

An Interview with
Susan E. Block

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
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interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill
transcribed by Valerie Leri and edited by
Josephine Sporleder



Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 116

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PREFACE

The interview was taped 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
WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

NOVEMBER 4, 2016

SUSAN E. BLOCK INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL

Susan Block: I am an attorney. I practice with the law firm of Paul Kamazine and Blumenthal and I formerly served as a judge in the State of Missouri for a quarter of a century.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your youth: your parents; your siblings. Did you play with dolls when you were young? Did you play a free spirit? Did you play with boys and girls or just girls? Just talk about your youth, and I'm particularly interested in who encouraged you to be what you wanted to be.

Susan Block: Okay. Well, I remember my youth as a very happy time, lived in a small town outside of Pittsburgh so you could roam around the town very easily. People weren't afraid to let their kids play outside, take walks in the neighborhood, a town under 20,000, for sure. My parents had a store so different people knew me and I couldn't get in too much trouble because people would tell my parents. But I had a mom and a dad and my dad's store was in Ambridge, Pennsylvania which was the town I grew up in, home of the American Bridge Company. I had a sister who was two years older than me. We actually were in companion gangs. She was in the girls and I was in the boys so because we had two girls in the family, somehow I became my father's son and he really was the big influence in my life and it was at a relatively early age that he started to tell me about women judges in Pittsburgh and he walked me by the law office of a sole practitioner in our town...I can't remember what her last name was but I'm going to say Genevieve was her first name, I remember that because it was unusual and we had a store around the corner and he said, "You could be a lawyer like her," and I really didn't pay too much attention to what he was saying. I wasn't even sure really what a lawyer did. I kind of knew what a judge did. There was some kind of program on TV, I don't remember who the actor was, but he played a juvenile court judge and I was actually really fascinated with his trying to help young kids who had

problems and made some bad decisions, or in those days we would say were troubled. So, it was really very early on that I had exposure to this idea of being a juvenile court judge which is really how my judicial career ended. So, it's really interesting. But as far as playing though, no dolls, although I do remember having a boy doll I liked but mostly I played with this gang of boys that were older than me and we played a lot of war and I was relegated to delivering the water. I don't know if you could say that that is consistent with making coffee, but they did send me for water a lot and we all had canteens and we spent a lot of time hiding behind hills for fear of being attacked by, I guess, these other boys. I even have a picture of me before puberty where I am standing with a group of boys without a shirt on and I think at some point I may have cut that part out but I do remember seeing it at one time and my parents had a men's and boys' clothing store so I don't know that I was cross-dressing but it was a really convenient way to get t-shirts and jeans and you could pretty much wear the same sizes so I didn't have to argue with anybody about, could I have this or that because there was in the store.

Blanche Touhill: When you went to grade school and high school, was that in the small town too?

Susan Block: Yes, it was, uh-huh.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a teacher that said to you-you have ability and you can do what you want to do, or did you have a religious leader or somebody?

Susan Block: I really do feel like, in our school, the message was going out that girls could be teachers or nurses and boys would be engineers or maybe accountants or business people. There were very few Jewish kids in my school and I was brought up in the Jewish faith and tradition and education was very, very important. Neither of my parents went further than high school and my father liked to tell the story he went to the "school of hard knocks" when people were talking about college. He was very smart but they were poor and he didn't have that chance. It was very important to my dad that both my sister and I went to college. Of course, we had disagreements about where we would go. I wanted to go to some fancy school and he wanted my sister and I to go to Penn State and we both ended up at Penn State.

Blanche Touhill: But that's' a wonderful school.

Susan Block: Well, you know, actually, I kind of went with a little chip on my shoulder thinking that I was smarter than those kids and I wasn't a rah-rah kind of kid. I didn't want to go to football games and stuff. It was very pretty, I will say that; it's a lovely school. But that wasn't a comfortable time in my maturation. It was too social. I tried a sorority. I didn't like that but towards the end of my college, I sort of found myself with the ad-hoc committee and we were protesting the war and there were probably 12 of us on a campus of at least 20 to 40,000 and if my parents, if my father, particularly, would have known I was doing that, he would have just...as the expression goes...cut me off because he was a very proud war veteran. But, yeah, it wasn't until the end that I really did find myself. But other influences came from...I was active in an organization called "The Nebreth Youth" ..."Nebreth Girls" was the girls part.

Blanche Touhill: And what age was that?

Susan Block: Thirteen.

Blanche Touhill: So, when you were beginning high school...

Susan Block: Maybe 8th grade. We had junior high and high school. There wasn't any middle school, were all the same building but the junior high was over here, and the regular school was over here. My sister was a really good and quiet student and I wasn't. I was a good student, but I was kind of a trouble-maker early on. I think I was bored, looking back on it. I spent a lot of time writing notes to boys and still in touch with some of them, it's funny...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, isn't it?

Susan Block: Yeah, maintain your friends 50, 60 years later. I did fine. I think I got A's and B's, but I really wasn't...I didn't care about being the top student. I really liked having a good time and I was smart enough to get A's and B's but there was sort of a halo effect because of my sister because she was so good, and I do think that there was somewhat of a prejudice that was a positive bias, that if you were Jewish, you were expected to be a good student.

Blanche Touhill: Well, the Jewish people did treasure education.

Susan Block: Yes, but my parents were never helicopter parents. They had their job and I had my job and nobody was on me and then, of course, they didn't have to be.

Blanche Touhill: They had that expectation?

Susan Block: Yeah, and that was, I think, the reason why I really didn't get into any serious trouble or do anything that would bring shame to the family, was that I actually worked in the store side-by-side with my dad.

Blanche Touhill: What did you learn from that?

Susan Block: You know, actually, I just wrote a little story about it for the lawyer magazine. I do a little writing for them BAMS and you know that book, *Everything You Learn, You Learn in Kindergarten*, well, everything I learned I probably learned at Charlie's Men's Store because I started working there when I was about 12, folding boxes. They were these flat pieces of cardboard and you put the corners together and then you put a red rubber band around them and then when they were as tall as you were, which was...I wasn't that tall, still not...then I said, "Dad, I'm done," and then he either gave you some more or he gave you another job. So, I worked my way up from boxes to actually managing the store by the time I was 16. And my parents would go on vacation and they would leave me with the keys to the store. They did not treat my sister in the same way. My sister was, like, she needed a tutor in geometry or she had a boyfriend and she was going somewhere so I was the responsible one, very, very early on and I complained about it at the time but looking back on it, I think having that level of responsibility kind of made me step up to the plate. I had to do it. My parents were in Cuba at one time. This is before you could even make a call to Cuba and I had to make the decisions about buyers that called up and said my dad owed this bill or somebody that came in that wanted a special size of something. So, to this day, I can still size guys up pretty well. I can look at somebody and say, "You have a 15 neck, a 32 sleeve, a 34 waist, 30 legs," and they look at me. They think I am crazy. I've had more fun with that. So, you should always say smaller, a little smaller size if you want to ere.

Blanche Touhill: Were you in charge of your sister too?

Susan Block: No, I really wasn't. We were pretty independent. When I was little, she had to take me with her if she went to a friend's house and then they just

kind of put me in the adjoining room and I'd just go through whoever's stuff it was and just sort of do my own little historic research and they didn't care as long as I didn't make any noise. I didn't tell my parents and that was it. So, yeah, we had that kind of thing. We always had a housekeeper because my mom had her own store down the road. So, I did see a woman, a very capable woman at work...

Blanche Touhill: Managing?

Susan Block: Not only did she manage the store, she managed the home. My mother did not do a thing at home and she managed their social life and she drove and he didn't, and we really don't know the true story behind that. There was a story, a family legend that he was in an accident and he was afraid and what's interesting is that I did not drive until I was 26 and I do think it came from, somewhere along the line when we were 16, I wanted to do Driver's Ed and my father said, "No, you're not driving..."...it was a car that we used for our business too, so we weren't allowed to drive that car and neither my sister or I are, even to this day, what I would call confident drivers. We get where we need to get but none of us is driving across the state.

Blanche Touhill: What happened to your sister?

Susan Block: My sister ended up teaching. She was a substitute first and then she...with my dad's help, financial and emotional, went back to get a Master's Degree and then she taught English as a second language in New Jersey and she would go from school to school teaching the kids that were immigrants probably, were immigrant families and she did that for a while and then she retired and now she lives in New Jersey and she's retired.

Blanche Touhill: Are you close?

Susan Block: You know, we are sisters but she's not a person that I would go to for advice or if I had a problem, but I care about her.

Blanche Touhill: But you're bound together by your...

Susan Block: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: ...by your memories.

Susan Block: Yeah, and we sort of count on each other sometimes to see who's got the right facts about the story, but she also worked in the store, although from my perspective, she got out of a lot of work because she had to get her hair done for the date and get a new outfit and I was kind of like...but then I went out of town a lot for these Nebreth conventions and she really wasn't active in that. So, we were driven and motivated by different things but what I was going to say about people who inspired me, was, we had an advisor for the local chapter of the BBG, we called it, and then we had a regional director. So, I kind of moved up to leadership rank and I actually ended up being a district president, so I was president of four states: Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey and West Virginia.

Blanche Touhill: And did you travel?

Susan Block: I did. I actually had \$1000 travel budget and I would fly on Allegheny Airlines to these different places and either give a speech or meet with people about maybe problems they were having with their chapter or about membership recruitment or programming. So, it was a very, very early leadership experience and it's interesting because I have a granddaughter now who's doing the same thing and I know her mother, who's my daughter, couldn't have been less interested and for her, it's her whole life. It's a very rewarding thing to see that kind of passed on.

Blanche Touhill: How long did that last in your life?

Susan Block: Until I graduated high school.

Blanche Touhill: So, it was really about four or five years?

Susan Block: Yeah, I would be so tired from the weekends away. I missed about 10 Mondays and finally got called into the principal's office. They said, "You're not going to graduate if you keep missing these Mondays" and I was kind of like, "Okay," so I just made myself get up, but I was exhausted. And then as a result of my actions, I applied for a scholarship and I was a recipient of...maybe there were a dozen kids that got them across the United States, and I got to go to Israel.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, at what age?

Susan Block: Sixteen.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Susan Block: And I was the first one in my family to do that. And then later, my second daughter did the same thing, not under the same auspices...and then she ended up actually living in Israel for 10 years, so it was hard for me to complain that she had done that when I was the one that got it started. But I met her relatives over there and I spent a weekend with some of her relatives that spoke no English, with my Hebrew-English dictionary, trying to come up with different words. So, I really got kind of a travel bug. That was the beginning of my real interest in travel and appreciating that there was another world out there.

Blanche Touhill: But, you know, your travel around the United States probably helped you to go overseas.

Susan Block: Yeah, I think it did. Later, when I was in college, I actually spent a quarter in Cologne, Germany, and my parents were, of course, furious with me going to Germany but that was the language that I studied and I studied that language because I was under the mistaken impression that if I studied German, that I could pick up Yiddish and my grandmother would talk to me but she wouldn't talk to me anyhow because I was a kid and she didn't believe kids should talk. So, my journey was for naught, but it was a really interesting experience because, of course, I took little side trips to France and Amsterdam and Switzerland and it was great.

Blanche Touhill: So, you did have a world view before you graduated from college.

Susan Block: Absolutely, yeah, and in fact, I think that that was partly what made college different for me and difficult for me, was that it seemed so parochial, like going to these football games or "Rush" for women which was...and probably still is...racist and...

Blanche Touhill: Yes. I hope not but I suspect it is.

Susan Block: ...very surface. So, one of my experiences I had at Penn State actually, I just reconnected with the only African American woman who was ever nominated for Miss Penn State and she's a real estate agent in Philadelphia and I finally found her on Facebook and it was great. We had a great talk. She doesn't remember the experience that we had when we were sent out to student teach...oh, I forgot to say...so my father was big on me being a lawyer but first I had to be a teacher.

Blanche Touhill: So that you could always support yourself?

- Susan Block: Right, I'd have something to fall back on when my husband died.
- Blanche Touhill: That's right.
- Susan Block: And I didn't even have a boyfriend, so it wasn't very appealing, the idea of meeting someone and they were just going to die anyhow. So, I went along with it because he was paying for it and when I worked in the store, I never got paid. You asked for money and if it was reasonable, you got it. But, no, I didn't have a Social Security record from back then, neither did my mother because my father didn't want to pay...
- Blanche Touhill: ...to Social Security.
- Susan Block: ...Social Security for her, which later...
- Blanche Touhill: ...was important.
- Susan Block: Yeah. But she made it up because she worked later too. Yeah, she was pretty much...I don't know if it's the word "controlled" but my father made the decisions. She was sort of the work horse and he sort of...we used to say, "he set up the pins and she knocked them down." She was a very, very good salesperson. She had great people skills. When I ran for office, both my mom and dad came up here to help me with my kids. I shouldn't say that...my mom helped me with my kids. My father tagged along to any meeting I went to and when my mother asked if she could go to one of those meetings, he basically said, "No, that's what I'm here for." He was a highbred feminist I guess we could say...
- Blanche Touhill: You could be the feminist.
- Susan Block: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: But she had a role.
- Susan Block: She did, except that he did want her to work and he would be the first person to say that her store did better than his store. It was also in a better town. There were less immigrants, the people were...they were easier to sell to. The immigrants were a little bit more..."I don't know, is this a good deal?"
- Blanche Touhill: What happened when you went out to student teach?

Susan Block: So, when I went out to student teach, we were given a list of places we could stay, and they said two boys and two girls and Julie was the girl that was sent with me and she was the African American president of the Women's Students Association. She was very glamorous...and still is, and so we went to the list, and the boys found a place just like that and the first time we went to the home...we had three homes. The first home was, they said, "Oh, we didn't think that you guys would be so big," and Julie was taller than me, although probably not heavier and they said, "I think we'll just take the little one." That was me. And so I said, "No, we're going to stay together." We went to the next place and they called down from the porch, "We changed our mind. We have some illness in the family" so we knew that...

Blanche Touhill: The first one had called the second.

Susan Block: The other one had called the second one. Then we went to the third one and it was an African American family but it was in the basement and there were throw rugs, but it was basically a dirt floor and I said to Julie, "It's fine" and Julie said, "I will not stay here," and that was the only conversation we ever had about it. We never got into the car and done what you would do today, you know, processing. We didn't do that, which we did just recently when we reconnected and she's like, "Oh, you know, I don't even remember all of that stuff." I said, "Well, do you remember what happened?" She said, "Yeah, I remember that you found this family for us that was very wealthy and the woman was on the school board..." ...because I was going around, anybody who would be in my path I would say, "Do you know what happened?" I would tell them my story and I was telling it to this woman I knew, and she said, "My roommate is from that school district. In fact, her mother is on the school board" and I said, "Oh, yeah, well, you can tell her..." ...blah, blah, blah, and the mother called that night and asked if Julie and I would stay with them and they just treated us royally and it made it a wonderful experience, actually took us into Pittsburgh. They lived in a...the goal of the student teaching program was that you went to another town and you had to learn how to be sort of on your own, so you couldn't do it in your own town.

Blanche Touhill: Was it a semester?

Susan Block: We had quarters there, so it was, like, I guess three months.

Blanche Touhill: Did you ever teach school?

Susan Block: I substitute taught when my husband... then husband was in the military. I substitute taught in San Antonio, Texas.

Blanche Touhill: So, you had a lifetime certificate?

Susan Block: I did, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And it was approved so you could go from state to state?

Susan Block: No, I think you had to re-apply to each state, so I never taught in Missouri. After I got married, I moved here. I went to work for the VA and I was so bored I thought I would die. We were willing out forms for the Korean War benefits and you didn't talk to people, you sat at your desk, you dictated to a phone. I mean, I was just drying up. Oh, I forgot to say that after college, I did go to law school.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that's what I'm going to ask.

Susan Block: So, my father...I then had this big fight because I wanted to be a social worker. He wanted me to be a lawyer and we were very close, and it really was a rift and, so we made a deal, we negotiated. He said if I went to law school one year and I didn't like it, then I could go to social work school.

Blanche Touhill: And he'd pay for it?

Susan Block: Yeah, and I thought, where could I go to law school and have a good time? So, I picked out GW in Washington, D.C. They had more women at that time than any other school that I knew about.

Blanche Touhill: What year was that?

Susan Block: 1965.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Susan Block: There were nine women out of nine hundred.

Blanche Touhill: I was going to say, when you said, "more women," I thought there won't be many in that class.

Susan Block: Right, and at the end of the year, what do you think happened? I got married. How could not get married? It was like, you know, shooting fish in a barrel, right, and I married a guy from St. Louis and that's how I got here.

Blanche Touhill: And he was a law student?

Susan Block: He was a law student but then he didn't finish his degree. He went back and he was in the middle of an MBA too, he was trying to get two degrees. So, he eventually became a CPA but then, when I was working at the VA, I got a call from him one day that said his draft status had been reclassified and then we went into a flurry of activity, of how to keep him from getting drafted and the best we could do was he could get into an officer's program for the Air Force but that didn't work out too well. To make a long story short, he served in the Air Force for two years and we lived in San Antonio. And I had that one year of law school at GW but while I worked for the VA, I just couldn't stand it, so I went at night to law school at SLU.

Blanche Touhill: So, St. Louis U?

Susan Block: Yeah, so I got a half a year there. So now, at the end of that time, before he went into the service, I now had a year-and-a-half.

Blanche Touhill: So, you're halfway through the program.

Susan Block: Right, but then when I came back, I was actually thinking at that time maybe I would be a doctor and then I looked at all the courses you'd have to take to get in and I went, oh...and then it was Vivian Eveloff who heads up the Sue Shearer Institute. She and I were working on campaigns and stuff and I was talking to her. She told me she was going to get a Master's in public administration. I said, "Well, you should go to law school if you're going to do that." She said, "I'm not interested in being a lawyer." She said, "Anyhow, how would you know?" I said, "Well, I'm a year-and-a-half of law school." She said, "Well, why don't you go back?" I said, "Who would take me? I have been out for six years." She said, "Well, why don't you call and find out." All my kids were asleep. I had three kids under the age of five at the time. They were all asleep, it was a miracle, so I called. Peter Salsage answered the phone, a lovely man. He was, I think, the head of Admissions. It was before...you know, pressed 1 for something. His secretary was gone so he answered her phone. He

readmitted me over the phone because he said, "You did fine," and I said, "Well, what about the...and I supposed to send \$10 to somebody?" He said, "No, you don't have to send \$10." He said, "What would be your plan? How long would it take you to finish?" I'm just calling because Vivian told me to call. I said, "What about two years?" and then I thought I would just go heavy part-time, which I did. So, then I went back in '73 with a huge amount of women starting to go to law school, huge meaning about a dozen. So, it was Sally Barker. She had already completed her first year...no, she was starting her first year and I was re-entering. Marilyn Titlebom, Maryanne Saday, Lisa Van Hamper, Ellen Watkins was a little bit ahead of us...Anna Forder, a little bit ahead of us, Karen Tokars, I think a first-year student. So, I had to take some first-year courses because they were required and then I took some other courses. I have no idea how I got through law school. Well, I do have a little bit of an idea: Doreen Dotson was in some of my classes and I would buy her books because she would highlight what all the issues were. She was a very, very good student and I really give her a lot of credit for my getting through law school.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's very helpful.

Susan Block: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Somebody has done it correctly.

Susan Block: That's right. So, I graduated with the exact number of credits you needed. I think I had to take a one-credit course over summer school and maybe, I think it was, Jesse...I can't think of what his last name is, but he let me take an independent study course too. So, with those two things, I was older. I was able to graduate with the class of '75.

Blanche Touhill: So, did you quit the VA then?

Susan Block: Oh, yeah...no, no, I had already left. We had lived in Chicago for a while because Russ was in the military, then he worked for Arthur Andersen and then when he came back here, that's when I had the three little kids. So, I was a stay-at-home mom at that time and within months of my coming back here, at a time when I was pregnant with my third child was when the Women's Political Caucus was formed and that was a tremendous, tremendous influence in my life. I really felt like I had found myself.

Blanche Touhill: And so, you ran for office, is my memory?

Susan Block: Well, first I was the first president of the Women's Political Caucus and then Sue Shearer ran in '72, Betty Van Uum in '74, Harriet Woods in '76. Nobody was running in '78 and I was standing in a traffic line with a lot of young guys in somebody's court waiting to tell the judge my announcement and he was about at least a half an hour late so I said to the guy standing next to me, I said...because I'm late a lot...I said, "I could do that job" and he laughed and then I kind of thought about that and I said, I wonder if I could do that job? So, I was working for a state representative, Murray Stowe part-time. He was one of the few people that would hire somebody part-time because he was going up to Jeff City part-time, so it was a good marriage. And I came back and told him, and he'd run in part of my district and he said, "Well, you're not going to win. You're running against somebody who's a 10-year incumbent and we're going to be mad at you if you do win because you won't be coming back here so either way we're going to be mad." So, then I started moving around and asking people to help me. Harriet helped me; Betty helped me; Murray helped me, and there was this whole army of campaign workers and they were ready to go on their next campaign and I was the candidate of '78. I should never have won.

Blanche Touhill: But you did.

Susan Block: But I won because after I filed, they put "Right to Work" on the ballot and my district was where MacDonnell Douglas, now Boeing was so they were told...and you could vote a straight ticket then...they were told, "Go in there, hit the Democratic lever and hit 'No' on 'Right to Work.'" And I'm sure that my efforts made some difference but running against the 10-year incumbent, I beat him 17,000, 16,000 so it was pretty surprising and that next morning, I was actually the "thought of the day" on KMOX at 6:55 A.M. Do you remember that?

Blanche Touhill: No.

Susan Block: If you set your alarm at 6:55 A.M., it came onto "the thought of the day" and I woke up the next day and they said history was made in St. Louis County and I was like, hey, I think they're talking about me. It was a minute, it was a minute of being a "thought of the day." I think I may have given that reel...I think it might be in the historic file.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful.

Susan Block: Yeah, I'll check and see. Whether you could even have anybody listen to that now, I don't know. But, yeah, I was kind of a...I would say the accidental judge and then as somebody said, "And then you stayed for 20 years," and I said, "No, 25." And it was just a wonderful...

Blanche Touhill: So, you were the second woman judge in St. Louis County?

Susan Block: I was because there was an appointment process for magistrates before it became non-partisan and we were associate circuit judges and Anne Niederlander got one of the two slots and I had known her because she was the lawyer for the Women's Political Caucus and I actually wanted to work for her. That was, like, my plan when I graduated, and I went to see Anne and Margaret and they said, "We don't have a job, we don't have enough business and we don't have an office" and then I was kind of like, where do I go? That was my plan. So I started going around and I did find a job. But, yeah, so Anne and I were very close. She was just a wonderful, wonderful mentor. We went to conferences together. We roomed together. I always like to say that she was doing sit-ups at about age 65 and I was counting for her from the bed. She was in great shape, biking through the park and...

Blanche Touhill: She made a graduation speech at UMSL one time.

Susan Block: It was *One Life: With Education Becomes Responsibility*. That was her speech. I know. There's certain things you don't forget.

Blanche Touhill: No. I remembered it too. Isn't that interesting?

Susan Block: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: How were your children at this time? Were they delighted that their mother was one of the first women judges?

Susan Block: Well, you know, I think looking back on it, I know that they're all proud of me but there is kind of a sweet story. We call it the "Jerry Block story." Jerry was about...he's a lawyer now...Jerry was about three or four at the time and I was working Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and he could never figure out because of that odd schedule, when I was going to be at work and he asked if I was going to work and he was upset that I was going and I said, "Well, when you grow up and you're a daddy," I said,

“you’ll have to work and your kids will miss you just like you’re going to miss me and I miss you, too.” He said, “Well, what will I be?” and I went through a whole list of things: plumber; cowboy; fireman; CPA, and then I said, “Or you could be a lawyer,” and he said, “Ick, that’s for girls.” So, as Jerry says, I have used that story in many settings. It used to be the story I always told sort of warm up an audience but it’s true. He’s not sure if it’s true. He still doesn’t believe to this day that I didn’t make it up, but you can’t make up stuff like that.

Blanche Touhill: And what happened to your other kids?

Susan Block: My oldest child is a social worker. She had to be because I couldn’t be, and she works with the Employment Assistance Program and she mostly works over the phone managing intensive mental health cases. My second child is a writer, which I like to write too so it’s fun. We enjoy each other’s writing. She actually wrote a play, made out of an anthology and she is the communications director of American Associates for [inaudible 36:21] University” and she worked out of New York but she got married about three years ago and they let her work remotely from Dallas and she writes their website and their manuals and gets to go to Israel a couple times a year for their board meetings and that feeds her love of Israel.

Blanche Touhill: And do you go back and forth to Israel?

Susan Block: I did. I used to go at least once a year, maybe twice.

Blanche Touhill: And has it changed over the years?

Susan Block: Oh, yeah, everybody smokes and has a cell phone and in sitting at a coffee shop, I don’t know how anybody makes a living and has a computer in front of them, very, very high tech, and you know, I adopted a child about 15 years ago...

Blanche Touhill: And it’s a boy?

Susan Block: ...he’s a boy, his name is Ben and he goes to Clayton High School. I thought he was going to be in the forensics program this weekend, but I guess he didn’t sign up in time. But he does not say that he wants to be a lawyer. He usually only wants to know how much money I make, and I tell him that’s an adult conversation. But he’s very interested any time

I'm talking about a case in general. He's very, very interested in it, but I don't know, it might skip a gender again. He may not be ready to jump forth.

Blanche Touhill: Were your mother and father proud of you?

Susan Block: Oh, beyond belief. My mom was campaigning for me in Dierbergs and you couldn't be squeezing a peach without my mother telling you to vote for me. Fortunately, my father was very proud that I was a lawyer. He actually came to town and sat through my first jury trial. I was nervous enough and there he was, and the other lawyer couldn't figure out who he was. We had an elevator at [inaudible 38:09] as she would get older and she did end up with Alzheimer's, but she always remembered that I was a judge. She would always tell everybody.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful.

Susan Block: And there's sort of a funny story about her: She had some kind of a problem with, I think, somebody they hired for a party and then they decided they didn't like him, they didn't want him. She was living in Florida at the time and she said, "So I want you to write him a letter. We want our deposit back," and she said, "Put it on your judge's stationary because I want him to know we mean business." So, ethics, that was not a part of my upbringing. So, I had to learn that later in the real world.

Blanche Touhill: So, did you really want to become a social worker?

Susan Block: I did and the perfect job for me was being the head of the juvenile court because you are part social worker, part judge. You have to get involved in all of that. I read thousands of psychological evaluations and it's partly how I came to adopt Ben, because how could you not? You see kids who don't have anything, and you want to try to help them. So, I loved that job. They practically had to pry me with a root canal out of there.

Blanche Touhill: I heard your story that when you were going campaigning, that Marsha Melitz had told you to go to certain houses...

Susan Block: Oh, Marsha Melitz was incredibly brilliant.

Blanche Touhill: Why don't you tell that story.

Susan Block: So, Marsha would study the voter lists, who voted in primaries, who voted in general elections and she came up with...because she is very bright, and she's got a scientific and analytical mind...she would come up with the doors that I should knock on and she had her hands full because she had three kids too and one of them had disabilities. But every Saturday morning, right as rain, she gave me maybe a dozen clipboards that had the streets and were notated which houses to knock on. You might think you should knock on that house but if Marsha ever caught you doing that, that was really a bad idea. And then if you were out in Chesterfield, you would be, like, walking for miles before you got to the next house she said you should knock on and you'd really want to say...it's 100 degrees outside...do I really need...you just better have that marked on and you had to write down what they said. So, I am incredibly indebted to Marsha and admire her so much. She has such discipline. She is so loyal. Actually, her birthday probably is next week...I don't know, November birthdays, they get caught in...I'm glad you mentioned her name. I'm going to call her.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you know, you went to law school with a group of women that really did make a mark in St. Louis.

Susan Block: Oh, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And was that because of the Women's Political Caucus?

Susan Block: Well, Maryanne Seday sort of came from the Knowell family. Karen Tokarz and Anna (Forder) came from being DJOs in the juvenile court so there were a variety of people. Lisa Van Amberg and I stuffed envelopes together in the days when one stuffed envelopes. So, I knew Lisa. Nancy Everett might have been in the Women's Political Caucus too, yeah, and Anne Niederlander came and talked to us because we were so hungry to hear about what would the lawyers do. It was tough in those first years, even being a judge. If I would come out into my courtroom without my robe, looking for some papers or something, inevitably a litigant, sometimes a lawyer would ask me if the judge were in.

Blanche Touhill: Did you tell them you were the judge, or you just said, "No"?

Susan Block: Sometimes, it depended. If wanted to have a little fun, and sometimes if I was down in the little lunch area because I have such a deep voice and its sort of, I think, unique to a woman and some big guy might turn around

and he'd say, "Are you the judge?" and I said, "So many people think that." I may have just sentenced him; I didn't really want to. And people used to mix Anne Niederlander and I up or if they didn't, we would mix them up. So, somebody might stop us in the grocery store and say, "My neighbor had a small claims case in front of you last week and I don't know what you were thinking. I mean, you ruled for the other party. Don't you know that the people did terrible work for her house?" Number one, I didn't remember for sure because you'd have about 20 cases, and I would say, "You know, I think that was probably Judge Niederlander. I don't think I had a docket last week" and she would have a little fun doing that too. It's sort of the way...I guess it was Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Sandra Day O'Connor used to have the t-shirts that say, "I'm the other one," or whatever, yeah. So, we did have a little fun doing that. But, you know, now things have changed and there's a panel right now that's before the governor with three women on it.

Blanche Touhill: Really?!

Susan Block: Yeah, and it's not the first time. They call it the "pink panel."

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Susan Block: Yeah, and they all would be fine judges. They have real different back grounds but they would all be fine judges. It used to be people would say, "Well, yeah, we would have a woman judge if we could find a qualified one." Well, you know...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course. There aren't any in the pipeline, that's right.

Susan Block: Right.

Blanche Touhill: There aren't any] of them.

Susan Block: So, and the governors, I think, have been great about it and I think they've done it for their own amelioration and they've done it because of the right thing.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. There was an attitude in the society in the '70s and the '80s that this was the right thing to do. Does that still exist?

Susan Block: You know, I think it's less about "it's the right thing to do" but that it's fee generating. That's, I think, the bottom dollar, is that there...somebody

called me the other day and said, "I want to get a woman lawyer for my son." Actually, the family was in Kansas, so I went online...he said, "Because I just think if she has a woman lawyer and he has a male lawyer and the judge is a woman..." ...and I wanted to say, "Really, it really doesn't make that much difference." I said, "I understand where you're coming from." So, we went online, and we picked two women. It was kind of a fun feeling.

Blanche Touhill: Let me change the subject a little bit. Talk about some of the awards you've gotten and maybe which one or ones you're really proud of.

Susan Block: Well, I've been really very humbled by the number of the awards. I think some of them came because I was serving in the family court and when you get to do that, you just...if you're breathing and if you're really interested, which I was...I never really wanted to go home. There was so much to do...you inevitably do good things. So, I would say the most prestigious award I got was the Andrew Jackson Higgins Excellence in Juvenile Justice Award by the Missouri Juvenile Justice Association. But one of my favorite awards is the Cool People Award and it was a t-shirt and a plaque, and I used to wear the t-shirt to sleep. I'm not sure where it is now, probably very soft by now...and it was given to me by the kids that were in transition, that were transitioning out of foster care through independent living and leaving the system and I spent a lot of time with them. I actually did a video on them for training purposes for the National and Judicial College because I thought that their stories were very compelling and that judges didn't really understand how they really wanted to stay in the system until they were, like, 23, because becoming 21, some of them weren't finished with...some of them had just really finished high school, late, and so they weren't finished with college. They didn't have the safety net of someone signing a lease with them or someone helping them buy their first car and I wanted to kind of champion for them to get more benefits, and actually it happened. It recently happened in the last maybe four or five years, that if you left the system...

Blanche Touhill: And you want to come back...

Susan Block: ...and you want to come back, they let you come back, which was great.

Blanche Touhill: What's the theme of your life?

Susan Block: Well, after we talked earlier a little bit about...that I thought about it and I guess I really wanted to make a difference in people's lives and then I was thinking, well, how did I go astray from being this social worker, I wanted to save the world when I was a social worker and I thought I could. We were driving on a vacation just recently in West Virginia, big billboards lawyers have, big billboards and this one billboard really struck me and it just said, "I help people," and I thought, wow, versus, like, personal injury, probate, family law, just "I help people. If you have a problem, I want to help" and his name, his website, his telephone number, and I thought, you know, if everybody just got up in the morning and just said that, that's really what lawyers are doing. Even if you're a transactional lawyer, you're helping people.

Blanche Touhill: You know, I was on a federal judicial search committee and I asked each of the candidates to tell me if they had been involved in some law that changed things or some case that really helped somebody and every one of them had an answer to that question that showed that they were really in it to help people. It was the most astounding...we forget about the basis of why we chose a profession.

Susan Block: Right. Well, I mean, I chose it because it was my deal with my dad. I had no idea, when my dad said to go to law school, that lawyers helped people. I just saw books and papers...

Blanche Touhill: But you stayed in.

Susan Block: When I went to law school, I started to see that lawyers could help people but I still...I really wasn't absolutely convinced...

Blanche Touhill: ...until you became a judge?

Susan Block: No, actually until I became a lawyer. Well, during law school, I had some practicums and I guess my most compelling practicum was with the juvenile court, which I ended up running so it was really interesting, and the other one was with the public defenders' office where the public defender would have 200 cases but as an intern, we only have one or two. So, we actually went to the homes of our clients. I mean, there isn't a public defender that does that today and we saw what they didn't have. So, I can remember, I was with a young fellow who is a criminal defense lawyer now, we're still friends, Mark Fredman, we went to this woman's house. Mark ended up changing a light bulb for her. I ended up running

to the store for her because she didn't have milk and she had been accused of driving under the influence and they had towed her car so that was gone because she was never going to be able to come up with the money for the car and her family told her that they wouldn't help her get a car, so she turned in her license and the judge said, "Well, it would be \$25 and costs," and we were able to say to the judge, "She doesn't have \$25. Can you just waive the fine?" and he said, "Okay, well just costs." And then we said, "She doesn't have the costs either." I remember it was Bill Crandall and we were two law students and he said, "Yeah, I'll waive the costs too." So, we won our case. We were able to go back and tell her.

Blanche Touhill: So, you saw that you could really help somebody in a meaningful way?

Susan Block: Yeah, and we really saw the need too because we went into somebody's house, which, as a lawyer, you generally don't go to somebody's house. I mean, I do occasionally. But, yeah, I like helping people. I don't know if it's addictive, maybe there should be a 12-step program for it. I don't know how I'm ever going to get out of it because I like it too much and it's like, as long as people are calling me, as long as I can still make sense out of what their problems are and how to come to a solution, as long as I have support people helping me, I can't imagine not doing it. Look what Anne did. I mean, Anne Niederlander worked between a coat rack at a food pantry in a church. That's how Catholic Legal Assistance Ministry started. Yeah, she was in a church and then she started talking to Catholic lawyers like Jerry Orbaltz and people who had money, I think Dennis Donnelly and they formed this Catholic Legal Assistance Ministry which is really, it's the law clinic out of SLU now. She had a cart table and a chair and, like I say, there were gently worn clothes on one side...or not so gently worn, and a bunch of cans on the other side and people walking around and she was interviewing a client who maybe needed a will or maybe signed a contract that they shouldn't have signed or got behind in payments and needed a bankruptcy. She was still doing that after she was 70, for sure, and then going to the Archdiocese and saying, "This is part of what faith is about, is helping people through their legal problems." So, she really...she more than cracked the door. She really...

Blanche Touhill: And who runs that today?

Susan Block: Amy Deaver, who was a guardian ad litem and did a lot of work on our case, also Catholic and has a Jesuit spirit to her and I know she's just busy. The need is so great. I mean, even with legal services, they're both just bursting at the seams with people who really need help in so many different ways. So, that billboard has stayed with me, just that simple statement, "I help people."

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

Susan Block: So, 50 years older would have been sometime in the late 1800's and I'm not good with history at all...well, I could only say if I'd been 50 years older, I might have been in the holocaust. I mean, it's possible that my relatives are all from Europe so when I think about my great grandparents, I did not know my great grandparents at all. I barely can tell you anything about them. One of the members of my family has done a little archive work so I've got a little more information but my grandmother...one of my grandmothers, they actually had a clothing store too and the other one could not speak English and she plucked chickens.

Blanche Touhill: So, go on, so your great grandmother plucked chickens.

Susan Block: Right, and probably I would have been in that generation where we were trying to send our kids to get education and that was the generation where they finished high school and they maybe ran a business. Some of my relatives, like my first cousins of my dad, we did have somebody that became a movie producer, somebody that became a doctor, somebody became a pharmacist, stuff like that. One of the things I think we haven't talked about is what about the women today? How do we really inculcate within those women the sense of history of where we came from because I think that in many respects they don't get it. They really don't get it and I think that that is not a good thing. Even in the current election that we're facing next week, there just isn't the excitement about whether or not there would be the first woman president. I think most young women are thinking, well, there will be a woman president at some point and those of us who have been in the trenches for over 40 years, are like, yeah, what makes you say that? I actually sort of think there will be...if this isn't the one, there will be a woman president, but I don't think they realize how hard it is and that the difference between

the burden, the challenges, the fundraising and nor do I think that they really understand sometimes that in order to have been considered a good judge when I was a judge you were under great scrutiny. I mean, there were times when I was admonished. I was exonerated from whatever anyone said but you had to sort of go through that if you weren't one of the boys, you probably got in trouble, which I got in trouble occasionally and more recently, other judges, women have still...and being a woman of color is particularly and continues to be particularly difficult. So, I think without a sense of that history...I think we may have a backlash that we may actually regress and that would be really a shame for all the things that everybody has done to try to get us to where we are today. So, I think that in some way we need to figure out a way to spread the word, that maybe it's not fair that you've got to be better to be considered good but that would be my advice if someone said, "What should I do?" I would say, "Be determined, go for it. Be prepared to fall down and pick yourself up" and then one other thing is, is that, don't be afraid to ask a man to be your mentor too because there are a lot of good men out there and it might feel more comfortable to have a woman as a mentor but having a man as a mentor is likely to get you maybe where you want to go if that's where you want to go.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much. It's been a wonderful hour.

Susan Block: Well, it's been fun. Thank you. You're a great interviewer.