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Interview with Mary Bohurjak, Retired Assistant Director of Admission (transcript)

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Mary Bohurjak

Retired Assistant Director of Admission

Oliver Schroeder's reconstruction of interview, September 23, 1988
transcription by Kerstin Ekfelt Trawick

Oliver Schroeder, recording on September 23, 1988, an interview that was held several days ago, on September 20, with Mary Bohurjak, on the occasion of her retirement from the School of Law after 35 years of service in law administration. I shall use the first person, reading from the notes which I took during the interview with Mary.

I came to Western Reserve University in December of 1953, to the law school administration. I left western Pennsylvania about a month before. I had lost my job, and our area was a depressed area. I wanted to work in a school. I love schools; I love learning. I wanted to come to Cleveland, the largest city nearby, so I put all of my worldly belongings in a pickup truck and arrived in Cleveland on the day after Thanksgiving in 1953. I came to Cleveland with a friend who had a friend living in the city, and I was offered a place to live until I could get settled into a job and my own residence.

I picked up the newspaper on the first Sunday I was there, and I read the want ads. Obviously I needed cash, so I planned to get a job immediately--anywhere--to earn money. I went downtown on the bus on the Monday after Thanksgiving, and I went into the Holiday shoe store. They had advertised for a salesperson. When I spoke with the manager, we came to an agreement, and I began working there immediately. I worked there for several weeks. Meanwhile I would check the papers daily, looking in the want ads for some type of school-related employment. I did go across the street to the National City Bank and took their personnel test. I also went to other banks. The personnel director at National City, after speaking with me, advised me to look around and keep looking until I got the right job--a job in which I would be satisfied.

On one Sunday morning I looked at the Sunday paper and there was an ad from Western Reserve University indicating a secretary was going to be hired. Early Monday morning I went to the university. (I did not have to go to the shoe store to work until early afternoon.) At that time Western Reserve University had a personnel office composed of one person, a very nice lady. After talking with me and testing me, she referred me to the English Department and to the law school. She did confide that she thought I probably would be happier at the law school, so I went there first.

It was here I met Frances Goff. She was the registrar of the law school, the dean's secretary, and you might say the chief administrative officer. This was Monday, and as usual the Monday noon luncheon which was the faculty meeting was being held. When I arrived late in the morning, the dean had gone to the faculty meeting, so he was not there. I decided to wait because it was the dean's prerogative to interview the prospective secretary and determine whether that person should be hired.

As I looked around the old law school building, I fell in love with the building. It appealed to me much more than downtown offices. And the next thing I remember about early in the afternoon, the law faculty was returning from their luncheon, which was held off the campus every Monday noon. I was impressed with them. They came in laughing and joking and kidding each other. I never saw such a pleasant group of men. I then had an interview with Dean Fletcher Andrews, whom I later served very closely. He was a perfect gentleman, a most sincere and dedicated individual. I also had an interview with Edgar I. King, who was the assistant dean. As I said, I immediately fell in love with Dean Andrews. As an employer I thought he would be superb. Both King and Andrews agreed that they wanted me, but they wanted first to check references. I was sent back to Personnel just before 5 p.m. It would take a while to check the references, and I would have to continue working at the shoe store. Or so I thought. When I went to the shoe store Tuesday morning early, I was asked, "Where were you yesterday?" I told them I regretfully was not able to come in. The manager said, "You're fired."

On December 14, 1953, I began work at the law school. I worked originally with Vivian Langille as a faculty secretary. We served ten faculty members--the complete faculty. They were an interesting group of people. I always remember Professor Robert Cook. Whatever he had done, he would ask for an original and twelve copies. Vivian worked with Dean Andrews, Professor Clinton DeWitt, and Assistant Dean Edgar I. King. I would help out with Mr. DeWitt's work. He was a book writer, and he would prepare his materials, have them mimeographed for class, before going to publication. What a job! It was a fascinating and interesting job, but the mimeographed pages kept piling up and piling up around my desk and through the entire office.

I remember in 1954 there was a major tax code change in the federal government. Professor Maurice Culp taught taxes, and he put on a huge project--a continuing legal education program in downtown Cleveland for lawyers and accountants to study the new tax code. Continuing legal education by law schools was unheard of, but the major tax code change was a real challenge, and the law school stepped in. We had between 500 and 600 people register for this downtown institute. I was given the job of being in charge of advertising, of registering the people, of getting all the paperwork done. The meeting was held in the old Statler Hotel. It was a tremendous success. It was an innovative CLE program which began what today is an outstanding area of legal education.

At the same time I remember the Law-Medicine Center was starting in full force and similar programs were held. I went to help Professor Schroeder in this activity, and we had a very enjoyable time putting these institutes on. I remember Professor Schroeder coming into my office one time and asking for a paper, and I told him, "I don't have that, Mr. Schroeder." He looked at me and smiled and said, "Mary you do too have it," and then he came over and reached in through a big pile of papers and quietly pulled out the missing paper, where I had filed it and had forgotten.

In 1957 Vivian Langille retired. I then began to serve Dean Andrews as his secretary. We began hiring additional administrative help because the law school was active, the faculty were busy and producing articles and books. Carolyn Moore was hired. Now Carolyn was a very good worker, a very intelligent worker, but in some ways she was hard to get along with. I think that I sort of shaped her up. It took about six weeks. And she turned into a superb executive secretary, becoming secretary for the Law Review, where she could do all kinds of things. She knew the Blue Book better than the Law Review editors, and she would make corrections in footnotes--which were so important. Carolyn Moore did a bang-up job.

In 1960, I remember, Dean King, who had just served two years, became ill. Frances called me and told me about this, and we had to go get Professor Schroeder because the president, Dr. Millis, had called up and wanted to see Professor Schroeder. What happened--Dean King had a mental breakdown under emergency conditions, and Professor Schroeder was named administrative dean and Professor Culp academic dean. These were dark days in the law school. We had very great difficulties, but I never saw such cooperation amongst a faculty or any other group of individuals, facing up to the problems that confronted the law school. There was a closeness between the faculty and the staff, both collectively and individually. We all worked together. It was a wonderful experience. You can't really describe how wonderful it was to overcome the problems that the law school faced from 1960 to 1965--just a tremendous feeling. Financially things were very bad over these years. Actually what we were trying to do was just survive.

I at that time shared the office--the front office--with Frances Goff. I learned so much from Frances. Now Frances wanted to control everything, including the faculty. She was conscientious, loyal, most talented. She was married to the law school, and nobody had better try to interrupt that marriage. She was dedicated and absolutely fantastic.

At the time the admissions to the law school were controlled by the university--in another office, down in the university's central offices. Professor Culp finally began making his own files on the applicants. So now we had two sets of files for admission. We never told the university central admissions office that we had the separate files. Finally we talked them into sending the files up to us, and we would then send the admission letters to the applicants. This was a very great advance. Of course today we have complete control over our admissions and handle all the administrative details. One of the interesting things-- At that time we had pictures on the applications. And when the new students would come in September, Frances Goff, sitting beside her desk as she began to register them in, would look up at the student and say, "Oh, you're John Smith! We're very glad to have you." Frances had a photographic memory. She remembered the picture of John Smith from the application, and she looked up and when she saw the real John Smith she would address him by name. Obviously, first-year students were flabbergasted.

One of the administrative challenges was Professor Culp, a wonderful person. We always had a conflict when the admissions files were

handled in the university central office, between Culp and the central office. The central office would handle things in a very cold, inhuman, mechanical way. They had no interest in the law school, it was just a movement of paper. Culp had compassion for human beings, and he would admit somebody that maybe the central admissions office wouldn't want admitted. So Culp and the central admissions office were at constant loggerheads. Culp was good-hearted, a wonderful man.

Then we had the Bok report, the beginning of the renaissance of the law school. Louis Toepfer arrived as dean. This was a great advance. Up to this time Dr. Millis, the president, was a son of a gun. He was tough. He had no sympathy for the law school. Dean Andrews agonized over this. Dean Andrews was not a person to force confrontation. He just said his hands were tied.

I really loved working for Dean Andrews. He was a dream of a man. Everyone knew him, and no one had anything bad to say about him. He had absolutely no arrogance. It hurt him to reprimand a student. It hurt him to tell an individual bad news. Now there was one thing he did really want and I tried to provide for him: he wanted letter-perfect papers, letter-perfect articles that he had written, letter-perfect letters that were to be mailed out, and we had to do it over until it was letter-perfect. This was a challenge to me, but I liked the challenge because in this relationship he was always a perfect gentleman and he treated people equally.

Oh, I remember one time our custodian, Otis, had a birthday, and he wanted so much to celebrate his birthday he brought in his own birthday cake--much to our surprise, because we did not know it was his birthday even. We hustled around, got some balloons, put it in the front office in the Adelbert Road building, hung a sign up--Happy Birthday, Otis--and he came in and we all sang Happy Birthday with Dean Andrews leading it. Otis at that time had some pictures, including a baby picture of himself taken about sixty years earlier.

When Dean Toepfer arrived in July of 1965, he had already hired Blanche Lansky in May of 1965. Her instructions were to observe Frances Goff, who knew everything about the school. The only problem was that everything she knew about the school was in her head, and there was no paper on it. So Blanche Lansky literally sat beside Frances Goff for two months before Louis Toepfer arrived and then continued doing so to learn absolutely everything about the operation of the law school. Frances cooperated with this, although it must have been hard. She was so used to running the school herself, and she knew what was happening was that it was going to be a bigger school and there were going to be reassignments of responsibilities.

Dean Toepfer was very astute, a quiet person. He would not tell exactly what persons should do. He would watch them. But you got instructions from Dean Toepfer by how he acted. He spoke through his actions. One of the first things that was accomplished following the Bok Report's recommendations was to get all of the admissions activities into the law school and get the central university office out of our hair. The same thing was done for all the placement activities, which up to this time had been handled by a central

placement office.

Toepper in looking around told Frances Goff that he didn't think I was being utilized to the full extent, so I should be promoted to administrative secretary. In 1967 this occurred. I worked with Earl Leiken, who was the assistant dean, and Dean Toepper. I also worked with the committee on admissions--Professor Lewis Katz handled that--and Professor Katz had a piece of paper on his wall which indicated a scale on which all of the applications were analyzed. Professor Katz was really controlled by this wonderful written scale in helping to make the decisions for the admissions committee. Today as I leave, admissions is an operation of a whole cycle. It is a yearly operation. It changes every week--what has to be done--but when the cycle is completed and the first-year class is admitted, the cycle begins again. There has been a drastic growth in the activities and the requirements, with financial aid, with the opportunity to select better and better quality students.

When Frances Goff retired and had to be replaced, Blanche Lansky asked me if I did not want the registrar's job. I said no, I did not. They looked around--Blanche Lansky and Louis Toepper looked around some more, then they came back to me a second time about a month later. And Blanche said to me, "Are you sure, Mary, that you don't want the registrar's job?" I really turned it down. It was very flattering to me. But I have always wanted to do something that I felt I was perfectly capable of doing and would be happy doing. Now I probably would have been capable of doing the registrar's job, but I would not have been happy. I enjoyed what I was doing, working with different faculty and different areas of the law school.

Then, to fill the registrar's job, Irene Tenenbaum was hired. Irene worked well with Frances, learning the job of registrar, and when Frances retired, Irene became the law registrar. Frances was high-caliber. She was intelligent, and you know what-- One of the interesting things was that Frances always had to sort the mail. All the mail that came into the law school at that time, she sorted. When Dean Toepper asked one day, "Frances, why do you spend all your time sorting the mail?" she shot back at him, "How do I know what's going on otherwise?"

We moved into a period of fund raising for a new building-- construction of a new building. Everything changed. We became a new law school. In the fall of 1971 the second- and third-year students began their classes in Gund Hall. The admissions office, which I now headed, was put into Gund Hall at the very beginning also. The first-year class met in the old building on Adelbert Road for several months.

We had to set up financial aid books at this time. The number of applications was growing. LSATs became an important part of the admissions process. We had to compute the GPAs of each applicant, and we had to compute this by hand. Many nights I took the GPA files for students home and worked on those transcripts. Now, of course, this is all done nationwide and we get the benefit of a nationwide analysis of GPAs.

I remember very well 1969 and 1970--the student uprisings. It is a frightening thing to come to the campus at the old law school building and across the street to see on the playing fields the Ohio National Guard bivouacked with all of their weapons and all of their motor vehicles and things like that. It's a frightening sensation. Students were belligerent. Even the law students, although personal relations with the individual students remained well, collectively the law students would be on the lawn, they'd have arm strips around their arms with defiant words on them, and I remember Irene Tenenbaum, who was so sympathetic with the students, she would cut up sheets--white sheets--and help the students get the arm bands of dissidents, shall we say, on their arms. I never went that far. I felt a loyalty to the administration, I guess, in this particular situation. The student body changed, I noticed courtesy seemed to go out, I noticed a disrespect in the classrooms, the way people sat and the way they conducted themselves.

Well, I remember then Dean Toepfer was selected as the acting president of the university and Leon Gabinet became the acting dean. When we moved over in the fall of 1971 completely to the new building, Leon Gabinet gave up his acting deanship and Morris Shanker became the acting dean. I was named the assistant director of admissions then and was responsible for most of the administrative work. The faculty member who headed up the admissions was Joe Howe. Professor Howe and I came over--the original administrative offices--to arrive at Gund Hall in the summer of 1971. About three or four months later everybody had moved over and we were on a new pathway.

Lindsey Cowen was selected dean to follow Lou Toepfer, now the acting president. Or now he actually became president. Blanche Lansky left, and Dean Cowen hired Pat Ferry as the chief administrative officer. Our admissions grew to over 2400 applications a year. Now just handling that number of pieces of paper with all of the material attached thereto is a really masterful undertaking. We were greatly involved with a mountain of work. We became isolated from the students because we had a barrier of papers between us. Really we became attached at that time just to applicants--not students but applicants. After a person became a student, they never came into the admissions office. In the old building, where the admissions and the registrar and everything was done in the same large office, we would see applicants when they became students and we'd see them when they were going to graduate. But when our admissions became so involved and so large, we only really touched--humanly touched--applicants. After the applicant became a student, we lost touch with them. We had a pre-student contact. At the old building we knew everyone by the first Christmas. We knew the personal problems, their happinesses, and their sadnesses, and things like that.

Financial aid became separated out from admissions then because it became a problem of its own. We have to coordinate the activities but there really are two massive administrative jobs. One, selecting the applicant to be admitted, and two, getting the financial aid to the students.

I've enjoyed my job. I'm thankful to the law school. I've had a very happy life. Cleveland is my home. I'm going to stay in Cleveland now that I've retired, and I'm going to enjoy many things that I have put off--things to enrich my life. I like to go to museums--the art museum. I like to do church work. I want to take advantage of all the cultural opportunities in University Circle. I want to go to Cuyahoga Community College, which has a lot of programs that are appealing to me. And I want to see a lot of people that I have met as the admissions officer--some of the older alumni now, who are practicing, and when I see them I'll remember that I had a little something to do with their preparation, because through the process which I participated in--the admissions process--they became law students and then lawyers.