

An Interview with
Robbyn Wahby

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
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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.

Robbyn Wahby: My name is Robbyn Wahby.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about when you were a child: your family; your siblings; your parents; your grandparents; your cousins, anybody you want to...the kids you played with, how did you play? What I'm really interested in is what were your early years like and then I'm interested in, did anybody in your family say to you, "Robbyn, you have ability and you have certain talents and you should prize them"?

Robbyn Wahby: Well, my parents were older. My dad was 37 when I was born. I was born in 1963 so right at the end of the baby boom so I'm really not of the baby boom era but I'm not not. I'm at the tail end. So my father was a veteran. He was in the Second World War. My mother didn't finish high school. My father was the first in our family to finish high school and he went right from Cleveland High School into...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, he did?

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, right here in the city and then right into the navy and then, like so many of his generation, really shaped who he was and so that shaped who I am. So I grew up listening to big band music and I had a dad who grew up in the Depression so we reused Ziploc bags and other things that one learns and that's passed on, the sort of frugality of it and not ever taking anything for granted. My dad drove a cab. He had worked for Remington Rand when he came back from the service and years later, I asked him about the decision not to use the GI Bill and he said that he didn't know anybody that went to college and because of being a Depression kid, he went to work. So he worked for Remington Rand and that didn't work out well for him. He had a boss that wanted him to hire someone who was a romantic person of the boss and my dad didn't do it and he lost his job. My mother was pregnant with me and my dad started driving a cab and for 25 years, my dad drove a cab in the City of St. Louis. What I got out of that experience of being raised by someone who went through the Second World War, lived through the Depression and then took a job that I think, in a lot of ways, was beneath his intellect and ability, was the importance of family, the importance of doing whatever it takes to not be a victim, that you have to actually overcome whatever barriers are in your way and find meaning in all the work that you do. And so my dad was chief shop steward of his union and he took care of the other drivers who were maybe illiterate or had substance abuse

problems and racial inequities within the time in which my dad was working. All of that was the context in which I grew up. I have a sister; she's 14 months younger than I am. She took a more traditional route even for our age group. She left high school, married her high school sweetheart and they have two children and when her youngest was in elementary school, she went back to school and she is a high school teacher and she's nationally board-certified, loves it. She's an art teacher. She's phenomenal at it. So she went a different route than I did. So I went to work after high school. I went to the same high school that my father went to, which I think is pretty typical of a lot of us in St. Louis. So I went to Cleveland High School.

Blanche Touhill: And it was so good. Cleveland High School was such a good school.

Robbyn Wahby: It was. My senior year was the first year of the desegregation case so I had the experience of living through...

Blanche Touhill: ...the change.

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, but not being a on a bus but watching children come in and watching my community be torn apart by old thinking and being drug into a new world. So I remember distinctly the first day of school my senior year in high school where we had armed police surrounding the building to allow a bus of African American children attend our school and I remember the parents, white parents, protesting those children and just the meanness and the nastiness and they were just kids like me.

Blanche Touhill: Were you afraid?

Robbyn Wahby: No, I was ashamed. I didn't understand why this would be the reaction, what we were getting and we were sort of prepared for it. The first change was the faculty were changed. We received teachers from Soldan and it's interesting now, thinking about it, Soldan was so far away from Cleveland High School and it's a 10-minute...

Blanche Touhill: ...ride.

Robbyn Wahby: ...maximum, 10-minute. I'm in that neighborhood all the time and I think because of the way that my father was raised and the way that my father raised us, it just was not acceptable and I didn't understand that my whole community saw that these children were a problem just because

of their race or that there was an assumption of the things that were happening in our school. I was also bewildered by the way the people that ran the school reacted to it, real lack of leadership. There wasn't the pulling people together initially. There was cowering. I mean, literally, the principal had locked himself in his office and was not really...

Blanche Touhill: ...seen in the halls.

Robbyn Wahby: Oh, he was fearful. He was fearful. And what I think, that did shape me a lot in the work that I do now and the way that I saw my responsibility in my community, because several of us, as seniors, were tapped to a boy and a girl African American and a white were trained to go into classrooms and speak to freshmen about conflict resolution and getting along and I think being tapped early to take on that responsibility, it was another opportunity for me to think about, what's my job here? What's my role here in helping my community? So, that wasn't something I chose. It wasn't something that I thought, oh, I'll go to this school because it's integrated or I'll be part of the desegregation case, but it very much shaped how I saw what our community needed to do in order to get over this.

Blanche Touhill: Was that the fall of '59 or '54 or what?

Robbyn Wahby: No, actually, that was the fall of 1980 so that really does speak to...'54, the Brown case...

Blanche Touhill: So Cleveland didn't have African Americans until 1980?

Robbyn Wahby: 1980. There were a handful of kids who lived in South St. Louis by Kremlin Park on a street called Coronado and there were deed restrictions that those families that owned that property were to, I guess, pass that property on to other African Americans. So there was a couple of blocks within South St. Louis...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, for years. They were there for 50 years, 60 years or 100 years.

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely, and so those children were children but I really think that was a handful of kids and so it was 1980 when we saw the actual desegregation case. 1972 is when Minnie LaDelle filed her suit, the '54...

Blanche Touhill: ...Brown versus the Board of Education.

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah...was not being enacted in St. Louis and so '72 became the LaDelle case and 1980 was the actual implementation of that case.

Blanche Touhill: Well, let me say that I taught at Central High School and I was just trying to think of what year I taught there and I had just sort of gotten out of college and I had a Master's Degree. I had gone straight through and I went back later for my doctorate but I was at Central High School and it was the first year they integrated. Did they just begin by taking people from the neighborhood? Is that how they did it?

Robbyn Wahby: So, the first thing they did is they moved faculty because there was, African American faculty taught in African American schools and white faculty taught in white schools.

Blanche Touhill: But, see, that was at Central in '54 and I'm just trying to think whether it was '54 or '55. So I'm saying, they desegregated the schools at different times.

Robbyn Wahby: Well, I think more of St. Louis was fairly white up until probably the '40s. The migration of African Americans from the South and then the exodus of whites, so whites moved from North St. Louis to South St. Louis. Remember, South St. Louis was ethnic, right? There was the Polish population, Irish population, the Italian population, the Syrian population and white middle class families, white Daughters of the Revolution, the other folks that had been part of the St. Louis population for a long time moved South and then African Americans moved up from the South but into North St. Louis. And so until about, I would say, post-World War II, so when we saw Pruitt-Igoe built, when we saw FHA and the development of housing policy that moved people out to the suburbs, returning vets wanting their...

Blanche Touhill: ...dream home?

Robbyn Wahby: ...their dream home.

Blanche Touhill: They lived in those four-family flats and they wanted their own place.

Robbyn Wahby: Right, absolutely and so that changed the dynamics of the city so there had been more integrated schools like Soldan High School had been an integrated school.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it went almost overnight...

Robbyn Wahby: Right.

Blanche Touhill: ...because they lived in that neighborhood.

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: So that's really very interesting. I guess they didn't start bussing until later.

Robbyn Wahby: Until 1980.

Blanche Touhill: But if you were in the neighborhood, they opened the schools in that early, mid-'50s kind of period.

Robbyn Wahby: Right, so before '54, you may have been put on a bus or worse, not on a bus because they were given an assignment.

Blanche Touhill: They were segregated.

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, so Sumner High School, Vishon High School would have all been segregated schools. They were all segregated and children actually, before that, before '54, children in St. Louis County, African American children were sent to African American schools, Sumner High School...

Blanche Touhill: In the county?

Robbyn Wahby: Well, actually...

Blanche Touhill: Or did they bring them into the city?

Robbyn Wahby: Actually, Central High School in the city, Central High School was the high school. Remember, the "H" was Central High School's letter on their jerseys, was an "H" for high school.

Blanche Touhill: Because it was the high school.

Robbyn Wahby: It was the high school. So then Sumner was built for African American kids.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, but the high school really...Central started...because my aunt taught at the old Central that blew down in the tornado of, like, I don't know, 1926 or '27 or something like that, and then they moved that faculty...she moved to Beaumont but they moved some of that faculty to the moved Central.

- Robbyn Wahby: Yes, the new Central.
- Blanche Touhill: But you're right, Central was the high school.
- Robbyn Wahby: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: It was like St. Louis U High, they made the high school.
- Robbyn Wahby: Right, the high school.
- Blanche Touhill: It's where did you go to high school in St. Louis.
- Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, so your experience of having an integrated classroom had a lot to do with where you lived and then the desegregation case was a lot about the assignment lines being moved so that they kept kids from going into all-white schools, kept African American kids from going into all-white schools. So that was sort of my growing up period. So having a dad who is really active in his union, which is all about justice and...
- Blanche Touhill: ...and a leader.
- Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, and a leader, and then not going to college but having a high school education...
- Blanche Touhill: And a good high school education.
- Robbyn Wahby: Oh, my dad, he could do math in his head like nobody's business and he had a vocabulary that was amazing, well read.
- Blanche Touhill: What grade school did you go to? Did you go to Scrogg's?
- Robbyn Wahby: I did not. My dad actually went to Scrogg's.
- Blanche Touhill: I had relatives who went to Scrogg's.
- Robbyn Wahby: So I went to Blough School for middle school. We had lived in Webster Groves when I was young so I went to Kennard in the city and then we moved to Avery and then we came back into the city and I went to Blough School.
- Blanche Touhill: You know, they say Kennard is still one of the best elementary schools in the region.
- Robbyn Wahby: It is, actually, it's a magnet school now for gifted kids.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, is it? Okay.

Robbyn Wahby: When I first went back to Kennard years later, I couldn't believe how tiny everything was. It seemed like such a big place.

Blanche Touhill: Well, did your father and mother say to you, "If you want to go to college, we'll help you" or did they just not mention it? You could do whatever you wanted to do?

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, so my dad was really insistent that I go to college.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, he was?

Robbyn Wahby: It was always a conversation, that "you need to go to college; you have to plan to go to college" and I think that choice of going to work instead of going to college, I think really gnawed at my dad all of his life. It was not something that he even saw as a possibility. What he instilled in me was that vision but no tools. I didn't know what that meant at all.

Blanche Touhill: Well, he didn't know how to guide you into the process.

Robbyn Wahby: No, but it was important that he said, and particularly a young woman growing up in the '70s where it was much more of a conversation about women's rights, obviously and that women should go to college. It didn't seem extraordinary to me that I would be doing that, even though I look back on it and think about how few of my peers were going to college. They were still going into school.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I'll even take it a step further: I went to St. Louis University, I got a scholarship when I went down to St. Louis University and there were these women that I was just talking about that I went to lunch with the other day, there were very few women in the freshman class, considering the number of students in the freshman class. But it was the first time they accepted women into the College of Arts & Sciences. Prior to that time...I had a sister-in-law who was a little older than I was and she was accepted into something like University College or something...when did I start to college...I started to college in the fall of '49 and when I went in, it was the first time...but I didn't even know it was a change. Do you know what I'm saying? I just signed up. It was the College of Arts & Sciences and I went in but it was the first year they integrated. They integrated before Brown vs. The Board of Education and Bill Clay was in my class and

there were a lot of other African Americans that I would meet throughout my life and it was so helpful to me because a lot of those women went into teaching and I went into teaching at St. Louis Public Schools. So we really met and knew each other and talked about old teachers that we had and I didn't fully grasp that it was the first time they integrated. You just sort of go with the flow and you're there and everything's normal and you just think life...it's been like this forever but it wasn't that way forever.

Robbyn Wahby: No, like, a fish doesn't know the water they swim in, right? And it's only in looking back, you're like, wow, that was really an important time. I remember talking to my guidance counselor in high school about going to college. I wanted to become an engineer.

Blanche Touhill: Do you have mathematical skills?

Robbyn Wahby: I loved math and science. I was president of my science club. Robert Wagner was my chemistry teacher and he was a terrific man to guide me and to take me to science fairs, to take me to seminars on science. It was just terrific but there wasn't an infrastructure for women to go into science. No one said, "You could be a chemist" or "You could be an engineer," but I really was at that time thinking, that's really what I want to do; I want to be an engineer. So when I went to my guidance counselor to get my schedule, I thought I needed to take mechanical drawing. I had it in my head, I don't know where I got this, that if I wanted to go into engineering school, I was going to need mechanical drawing and so I signed up and my counselor said, "Oh, no, honey, girls take art," but I need this for college and I had to bully my way into a mechanical drawing class. So I took mechanical drawing class in high school and I actually bullied my way into a pre-calculus class in high school and did many of those things, like, no, I want to take these courses and so took advanced chemistry on independent study because they didn't offer it and I had people like Mr. Wagner who was my advocate, to do some of those things. But even so, what I found to be the case was, when I got to college, I still wasn't prepared. I was woefully underprepared. I was seen as a good student. I obviously was an advocate for myself. I was interested but when I got to college, my peers were way more prepared.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they had taken four years of math and they had taken other drawing courses. So, what made you decide to go to college?

Robbyn Wahby: Well, in my day, I was about going to college so I just had it in my head that that's what I was supposed to do. My parents got divorced when I was 11 and that's what had us move back to the city and that's when I went to Blough School. So that was an important thing that happened in my life, having my family break up. My mother suffers from mental illness and growing up with someone who is depressed and has several other issues, it certainly shapes you, but that actually forced me to be much more independent. So I got myself enrolled in school but I also knew that I needed to work and so back then, there were summer programs for low income kids and they were called (JUPTA?) or Manpower. Now they call them Slate workforce investment and across the street from our house when we lived in Carondelet was the Carondelet Community Betterment Federation run by Sister Marie Charles. She was a sister of Carondelet...

Blanche Touhill: St. Joseph's.

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, St. Joseph of the Carondelet, which is still there, beautiful complex, and Sister Mary Charles offered me a job for the summer.

Blanche Touhill: How old were you?

Robbyn Wahby: I was 14.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, you could get a work permit.

Robbyn Wahby: You could get a work permit at 14 and so I worked my first summer. I worked at the Carondelet Library and I shelved books and back then, when you had put all the index cards and then I worked with the children in the children's library and did that. I made my own money for the first time...

Blanche Touhill: It was nice surroundings.

Robbyn Wahby: Oh, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: You could read things in your...

Robbyn Wahby: Oh, it was air-conditioned which most kids didn't have. They were out mowing lawns and cleaning up the streets. But I got a good review and so next summer, Sister enrolled me into this program with St. Louis University and it was a research program. I'm sure some wonderful graduate student was doing this but we surveyed our neighborhood and

so there was a group of kids that went door-to-door all summer long and met people in our neighborhood. We knocked on doors and we asked them about what their needs were and it was a needs assessment. We took notice of the house: did the lawn need to be mowed; was it a senior citizen; did the roof look like it was in disrepair. And it was a workforce component because we were all taken to St. Louis University and taught to keypunch because that was a skill we were going to need.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, yes.

Robbyn Wahby: But I met my neighbors. I got to know my neighborhood. I understood, first of all, that I wasn't the worst off person in the world. There were people far worse off than I was in my community. But there were also people who were wonderful people that I had never met before, that I didn't know that there were Spanish speaking people in my neighborhood. It was just a terrific program.

Blanche Touhill: Carondelet had a whole community from Spain.

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, the Spanish Society: soccer program. So I got to know my neighborhood and in that, I got to know a man by the name of Jim Hudson and Jim ran the Carondelet Community School at Blough School and he offered me a job after school after that summer and that experience of meeting my neighbors, knowing my neighborhood and then getting to know Jim was really important because I actually worked for Jim and then eventually the St. Louis Public Schools for 10 years. So Jim was a terrific mentor.

Blanche Touhill: So when you started work after high school, you were in that community involvement.

Robbyn Wahby: I was, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Because I remember when you were here, you were always sort of politically astute. Do you think it was that experience that put you into it?

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely. There weren't that many women doing top level work but Jim saw something in me and he put me on tables I had no business of being at. So we would go to the annual community school banquet and he'd sit me at a table and the person sitting next to me was Senator Danforth. How would a kid from Carondelet ever get to meet somebody like

Senator Danforth? I told my story that I had just graduated from high school in the desegregation case and he said, "I want to know more about that." So he had his office call me and I went and met with his staffers. It was those kinds of experiences that...Jim was always putting me in a place. I would go to the neighborhood meetings and he'd say, "I want you to watch what goes on here" and so I watched how people govern themselves, how they govern themselves well, how they govern themselves not so well.

Blanche Touhill: But how did you decide to go to college? I mean, you decided you were going to go but what was the trigger that made you enroll?

Robbyn Wahby: I didn't know you didn't. I just assumed you did. So actually, I enrolled because of the desegregation case and because of the turmoil. I had all my credits that I needed. I graduated, actually officially graduated in January so I enrolled here at the University of Missouri – St. Louis in January of 1981 while I was still in high school and I took a political science class. I didn't have a car, I took a bus here...two buses here.

Blanche Touhill: From Carondelet?

Robbyn Wahby: From Carondelet, yeah. I would go downtown from Carondelet, take the Carondelet bus downtown in front of the Stix Baer & Fuller on Washington Avenue, the Natural Bridge bus and then I would take the bus here and it was a motivator to get a car, was going to save my money.

Blanche Touhill: So you kept working in this community involvement while you were going to college?

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, and I went to college.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go full-time to college?

Robbyn Wahby: I did not. Originally I did.

Blanche Touhill: But then you cut back here and went a little part-time?

Robbyn Wahby: Because no one knew how to do this...a couple of things that were fascinating about looking back on it, I enrolled, got my classes, took that political science class my freshman year or that first semester and then I get a call from the University, "You need to take the ACT" and I said,

“What’s an ACT?” There was no preparation. You just signed up. So I had to backtrack and actually get officially enrolled, did that and at the time, remember, every credit hour after 12 hours was at no cost, right?

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Oh, so you signed up...

Robbyn Wahby: I signed up for a lot of classes because I’m like, oh, well, this is really good for me economically. This is how I’ll get through college. I’ll take 18 credit hours and work full-time. That was insane but I didn’t know and so I took a full load my full freshman year and I did miserably.

Blanche Touhill: But you came back.

Robbyn Wahby: But I came back, until I was asked not to so I don’t know if you know that I got a gentle nudge to leave this university.

Blanche Touhill: How long did you have to stay out?

Robbyn Wahby: Anita MacDonald...what a wonderful woman, another surprising woman, came up to me one day...

Blanche Touhill: Who was African American.

Robbyn Wahby: African American, she was the acting dean of Arts & Sciences in the evening college...I was in the evening college.

Blanche Touhill: And she became dean.

Robbyn Wahby: She became the dean and she said, “I think you need to take a break. This isn’t working for you,” and I was mortified. I was like, what am I going to do? I have to go to college. I didn’t know how I was going to get myself out of this and she said, “You should think about the community college” and so I did and she was just wonderful. She wasn’t “You’re a failure...” ...

Blanche Touhill: She made sure that you took the right courses at the community college?

Robbyn Wahby: No, not necessarily but she really wasn’t “You’re a failure. We’re kicking you out of school,” “You’re going to take a year off and you need to think about how serious...” ...

Blanche Touhill: So you did that?

Robbyn Wahby: I did and I went to the community college and I came back. I actually got an Associate’s Degree and then came back.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Robbyn Wahby: It was the right thing to do. I didn't know how to balance all of this. I didn't understand...and I wasn't as serious as...I was a kid. I was 19 and I wasn't serious about it. That intervention...but it was an intervention in the right way. It wasn't a letter, "You're no longer enrolled here"; it really was a caring individual that said, "Let's step out here for a moment. This is not an acceptable outcome for you," and it made all the difference.

Blanche Touhill: Did you major in political science?

Robbyn Wahby: No, I was an engineering student. I was taking physics and chemistry.

Blanche Touhill: And when you came back, you continued that?

Robbyn Wahby: No, because part of the problem, too, was that I didn't know how to go away to school. It was hard enough to figure out how to go to college here. I really didn't know how I was going to go to Rolla and there were no girls at Rolla. None of those things made sense to me. So when I came back, I came back with a degree in business. And so I did my undergrad in business.

Blanche Touhill: And then you came to work for the university?

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, and so while I was here getting my undergraduate, I was enrolled in the evening college because I was working for the school system at the time and I was in community education but at that time, I had left the school and was working at the main office. I was working downtown. I was actually at (Cardilane?) but in administration and I was an administrative assistant working in a community education office and it was great, flexible hours. When I needed to take a class during the day, I could just take my lunch hour at 9:00 in the morning so I could come here three days a week for a class. So I was aggravated in the evening college because it was so dark, going around campus at night and I thought, why don't we have lights on these stairwells around campus? So I went in to the evening college office and said, "What do you got to do to get some lights around here?" and they said, "Well, you know, we have an evening college council. Why don't you join the evening college council."

Blanche Touhill: And you became the head of the evening college council?

Robbyn Wahby: And I eventually became head of the evening college council and then a young man, who I had tutored when I had started school here, he was in high school, his uncle was Jim Hudson and his uncle said, "My nephew needs some tutoring in high school in algebra. Could you tutor him?" "Sure." So I tutored him. Well, he, years later, is running for student body president, comes to the evening college and says, "I can't believe you're here. Why don't you get involved in student government?" I'm like, "I'm working full-time." "No, no, no, get involved in student government." I got involved in student government.

Blanche Touhill: And what was his name?

Robbyn Wahby: Ken Myers.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I know Ken Myers.

Robbyn Wahby: You know Kenny Myers.

Blanche Touhill: Of course I know Kenny Myers.

Robbyn Wahby: So Kenny's uncle...this is actually my life story and this is a St. Louis story, right?

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, it is a St. Louis story.

Robbyn Wahby: Two degrees of separation.

Blanche Touhill: It is, it's a St. Louis story.

Robbyn Wahby: So anyway, by getting involved in student government...and I'm an adult; I'm 25 years old.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, they were all...age didn't matter.

Robbyn Wahby: It was wonderful. It did not matter, no. There were 38-year-olds involved.

Blanche Touhill: That's right, there were and they didn't look 38. I mean, you would never know that they were 38 except every once in a while they'd say that to you.

Robbyn Wahby: So at that time, Marguerite Ross Barnett was chancellor. Betty Van Uum was doing government relations. There was this growing drum beat on campus. We were at a time of change where the urban campuses were not getting their fair share of the allocation and so there was the

Partnerships for Progress that the chancellor was talking about the importance of advancing this university because of the importance that this university has to this region. And it was only fair. So, as student government, we got involved in that and eventually the pack of young people I was running with, young adults, were all poly sci majors so I minored in political science. I started gravitating towards political science, was finishing my degree in business but then my friend asked me if I would run for vice president of the student government. So I did and so we won and we were also part of that effort...

Blanche Touhill: Who was the president?

Robbyn Wahby: Steve Brancher.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I know Steve.

Robbyn Wahby: And actually, Steve's father passed away about two months ago and I actually just ran into him. We're all looking a little older.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you're not looking any older.

Robbyn Wahby: So he and I ran and we went to Jeff City and we argued our point because everyone who worked here had been banished from ...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's right.

Robbyn Wahby: By the president.

Blanche Touhill: The administrators were forbidden to go...

Robbyn Wahby: They were forbidden to go so the students went and that was really where Betty Van Uum steps into my life and Betty helped me understand the legislature and Harriet Woods was lieutenant governor and Sue Shearer...

Blanche Touhill: Gina Lumpe was the head of the budget committee.

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely, and so now I began seeing women in public life. I had a woman chancellor, a woman who was running governmental affairs, I began meeting women in the legislature and I began saying, again, how do I play a role now I'm involved in student government? And so then back in my other life, back in the school district, some really wrong-thinking people were being elected to our Board of Education and at the

time, we were still on the desegregation case. We had 12 members of our school board and five members of our school board were connected to a white citizens group that really is code for KLAN, the Klu Klux Klan and they were running a slate of candidates to take over the school board and I had left the school system and had taken a job managing Plaza Square Apartments downtown. John Roach had convinced me that it was time for people who lived downtown to have a community. I was the kind of person to go in. I was not the right person for that job, 936 units of downtown property. I was 26 years old, but it afforded me the opportunity to run for the school board and I did, and I ran and I won. And so that allowed me to move into a position of governance and understand how to...

Blanche Touhill: And you were 26?

Robbyn Wahby: I was 26 and, how are we going to affect change that we couldn't affect at a community level? How could we do it at a city level?

Blanche Touhill: That's a wonderful story.

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, it was a wonderful opportunity.

Blanche Touhill: So then, you worked here though for a while.

Robbyn Wahby: So I did. Well, I left Plaza Square Apartments, worked there for a year and then I went to work for an organization called CORO.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, and we brought CORO eventually onto the campus for a while.

Robbyn Wahby: Eventually came on the campus but that was after I had left.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it was.

Robbyn Wahby: But I got really engaged. I had been a participant in the Women in Leadership Program and I went and became a trainer in Women in Leadership and did that for many years and then I started working for an organization called the Family Investment Trust and it was a new intermediary, a state-wide intermediary and we went around the State of Missouri developing local community partnerships that would work with state agencies to do systems reform work around Children and Family Services. So I did that work while I was on the school board and I met my husband and we got married and we wanted to have a family and

traveling around the state, it didn't seem like that was going to help. So I got a call from Jan...her last name escapes me. She just passed away not too long ago...over in the Political Science Department.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, is she the one that ran the Political Science Department?

Robbyn Wahby: Oh, for the most part, she did.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Robbyn Wahby: Oh, wonderful. So Jan calls me and says, "We need an alumni director" and I said, "Well, I don't know anything about that." She said, "No, really, we need somebody to come in here. The alumni association really needs to be turned around. You would be the right person."

Blanche Touhill: And it was just beginning to turn around. In other words, if they hadn't brought you in, it would never have developed because time was going on and we were losing those names.

Robbyn Wahby: It was a great time to be part of the university. So in '96, I joined the University of Missouri St. Louis and became the alumni director.

Blanche Touhill: And how long were you there?

Robbyn Wahby: Five years and then I left and joined Mayor Slays administration to go back and to do more school reform work. But I loved my time at the university. It allowed me to do some real turn-around work which really speaks to what we need to do in education and really work with community people and I loved this institution.

Blanche Touhill: And what do you do now? You're a director of Charter Schools?

Robbyn Wahby: I am the executive director of the Missouri Charter of School Commission and the right name of it is Missouri Charter of Public School Commission and I'm the founding executive director. So I'm doing my own start-up of a state agency. We're the state-wide agency that is the red light/green light on charter schools.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, so if you don't take part in the evaluations, you know what's happening and then you can say yes, they go forward or they don't go forward?

Robbyn Wahby: Correct. There are still university sponsors, this university, for example.

- Blanche Touhill: Oh, but, there are other ways to sponsor charter schools.
- Robbyn Wahby: But we came about two years ago in legislation and our commission was appointed last year and then I was hired this year.
- Blanche Touhill: So you're the commissioner?
- Robbyn Wahby: I am the executive director and I have commissioners that hired me.
- Blanche Touhill: So you run it?
- Robbyn Wahby: I do.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, let me stop for just a moment and go back and ask two questions: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life have been like?
- Robbyn Wahby: That is an amazing question and because I was born at the end of the baby boomer era, that puts me at an interesting time 50 years before. I would have been born in 1913. Women didn't have the right to vote then. We were really going...you know, the gilded age, the Roaring '20s was coming in, so I would have been a girl through the '20s but I would have been an adult in the Depression. And I would have been a young woman in the Midwest. I think if I had been born someplace else in 1913, if I had been born in New York, I think I would have had different opportunities than being more in the Midwest. I would not have finished high school. I would have gotten married early.
- Blanche Touhill: I think there's truth to that.
- Robbyn Wahby: Yeah. I think that my DNA says that I probably would have been a troublemaker and rubble rouser.
- Blanche Touhill: You would have probably joined the women's voting...
- Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, the League of Women Voters. I probably would have been involved in that. I probably would have been involved in some of the social...
- Blanche Touhill: Like the Wednesday Club that made changes, or the St. Louis Women's Club that made changes. They inspected the milk and they exposed the people that weren't cleaning the milk up as they should and things like that.

Robbyn Wahby: I may have known the women who were doing that because my family wasn't wealthy.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, indeed, you're right.

Robbyn Wahby: I may have worked for one of those women. I may have cleaned their home or taken care of their children and so I think I would have been able to influence my peer group, the women back in my poor neighborhood but I don't think that I would have been afforded positions of leadership.

Blanche Touhill: No, you're absolutely right.

Robbyn Wahby: I think it would have been hard but I think that I would have stoked the fire for the next generation and I certainly would have raised my daughter as a young woman who could have...she would have been part of the '60s then, right? I would have been an adult in the '40s. I would have been Rosie the Rivetter. I would have been working in...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's what you would have done.

Robbyn Wahby: I would have.

Blanche Touhill: Then there were opportunities to go to work...

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, it would have been then.

Blanche Touhill: Because in those days, once you had a child, you didn't work.

Robbyn Wahby: Right, so I would have had children in the '30s and so my children would have been probably too young or just around the same age as somebody that my dad would have had. So I think it would have not at all afforded me the leadership opportunities but I think I would, just because I can't imagine just sitting around. I think I would have been engaged in some fight but just not nearly what I'd been afforded the opportunity to do.

Blanche Touhill: And what you said really wouldn't be necessarily listened to by a broad spectrum of the population. When I talk about the women in the St. Louis Women's Club, they had a social push and the Wednesday Club had a social push. Well, the women, talking about the last part of the 19th century, those leaders were wealthy women and they were in social work, the Hull House.

Robbyn Wahby: That's right

Blanche Touhill: ...and things like that.

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And I think there's a difference between the East and the West Coast and the Midwest. I think things started earlier there and moved slowly into the Midwest.

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely. I would have been a contemporary of Francis Perkins but never afforded the same opportunities as Francis Perkins and so I would have been able to watch that play out and see a woman in the Cabinet. It would have been aspirational for me but I don't think it would have been for me. I would not have been afforded that.

Blanche Touhill: No, I think you've hit the nail on the head. Well, is there any award or awards that you've received that you really are proud of?

Robbyn Wahby: You know it's interesting; I have an aversion to the awards. I always feel that I didn't accomplish these things on my own. There are really many more people that should be awarded these recognitions. I am grateful when I'm singled out but I'm always..."I didn't do this. There's three of us that did this." So, I'll leave it at that. I think when I think about that question a lot, I go back to some things that, where did I do something just for myself and it's a camp. It's those things that when you're a kid...I know this might sound a little silly but I'm really proud of my Robin Hood Award.

Blanche Touhill: Now, tell me about the Robin Hood Award because I'm very proud of an award I got in kindergarten and that one and then maybe one or two others I'm especially proud of but I go back to something I got, a recognition I got in kindergarten and I think it set me on a path. So what was your Robin Hood Award?

Robbyn Wahby: It was an archery award during summer camp. It was the only time I was ever away at camp. It was a camp for kids whose dads were teamsters and so I got to go to away camp one year. It was my only time away from home. It was terrific and I practiced all week. I had never shot a bow and arrow. You know, boys did those things but at the end of the week, when they passed out the award, I got the Robin Hood Award for best archery

and it really made me think about, with practice...it wasn't skill. I didn't have that going into it...I could do whatever I wanted. I didn't need a whole lot of other things in my life. I had my own sticktoitness.

Blanche Touhill: It confirmed that you could do things.

Robbyn Wahby: It did and it was something I did. It was really, I had the initiative, I signed up for archery, I did it. Over the years when I sort of think, oh, maybe I'm not doing what I need to do or I'm not doing enough of what I need to do or that didn't work out so well, there are those silly little moments in your life but they do impact your life. And so I think a lot about that when I think about what we do for other people and acknowledging people. Awards are important. They are important because they do take a moment in time to say to somebody, "What you paid attention to mattered for you and it mattered for other people." I'm really proud of the awards that I got on the work that I've done for children. I was most recently recognized as a champion for children by the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri and that means a lot to me. I've spent most of my career now working on schools and school reform and I appreciate that.

Blanche Touhill: You know, you have. If there's a theme in your life, it's educational.

Robbyn Wahby: It is, and I'm not a teacher.

Blanche Touhill: No, that's right, and you're not a teacher so it puts you in a little different category, doesn't it? You're really a community change agent.

Robbyn Wahby: I am and I think education is an important part of that. I really believe in the democracy in public education. It is for everyone. I saw what happened in the issues around the desegregation case. I saw what happened when I got to college. I didn't have the same education as other kids had. I saw what happened when I got on the school board and people who really thought that only certain people could get an education. I saw what was afforded to me because I had access to a land grant higher education institution. These are the things that make up pathways to the American dream and so they do, for me, mean a lot about giving future generations the ability to fully realize their citizenship as American and, of course, I want them taking care of themselves economically but I think that if we really want to see our democracy thrive, we have to provide everybody an equal chance to an exceptional

education and that's been my life's work, is really finding ways in which we can make sure that it's not economics, not your zip code, not your gender, not your race that defines your future, not in this country. Everyone has a shot.

Blanche Touhill: I agree with you. Actually, I think that opportunity in the early days was in land and in the 20th century it was education because the government didn't have any more land to give out to returning veterans so they gave them education and it was the greatest socio-economic revolution in this country.

Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely, and so we have to fully realize that now in the K-12 world. We did it in higher education and now we have to do it in the K-12 world.

Blanche Touhill: So your father was the main push that you would go to college?

Robbyn Wahby: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And he did affect both you and your sister in that.

Robbyn Wahby: In different ways, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And then outside, you had the nun that helped you.

Robbyn Wahby: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And then you had Mr. Hudson who helped you, so you always found somebody as you were going through different phases, that there was somebody there that reached out a hand and said, "Yes, you're it and come along."

Robbyn Wahby: Yeah, and sometimes that hand was Anita MacDonald. It was more like a foot in the kiester and sometimes it was Betty Van Uum or Marguerite Ross Barnett pushing me into a new environment. I think that what I bring to it is my willingness to say yes.

Blanche Touhill: Well, and you could deliver the goods.

Robbyn Wahby: I'm open to it. Yeah, I'll do that; sure, I'll do that; oh, I'll go on that bus trip; oh, sure, I'll run for office; sure, I'll join that council.

- Blanche Touhill: What did you learn when you worked in Mayor Slay's office and what have you learned since you really are the executive director of Charter Schools?
- Robbyn Wahby: I learned an immense amount in Mayor Slay's office. I think there's two real influential people in that office. The first one obviously is Mayor Slay. He is a principled, centered leader. He is unwavering. He has a strong moral compass and to be, day in and day out with somebody and watch things around the environment change and catastrophes happen and celebrations happen and see this steady hand and see how clear he was in his decisions about right and wrong. It was never about him. It was what does this mean for our city? What does this mean for the people who live here? What does this mean for our region? Day in and day out watching that happen has been a real influence on me. So it confirmed that that's the way that you make decisions in the public domain.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, you have a...
- Robbyn Wahby: There are no shortcuts.
- Blanche Touhill: No. I worked with a man, Jim Mueller, who you remember, and he was the director of Admissions and he said, "You have to teach children to have a hat rack so that they can hang their hat on it. They know who they are and then when they go through life and they have a quandary about what to do, they can make their way back to the hat rack."
- Robbyn Wahby: Absolutely.
- Blanche Touhill: Guide them in the next phase. I don't know whether it makes sense or not but it made sense to me.
- Robbyn Wahby: I think my dad's sense of service has been ingrained in me and so coming in to do the work for Mayor Slay and then working with someone who always believed in me and never failed my belief in him. That relationship that trust relationship that I would be able to do the right thing and I never had to worry about a scandal or a misstep...not that we aren't human and we don't all make mistakes, but it was never ethical. It was never because we thought about ourselves first and not the people first and it was a true joy and unbelievable good fortune.
- Blanche Touhill: And who was the other person?

Robbyn Wahby: The other is the chief of staff, Jeff Rainford. He's an incredible communicator and a really exceptional leader in the office and has his public persona and this internal persona...tough, tough, tough leader. Like, he puts nails on his Wheaties in the morning. A lot of people might crumble under some sort of leadership like that but he was demanding of it and he never let us miss out on the opportunities that we had to serve the people. We had a short period of time, this was not our office, it was the people's office. We were there to do their work and there was one elected official and it was never about us. But he also really demanded more out of each of us every day. You didn't come to him with a problem without a solution. He had 10 more questions to ask you and he just made me a better leader, a better thinker. He also allowed me the opportunity to pick up slack and do things that any other organization wouldn't let you do or wouldn't think, "Well, sure, I'll take advantage of your extra time." So he placed me in a position as the director of operations which is a city manager job, for about 18 months when we were between two city managers and so that really allowed me an opportunity to understand the operations of city government and really hone some other skills and spend some time thinking differently about government than what I was doing on the policy side of it. And then I led our information technology office for two-and-a-half years and get a mini MBA-IT Degree while I'm sitting in there leading that office. But Jeff was one for investing in us and said, "Sure, if you think you can take that on, take it on," and giving me an opportunity to do work that, I had no background in IT. I have a public policy degree and public administration degree so the city operations made sense but this other didn't make any sense but he afforded me the opportunity to do that.

Blanche Touhill: Now, go to the charter schools. Why were you so interested in the charter schools?

Robbyn Wahby: Well, charter schools were not my first love. As a matter of fact, I worked against the bill. I did not really think that parceling out school reform...

Blanche Touhill: So talk about the charter schools.

Robbyn Wahby: Sure. So I was not a big fan of the charter schools when I was on the school board and actually when the legislation was part of the desegregation settlement agreement, I really didn't think this was a good idea. We had kids in the system, we needed to focus on the school

system and splitting it up and having all these little schools didn't make sense to me. When I joined the mayor, we led an effort to have the district go through a rapid and dramatic reform effort and over a five-year period we found that that was just not possible. We had some wins but there had been a lot of losses there. And it's at that time when the mayor asked me, he said, "We need to get as many good schools to kids as quickly as possible. How do we do that?" and I said, "Well, there's this charter school thing" and we actually saw the mayor in Indianapolis leading on that and so we got in the car, went to Indianapolis. Harvard had just recognized Mayor Peterson's work and we thought, "Well, let's take a look at what they are doing" and we actually came back to St. Louis and replicated that work and we began attracting high quality charter schools to St. Louis as an interim step between where we were with the chaos of the district and what would eventually be some other model for public education. So over the last, now 10 years, I've been working on charter schools and much to my surprise, I saw early on and then now have fully realized the power of this tool to help us rethink and reinvent the way that we deliver public education. So Charter Schools of Missouri are free open, public, independent schools so they operate independent of the district but they're really free to innovate and so what we hope to see under this new role is that we replicate high quality schools but we also provide an opportunity to unlock the genius in educators throughout Missouri.

Blanche Touhill: Do you want to talk about anything else before we close off today?

Robbyn Wahby: Well, I do want to talk about my husband and kids. I have a wonderful husband, Brian. He was involved in our local community when I was running a community school and he would come over to neighborhood meetings because he was a legislative aid to the state rep and as he came in to go to neighborhood meetings, we would argue politics in the hall or whatever and my staff would say, "You should date Brian Wahby." I'm like, "I am not going to date Brian Wahby." Well, we were married 20 years yesterday and actually, he really encouraged me. I have to say, he's been an incredible, encouraging friend, not just a wonderful life partner and romantic, my love but he's been a real driver of my own success. He believes in me and he constantly urges me to take on things and the school board race was one. He absolutely said that I should do it. All the press clippings had him as a campaigning volunteer back then. I love it.

We talk about it all the time. We have two children, Berrick, who is a freshman at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He's in the School of Agriculture and a freshman year of college. My husband and I both having, neither one of us going away to school, Brian's a graduate of UMSL too, his undergrad here and his graduate degree and MBA from Wash U. But now we have our child going away to school, and that's what parents do. My dad didn't get to go to college. He said, "I really want you to go to college." Neither Brian and I got to go away to college. This is an opportunity for our child to be able to do that. And then our daughter, Delia, she is a freshman in high school. She's 14 and she attends one of our local charter schools, Grand Center Arts, and she wants to be in theater, a beautiful girl. I am so very proud of her. She's a bright girl. She's so sweet but she is one of the hardest-working people I have ever met and I think that kind of...I'll say it's my dad's grit has certainly been passed on to her.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you for coming today. It was a wonderful conversation and I know that you'll continue to work, especially for the moment in Charter Schools and you should come back in 20 years and make another video. So thank you very much.

Robbyn Wahby: Thank you, I've really enjoyed it.