

An Interview with  
**Sharon Stevens**

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis  
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interviewed by Dr. Blanche Touhill  
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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: ...neighbors and friends and where you went to elementary school or how was your elementary and high school. Was there a teacher that affected you, let's put it like that, and really, somebody that encouraged you as well?

Sharon Stevens: Well, I was born on the south side of Chicago. I am a proud south sider, White Sox fan, had to be because they were the south side team and I went to neighborhood schools, as they were called and what I did in school, I was not a spectacular student but I loved to write. So I was about eight when I started writing about...you write about what you know. Good writers always tell you that, write what you know.

Blanche Touhill: Did somebody tell you that?

Sharon Stevens: No, I just did it. So I started writing about my classmates. I'd look around and I said, I'm going to write...it was incorrect, I would call it "The Autobiography of..." ...and I started writing about my classmates and it became so popular that students started coming to me, asking me if I would write their story and each story had a beginning, a middle and an end and sometimes in the story, I talked about...and then you died. People didn't care, it was just "It's my story."

Blanche Touhill: I wonder if any of those stories are still around. Do you ever meet anybody who...

Sharon Stevens: You know, it's rare even though a number of us, because we lived in the same neighborhood, went on to the same high school. I don't recall. I wish I could find one of those stories. Oh, my goodness, just for me.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. I know parents often save things like that of their children.

Sharon Stevens: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And I suppose it's lost but it would be fun, wouldn't it?

Sharon Stevens: It would. Now, you know what? I'll tell you, I started writing for my elementary school newspaper when I was about 10. The name of the school that I attended was Martha Ruggles Elementary School and our paper was The Ruggles Air and there is a guy with whom I went to elementary school, and later high school, and he found a copy of the Ruggles Air, a few years ago. He was setting up a high school reunion and I don't know where he found it but he sent it to me and I just about fell

out, there's my name; there I am. There was a story I wrote "by Sharon Stevens."

Blanche Touhill: Talking about that, the St. Louis Public Schools...I had relatives who went and I went to the St. Louis Public Schools too for part of my education but my relatives did too and I went down looking for pictures and they had all the old yearbooks and I was able to find pictures of my parents and I got them copied. I wonder if those public schools don't have those archives someplace, you know? So I'm going to look again to see if I have other relatives, look at them when they were young. But go on with your story. So you went to grade school...

Sharon Stevens: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And you wrote for the school newspaper.

Sharon Stevens: That's correct, and when I got into high school, I graduated from Hirsch High School and I wrote for that newspaper and, in addition to that, I wrote for a community newspaper. It was called The Bulletin and it served a community of 50,000 people. I mean, it's a small paper but not too small, you know?

Blanche Touhill: How did you get that job?

Sharon Stevens: Well, I applied and I had a friend who was...when I say I was the editor, let me clarify: the teen editor, I was the editor of the teen page and I had a friend who worked there and she knew I liked to write and she said, "Hey, why don't you come and see if Mr. Green would hire you." His name was Hurley Green. So he did and I worked there and brought on more friends from schools in our area that hadn't been represented so that all of the schools that were covered by the newspaper had a writer. So you could find out what was going on at my school, Hirsch or another school, Parker, Calumet, Inglewood, all of these were schools, I won't say they were close but they weren't far apart. They were all south side high schools. So we had a ball. We were too young to be paid so they paid us in hamburgers.

Blanche Touhill: Oh.

Sharon Stevens: Which was fine.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. So did you all meet together?

Sharon Stevens: Yes. I knew everybody. That's how I got them to the paper, but yes, we did, mm-hmm, come in, we'd write our columns or whatever we were writing about.

Blanche Touhill: And then you'd get your hamburgers together?

Sharon Stevens: And then we'd get our hamburgers, mm-hmm. We'd walk right across the street and I think it was Mohammed Ali's future wife, one of his future wives, worked at this place. Now, of course, we only knew her as one of the people in the place. She was very pretty and it wasn't until years later when they got married, it was like, "Hey, that's Veronica" or whatever her name was, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get to know the people at the other schools?

Sharon Stevens: Well, two of us went to elementary school together and one of them, my oldest friend in the world...or as we now say, the friend I've known the longest, we met in pre-school. We were four years old. We're still friends to this day, to this day.

Blanche Touhill: Where does she live?

Sharon Stevens: She lives in New Jersey.

Blanche Touhill: And you still talk to each other and visit?

Sharon Stevens: See each other. Her daughter is my god-daughter. Her daughter now has a daughter. And then, we went to parties together. You just met on...I don't want to say the social scene but that might have been it. We met at a party or somebody else had a friend and said, "Hey, you know, I know someone who likes to write or who might make a good candidate for the paper so why don't you talk to them" and so we did that, all women.

Blanche Touhill: After you left high school, did that column continue?

Sharon Stevens: I believe it did for a while.

Blanche Touhill: And it faded?

Sharon Stevens: I'm not sure how long the paper lasted after that, but, yes, somebody else came behind me, mm-hmm, somebody who had already been on the staff. And I worked for my college paper.

- Blanche Touhill: Don't get to college yet.
- Sharon Stevens: Too fast.
- Blanche Touhill: Talk about your parents.
- Sharon Stevens: My mother, Irma, was an elementary school teacher. She taught the middle grades like...or intermediate, I guess they were called at the time, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, something like that. My father was a waiter on the Burlington Northern and later he sold real estate. My brother was an educator, now retired, very, very smart young man, took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago... I was never this bright...was skipped in school and just all around good guy. I have a cousin whom I refer to as my sister. We're sisters.
- Blanche Touhill: You grew up together.
- Sharon Stevens: And, actually, our mothers were sisters so we just grew up thinking, "Well, they're sisters. We must be too," and it's always been that way.
- Blanche Touhill: And you lived near each other?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes, always, mm-hmm. We don't now but, yes, growing up, mm-hmm, we were only blocks apart.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you still visit with them?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes, absolutely. My parents have passed on but I have lots of cousins in Chicago and then around the country. My brother is out in California. I have cousins in Denver and New York, Knoxville, Tennessee. Most of them are in Chicago.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you play with the neighborhood kids or with your cousins or was it all the same?
- Sharon Stevens: Oh, sure, yeah. We had a nice little block association and I don't even know if they have those anymore. Every block had a block club party once a year, generally around the time that...just before you go back to school in the fall. And so people would fix their favorite dish and you'd bring your lawn chairs and they'd block off the street. It was a true block party. Everything happened in the street. There was dancing, there was music, there were games, you could eat. It was very nice. The neighborhood was called Chatham. That was the big thing in Chicago.

People in St. Louis talk about what high school you went to and that played some part. Chicago, I think, was a little more political. They might ask you what ward you lived in or what precinct, before they'd ask about your high school. So I enjoyed those block parties and then if there was a block party in the next block, we might go to that one too.

Blanche Touhill: And they were on different days or the same day?

Sharon Stevens: Yes, different days, mm-hmm, yeah, because they could only block off so much of the street.

Blanche Touhill: Were you free to ride your bicycle around or...

Sharon Stevens: Yes. You know, my best friend and I talk about that a lot. She lived two blocks away and we regularly walked to each other's houses when we would go to visit. Sometimes we weren't coming back until, say, 8:00 o'clock at night. It was kind of getting dark. Later in the year, it definitely was dark and we didn't think anything about it.

Blanche Touhill: That's what I'm asking.

Sharon Stevens: Yes, it was so different, particularly for women. I think, probably, just walking around at 8:00 o'clock at night is something that everybody should think about, whether they want to do it. Two blocks becomes very long at that point but particularly for young girls as we were.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, for little girls, yeah.

Sharon Stevens: So, yeah, we rode our bikes, we did a lot of walking.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go on public transpiration?

Sharon Stevens: Yup, sure did.

Blanche Touhill: Did they have school passes in those days?

Sharon Stevens: They did.

Blanche Touhill: Sort of buy one at the beginning of the semester or...

Sharon Stevens: You know, I'm assuming I did. They did have school passes.

Blanche Touhill: I can't remember whether they just gave them to you or whether you paid, but whatever you paid, it was a minimum fee.

Sharon Stevens: Exactly, nothing like whatever it is today. We usually walked until it became too cold to do so because Chicago was so cold in the winter.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

Sharon Stevens: The summer's not too bad, not like St. Louis where it's real humid and where you might want to be on a bus or just anywhere where there's some air conditioning or some air but Chicago, we walked most of the time, and I did not live very close to my high school. It's just something you did.

Blanche Touhill: Now, your family assumed you were going to go to college and do something with your life?

Sharon Stevens: My family hoped I would go to college. Like I said, I wasn't the best student but they definitely knew that I could write and there were subjects where I excelled. I was fine in English, fine in history, a subject I did not even like but I did well in it. But I was that girl who thought in her mind I could not do math or science.

Blanche Touhill: And you weren't encouraged to do it?

Sharon Stevens: And was not encouraged, struggled, much more so with math than science.

Blanche Touhill: Did the teachers say anything to you?

Sharon Stevens: Well, they didn't try to help me. I was stuck. Once I had it here, "I just...I can't do it; I simply can't do it" as opposed to "Well, Sharon, come on, let's try."

Blanche Touhill: Yes, "I'll lead you through."

Sharon Stevens: "I'll show you; I'll help you" that's right. I had one teacher who put a dunce cap on my head.

Blanche Touhill: At what age or what grade?

Sharon Stevens: Fifteen or sixteen.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my.

Sharon Stevens: That was...it was startling, stunning to have that happen, to be singled out like that. It's bad enough when you think you can't do something or

you've convinced yourself and you've cut off all trails, not that there were any, in any type of help. There was no help coming my way.

Blanche Touhill: Was that a math course?

Sharon Stevens: Yes, it was advanced algebra. Maybe I had no business taking it but since I did, you know, "Help me out."

Blanche Touhill: That was a sign you wanted to learn.

Sharon Stevens: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: So how did your family react?

Sharon Stevens: My parents were horrified and they did have a conversation with the teacher. I don't know exactly what was said but I do know that didn't happen again. He and I did not even talk very much after that.

Blanche Touhill: I think that was a wise move.

Sharon Stevens: Mm-hmm, yeah, and I didn't feel a sense...

Blanche Touhill: Did you pass the course?

Sharon Stevens: No, uh-uh, I failed it, I absolutely failed it. I didn't feel a sense of victory. It wasn't that. Obviously I was happy that my parents were shook up enough to...

Blanche Touhill: But, I mean, even after that there was no tutoring; there was no explanation?

Sharon Stevens: No. I don't know if my parents really knew what to do to help me there.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you didn't need advanced algebra to go to college.

Sharon Stevens: No.

Blanche Touhill: You needed algebra and geometry to go to college.

Sharon Stevens: I think I took...I'm almost sure this was it: I took advanced algebra so I wouldn't have to take chemistry. So I was fooling myself.

Blanche Touhill: Did you take advanced chemistry?

Sharon Stevens: I never took chemistry.

- Blanche Touhill: But you had the science the math to get into college.
- Sharon Stevens: That's right, oh, yeah, uh-huh.
- Blanche Touhill: Your family saw to that?
- Sharon Stevens: That's right.
- Blanche Touhill: So they knew that it wasn't...
- Sharon Stevens: I had one math course in college. It was the equivalent of basic college algebra.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, everybody has to take that.
- Sharon Stevens: That's right. This was a requirement. I waited to take it until my last semester of my senior year.
- Blanche Touhill: You were a brave person.
- Sharon Stevens: Now, that teacher, on the other hand, did his best to help me. He said, "You are a graduating senior. I cannot believe you have waited all of this time to take this one class." So he helped me enough so that I got a D in the course.
- Blanche Touhill: Actually, most universities and colleges provide assistance of one kind or another for college algebra. They either ask that you do a lot of workshops before you take it and then, while you're taking it, they provide tutorials or they have teachers that specialize in that.
- Sharon Stevens: Well, this person tutored me. He had me come to his office and by this point; I'm almost frantic because that's all that's standing between me and a diploma.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, well, students do that. That wasn't unusual. They shouldn't do it but they try to maneuver around the counselors to do that.
- Sharon Stevens: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: So, you had your friends around you and you were very social?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes, very social.
- Blanche Touhill: And you could write, loved to write?

- Sharon Stevens: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And I think your parents recognized that it was unusual for a child at the age of eight to start writing stories.
- Sharon Stevens: Mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: I think your mother knew. She taught school. She knew how unusual that was because when you're eight, you're like in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Sharon Stevens: That's correct, uh-huh. I wrote to my mother.
- Blanche Touhill: Maybe she kept the letters.
- Sharon Stevens: And I wrote to her while we were living in the same house. She's in the next room and I would write to her.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, that's how you communicated.
- Sharon Stevens: Yeah, that's right.
- Blanche Touhill: So go on. You decided to go to college and you went where?
- Sharon Stevens: I went to Northern Illinois University and of the state schools in Illinois, it was one of the smaller ones even though there were, like, 21,000, 22,000 students there but it was still much smaller than the University of Illinois or Southern Illinois-Carbondale. We were bigger than, say, Eastern or Western, but still on the small side and the first thing about Northern was, really, I noticed was race. There were just so few African American students there.
- Blanche Touhill: Really, because it's so near Chicago?
- Sharon Stevens: That's correct.
- Blanche Touhill: So you must have been in the first wave because I assume more African American Chicagoans use Northern.
- Sharon Stevens: That's correct. I'm not saying there weren't African American students there...
- Blanche Touhill: No, but there were few compared to...
- Sharon Stevens: Very few.

Blanche Touhill: Compared to the 21,000.

Sharon Stevens: My history teacher was one of them. He was one of my influences. But 200 came in with me.

Blanche Touhill: What year was that? Do you mind telling me?

Sharon Stevens: It was a while ago.

Blanche Touhill: Was it in the '70s?

Sharon Stevens: Close.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, because I think America changed in the '70s.

Sharon Stevens: Sure, no question, and the next class was bigger.

Blanche Touhill: The Civil Rights Act passed in '65, I think...'64 or '65 and it took about 10 years for it to really sink in to the society and the reauthorization of the Civil Rights Act giving protection to sex and race, was '72 and then Title Nine, I think was about '74. So the '70s were huge...

Sharon Stevens: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: ...when the message was beginning to get out: we want diversity; we want women; we want people who haven't availed themselves of that. Where did your mother go to college?

Sharon Stevens: She went to...

Blanche Touhill: Probably a city college.

Sharon Stevens: It was a city college.

Blanche Touhill: For teachers, I'll bet.

Sharon Stevens: Chicago Teachers' College, thank you.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, because that was the same as Stowe in St. Louis.

Sharon Stevens: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So Stowe always prepared African Americans for teaching in the St. Louis public schools...

Sharon Stevens: Right.

- Blanche Touhill: ...although they were separated until Brown versus the Board of Education.
- Sharon Stevens: That's right. You know something else I noticed in college: That was the first time that I'd gone to a school with white students.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, how was that?
- Sharon Stevens: Well, I had recently read Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man." I knew how he felt. One thing I noticed, though, was that there were a number of women in my journalism classes and, for the first two years, I was the only African American and then more came.
- Blanche Touhill: Talk about the diversity of the journalism program.
- Sharon Stevens: Well, I was the only African American woman for a while.
- Blanche Touhill: Were there other women?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Many?
- Sharon Stevens: I wouldn't say many but more than five.
- Blanche Touhill: But, I mean, if you had a class of 30, what were the women, 10?
- Sharon Stevens: Five to ten, no more than that, definitely not.
- Blanche Touhill: Because journalism was late in opening up.
- Sharon Stevens: Mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: But go on.
- Sharon Stevens: I'd never gone to school with white students before. I'd been involved with some organizations in Chicago that promoted diversity but I'd never gone to school with white students and we found that we liked each other. These were kind of turbulent times so there were issues and marches, sometimes together, sometimes not, but I kind of discovered my sense of humor and I can remember doing a project with a couple of white students, particularly two women, and we put together this project that the teacher absolutely hated and we were in an advertising class because then they were just kind of altogether, the courses, I mean. And

we put together an ad campaign for a drive-through funeral parlor, which exists today in some cities. There are drive-through funeral parlors. We were just ahead of our time.

Blanche Touhill: You drive through and do you view the body?

Sharon Stevens: Yes, there's a window. You take a look, "Goodbye, Murray" and then you go.

Blanche Touhill: And then you drive on.

Sharon Stevens: Uh-huh.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, go on.

Sharon Stevens: And I remember this one woman...I think her name was Bea, Beatrice, and we just thought this was hilarious. We had such fun putting together this whole campaign. It was really creative. The instructor hated it and he failed us. I remember we had to go to the dean of the department and ask that this grade be reversed because it had nothing to do with whether we had done the work. We did. We did the work. He just personally was offended.

Blanche Touhill: Did the dean agree with you?

Sharon Stevens: Yes. But it was very interesting.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I do recall, when I went to college, girls weren't in the service and we had, signing up for classes, these three girls went up and signed up for ROTC classes, which we thought was so funny, and then, lo and behold, years later...well, then they found out that they were female and they tossed them out of the program. But I thought it was so funny that girls would be in the service. I knew they had been...

Sharon Stevens: They had WACs and WAVES.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they did, that's right, but to be in the ROTC, I just never thought of a woman being in the ROTC. I knew they could be in the Wax and Waves and go through officer's training. And we all laughed, all my girlfriends laughed and then, lo and behold, 10 years later or 15 years later, they were in the ROTC. It was an era of great change, great change.

Sharon Stevens: Yes, indeed.

Blanche Touhill: So go on, so you took journalism and you knew that's what you wanted to do.

Sharon Stevens: Oh, no question about it, and I started out like a lot of people, on the print side and it wasn't until I actually took a couple of courses in broadcasting that I thought, oh, here's something that I could do too. I've got a voice; I could do this. So I did graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism and I went on to my first job at another community newspaper. It was kind of like the Bulletin. It was called the Chatham Citizen and Chatham was named for the neighborhood that we lived in and so I worked for a guy who actually had worked at the Bulletin as well, so all these things are circular, and we didn't get along very well at all. Just to show you how things have come back around, I was a reporter for the paper and I'd go to community meetings or events or a store opening or something like that and so he wanted me to sell ads and I said, "Well, I'm the reporter." I felt there was a conflict: "I'd like to interview you for this story and, oh, by the way, would you buy an ad?" and I just thought there was a conflict. Well, he thought the conflict was me not doing what he said so he fired me. That's when I went ahead and took the leap into broadcasting and started working at the CBS owned and operated station in Chicago, WBBM Radio, and I came in as an intern, paid, like a production assistant and I remember one of the first things that one of the on-air people asked me to do was to make some coffee and I thought, oh, you know, I don't think so. I said, "I don't drink coffee. I wouldn't know how to make it" and I was being honest. To this day I don't drink coffee. And he just looked so perplexed. He said, "Well, that's one of the things you're supposed to do" and I said, "Well, really, I do not know how to make coffee" so he just let it go.

Blanche Touhill: He did let it go?

Sharon Stevens: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And who did he ask to make the coffee then? He found somebody else?

Sharon Stevens: You know, he found somebody else. I didn't even pay attention to the coffee machine. I didn't know who was making it, you know? I think I was surprised when he asked me, no question about it.

Blanche Touhill: Because it wasn't a professional job?

- Sharon Stevens: Right, exactly, or at least ask me, "Do you know how to make coffee? Would you mind?" something like that, but....
- Blanche Touhill: But he just said get the coffee.
- Sharon Stevens: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: How did you get that job? Did you go through Northern Illinois or did you just write them or call them?
- Sharon Stevens: Well, CBS was starting a new program where they wanted to have more ethnic minorities and women and it was specifically for people who were maybe just coming out of college or not too far out. It was very clear that it was the low end of the spectrum and that it was more like an internship except that it was a paid job.
- Blanche Touhill: Did it have beginning and ending dates?
- Sharon Stevens: No. It was a sustaining job.
- Blanche Touhill: If you got into it, then you could move up if you wanted to?
- Sharon Stevens: That's right. That is correct.
- Blanche Touhill: And did you move up?
- Sharon Stevens: I did. I went back to school. I went to Columbia University in New York and I came back, oh, about eight months later and I became an on-air reporter.
- Blanche Touhill: For the same station?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes, mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: And did you take then journalism there at Columbia University?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes, mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: How did you get to Columbia? Somebody recommended it?
- Sharon Stevens: Well, they also had a program. You know, this was a time when everybody was starting to open those doors and so these programs were specifically aimed at finding African Americans, Latinos, Asians, women, people who had not been in the mainstream of certain jobs, and if you remember, the Kerner Commission Report, pointed out...

- Blanche Touhill: Yes, I do.
- Sharon Stevens: Okay, we have two societies, one black, one white, separate, unequal. So, as part of trying to correct these issues, there were programs everywhere. It wasn't just journalism but, of course, I was focused on that. There were other programs as well but I looked for those programs.
- Blanche Touhill: You know, I had a friend who was an African American and she was a lawyer and one day she said to me...she worked on this campus...and she said to me, about this journalism opportunity and it was to be a TV reporter and she said, "Do you think I ought to do it?" I said, "I really can't say" because I wasn't in it. I didn't know about it. But the reality is, there were no African American women on the TV or the radio much, were there?
- Sharon Stevens: No.
- Blanche Touhill: Or really, in newspapers. There weren't Caucasian women reporters either.
- Sharon Stevens: Right, not reporting hard news; maybe party circuit news.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yeah, the social, who was getting married?
- Sharon Stevens: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: So go on. So you came back then and you became an on-air reporter.
- Sharon Stevens: Right. In fact, the program that I did at Columbia was a fellowship and it was named after one of the first African American women to become a network correspondent.
- Blanche Touhill: Who was that?
- Sharon Stevens: Michelle Clark, CBS News, and unfortunately, she lost her life in a plane crash and I just remember crying and my mother was just kind of patting me and we knew her. We knew her family. They were pioneers in Chicago for desegregating a neighborhood. So there was a lot of history there. She was a wonderful person really. So I was honored to be a part of that. I wanted to follow in her footsteps, you know?
- Blanche Touhill: Of course.

Sharon Stevens: Later on, I think, women looked at Barbara Walters, me, too, and said, "I want to be in this business just like Barbara Walters."

Blanche Touhill: I always heard the radio business was very hard.

Sharon Stevens: It was hard.

Blanche Touhill: That a new manager could come in and just wipe everybody out. Is that true? I suppose it's still true.

Sharon Stevens: I think it is true, and I don't think it's just limited to journalism.

Blanche Touhill: No, it isn't, but it seemed to me that it was a particularly hard...especially for radio...I think if you went with a CBS or an NBC, maybe you could transfer to another area but when I hear tales of that in small towns, I've heard it's very hard to hang on when one manager comes in.

Sharon Stevens: I think that is absolutely true.

Blanche Touhill: How did you transfer to TV?

Sharon Stevens: Well, I'll tell you in a second, but let me just share something with you. One thing women faced, particularly in the '70s, we wanted those jobs but you had to be able to work those horrible shifts. You could not say, "I can't work at night; I can't start my shift at midnight," that's not fair. The guys do it. Do we want to be equal? Then we're going to have to do that too, and I had a shift. I had several shifts that started late at night.

Blanche Touhill: And you just did it?

Sharon Stevens: You had to. It was the right thing to do. Now, were there a disproportionate number of us on those shifts? Maybe because we came in and we were lower in seniority and that's who those shifts went to. Now, if you'd been there for a while, you got a better pick, and obviously if you were doing your work and they liked you, had some plans for you, that would make things a little easier.

Blanche Touhill: So you stayed in Chicago with that one station?

Sharon Stevens: Yes, mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: And then, how did you get to St. Louis?

Sharon Stevens: Well, I made a stop in New York, a stop in Boston, did a little time in D.C.

Blanche Touhill: All with CBS?

Sharon Stevens: No, with NBC in New York, NBC Network Radio, and then in Boston with WGBH-TV which is one of the premier public television stations.

Blanche Touhill: So you moved on to the public side as well?

Sharon Stevens: That's right, mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: What's the difference between the public side and the commercial side?

Sharon Stevens: Well, two things: one, money. You don't get paid as much. Most public television stations didn't have a news component. WGBH was one of the few. The public television stations in New York and San Francisco also had news departments, much smaller but at least they had news. Pay was much lower. Generally these were not stations that were unionized. Some were but most were not. But you got to do almost anything you wanted. I was doing long form news stories at WGBH. I could take...say your average story is a minute fifteen, a minute thirty, tops, on any given news station. I could do stories that were three minutes and if I could fill the time, five minutes. I liked that.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and you could do it yourself?

Sharon Stevens: That's right.

Blanche Touhill: And you were professional enough that they would put it on?

Sharon Stevens: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: I guess you had to clear it with lawyers or something?

Sharon Stevens: Well, if there was some controversy, of course.

Blanche Touhill: But you knew what to do and what not to do?

Sharon Stevens: That is correct, and by this time, there were more women in the business and there were a group of us at WGBH, we became fast friends and so we formed our little group. I wouldn't call it a clique because it's not like no outsiders allowed. It's just that we liked hanging together and so there was a guy we worked with. His name was Charlie and he wanted to know if he could just be the honorary guy in the group.

Blanche Touhill: Did he join?

Sharon Stevens: Mm-hmm, of course, because he said we always looked like we were having such fun and we looked out for each other and I appreciated that type of camaraderie, and we were from everywhere. There were African Americans in the group; there were Asians; there were whites; there were people who had different religions and they were really a good group of people.

Blanche Touhill: So then what happened?

Sharon Stevens: So then, my dad died and I moved back home to help Mother out and I had another radio job while I was there. I was still working and looking for something else and a friend of mine with whom I'd gone to college and who was a print reporter down here in St. Louis...well, was working in St. Louis and I called her to see what was going on and she said, "Well, here's a couple television stations you might contact." So she was extremely helpful and one of those stations was Channel 2, KTVI, which at that time was an ABC station, an ABC affiliate and so I came down for an interview. They offered me a job. I said, "Okay."

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful! And you've been here how many years?

Sharon Stevens: Thirty.

Blanche Touhill: Thirty years? So you're a St. Louisan now?

Sharon Stevens: No, no, I'm a Chicagoan.

Blanche Touhill: You're still a Chicagoan, okay. And you're still with the White Sox is what you're telling me.

Sharon Stevens: That's correct. People do that all the time, "Oh, you've been here so long, you're a St. Louisan," and I know that's how it really is. I live here. My home is here but...

Blanche Touhill: But a lot of your loyalties...

Sharon Stevens: I will forever be a Chicagoan, no offense to St. Louis at all.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I ran into you when I was in academic administration at the university but I knew you from the Journalism Workshop. Would you talk about that, how you helped to form that and everything?

Sharon Stevens: Well, the Minority Journalism Workshop is what it's known as formally, MJW. It is sponsored by the Greater St. Louis Association of Black Journalists and we were the first one in the country. There are lots of other journalism workshops now but we were the first one within the structure of the National Association of Black Journalist, NABJ, and so what we do is we help high school students. That was founded in 1977, long before I got here and so we help high school students who are interested in journalism to get an idea of what it might be like. We have projects for them. At first it was just print so they printed a newspaper called the Black Scribe and then we added radio and television so they produced a radio program and a television program. Then we added public relations and so they put together brochures and handled...we have what are called "mock news conferences," and we have the students ask questions. They do all the interviewing and they've got to put together their own work under our guidance, the guidance of professional people. It's all volunteer and when we were here at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which was our home for a long time, we had it for eight Saturdays. That's a long time.

Blanche Touhill: You had a good crowd though.

Sharon Stevens: Yes, we did.

Blanche Touhill: I would go over and look at them. They were all interested and there was a good number. I'm going to say there were 50 or 60. Is that possible?

Sharon Stevens: Fifty was our highest number. We achieved that several times.

Blanche Touhill: And boys and girls.

Sharon Stevens: Boys and girls, mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: And sort of an equal number of boys and girls?

Sharon Stevens: That's correct. Now, some years, we have fewer boys. I'm not sure why but I do know economics comes into play. A lot of the students who would be interested in our program have jobs so there have been years when we might have only had two guys and that would always bother me but I was glad it was two instead of zero.

Blanche Touhill: That's right, and my memory was everybody in your organization played a different role.

Sharon Stevens: Right.

Blanche Touhill: They taught different things, is that right?

Sharon Stevens: That's correct, yes. I would teach in the television section myself and Bonita Cornute, people who are still around. The late Greg Freeman who was at the Post-Dispatch was leading on the print side, along with many other people. We had Gloria Ross, who was a former president of the St. Louis Press Club on the public relations side.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful!

Sharon Stevens: Yes. So, yeah, we had a lot of people.

Blanche Touhill: And it still goes on today?

Sharon Stevens: And it still goes on today, thank goodness. There have been some lean times.

Blanche Touhill: But it's now at Flo Valley, Florissant Valley Community College?

Sharon Stevens: St. Louis Community College at Flo Valley, that's correct, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Now, you've moved from Channel 2 and then you moved to other channels?

Sharon Stevens: Channel 5, right. In my later years at Channel 2, my latter years, I became the education reporter.

Blanche Touhill: You did because that's how I used to interview with you every once in a while.

Sharon Stevens: That's right. Well, you know, what's interesting is that I really wanted to be the City Hall reporter and so one of my producers, he was in management, with whom I was good friends, pulled me aside one day. He said, "You're not getting the City Hall job," and I was so upset. He said, "But we're going to make you the education reporter." So I thought, okay, I'll get a beat out of it. I said, "Well, what is it, is it because I'm black or because I'm a woman?" He said, "You're not getting the job," and as it turned out, there was no City Hall reporter. They didn't make anybody the City Hall reporter. Now, there were people who covered City Hall but...

Blanche Touhill: But not one person?

Sharon Stevens: That is correct.

Blanche Touhill: Well, education was exciting, wasn't it?

Sharon Stevens: That's right. We had a political reporter. Now, that was a beat, and we had medical reporter, that was a beat, and then education, yeah. So, I was, good, okay, I'll take that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you ever go to the St. Louis Public Schools' board meeting?

Sharon Stevens: Way too many times.

Blanche Touhill: I went once and they were exciting meetings is all I can say.

Sharon Stevens: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Then, you stayed and then finally now you're with...

Sharon Stevens: The Higher Education Channel so I'm doing part-time. It's almost going back to WGBH in that I'm doing long form TV again, which is what was very, very interesting and enticing to me. I could do that.

Blanche Touhill: You do things other than education?

Sharon Stevens: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: You do a wide variety?

Sharon Stevens: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Is it what you want or it's what the management wants or how do you work it out?

Sharon Stevens: Well, they've suggested ideas to me and I've suggested ideas so it's a nice little back and forth and I'm happy to all of their suggestions...have worked out fine; mine have worked out so, yeah, I like it.

Blanche Touhill: You know, I think it's unusual for somebody to remain in the kind of work you have done all those years.

Sharon Stevens: I think it's tough as well.

Blanche Touhill: It's very tough.

- Sharon Stevens: But again, I point to Barbara Walters, who, while she sort of reinvented herself, she stayed in the medium that she loved for all of those years. What is she, 85 or something? I'm not even sure.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, she did. And people sought her out to be interviewed.
- Sharon Stevens: That's right.
- Blanche Touhill: I mean, she had a market, didn't she?
- Sharon Stevens: That's right, absolutely. There is a woman in San Francisco, an African American woman named Belva Davis, very popular. She was on the air for years, just carved her own little niche.
- Blanche Touhill: How do you carve out a niche, because you have to be accepted by the people?
- Sharon Stevens: I think you do too, but you have an idea and you agree to work so hard on it and to own it that it becomes just a part of the fabric. So if you're on The View, you've made that your program. People associate you and with Belva, she had one of those programs that talked a lot about what was going on in the community and so people thought about community programming...Belva that kind of thing and I hoped that once I had the education beat...I tried to make that something so that people would call.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, and they did.
- Sharon Stevens: You know, "I've got an education story. Let me call Sharon."
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, they did, too. I'm going to change the subject a little bit. Did you get some award or awards in your life that you really treasure?
- Sharon Stevens: I have had a few awards. I was recognized by the National Association of Black Journalists, our local chapter, as the Journalist of the Year one year and I thought, that is just great.
- Blanche Touhill: What was the story?
- Sharon Stevens: It was body of work.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, body of work, even more important.
- Sharon Stevens: Right, and that just thrilled me.

- Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's your peers.
- Sharon Stevens: Right, that my peers thought that much of me, so for one year, I get to be the face of the organization in terms of what good journalism should be.
- Blanche Touhill: My other question is: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like?
- Sharon Stevens: Well, I kind of hope that maybe I would have been like Ida B. Wells and put together a newspaper that talked about the atrocities of segregation. She was very brave but I don't know. I certainly don't think I would have gotten as far as I did.
- Blanche Touhill: You would have written though? You would have been a writer?
- Sharon Stevens: No question, no question.
- Blanche Touhill: And you would have done journalism of some kind?
- Sharon Stevens: That's right.
- Blanche Touhill: Would you have been welcome at Northern Illinois?
- Sharon Stevens: I don't know, probably not, but I don't know for sure.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, your mother went to a city college for teachers...
- Sharon Stevens: That is correct. There were white students there as well.
- Blanche Touhill: But you could have gone...well, I wonder when the first African Americans went to that school.
- Sharon Stevens: Exactly. That's why I said, I don't know when the first African Americans entered Northern. I know that there were African Americans at Northwestern, which is a fine, wonderful school, particularly for journalism, or the University of Illinois. I mean, I know that one of my sorority sisters just had a building named after her. I think she was the first African American woman there. So that said a lot, not only for us as black people, but for women, that she got into the University of Illinois. But I think things would have been different.
- Blanche Touhill: Would you have taught school?
- Sharon Stevens: Sure, absolutely.

- Blanche Touhill: And maybe run a newspaper or something of that nature, but you would have been in journalism of some kind?
- Sharon Stevens: Of some kind, that is correct. I'm absolutely sure of it.
- Blanche Touhill: Because that's your theme.
- Sharon Stevens: It was my calling.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, and are you particularly proud of a body of work that you really did?
- Sharon Stevens: You know, I try to think about a favorite story and it's just too hard, you know?
- Blanche Touhill: So you think of what you contributed to CBS or ABC or to public radio or something like that.
- Sharon Stevens: Right, and to the community, you know? I'd like to think that, by being a part of the local and national workshops...that's something else, every year I go to North Carolina, A&T State University in Greensborough and teach a similar course but this time it's on the college level.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, or future journalists?
- Sharon Stevens: That's correct. For those who are about to get their jobs, they have to be juniors or seniors in college. It's a very intense program.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, you've lived during a tumultuous time that has nothing to do with race but with the demise of print journalism as we have known it.
- Sharon Stevens: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you want to comment on that?
- Sharon Stevens: Well, I tell you, I hate to see that it's come to this. You can't stop progress. Time marches on but I still read my newspapers.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes, I do. I know I can read them online. I just prefer to have my newspapers in hand. I want to see the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; I want to see the St. Louis American and there's no way I'm going through Sunday without reading the New York Times. I read online too but I prefer to

have that. So I miss the way newspapers used to be. I hate that colleagues have lost jobs that newspapers have shut down.

Blanche Touhill: Well, what worries me is when you get your information from the computer, that sometimes you're reading things that aren't written by journalists who know how to do the research and present it in a more rounded manner. How do you think this is all going to end up?

Sharon Stevens: Well, I think that everything is going to be on a computer of some sort. We can see it in television, that a lot of people are watching the screens that they can hold in their hands, although that's not a favorite of mine. It's so small. I would like to have a 60" flat screen TV.

Blanche Touhill: So you could read.

Sharon Stevens: That's right.

Blanche Touhill: You can read more easily.

Sharon Stevens: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Well, it's something to watch, isn't it?

Sharon Stevens: It is, indeed, and who knows, the pendulum may swing.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, we don't know. It's like books. I like to hold the book...

Sharon Stevens: That's right.

Blanche Touhill: ...but everybody I know reads on a...

Sharon Stevens: Has a Kindle reader.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, has a Kindle reader. So it's just changing times and America, in particular, is a changing society.

Sharon Stevens: No question.

Blanche Touhill: Was your mother...were they proud of you?

Sharon Stevens: Yes, absolutely and I just found...I was doing some cleaning up, I found a letter from my mother and so she was saying, "I'm so glad you're..."...I forget what year it was but, you know, decades ago...she said, "I'm glad you're coming home and..."...she said, "you know, I like to show you off to my friends."

Blanche Touhill: Oh, isn't that nice!

Sharon Stevens: So, yes, both of my parents were extremely supportive and really, all of my family. I think I was very blessed in that way.

Blanche Touhill: Did you make your way more easily because you are so socially adept?

Sharon Stevens: I think it probably helped. I'm pretty friendly and I'm curious. I know how to ask a question without being off-putting, although sometimes you have to be off-putting if somebody's running from you. And I think, again, once I really discovered my sense of humor, I think that helped. You put people at ease.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Well, you have to feel that you're going to get a fair hearing.

Sharon Stevens: Sure, absolutely. That's right. And there are those times where you have to ask "those" questions that you just...and your choice, if you don't want to answer them but I have to ask this, and I hate that, when people say, "You know, I'm sorry to ask you this..." ...I think it's very polite but you know I have to ask you that.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course. Do you have a favorite commentator that you listen to?

Sharon Stevens: On television, no. I listen to a variety of people but, no, no favorites.

Blanche Touhill: Okay.

Sharon Stevens: I used to, when I was a kid, the father of a friend of mine was the editorial director at a local radio station. They catered mainly to African Americans and so he was always spouting off about something and his tag line was "Now run and tell that" and I loved that and I recently have been back in touch with the son and I said, "You know, your father just always, whenever he said that, that kind of made the day."

Blanche Touhill: Do you belong to a sorority?

Sharon Stevens: I do. I'm a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated.

Blanche Touhill: And they do a lot of charitable work?

Sharon Stevens: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your charity work.

- Sharon Stevens: Well, of course, we have voter registration drives that we're very active in and outside of the sorority; I've also been involved with the Black Rep so I'm really proud of that.
- Blanche Touhill: Go on about the Black Rep.
- Sharon Stevens: Well, when I first came to town, the Black Rep was one of the first places that I went to and then it was in a church, I think it was on 23<sup>rd</sup> street, not much to look at but just great productions and I'd always had an interest in theater and I think, had I not gone into journalism, I might have gone into theater. When I was in college, I actually directed a play. I wasn't even in the department but I was just so enthusiastic. I wanted to do it.
- Blanche Touhill: What was the play you directed?
- Sharon Stevens: I don't remember the name of it. I wish I did.
- Blanche Touhill: But you enjoyed it.
- Sharon Stevens: Oh, my gosh, yeah, and it was just something that ran for a night or two but it was just thrilling. It was exhilarating and when I lived in New York, I practically lived on Broadway. I saw everything and I must have seen The Wiz at least six times because everyone who came to town wanted to go see it. I've enjoyed working with the Black Rep, sat on the board for a number of years and, like many institutions, especially in the arts, they've had a hard time. So I'm hoping that better days are ahead.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Are they still performing?
- Sharon Stevens: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Where do they perform now, just around?
- Sharon Stevens: They're at Harris Stowe State University.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, well, that's...
- Sharon Stevens: The Emerson Performance Center.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, they have a theater there.
- Sharon Stevens: That's right, mm-hmm.

- Blanche Touhill: And I bet they get some of their students to join the group, don't they or do they let the students...
- Sharon Stevens: Well, they actually have their own troupe there at Harris, at Harris Stowe.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, I know they have it, yes, but I'm just wondering. They just rent the place? They don't...but I think sometimes students who are going to school there would like to help or...
- Sharon Stevens: Right and I'm guessing that they probably do, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, as sort of an intern.
- Sharon Stevens: That's right. Here's something else that I've done too: I've worked with Girls Incorporated which is an organization that aims to help young ladies be successful in life. I sat on that board for a while and have visited with the young ladies and talked with them and tried to be encouraging.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Have any of the students that you've touched base with over the years, have they gone into journalism? Do you ever meet up with them?
- Sharon Stevens: Oh, yes, mm-hmm, yes. Over at Channel 4, Brittany Nobel-Jones was part of our NABJ workshop program on the national level and later was an intern at Channel 5 and so this year she came back to work in the program as a professional and she told the students a story about working under me. It was just so delightful to have somebody that you could go back with and here they are, coming forward and giving back. And it's really important to have young women in these roles, all takers, okay? I take everybody in this program but I really want to see young ladies because I think that young women in high school need role models now more than ever. So I'm so glad that a Benita Cornute is still around but that new people like Brittany Nobel-Jones are coming around.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Well, it's been wonderful talking to you and I've known you for years and...
- Sharon Stevens: It's kind of fun reversing roles, isn't it?
- Blanche Touhill: It is, it's wonderful. Yeah, well, it is in a way, yeah, but I'm not a professional at it. I'm sort of an amateur who is more of a historian and that's really what this is all about, to save your life to help; really, young people in the future know who was one of the frontiersmen or

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frontierswoman in the field of communication. So thank you very much. You've done a lot for St. Louis and I know for the nation in the area of spreading the news.

Sharon Stevens: Well, thank you very, very much. I enjoyed this.