from high school. She is interested in helping people, too [laughter]. She is.

Blanche Touhill: How does she display that?

Deborah Patterson: So, she has a very good friend whose sister is developmentally disabled. She babysits for the parents. When her friend can't babysit, she goes out, and she babysits for them, and so she thinks she wants to major in special education and/or behavioral psychology to help children with developmental disabilities. So, once again, caring...

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it's the helping.

Deborah Patterson: ...it's the helping. I'm not sure my other one—she'll be 16 Saturday, and she's thinking she wants to be an attorney, and I think she could probably do that. I think she could be a really good litigator [laughter].

Blanche Touhill: So she's the one that has the arguments?

- Deborah Patterson: Oh, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Not bad. By argument, I mean a legal argument. She'll tell you why she wants to do something.
- Deborah Patterson: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. It is...
- Blanche Touhill: And does she write?
- Deborah Patterson: She writes. She likes to write. She has a very good memory, and she is very...
- Blanche Touhill: She's quick on her feet.
- Deborah Patterson: She is, especially with me. Yes, and I have to sometimes say, "You're right." [laughter] "You got me; you're right."
- Blanche Touhill: So you're the judge?
- Deborah Patterson: So I'm the judge, but when they're right, you need to let them know that they're right, and that you're wrong and you don't know everything.
- Blanche Touhill: How did you handle their development when you worked?
- Deborah Patterson: So I was really fortunate in that I've had someone help me since Sierra was six months old, and Maria's come to my house since she was six months old, and she still comes to my house. And they're teenagers, and she still comes. So she's like their grandmother.
- Blanche Touhill: She's like a nanny.
- Deborah Patterson: She's like their grandmother.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, she's like a grandmother.
- Deborah Patterson: Yeah, because it's been...
- Blanche Touhill: She straightens them out, too?
- Deborah Patterson: She'll straighten them out, too. I feel like I've been so fortunate because I would say, in 15½ years she's probably not been there when she had knee surgery, and other than that, she's been right there with me, helping me the whole way. So from that perspective, I've been really fortunate, and then I have a very supportive family, very supportive.

Blanche Touhill: So your parents still help out?

Deborah Patterson: Yeah, my parents would help; my sister; my cousins. Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So let's sort of end this with your graduation speech at UMSL two or three years ago.

Deborah Patterson: Yes. I was asked to do the commencement address, and I thought they made a mistake. I said, "Really? Me?" And he said, "Yes, you!" and they asked me to talk about the changes that were going on in the world and the role of technology. So I did, and it was such an honor. It was just an incredible honor for me. Here I am, a working class girl—yeah, working class family and paid our way through the university, and here I am today, giving the commencement address. Oh, my goodness! I felt like I have arrived. Nothing else said it to me more than giving that commencement address. And then I looked out at all of those students, and the different nationalities, and their families, and they were so excited because they were like me, first generation to finish college, and I was just blown away. I was blown away.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I'm sure the university picked you personally, and I'm sure they were just delighted with your speech, and I hope you've left your speech in the archives, either here or in the Mercantile Library.

Deborah Patterson: I have no idea where my speech is.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I think if you—I'm just saying, I know the university would love to have your speech.

Deborah Patterson: Well, I gave it to them.

Blanche Touhill: Okay.

Deborah Patterson: I gave it to them, Blanche, but yeah. And so it was just...

Blanche Touhill: And did your daughters come?

Deborah Patterson: My daughters came, and they were very proud of me. They are very proud of me, they really are.

Blanche Touhill: Well, just as your mother was your role model, I think you're their role model.

Deborah Patterson 6-15-2014

Deborah Patterson: Yes, and, in fact, my 18-year-old said to me the other day, "I have listened to you. Believe it or not, Mom, I have listened to you." I said, "Okay, great."

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much for such a pleasant hour.

Deborah Patterson: It's been an honor and a privilege, Blanche.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you.

Deborah Patterson: You're welcome.