

An Interview with  
**Laura Burton**

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis  
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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**Oral History Program**

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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.

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself.

Laura Burton: My name is Laura Dancy Burton.

Blanche Touhill: Laura, would you tell me something about your childhood: where you were born; did you have siblings; your mother and father; you grandparents; your cousins; your playmates; your elementary school; your secondary school. Who was it that encouraged you to be what you wanted to be, in both your home or your neighborhood setting, and then in school. So why don't you just talk in general.

Laura Burton: First of all, I was born in a little town in Alabama called Aliceville, Alabama and my mother and father, my grandparents, we all lived on my grandparents' land which was about 220 acres. They raised cotton. That was when cotton was king and all the families: my father, his brother and, I think, the daughters that married off and lived someplace else, but I lived there as a child. We were kind of let to run free: you know, water, ponds, trees. This time of the year really makes me think about how we had to gather the holly, real holly, and the pinecones to make the decorations for the Christmas and everything.

Blanche Touhill: Do you still do that a little?

Laura Burton: Yes, I love the smells of the land, you know, when you're walking in the country or in a park where there's still some real dirt, not gravel. There was nine of us in my family. My father was the oldest of five children. My grandfather, I always wondered as an adult living in Jim Crow area in Alabama, how my grandfather acquired all that land right next to a white farmer. I never really knew when I was young but when I became a little older, I understood that my grandfather was a horse breeder and he was an expert at it and people from all over would bring their horses and that's part of how, the story is told to me, how he acquired that much land, because it's still in the family. As I said, it was nine of us. I have five older brothers, then me, and then another brother, then two sisters. So when my sister came, it was just like a little doll. I mean, it was wonderful but as I grew older, my brothers were always such a comfort and I felt so...

Blanche Touhill: ...protected.

Laura Burton: Protected, that's the word. I felt protected all my life because I had those five older brothers. They could get in the way sometimes, when I started dating and things like that, but they had something to say about that and I think, in school, the first school we went to was in the country and it was a rural one-room school. Everybody was in the same room. I think later on I found out that was sort of one type of learning they went through in the '60s or '70s, having everybody in the same room and learning from each other.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, the open classroom.

Laura Burton: Open classroom, because my husband was an educator, and I thought, well, it does work because I learned how to read my time tables, listen to the big kids because there was no kindergarten and pre-school and all of that. Children stayed at home and family took care of all the children. But my mother was a homemaker when we were in the country. I guess around 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I think you've heard of that city.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, the university.

Laura Burton: Yes, University of Alabama. I was there when President Kennedy was killed. I know what happened. I was there when the troops were sent. Mr. Wallace stood in the door and all of that. That was my upbringing, my childhood. I graduated from high school in 1964 so you can tell...

Blanche Touhill: That's the Civil Rights Act.

Laura Burton: Yes, all of the freedom walkers and riders, you can see them walking the highways and the boycott that took place in our town; the bus system and I never knew the power of a boycott, but all those men who would speak to us so disrespectfully when we got on the bus, they lost their jobs for two years in our little town. And the way I understood it from a teenage standpoint, so you aren't going to get maybe the big view but just my view of that, the church, our Pasteur, they would tell the Pasteur what was coming down, what was next, how many people you needed to go vote and what events were on the docket for and what stores you were not to go shop in. Well, a lot of them, like the Woolworth's and all those kinds of...Kresge and those kinds of things, as a child, that looked so appealing. You can sit at the counter and have a big ice cream, malt or a sundae and as a child, those are the things that I think I...

- Blanche Touhill: Now, were those stores boycotted?
- Laura Burton: Yes. As a matter of fact...and I hate to jump like this...the last time I was in South Africa, my husband and I helped open two churches, in 2002 we started but I was just there last year when Mandela died, I was in South Africa...Woolworth's, do you remember that store?
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.
- Laura Burton: Well, I always wondered what happened to them. They're all in South Africa doing well. They're kind of upscale now so when I first went there, I was so shocked. I said to my husband, "You know what? I'm going and I'm going to sit at that counter," and he laughed at me because he thought I was joking but it was serious to me.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you get served?
- Laura Burton: Yes, apartheid...
- Blanche Touhill: And were they polite?
- Laura Burton: You still could feel the vestiges of apartheid. When we first went in 2002, I can still see the stairs of people and I remember one of the white South Africans invited us to his home and he made a speech before we ate and said, "I just want to tell you, you're the first blacks," he said, "that's ever been invited to sit." The maids were all there, cooking the food, but he wanted to let us know, that was a big thing for him as well, to invite us to his home as a guest and he was glad to do it but it was a historical moment for him. So that's the connection. Woolworth's went to South Africa to survive and they have and they still are surviving. Every time I go I see more stores and larger ones.
- Blanche Touhill: Is it still as enticing as it was?
- Laura Burton: Yes, very well done, even a little bit more upscale, even in the malls and even have, like, a Whole Foods. I mean, it's really big. But getting back to grade school and everything and the open school classroom, that's how my 1<sup>st</sup> grade experience, that's the style of education that was allowed at that time. I had one teacher, of course, and of course, I found out many years...I'm kind of jumping around but it kind of connects this way...when I met my husband here...oh, I better go back and get it straight this way...in school, it was a little one-room school and when we left that

school, we went to what they call a Rosenwahl school. Well, when I became an adult, I asked my husband...because he was on the Jewish Holocaust board...I asked him, "Why would we in the rural south have gone to a school called Rosenwahl?" Well, we started doing the research...and I meant to bring you one of our books on it...

Blanche Touhill: You can give it to us later.

Laura Burton: Okay...and found out that Mr. Rosenwahl had read Booker T. Washington's book *Up From Slavery*. He was so impressed about that book. Mr. Rosenwahl had become a CEO of Sears & Roebuck Company because Richard Sears was not that great of a, I guess, a manager so the store was really going through a lot of changes. Mr. Rosenwahl was hired because I guess with his trips for buying, to New York and all those kinds of places, he ran into him. But Mr. Rosenwahl came up with this big, big book called The Catalogue.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I remember the Sears Catalogue.

Laura Burton: That's what saved Sears, during the Depression and all of those times. And in that book, when we were in the South, when you got that book, that was like heaven because you can dream. You know, I don't know if children know how to fantasize and imagine and dream. You can look at pages and as kids, we would pretend, "Oh, that's mine," and my sister, "Oh, no, I want that. You had that one," and even I found out later, they even sold homes through that catalogue.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, they did, and there are homes in St. Louis made out of the Sears Catalogue. That's right.

Laura Burton: That's right, so Mr. Rosenwahl also came...the Museum of Science in Industry in Chicago...that's his money. That was his idea. That's his money.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, because Sears was in Chicago, the Sears Tower.

Laura Burton: Yes, and a lot of people...and until we did the research, we were just shocked at what we found.

Blanche Touhill: Did he fund schools?

Laura Burton: Yes, that's what I'm getting around to, over 5,000 schools. Oh, after his interaction with Mr. Washington, Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, Mr. Sears had the money so he took one of his Pullman cars all the way down with a bunch of his little rich friends and introduced them as well to Mr. Booker T. Washington and he told them about his plan, how he felt blacks should be educated and all of that but he also knew that the rural schools, there weren't any hardly. If they had them...you may have a teacher but no building. So the agreement was, in Mr. Rosenwahl's fellowship program now, when we did the research...and it took us a long time to get this little old book to have all the names and things in it...but anyway, he built over 5,000 schools all over the South, including Texas and Oklahoma. A lot of those schools are still standing and it's called The Rosenwahl...the preservation of schools. There's a big organization, if you look it up, they're still getting together to do that, to preserve those schools.

Blanche Touhill: So this group built the schools and then the school district supported the teachers and the children?

Laura Burton: All over the South, yes. It was like...

Blanche Touhill: Like the libraries, Carnegie libraries.

Laura Burton: Yes. It was just like...but what he did differently from Carnegie and the Rockefeller's was, the community had to be part of it. You had to come up with part of it. If you needed a building or whatever, the part that you didn't have, that's what he would provide and a lot of teachers, they may have had the schools but they didn't have the money to pay a teacher that was well qualified and all of that kind of thing. So the Rosenwahl school in my little town of Pickensville up the road 10 miles...Alabama, is still standing.

Blanche Touhill: And it's still used?

Laura Burton: Yes, it's used not for education but community gatherings and before my husband passed on, we went to Prattville on the way to Tuskegee, Prattville, Alabama where it's one of the regional Rosenwahl schools stands and that one, they use it as well as a community and my book, when you see it, you'll see a scene with all these little empty chairs. It would be from Prattville, Alabama, is where we took that photo. So that's how we were educated, my whole family.

Blanche Touhill: What years did that school cover?

Laura Burton: It was 3<sup>rd</sup> all the way up to high school. I guess it went to, like, 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup>.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and then you went to a big high school?

Laura Burton: Yes, yes, in the country it was called Somerville High School. Well, we had moved then, when I was 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, so I really didn't get to spend a lot of time there but my brothers did. So when I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we moved to Tuscaloosa because, at that time, historically, you know, a lot of blacks were moving north. It was a great migration because cotton was no longer making any money and we had all this land and cotton really messes up...well, not mess it up, but uses all the minerals and it's really hard on it. Then, all the young boys, they didn't want to do that anymore. They wanted to go North. So, my uncle moved North, all of us living on the same land and everything, all my cousins, and then I think he moved to Cleveland and my father just moved to Tuscaloosa to get work and he worked in a foundry there during that time. You know, it was hard, hard work but it was work. And I want to interject something here: When we grew up in Alabama during those times, every black community, there was a father in the house. That's a foreign thing to me until the great society, all of that came after that. But every home had a father. My father happened to die when he was young. He had an accident and broke his neck and, being in the South, he didn't get the best care. He had insurance with that job he had but my mother then was left to take care of us but my older brothers, they had gone to Cleveland with my uncle and started working in the factories and did very well during that time. You could buy a home and they did, raised their children and they did, sent them to school. They wanted to go to college but that's a little bit further in the future, but getting back to the school, that's how I was educated in the South. Tuscaloosa, as a university town, they also have a historically black university there called Stillman, and it has...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it has a good reputation.

Laura Burton: Yes. So, as a child...think about this...and I thought about it many years, why our education was so much...I didn't know it was any better than other people until I came to St. Louis and I realized that we were right there on a par with everybody in terms of basic education because most of the black professors and Master's and Ph.D.'s, they couldn't get jobs

anywhere and Stillman could only hire so many so they took the jobs in the grade schools and the high schools. We didn't have middle schools then.

Blanche Touhill: And women did that same thing when they began to get Ph.D.'s.

Laura Burton: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: They couldn't get jobs in the universities and colleges and they went into the high schools.

Laura Burton: Yes, and we were the benefactors.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and the children were...just as women couldn't get jobs other than librarianship and secretaryship and things like that.

Laura Burton: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And they went into the schools and really delivered a very high quality education.

Laura Burton: Yes, they did, high quality and that would answer one of your questions, my education and who impacted my life. That particular system, all of the children in that school...we had 1,000 kids in our high school, total. That was all of them.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it was a big school.

Laura Burton: Yes. As a matter of fact...and that was one advantage of being in a college town, although it was separate...you know, the books and things...you know, we didn't get the good books and all of that. Everything was second-hand but they did build schools and they hired a black principal that had this philosophy. He would hire couples that were educators so a lot of our teachers were married people.

Blanche Touhill: Husband and wife?

Laura Burton: Husband and wife. That was how we grew up. So that's why this thing that's going on now with no father in the house is foreign to me because even in our high school, that was promoted.

Blanche Touhill: But you went to a segregated school?

Laura Burton: Very segregated, oh, yeah.

- Blanche Touhill: But, isn't Brown versus the Board of Education, 1954?
- Laura Burton: It was in Little Rock, I think; that was where it happened. Yes, it had to be around that...yes, I think it had to be around that time but it was in Little Rock.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, okay.
- Laura Burton: Yes, but in our town, Tuscaloosa was KKK headquarters and University of Alabama was very, very prejudiced. However, on career day, all the white professors and things would come over to talk about the different careers that one could have but, of course, you don't ask a question if you want to be a lawyer or you want to be something other than a teacher or a nurse, you see what I mean?
- Blanche Touhill: I do. Oh, no, a woman...
- Laura Burton: Because that was one of the things I had thought I wanted to do, to be an attorney and my goal was to be a judge so I know you had to go through this and when I asked that question, of course, I don't think the gentleman liked it and he kind of hemmed and hawed about it. But looking back on it...
- Blanche Touhill: What decade was that?
- Laura Burton: The late '50s, because I graduated in '64, so it had to be late '50s, early '60s, yes, it would have been.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, then the Civil Rights Act went into effect, I think, by '64.
- Laura Burton: Yes, I graduated.
- Blanche Touhill: So you were a little ahead or right there.
- Laura Burton: Yes, right in the middle of the action, yes. Now, my husband was being brought up in Chicago at this time.
- Blanche Touhill: And did he get a good education?
- Laura Burton: Yes, he went to Thornton High School.
- Blanche Touhill: In Chicago?

- Laura Burton: Yes, outside of Chicago and he always bragged about Eleanor Roosevelt coming to their school for some reason. He always bragged about that but it was an excellent education.
- Blanche Touhill: And then, where did he go to college?
- Laura Burton: He went to Illinois State, Normal at the time was what it was called and then he went to SIU. We married in '66 and I was working for...when I moved to St. Louis, I lived with an aunt. Once you graduated, you were...actually, your parents had prepared you to go out, get a job, go North, go to school, do what you have to do and help somebody else.
- Blanche Touhill: And try to live with a relative?
- Laura Burton: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Or somebody in the family?
- Laura Burton: That's how you had to, yes, and that's what I did, my aunt in East St. Louis lived there and she worked for Dr. Masters before he was THE Dr. Masters. She was his housekeeper at Barnes, OB-GYN and she got me a job with them in the summer, my first summer, with the students, you know, that come in in the summer and we were just, like, running bloods and taking this in a cytogenetics lab, of all places and the head lab technician...most of the people who had...what do you call it? They don't call it Mongolism anymore; they call it Down's syndrome, but then that's what they called it and children were water heads which you don't see anymore, and anencephalies, you know, small, and then this thing on a kid's back. So that lab did all the research on those children and what our job was, there was some way the lab technician would take the blood and spin it all down and then he would take pictures of the chromosomes and then we would have to cut out the chromosomes and place them in order, start with the big XX and all the way to the little xx or xy or xxxx because sometimes in a pretty bad situation, there would be an extra. So, can you imagine, I was 17...16, 17 years old, come from the South and these doors were open for me through my aunt. Years later, I left there and I went to 1520 Market Street was moving their government regional office, Veterans Administration regional office was moving from Kansas City to St. Louis and I went to...because I needed a job, a permanent job, not just a summer, and so I did, I went to the Missouri State Employment and this lady, I imagine, now looking back on it, was not from St. Louis

because she gave me two places to go. One was on South Broadway and I didn't know blacks just didn't go down on South Broadway to the Coca Cola or Pepsi cola company and walk in to become a secretary. I had passed all the tests, all the written tests, all those kinds of tests and then, when I told her how the man treated me and everything...I know disrespect when I know...you know, and I just knew when I walked in because the janitor, when I walked in, the black man, you can see his face. He looked at me like, you know, "Girl, why are you here?" Well, I didn't know; the woman sent me there and I thought the man was a little disrespectful to me. The questions he asked were not the kinds of questions that he should ask. You know, later we know that they couldn't ask.

Blanche Touhill: They couldn't ask them today?

Laura Burton: Right, they couldn't ask them even with the EEO when that came out, you know, a number of years. So, I know I didn't get that job so I went back to the office and told that lady at the employment office and she said, "Well, you know what? There's a new government building right over on Market, 1520 and," she says, "next to the Kiel Auditorium." She says, "Here, take that over there and see if they would interview you." They gave me a written test. I made 82 on that written test. Then they made you do all the stuff from scratch and then they gave me a typing test and of course that's all you could do then, be a secretary, and they gave me the shorthand test and I knew I bombed on the shorthand test. I had gone to a business school in East St. Louis but I knew I had bombed on the shorthand test. So I was getting all my stuff ready to leave and getting up to go because I just knew I wasn't going to get a job, in my head, and the lady said, "Well, where are you going?" and I said, "Well, I didn't pass that test." She says, "Oh, but we need a clerk typist in the GI Loan Department up on this other floor so get your things and come with me."

Blanche Touhill: So you got hired?

Laura Burton: I was hired that same day.

Blanche Touhill: And for the federal government?

Laura Burton: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Which meant you had benefits and increments...

- Laura Burton: That's why I retired at 59.
- Blanche Touhill: So you were there 30 years or 35 years?
- Laura Burton: Actually, it ended up 40 years, the time I had because I could have retired at 55 but I waited until I was 59 and my husband retired first.
- Blanche Touhill: So you really got a wonderful job?
- Laura Burton: Yes, I got a wonderful job. One thing most people...I hear people talking about the government but I'll tell you, we were trained. You kept up on everything new, like the electronic records they had been talking about. We did that 15, 20 years ago in government, electronic records. They trained us to do computers. We had a whole building of computer experts to teach every person how to use a computer, how to enter those records so you had no excuses. Then there were courses that were given because I worked for the Education Department. They have their own university. It started out called Regional Medical Education Center and St. Louis University, Dr. Denati was the head man then but he helped get this set up and they started off with these, what they call physician's assistants. That started at the VA under Dr. Denati and Dr. F.A. [inaudible] and I was the secretary and I traveled with all those doctors at that time, in government. But it was one of the best jobs I've ever had and I was trained and I was promoted. Every job I applied for that I thought I wanted I always got that job.
- Blanche Touhill: When you retired, what...
- Laura Burton: Consumer Affairs specialist and I was a GS-10 and had gone through all the ranks and what I did then was...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, a GS-10 is very nice.
- Laura Burton: Yes, yes, benefits totally and I knew better to not change over from the old civil service system when they gave us an option to. A lot of people didn't know your better bet was to stay with the old system and not go Social Security because I've never really worked Social Security until my part-time job now. But, yes, I retired after 40 years, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, now, did your husband stay in St. Louis then too?

- Laura Burton: Yes, I met him in St. Louis. He had a friend in East St. Louis, went to school at Normal with him.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, at DeCole in Northern Illinois?
- Laura Burton: Yes, in Bloomington, Normal, Illinois, off of 55. But when we got married in '66, he was still working on his Master's because he was a geography teacher. Years ago, they valued geography.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Did he teach in the high schools?
- Laura Burton: Yes, he did, East St. Louis High, he did and then he went to St. Louis Community College at Meramec. He got his Master's in counseling and he stayed there until...
- Blanche Touhill: Where did he go to school for his Master's?
- Laura Burton: SIU over in Edwardsville.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, because he was in Illinois.
- Laura Burton: Yes, we lived over there and I worked at Sky Air Force Base so it just made sense. Well, then the EEOC started with the hit McDonnell Douglas, they were wondering why all those big government contracts had been awarded and there were no black people in meaningful jobs.
- Blanche Touhill: When was that, the '70s?
- Laura Burton: Yes, it had to be.
- Blanche Touhill: Because the Reauthorization Act of the Civil Rights Act was 1972 and then '74, they passed something else. So, it was not only affecting African Americans; it was affecting women.
- Laura Burton: Women, let me tell you, I tell a lot of women: Were it not for the Civil Rights Act, women, all women were really second-class citizens and women like my mother-in-law was brilliant, a brilliant woman. Her letters and even her... her mother, the letters, how well they were written. It was just unbelievable, never had an opportunity but they were told, "You have to stay home and raise the children" and that's what she did. But that act opened up a world for women and when I hear young women speaking as if they made it on their own, I really think there were people who lives.... I remember when my mother voted for the first time. The

church called a meeting...jumping back...in Alabama. Martin Luther King had been there and spoken to a lot of the ministers and the next thing was to get those people to vote. So, my mother raised her hand and I used to think about that, "Mama, all us kids, suppose you didn't come back" because they didn't know.

Blanche Touhill: No, they didn't.

Laura Burton: They didn't, so she raised her hand and said she wanted to vote and at that time, my mother had a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education which was wonderful for anybody. If you went through the system, you were well educated.

Blanche Touhill: That's right.

Laura Burton: Very well educated.

Blanche Touhill: The high schools were really like the community colleges...

Laura Burton: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: ...the two-year programs. They were excellent.

Laura Burton: Excellent.

Blanche Touhill: And very few people got their high school degree.

Laura Burton: That's right and that's why my mother was unique and she made sure all of us knew how to read and that's why it's so important, you know, when the children come home, she did that, although we didn't have a lot of books, the ones we had...

Blanche Touhill: So it was a challenge to really say, "I'm going to go to the polls and try to register"?

Laura Burton: Yes, she did.

Blanche Touhill: She had trouble?

Laura Burton: Yeah. They didn't do the water or the dogs but they were...you know, the nastiness and saying things, you know, to get them and they knew...the Civil Rights leaders knew what questions they were going to be asked and if there was money needed, that was all pre-planned.

Blanche Touhill: So they gave you the money to do it.

- Laura Burton: Yes, whatever you needed and so when she came home, I didn't realize the impact of it until I was an adult and I used to ask her...she said, "I didn't know we were coming home either." She said, "I just felt I needed to go so my children will know how important that voting was", and that's how I learned.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you vote?
- Laura Burton: Yes, I take my grandchildren with me every time and people get aggravated. I say, for number one, I want them to show me how to work the electronic thing; for number two, I want them to know how to do it and why you come and why you stand in line.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you know that there is a study that says if you take your children to vote with you or your grandchildren or they go through the school, there's a kids' voting program, that statistically, those children vote when they get to be an adult at a higher rate than the children that have had no...
- Laura Burton: ...no exposure to it.
- Blanche Touhill: ...no exposure to it.
- Laura Burton: And that makes sense, kind of, doesn't it? And even my sons, they're right on it. I don't ever have to tell them. They just know Dad and I...I mean, we always voted. We didn't take them like my grandchildren. I just took them because we believe in family taking care of the grandkids. Anyway, that's the story on the education and I loved our school and the spirit we had and how free. We were free within the...
- Blanche Touhill: ...confines of the group.
- Laura Burton: Yes. It's not like when I came to St. Louis, you didn't know where the lines were. I didn't know that you're not supposed to go south of Kings Highway, when we would go to church. I got married at Kings Highway in Washington. There's a beautiful edifice but during the riots, when people burned, baby burn..., the movement changed to be violent and St. Louis, all that area, central west end, that's why the Chase was closed.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

- Laura Burton: But at our church, a lot of the members, it was a mixed church and I always wondered why in the world I came all the way to St. Louis and we're in a mixed church. My husband and I were married there. Oh, it was because of him, he belonged to that church when he came from Chicago and his friend, they went to that church.
- Blanche Touhill: [Inaudible 32:55]?
- Laura Burton: No, their family went there. So, as a married couple, that's where we went. All of McPherson, the church owned a lot of those buildings which they should have kept, and Washington because nobody thought it would ever come back like it is now.
- Blanche Touhill: But it has come back.
- Laura Burton: It has and just exceeded expectations. When the Chase reopened, I knew then things were moving.
- Blanche Touhill: So your husband went to work for the community college?
- Laura Burton: Yes, he did, St. Louis Community College.
- Blanche Touhill: And then he taught geography?
- Laura Burton: No, no, no, he was counselor at the community college.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's right, you said that. He got his Master's in counseling.
- Laura Burton: Right, and then he went to...
- Blanche Touhill: And which community college?
- Laura Burton: Meramec.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes.
- Laura Burton: And then, after that, he worked on his doctorate at SIU, had a lot of problems there with it but he did almost all the work and then I think our church had a big split and our son got into trouble and he just put everything in a box and left it for almost 10 years and on our way back from South Africa, the first trip when we went to church dedication, we were invited over because we were instrumental in that church being built, and he was reading one of his (logo?) theory journals and in it, it said something about a program for people who are ABD; All But

Dissertation, there was a program at Notre Dame. It was through the Catholics. They had opened up their Continuing Ed. System to non-Catholics and they were advertising for people and he...

- Blanche Touhill: To finish their doctorate?
- Laura Burton: Yes, and you had to go to Notre Dame.
- Blanche Touhill: And they would transfer the courses?
- Laura Burton: Yes, but he had to spend a summer in Oxford.
- Blanche Touhill: In Oxford, Mississippi?
- Laura Burton: Oxford, England.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, in England, okay. You went to England?
- Laura Burton: Yes, we did.
- Blanche Touhill: How wonderful!
- Laura Burton: Yes, and from there...because his was based on Dr. Victor Frankl's book, Man's Search for Meaning and suffering and how people survive.
- Blanche Touhill: And were the records there? I mean, why did he go to Oxford?
- Laura Burton: Well, as part of finishing up the degree that he was going to be getting.
- Blanche Touhill: So his degree was from what institution?
- Laura Burton: It was Notre Dame.
- Blanche Touhill: Notre Dame?
- Laura Burton: Yes, it was a Catholic instit...yes.
- Blanche Touhill: But they had the program in a variety of places and he chose the Oxford?
- Laura Burton: Yes, because we had just been to Rome with Zonta and we had an audience with the Pope and we can't speak Italian anyway...we were down in Puerto Rico, of course we can't speak Spanish and not English too well so we went to Oxford which was wonderful and we ended up, we weren't supposed to end up where we ended up. We ended up in Poland for four days because we had set it up to go to St. Petersburg,

Russia for their 300-year anniversary. The tickets were one of those you can't change. Well, right before we were supposed to leave, of course, you know, the embassy in Washington called and said that you don't have this, you don't have that and you don't have that. Well, we lived in a neighborhood with a lot of the Russians who had migrated over to West County and the young man who was our neighbor had gotten everything ready for us and he was living there. We found out later they do that with a lot of people to get more money.

Blanche Touhill: Oh.

Laura Burton: Two hundred dollars more on each of you for the visa. So, my husband was so angry, he said, "No." So anyway, it ended up, since we had to get to Poland, we could get back to Chicago, we just took a red eye to...it was only a two or three hours' flight...to Warsaw and the reason why I did that was, we have a Zonta Club in Warsaw. We have a Zonta Club in Krakow. The Zonta Club is everywhere so I just sent e-mails to the people in the book and the woman in Warsaw came to our hotel with her Zonta shirt on and says, "Come with me. I'm going to show you Warsaw." We went places that I don't know if any tourist would have seen: children's war museums, interrogation places. We even saw Schindler's old factory. They didn't have that on the tour but she took us home with her, met her mother who was in the war, and it still had the vestiges of communism. It was a real dark kind of a place, you know.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I do know.

Laura Burton: With all the writing and people didn't smile very much and I think we were the only black people in the country because I didn't see anybody else except the black Madonna. They're 90-something percent Catholic, had a wonderful time and she got us a tour to Krakow.

Blanche Touhill: Which I hear is a wonderful place.

Laura Burton: Beautiful place, and it ended up, my husband was writing on the Holocaust so we went to Auschwitz. We had a young lady to drive us over to Auschwitz. None of this was planned but it ended up, that's how he finished his last...

Blanche Touhill: And he got the Ph.D.?

Laura Burton: Yes, EDD.

Blanche Touhill: EDD, yeah.

Laura Burton: And then he started working with it. Actually, he was on staff here and was working when he died. I mean, he was...what do you call it where you have to get so many students...

Blanche Touhill: Adjunct.

Laura Burton: Yes, and he did some for different places out in the community and he was on a Jewish Holocaust board and was really involved with that all over the world, wherever we would go, we would be invited to...

Blanche Touhill: What did he have, a heart attack?

Laura Burton: Yes. Actually, he had a heart murmur when I married him but all our married life he never had problems with it but apparently, I guess maybe our travels or the flu, it went down. You know how they...

Blanche Touhill: You never know. If you have heart disease...

Laura Burton: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: It was in his family?

Laura Burton: You know, I don't know, but obviously he was born with it. But anyway, he was 68, yes, when he passed on, but we had done all the things, traveled to Zonta all over the world. I think I only missed one or two of the conventions and he was such a...you know how some people are support...you can marry people and they're the wind beneath your wings? He was mine and I was his. One of our Zonta members was returning to China back in the late 1990's. She was moving back. All her kids were graduated. So she got this tour together for any Zonta member who wanted to go and 15 of us decided to go with her before she went to live. She took us places in China that I don't think a lot of people will see, like the Three Gorges Dam, when we would cruise the...

Blanche Touhill: Yangtze?

Laura Burton: Yes. You would see the lines on the side of the mountain where the...

Blanche Touhill: Pulled the boats.

- Laura Burton: And where the water was going to come in on the side of these huge mountains once the Three Gorges Dam was completed.
- Blanche Touhill: So you took the trip before the dam was completed?
- Laura Burton: Yes, yes, to see it.
- Blanche Touhill: To see those towns that were going to be...?
- Laura Burton: That were going, and the growth of the place was unbelievable, to see millions of people. You've been there. It's just...
- Blanche Touhill: What year did you go, or what decade?
- Laura Burton: I came back in 1999, and the only reason why I know that is my neighbor across the street had passed away. It had to be 1999.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, let me ask you something: How long have you belonged to Zonta?
- Laura Burton: About 15 years because that's the year Zonta had the international meeting in St. Louis and it was 1996...only on even years, and we had Maya Angelou for our guest speaker.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I've heard her speak.
- Laura Burton: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: I've met Maya, yes.
- Laura Burton: She was quite something and amazing how nervous she was before she comes out.
- Blanche Touhill: Actually, I experienced that same thing with her because I was Chancellor at the time and I went backstage to meet her and she was getting ready to go on and I know a lot of performers go through that. I know a lot of teachers go through that, that nervousness before you hit the stage.
- Laura Burton: I'm glad you confirmed that.
- Blanche Touhill: And then when you get on stage or you enter the classroom...
- Laura Burton: It was like it never happened.

Blanche Touhill: ...it never happened, and afterwards, she was just cool as a cucumber, but before, she really would have been better not to have any guests and just to sit there calmly, you know what I'm saying?

Laura Burton: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: And get ready. But I've known teachers and I'm sure performers have that same worry.

Laura Burton: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Maybe you have to get your juices going in order to...

Laura Burton: That's what I'm thinking.

Blanche Touhill: ...to be able to perform.

Laura Burton: It's like a prime, yes, for you, but she came out like nothing happened and spoke so calmly and she talked about women looking for saints. Don't look for the media for your saints or people necessarily in government, but look around you, she said, your grandmother, and then I thought about my mother. She was right. My mother...our father died early but she told us, "I would never marry anybody as long as you kids are in this house," and she lived up to that. She devoted her life to us and, you know, what she had to give. She would not allow anybody to separate us, you know, to have a lot of kids and you're alone...good thing we were living in a small town and the churches, and that's where...now I understand why they say this about a village: it takes a village to raise a child because at that time, the way the communities were in the black community, they looked after the children. Everybody did: the Pasteur...

Blanche Touhill: Are the black churches as strong as they were when you were growing up?

Laura Burton: You need to talk to my son. He's just become the Pasteur about two years ago, of New Northside which is right up there near Ferguson and he's going through a lot. Some things are the same but the young people don't go like they used to.

Blanche Touhill: No. In my youth, the local religious leader and the congregation...I'm not saying they were politically together but there was a social bonding...

Laura Burton: Yes, bonding in that community.

- Blanche Touhill: There really was and everybody knew everybody else. There was a care and concern.
- Laura Burton: I know, the deacons would come...my mother...my brothers, teenagers, when they start acting out, she would call for the deacons and they would come, give a little talk to Mr. Disobedient, and I'll tell you, they got in line. I'm not saying they didn't make any more mistakes but she knew she needed a male and she would call the deacons. The deacons would visit people then on a regular basis.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, everybody knew the church leaders.
- Laura Burton: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, go back to Zonta. What else do they do besides...I know it's an international group of women. Obviously they help one another. What else do they do?
- Laura Burton: Our main local project...I'm not talking about the international. It hooks into the international but is called Women's, Another Chance and if you have ever received a phone call and said, "We need your clothing" and all of this for the Women's, Another Chance, it will say that or it will say for Children's Home. Zonta was approached by the company is called Merchandise Pick-up Service. If they could use our name, not Zonta but this Women's, Another Chance because when you get a phone call, everybody would connect with that title and that's how we fund our scholarships but what we do, women who have children and want to go back to school and become independent.
- Blanche Touhill: And finish.
- Laura Burton: Yes, and take care of their children and themselves. And it started out with teenagers and we really bombed out with that. A lot of them were not ready. So what we did is we raised the age to 24. We assign a mentor and we pay the childcare because if the mother's got to worry about childcare...so that's what we do and last night at my church, we had two graduates, two nurses, RN's, so now they can get a job.
- Blanche Touhill: That's right, at a good salary.
- Laura Burton: Yes. You know you can get hired.

Blanche Touhill: A living wage.

Laura Burton: We don't do a lot of the...we did do some interior design but don't do a lot of those because we want them to get a job right away.

Blanche Touhill: Well, and that pays...

Laura Burton: Yes, that pays.

Blanche Touhill: A professional salary, and it can go up.

Laura Burton: Yes. As a matter of fact, one of our young ladies, she's a Hispanic young women, she works in Mo Baptist and she's going to get her Ph.D. now.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Laura Burton: She married a young man here at your university called Middleton. Yeah, he works here. I think it's M-i-d-d-l-e-t-o-n.

Blanche Touhill: I know Middleton's but they're UMC.

Laura Burton: Anyway, she married.

Blanche Touhill: It's a well-known name.

Laura Burton: Yes, and she is doing really well but that's what we do. That's our flagship and we have, I would say...we need to do the numbers...we have a scholarship, of course, that's our old endow scholarship that's at Wash U and now we have one set up here, and then we've set up one at Forest Park because this Merchandise Pick-up has been able to...we get more money. You would not believe the money that they get, the check we get, so they must be...a lot of money.

Blanche Touhill: Doing very well.

Laura Burton: Yes. We started off...at first, it was a big fight to even get the just agreement to even allow them to do it because some women didn't want to...

Blanche Touhill: Trust the name.

Laura Burton: Yeah, and that they didn't want second-hand materials and things like that. So anyway, it ended up, that's how we get our money. We don't have to do all those little fashion shows that really didn't...not much

money came out of that, by the time you paid all your expenses, but this Merchandise Pick-up and people just set the clothing or books or whatever on the front porch and once a month we get a check. That's how we fund our women.

Blanche Touhill: Good. Let me ask two other questions: Is there some award you've received or awards that you really are proud of?

Laura Burton: I have. Personally, I was a federal women's program manager at the VA hospital for many years and what that was, to really oversee the EEO program and the women and certain job series, to make sure that that was being enforced and that those women had an opportunity to apply, know about those jobs and to get into biomedical department or computers. It was slow coming but it happened.

Blanche Touhill: How do you get the word out?

Laura Burton: Well, we had a lot of help because it came from Washington. The plan's already set up there and the hospitals carried that out. What we had was...February, of course, was...

Blanche Touhill: So you watched it to see that the plan was carried out?

Laura Burton: Yes, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And if it was lagging behind, you would call and say, "How can I help you?"?

Laura Burton: Right, and we also had people to sit in on every interview. There was an EEO person, to make sure the same questions were asked. Now, they could go off on the same line, but you couldn't come up with a whole different question that was not on the approved questions.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and you couldn't ask questions that went off the target?

Laura Burton: That's right. So that was what we did and we also had to put on programs for the whole employee...all the staff to come to keep them educated as well.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, they were in training and education?

Laura Burton: Yes, I did, mostly I was, and then I brought in...this is one thing I was really proud, I would help some people in Washington. President Bush

had a black PR woman on his staff. I didn't know about it but the staff in Washington knew and they knew me there because of my interacting in my job. So I asked them, I needed somebody to be a guest speaker...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, for Zonta?

Laura Burton: No, this was for the federal women's program for the hospital, and for the whole region, all the agencies: FBI, DEA, we got together and had a large women's program every year and it was usually at one of the hotels because we had a budget for it. And she came, was outstanding and how she did it, we didn't have to pay because she had another government job visit so we were able to get her free. I was very glad...you know, I've forgotten her name now. It's been so many years.

Blanche Touhill: Did you manage those programs then?

Laura Burton: Yes, I did. I was the chair of the whole federal...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, women's program?

Laura Burton: Yes, and the local for the VA hospital at two locations, Jefferson Barracks and...

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask you another question: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like?

Laura Burton: So different, so different. I wouldn't have had any of the opportunities, earlier. Now, if you said 50 years later, I'd have a lot but earlier, I wouldn't have had any opportunities. I know who I would have been. The book and movie, *The Help*, that's who I would have been.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, so that rang a bell?

Laura Burton: Yes, it did. One of my Southern Illinois white friends, many years before that was a movie, called me and said, "Laura, you ought to read this book. You're from the South. It's called *The Help*." I said, "I'm not reading that book. We were the help." So I finally did and I went...down at the history museum, they had a group of women to discuss that very topic one day and I share it with them. It resonated. I didn't think it was way off. I didn't feel offended by it. It was the way it was and you could only be a teacher or a nurse, and only on the colored wards, because my

father was on the colored ward. And they let us visit him one time in three months because we were children.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, and they were afraid of disease?

Laura Burton: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Laura, what would you say the theme of your life has been?

Laura Burton: Service because I mentioned South Africa and I also mentioned...this is really big with me...is a friend of mine, the same woman who started the Merchandise Pick-up, called me two weeks ago about Monroe School and she had begun working with one girl there that was 14 and could not read. That hurt me. I take that personal, that people can't read in this day and age. It's disgraceful in the U.S.A. So she wanted me to...because I had contacts in the black community and the church, my son's church and all of that, to help get homework helpers and the program was just starting off, would be one child, one hour that you would take a week and you'd bond with that child and stay with that child until that child is reading. If you don't give a child the gift of reading, their lives are already determined and it's not good. So that's why we wrote this book about Mr. Rosenwahl because my husband and I felt that here this man knew the plight of so many black children in the South, because Jim Crow was cruel, very cruel and there was no push for you to be educated.

Blanche Touhill: There was no future.

Laura Burton: No future, and when I was in South Africa last year, I spoke with one of the Dutch ministers and he told me, the biggest mistake we made as South Africans, he said...white South Africans...was not educating the blacks because now their school is overrun, their hospital is overrun and the crime is very high and unemployment is very high. It's a beautiful country and the church that we helped build a community center, we have an AIDS clinic there and we had a woman coming from Sweden, a dentist, retired through the rotary, to do the dental work. But if you don't invest positively in a person when they're young, you're going to pay but it's going to be negative on the other end and reading is so vital, that whatever it takes to get a child up to speed, do it; spend the money.

Blanche Touhill: And are you using Zonta members to do that?

- Laura Burton: Yes, we're going to be using them.
- Blanche Touhill: And they go to the public library to meet the child?
- Laura Burton: You have to go to the school.
- Blanche Touhill: You go to the school, but that's all right.
- Laura Burton: Because they serve the community.
- Blanche Touhill: And do they go during school hours or do they go after school?
- Laura Burton: Yes. We're just getting set up so it would be during...it's a period of time that...
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, that everybody's free, yeah.
- Laura Burton: Right, right, and we're just setting it up, so to me, that would be a flagship, if you can just say in one year, say we got 20 people, 20 children are reading now that would not have, and so hopefully it would catch on to other schools.
- Blanche Touhill: Talk about your service theme. Where did you get those ideas from, that service was important to you?
- Laura Burton: My mother because...although it was nine kids in our house, everybody was at our house because when they came, first of all, they knew she listened to them. Married couples would come to just talk to her. I'm not so sure she had all the answers but it must have been something about her that people trusted and they wanted to tell her about their stories and whatever's happening. She did it: cooking, cleaning, and my great grandmother on her side was a midwife so I think she learned a lot and that was how all of us were born, except one of us, and I think she got a lot of that from that. Also, her mother died when she was very young and I think that's why she was so protective of us as children.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you so much. It was a wonderful interview and congratulations to Zonta and I hope your new project grows and prospers.
- Laura Burton: I hope so; I hope so for the children's sake. Thank you.