



Voices of Lycoming Oral Histories

Lycoming College Archives - Snowden Library

Oral History of

Marie White Bell

Alumnus, Class of 1958

Date: March 10, 2009

Interview conducted by: Julie Dougherty

Transcribed by: Alysha Russo

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Marie White Bell

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Dougherty: The date is March 10 and I'm speaking Judge Marie Bell and—

Bell: Marie White Bell.

Dougherty: Marie White Bell and I'm so grateful for you to be speaking with me.

Bell: Oh, well I appreciate it as well.

Dougherty: Okay, please tell me where you were born and where you received your early education.

Bell: I was born in York, Pennsylvania, 1936. I was a graduate of William Penn Senior High School in York in 1954.

Dougherty: And what brought you to Lycoming College?

Bell: My father.

Dougherty: [laughs] Your father.

Bell: I mentioned it because my dad was very religious and my interest that year was going to Bucknell. He made a very strict limitation on me; he says, "You cannot go outside of two hundred miles from York to attend college."

Dougherty: Was that for his benefit or yours?

Bell: It was for his benefit because he wanted to keep a watchful eye on me. I was always sort of rebellious. So when we visited the various colleges, I was not impressed with Lycoming at all. He was impressed with the chapel and he also knew that there was mandatory chapel attendance. I struggled and rebelled against coming to Lycoming. He placed me in the car—after I was accepted, he placed me in his vehicle and took me and drove me to Lycoming but we stopped for lunch—and I told the group this when I gave my speech—and I refused to get back in the car. He literally picked me up and dumped me in the car. When I came—the first day I was at Lycoming I cried. Unbeknownst to me my parents had arranged to stay at the Lycoming Hotel—I don't know what it's called anymore—for about a week because they didn't trust that I would stay there.

Dougherty: Oh my.

Bell: They made arrangements to stay at the hotel and the second day I was in the dorm at Rich Hall, I happened to glance out the window and I saw the football team practicing and I saw these handsome African-American fellows. So after seeing them, I rushed back to the telephone, called my parents and told them to go home.

Dougherty: [laughs] What a wonderful story that is.

Bell: And that was it and from that point on, I enjoyed Lycoming College; I had a passion for it.

Dougherty: That's a fantastic story it really is.

Bell: It was a situation where I was the only African-American female on campus and I was so lonely and I knew that I would be very lonely. But when I looked out and saw the guys, I said my goodness, I am going to call my dad and my mom and tell them no problem, they can go home. My dad, I believe until the day he died, didn't realize what had happened. He said to my mother, "What's with her complete turnaround?" My mother related that to me, she said "Your father was absolutely surprised." He was the one.

Now, the best part of that is when I was chosen for the alumni of the year at Lycoming—I think that was in 1986 but I'm not sure about the year—but my father had his chest out. He came with me—my father, my mother and my husband—he was so happy, he said "I told you I had a feeling about this college." He was so delighted.

Dougherty: Now tell me, were the guys friendly then?

Bell: Oh, we're lifetime friends, yes. With John Joe, Johnny Grier, Rich Fisher, we're all—Walt Dunston—we're all lifetime friends; we've been friends ever since.

Dougherty: That's so special. Can you describe your life as a student?

Bell: It was wonderful. I mean there were days, but I loved the college because of the closeness, the friendships I established and I was active in sports and loved that. The professors were absolutely outstanding. It was a wonderful college life for me.

Dougherty: Oh, that's great. You were really active on campus according to the 1958 yearbook.

Bell: I was involved in a lot of things but my passion was International Relations Club.

Dougherty: Really?

Bell: Yes, we had at that time a model United Nations and we would go to various colleges and make presentations on behalf of various foreign countries. Again, my favorite professor was Dr. Barnes who was the associate professor of history at that time. He had gotten his degree from

Harvard and a Ph.D. from Oxford and he came to Lycoming I believe in 1956 or '7. He lived across the street from the campus and there were Saturdays when he would invite some of the students to come and talk about international relations. And at the time you know I was so intrigued with Germany—I mean I took years of German and we would talk about the various countries at that time and that left a lasting impression upon me.

Dougherty: Wow.

Bell: Dr. Barnes, associate professor of history, I'll never forget him.

Dougherty: I'll have to look him up. I don't recognize the name but I will—

Bell: I don't believe he stayed more than five years at Lycoming because I used to want to follow up on where he was and I've lost track of him. But very engaging and just stimulated and motivated your intellectual capacity for international relations. I was awed by him. He used to wear the black robes you know that they wear in England and he would have the cape and all that. He was a very distinguished professor.

Dougherty: How many students were involved in this International Relations Club?

Bell: Offhand I would say at least twenty-five. We went to Wilkes College, we went to various colleges, and I believe it must have been about twenty-five of us.

Dougherty: That's a good size group.

Bell: Yeah, and to this day I wondered how did we travel? I don't recall a bus or train or anything like that. But it was a wonderful experience.

Dougherty: So you were in that club for the whole four years?

Bell: I was in the club I believe two years; the last two years I was at Lycoming.

Dougherty: And you were on the Arrow staff? The yearbook.

Bell: I was.

Dougherty: Was that enjoyable?

Bell: I was not too impressed with that. I worked hard on it but I was not into writing and that kind of thing at that time. But yeah, I was on the Arrow staff. I think Joy Williamson, who was my best friend at the time, was the one that prompted me to get involved with the Arrow. She was from Perth Amboy, New Jersey; she's a long-lasting friend.

Dougherty: And the Courier staff you were on as well?

Bell: Yes, I was. I was always nosy; always interested in what was going on around campus.

Dougherty: You were busy.

Bell: I was and I was very much involved with athletics. I was on the volleyball team and basketball and did all of those things.

Dougherty: How did you have time to study?

Bell: I did. I'm very—in my life—I'm very, I should say compartmentalized. I put down each day what I'm going to do; I've always done that. And set aside the time that I'm going to engage myself in various situations and I can tell you it helped me tremendously when I was going to law school and working at the same time.

Dougherty: Oh my goodness. Is Dr. Barnes the only favorite professor?

Bell: Oh no. Dr. Howe was the professor of biology and Dr. Shortess; they were all mentors to me. I was very much interested in biology and there was a Dr. Yoon at the time—Y-O-O-N—he was I think Chinese. I did a special experiment on artificial insemination way back in life at that time. He was a very charming professor, just kept after me to finish my experiment before I graduated. And I would slack and he would say you've got to get going; but he was a wonderful professor as well. I don't know where he is, if he's even alive today.

Dougherty: I haven't heard of him recently.

Bell: I think if you go back in the yearbook you will probably see his picture displayed.

Dougherty: I have the yearbook here so I'll have to check that out.

Bell: It's Dr. Yoon: Y-O-O-N. And Dr. Barnes is probably there as well.

Dougherty: You were a pretty lady.

Bell: Oh, well I would hope still that way. [laughs]

Dougherty: [laughs] I'm sure you are.

Bell: I was often—you know the interesting part of that is I used to attend the frat parties too, maybe one or two of them, but you know, I was pretty popular at the time.

Dougherty: I believe it. You have a wonderful personality.

Bell: Thank you.

Dougherty: You graduated in 1958 with a degree in biology? Why did you choose that major and what caused you to switch to law?

Bell: Well, it's a long story; I'll make it as short as I can.

Dougherty: You don't have to make it short.

Bell: My sister was a year older than me and she died of leukemia. In fact I'm active in the Leukemia Society today but that always intrigued me because in those days, nobody knew what leukemia was. So my passion was to pursue and research path of life and that's why I chose biology. Of course in high school I had advanced biology and was very active in the advanced biology class as well.

Dougherty: And then you left Lycoming when you graduated.

Bell: Yes, I went to Philadelphia and attended the University of Pennsylvania. At the time my parents were suffering from a financial circumstance so I had to help support my parents and then I was invited to Hoffman-La Roche for an interview and that's where I start my work history at Hoffman-La Roche in biological research.

Dougherty: How long were you involved in that?

Bell: I was there from 1960-1973. I was a group leader in the area of chemotherapy—dealt with parasitology and virology.

Dougherty: Oh my.

Bell: I was the first African-American, by the way, that was employed at that company.

Dougherty: You're amazing.

Bell: Dr. Grunberg was my boss and he would send me—in fact we'd go to Basel, Switzerland because Hoffman-La Roche is a Switzerland-based company and would send me all over the place. But he was a wonderful gentleman.

Dougherty: Were you married at that time?

Bell: I was not married when I first was employed by Hoffman-La Roche; I was married in 1964. I went to Hoffman La-Roche in 1959, 1960 I believe. I married my husband Conrad Bell in 1964. He was then a pharmacist. He went back to medical school and got his medical degree while we were married.

Dougherty: You have an amazing story. And how did you end up becoming a judge?

Bell: Long story again; we'll make it very short. We lived in Montclair, New Jersey—northern New Jersey—and when my husband graduated from medical school in 1970 he was offered an office—a medical office—in Burlington County which is south Jersey. And at that time I was just completing my law school at night. I had started law school in 1969 and went four years every single day at night while working. When we moved to Burlington County, I was offered a clerkship with the Honorable Alexander Wood, III. Not knowing I was the first woman in the county to become a clerk—a law clerk—and also the first African-American woman to become a law clerk as well. I was in the courthouse for a year and after I completed my clerkship for one year, I became involved in politics. At that time there was a Governor Byrne who was running for governor of the state of New Jersey and also various assemblymen and I worked really hard for all of them. Then someone said to me, “You know what, you’re so active, you ought to run for council in Willingboro, New Jersey.” And I said, okay, why not? I think I was appointed to the council—I think one of the gentlemen had resigned—and then I ran in 1977 and became the councilperson from 1977 through 1980—became the first African-American mayor in 1980 in Willingboro, New Jersey. And then thereafter there was a vacancy in the judiciary for the municipal court in Willingboro and they appointed me to the municipal court which is where I remained from 19— I’m getting my dates wrong—from 1981 through the time I was appointed to the Superior Court in 1997. And then I also was appointed to the bench in Camden City at the same time so I had several municipal court positions. They used to refer to me as “Have gown, will travel.” That’s how I got involved in politics and then subsequently became a member of the judiciary.

And then I was active in a lot of things. I was a member of the board of governors for Rutgers University for all three campuses; I was on that board for four years. That’s an appointment by the governor and I helped Governor Byrne and then he appointed me to the bench—to the governorship of the state university.

Dougherty: Talk about multi-tasking, you are something else.

Bell: Well, it was a busy life. My husband was developing his medical practice and I was sort of at that time involved in the politic part of government and it’s a very interesting time in our life.

Dougherty: I’m sure. And is it still as busy as it was then?

Bell: It still is busy because at this point I was recalled by the Supreme Court and so I traveled to various vicinages within New Jersey where they have a deficiency in judges. Most recently I was in Camden—Camden County Superior Court. I go up as far as Marmouth which is the northern part of the state and also I go as far south as Woodbury which is Gloucester County which is the southern part of the state and then I come back to my home court which is in Burlington County. So I’m doing that throughout each month. Circulating wherever there is a deficiency.

Dougherty: Good grief.

Bell: It's called a recall process. The Supreme Court will look at the retired judges and appoint one of them or some of them to take care of the deficiencies which may be apparent throughout the judiciary system.

Dougherty: Do you enjoy this work?

Bell: I love it. I love it. I was so bored. When I was retired, the governor had appointed me to a board and it was so boring. You know, we would meet and we would have issues and we would have lunch and we would have dinner and I thought I need to do something better than this. So I was so happy when I got the call to go back into active judiciary life.

Dougherty: Do you have any plans to retire? Or travel?

Bell: No. The only limitation with my present appointment is that I can't work beyond eighty. See, there's a mandatory retirement in the state of New Jersey with the judiciary. You have to retire at seventy. And then you're recalled—you can be recalled—but you can't work beyond eighty.

Dougherty: Well, that's not fair.

Bell: No, it isn't. I have often thought about bringing a lawsuit but then I thought no, I don't want to do that because I'm recalled and I'm working, I'm active so no need to do that. But for people that are coming along that are healthy and are able to sit on the bench—you know it really is, from my perspective, discriminatory.

Dougherty: That's right. And that's not going to be for a while. You'll still be able to do what you're doing for a while anyway.

Bell: Oh well yes, I'm serving on the board of trustees for Lycoming so I'm up and down the road for that and I'm also developing an in support group for young lawyers that are just coming out for the state of New Jersey and I'm involved in a lot of stuff. I still go to my bible study every Wednesday—very active in church—and so I have a pretty active life.

Dougherty: I'm sure you do. How long have you been on the board here at Lycoming?

Bell: I was appointed—now this is 2009—I believe it was 2006 or '7.

Dougherty: So it's been a few years.

Bell: Yeah, it's been a couple of years.

Dougherty: I'm sure that campus has changed a lot since you were student here.

Bell: Oh, you know overnight. When I first came to Lycoming after graduation, I started seeing buildings going up and I thought, boy, this is wonderful. And then I came back—I gave a speech to the first year college students—the first year I gave a speech. And I saw another building going up and I thought this is fantastic. And when I came back to teach a class—to lecture, actually, a class on women and politics—I believe that was in 1980, it was the late '80s I believe—and I kept seeing these buildings going up and I was so enthused. I've always been a contributor as an alumni—always—from the time that I think I was on the bench. When I go back, one of the trustees and myself we go through the new buildings and we're thinking oh, you know maybe we'd like to come back again as a student. The female dorms are just outstanding and I'm so enthused. So what we like to do is simply go through the buildings sometimes and look at the newer buildings and look at the facilities and accommodations—it's truly wonderful the way that college has blossomed.

Dougherty: Well, I think it's wonderful that we have mentors like you that want to come back and want to contribute still.

Bell: If you talk to the alumni organization there you'll find that I've always been active—always inquiring, always wanting to know what's going on. I guess as a result I was chosen to sit on the board. You see when I was an active jurist; I could not sit on college boards because of the potential conflict of interest. But as a retired judge I was able to do that and as a recalled judge I can do it because it's a Pennsylvania college and there is no possibility of a conflict. We're always trying to deal with isolating ourselves as jurists from suits, from lawsuits. And that was one of the reasons—they had wanted me to serve on the board of trustees way back when I was an active judge, way back in the late '80s, early '90s but I refused to do that because of the potential conflict. But now my understanding is that there is no problem. I enjoy it, I enjoy the discourse, I enjoy the issues that arise that require or need attention and also the goals that the trustees have indicated they wish to pursue. So it's a very interesting process and because of my experience as a board of governors at Rutgers University, I think I bring some things to the table that perhaps is essential to dealing with these issues.

Dougherty: That's wonderful. We really appreciate it. Let me tell you this, it's a wonderful place to work—I've enjoyed it.

Bell: Oh, I can imagine. The one thing about Lycoming that I've always found to be unusual is the family-oriented environment.

Dougherty: That's right.

Bell: You know, people looking out for each other, people caring about each other, which does not exist many places. Now I'm from the university here at Rutgers a long time and that doesn't exist because of the broad scope of the university—the fact that there are three campuses and nobody ever really connects in a formative way. But Lycoming is different.

Dougherty: The students become like our own children. You get to know them, you get close to them and they work for you and you get involved in their lives and so many over the years are still my friends—I still hear from.

Bell: I can imagine, yes, I'm sure that exists.

Dougherty: I enjoy it here and I retired once.

Bell: How long have you been there by the way?

Dougherty: I came in '86; I was the circulation supervisor and then I retired at sixty-two in '97 when my husband retired. We looked at one another for a year and decided this wasn't for us. So this archive job opened up part time and so I'm back part time; I work four mornings a week.

Bell: Now are you a Williamsport native?

Dougherty: No, I'm originally from Syracuse, New York and my husband was transferred down here because of his job and so we've been here since '68, I think. Quite a while, so this is home, we've raised our children here.

[personal conversation follows that was not transcribed]

Dougherty: Do you get to meet with any of the students when you come up? What are your impressions of our students these days?

Bell: Well, I was very involved with the black student union. Yes, I do meet them and I email some of them.

Dougherty: Oh, that's wonderful.

Bell: There are occasions when I email them and I still have—the young man who was head of the black student organization—he emails me; we reciprocate in that vein. And sometimes when I'm there, I will go into the lounge at the student union building and just say what's going on to whomever happens to be there. As I say, I've always been inquisitive and engaging and—I think I'm engaging—but I love to talk to people. I like to know what's going on with them so I do often talk to students and as I say, if you contact the alumni board you'll know that I often have conversation.

Dougherty: That's great.

Bell: I said alumni board. I mean alumni—

Dougherty: Association.

Bell: No, not the association, the group that deals with alumni relations I should say.

Dougherty: Oh, okay. That's good. Would you recommend a student to come to Lycoming?

Bell: I do but I have problems with it down here because first of all the economic situation is so bad but I've always promoted Lycoming. In fact when they have college day in Cherry Hill, I've been there to talk about Lycoming. But there isn't—and I criticized the alumni group about this—you need to send more people out to the high schools here in south Jersey. It doesn't happen and I don't know why they don't do that. I get very frustrated with that because when I'm on the bench, I talk to a lot of students and often they're curious—"Where did you go to college?" And when I say Lycoming, they say, "Where is that?" Even in my church the formidable students will come up to me and say, "Well how do we get there?" And my answer is, well I don't think you'll get there by train, you might get there by bus but I think public transportation is not a good deal, so somebody would have to take you there. But then I had one or two students that were interested and they went up there and said there's nothing there. You know most of the kids here are familiar with New York City, Philadelphia, you know.

Dougherty: Big towns.

Bell: Yeah and so I tell them you know, there's so many resources and so many things you can do. I learned to ski when I was at Lycoming. I never would have thought about skiing. I told the story at the alumni affair, I said you know when I was running for office, I said there was a senior citizens group—one of the largest groups in our community—that wanted to eyeball me as a potential politician. So I said they invited me to come on a Saturday night to their event. Well it was square dancing—I learned to square dance up at Lycoming. My roommate Dolores Keller was from Hughesville and she would ask me to come stay at her home in Hughesville on the weekend and that's what they did. So when I was invited to this group and they were square dancing, I knew all the calls. They were impressed—they thought, gee, you know, she knows how to square dance. My partner and I who were running for election, we won overwhelmingly.

Dougherty: It was the square dancing that did it.

Bell: It was the square dancing that put me over the top. So there are things there that maybe kids in the city, kids here, have not ever experienced that they may sometime during their lifetime.

Dougherty: That's right.

Bell: And that's why I loved it. First of all I loved the fact that there was a religious component to Lycoming and secondly, just having to do with people from different cultures. You know I came up in a mixed culture. My parents were poor but we lived in a neighborhood where there were Italian immigrants, just off the boat. So we learned a little bit of Italian and we would go

to each other's houses and so on. So I had that experience and was delighted that I had the experience coming to Lycoming to engage with other people from different areas.

Dougherty: Well, with the economic status the way things are now, I'm wondering if we will get students.

Bell: It's very likely we won't get many. There is some PR process with people going out into these areas but when I sat in Camden City I saw a lot of kids that had potential and I kept thinking if they had had the experience I had, they could make a difference in their town, in their city. But it's difficult to get people to go up there to visit.

Dougherty: That's sad. Is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven't asked you?

Bell: No, but if you have any other questions, I'd be very glad to answer them. The only other thing—I have probably received at least forty-five to fifty awards throughout my career.

Dougherty: You could list them for me.

Bell: Oh, no I can't list them, I couldn't possibly. As the member of the council, I was effective in establishing a house for domestic violence victims. I was the first woman to get the Rotary Business person of the Year Award in 1983. I was honored by my high school as an alumni of the year—William Penn Senior High School Alumni Award. And of course Lycoming Alumni Award and I was given the A. Philip Randolph Community Service Award back in 1984 and let's see, so many things. I was featured in Ebony Magazine in black female judges in the United States and—

Dougherty: What an amazing life you have had.

Bell: Burlington County College, which is a local college, I was given a distinguished public servant award back in '89 and outstanding achievement as a civic leader in the field of law by United Methodist Church. So many things, I don't need to go through all of these but yeah, those were the ones that I was awarded. I've been involved in so many different organizations, legal as well as social organizations: American Association of University Women, Board of Governors for American Trial Lawyers, member of the Burlington County Bar Foundation, and on and on and on.

Dougherty: It's amazing. I'm just blown away with everything that you have done. I wonder, do you ever have time to just sit and relax or go on vacation?

Bell: I read a lot; I'm a voracious reader. And I write—in fact I'm sort of getting a book together, writing of my experiences as a lawyer and a research person but I do write and as I say, I'm very—I regulate my time effectively. The only sport I engage in is skiing and during the summer obviously there is no skiing but I try to go out and talk to the boys and girls clubs—

those kinds of things—during the summer. But my husband passed away suddenly back in 2002.

Dougherty: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Bell: Yes, he died of a heart attack beside me in bed.

Dougherty: Oh!

Bell: Yes, uh-huh, and so my mother—we built a new house and we were all settled and loved our beautiful house and so on and he lived here two years and he passed away in bed. My mother was living with me—my father passed away back in 1989 while he was with us—I moved them from New York here to New Jersey—and my mother was with me until two years ago—she passed away here as well. So, and I'm an only child so I have the time to go out and talk to people. I've adopted—not legally—but I have these kids that I've put a couple through college and not happy about some of them. But I have a lot of godchildren and wonderful friends. So there's never a moment that I feel depressed. I mean there are moments when I reflect and think about the good things that have happened in my life. I had a wonderful husband and his family rallies around me and they come on holidays and you know they are here with me to celebrate holidays. So I've had a good life and I thank God for all the wonderful things that have happened to me.

Dougherty: Well you are extremely a special lady and I'm proud to have spoken with you and I hope I can get to see you when you come back.

Bell: Well, if you're there April 25 I'll be there for a trustee board meeting.

Dougherty: What time is your board meeting then?

Bell: Let's see, we usually start very early and then we have breaks and that's when we have time to sort of goof around the campus to see things. Generally it starts at 9:00 in the morning and we break at lunchtime and then we come back and we have dinner and then recess. It's generally two days, Friday and Saturday. So I will be there.

Dougherty: Okay.

Bell: And hopefully we'll meet with you.

Dougherty: Well I thank you so very much.

Bell: And I will mention to the board—I don't know if anybody knows about the archives. We just happened upon it but it would be nice if you could make a presentation.

Dougherty: Well, I don't know how I could give a presentation, but I could certainly be there and speak with anyone and answer any questions.

Bell: I will talk to the president, he's from Reading—I don't know if you know the president of the board—but I will speak with him and I think it would be nice if we would know about this.

Dougherty: Okay, that would be good.