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Interview with Irene Tenenbaum, Retired Registrar (transcript)

Oliver Schroeder

Case Western Reserve University School of Law

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Irene Tenenbaum
Retired Registrar
Interview with Oliver Schroeder, September 28, 1988
transcription by Kerstin Ekfelt Trawick

We are now recording in the home of Irene Tenenbaum, 3854 Meadowbrook Boulevard, University Heights, Ohio--another one of our series of oral history interviews.

Irene, can you tell us how you came to be employed at Case Western Reserve Law School?

I had just left a job for personal reasons and had driven down to Mt. Sinai Hospital, because I always wanted to work for doctors. They interviewed me and told me they would call me, and I left. And I thought, well, while I'm going by the university, I'll just stop and see what's doing there. They sent me to the Med School because Ruth Somebody-or-other was retiring, and I was interviewed and told that I would hear from them. Well, I waited about a week and I finally called. They said I was over-qualified for the job, but they had an opening at the law school and I said, "Sure, why not?" Well, I went down there and the next day Lou Toepfer hired me.

Was there anything more that you can think about this hiring process?

Well, I think it was lucky that I was employed at the law school, because my husband being an attorney, it made it easy for him at social functions to talk to people and know what was going on, whereas at the Medical School he'd have been in way over his head.

Can you tell us something about the working conditions and what you did in the first days of your employment.

Well actually the first six months of my employment I spent down in the university registrar's office, because Lou had just pulled the law school out of the university system and we had to do our own grade recording. The university couldn't get our pluses and minuses into their computer system, so he pulled us out and I went down to find out just what you do with grades. As I say, if it hadn't been for Pat Gallion and Ann Kramer in the registrar's office, I don't know what I would have done. They were the two guiding lights in my career as a registrar. When Lou pulled the grades out of the system, of course we had to have somebody to sign the transcripts because we were issuing them at the law school, and Lou said, "Well, sign them 'Assistant Registrar.'" Which I did for about a month, and then I said, "Well, what's the difference? There's no registrar here. How can I be an assistant registrar?" He said, "Okay, you're the registrar." And that's how I came to be registrar at the law school.

Where were you located in the law school building? This is the old building, on Adelbert Road.

As you came into the building, there was a hallway with a big

staircase that went up to the second floor to the library and the faculty offices, and to the right were the administrative offices. I had one desk there, and Mary Bohurjak had another, and there was one other person, I believe, sitting there with us. Then there was like a little inner sanctum, and Blanche [Lansky] was there, and then there was Lou Toepfer's office. And Mary and I were really the only two people there outside of Blanche, who was Lou's secretary.

This was the extent, then, of the whole administrative staff of the law school? And what year was this?

That's right. I started on November 1, 1967. Now I don't remember whether there was an assistant there or not, or it was just Mary and me. Now there were some people over in the annex, the building next door, and I really didn't know what they did. I was so busy learning how to be a registrar!

Can you tell me some of those early experiences you had with the students? What do you recollect?

Well, one of the things that stands out in my mind is Lou Toepfer's rule that as long as a student could hold a pencil he could take an exam. Those first couple of years were really hysterical because one time we had Jerry Weiss, who had an emergency appendectomy on Sunday and had to take a final on Monday. Earl Leiken had to trot down to the hospital, but Jerry couldn't even hold a pencil. Then we had another one who had a collapsed lung who when Earl went down was so full of tubes and stuff that Earl couldn't even find his hand to put the pencil in.

As I recall, Earl was the assistant dean at that time.

Yes, we called Earl "the green dean." Then of course we used to call everybody. If they didn't show up for an exam, we'd get on the phone and call them. I remember one time we called Gary Goldfarb, who was a first-year student who had taken one exam and had to come down for his second exam. Gary didn't show up on time so I got on the phone and called him and said, "Why aren't you here, Gary?" He said, "Well, I'm not going to take the exam. I'm leaving law school." I said, "You can't do that, Gary." So I spoke to Gary for about 15 minutes, and then I called Dan Clancy over and I said, "Dan, you work on this kid." Between the two of us, we worked on him for about half an hour and finally he said, well, he'd take the exam except that he had no way of getting down to school. Dan says, "I'll come and get you." Which he did, and Gary eventually graduated and is doing very well now.

This says something about the school as it was then, in size and-- shall we say--intimacy between the students and the faculty, as compared with today when we have a very large operation. You saw that change.

Oh, very definitely. It was one big happy family in the old building. In fact we used to kid each other--you take your life in your hands if you go out in the halls between classes. Remember we had that little narrow hall where the mailboxes were, and then the long corridor that

went down to the moot courtroom. And between classes, if you were caught in that little space, you had to hustle to get out of there fast! Because it was so crowded. And of course in my naivety I didn't know-- They told me later that the students were using those mailboxes for drug drops.

What do you recall of the faculty? You came in at a time when the faculty was just starting to be reborn, as it were. New personnel were coming on.

I remember when Peter Junger walked in. He had a cat on each shoulder--Good and Evil. And we knew on Tuesdays that the cleaning woman was at Peter's house because he had to bring the cats down and keep them in the office. And the pigeons outside were terrified of those cats. We'd hear their noise until he took the cats home. There were a lot of new ones at that time. I remember when Spencer and Nan [Neth] came in. Right now I can't think of some of the others. But it was one big happy family there.

As we developed and began to get our new building and that started, we had to make a transition over to Gund Hall, which is a large and beautiful facility compared with our small but very beautiful facility on Adelbert Road. What special problems do you recall that you had as the registrar in this activity? Were there any?

I don't remember any special ones. Maybe I blocked them out of my mind, I don't know. But when we moved to the new building, it became more of a businesslike thing than the homey atmosphere we had had in the other building. The building itself is so structured that it doesn't call for any intimacy between people. It was quite a change. I mean, we finally had a staff lounge. In the old building we just had a room down in the basement. And some of the other changes were-- I remember in the old building at exam time the wives would come in and bring cookies and coffee. Now in the new building we have a coffee stand run by the students. We also-- I remember this one kid who worked his way through law school playing bridge. His wife was always calling for emergencies, and we knew just where Mark was--he was downstairs playing bridge.

This was in the old law school. As one who's been there too, I don't detect that kind of operation anymore, or haven't in Gund Hall. Do you?

It's very impersonal in Gund Hall. In the old building you knew everybody. You knew their troubles, you knew when they were happy. It was one big happy family really. And of course that class of '72, who were in the old building two years, they were the first class to graduate from the new building--they were full of the devil. And of course the times were different. It was during the Vietnamese war, and there was a lot of activity in the old building. People were concerned, the students were concerned. I remember May fourth vividly, because I got a call--"Please send us legal and medical help immediately. Four of our kids have been pointblanked." And of course my daughter was at Kent at that time. But I contacted some of the students--A. J. DiMattia, and Seth Marks, and some of the others--and

said, "They need help down there." Well, there's no question--these kids ran. In fact I remember the whole university was closed except for the law school, and Beanie Toepfer was picketing the law school. They were exciting times, and these people were interested in what was happening and were doing things.

You were referring to that incident, the Kent State disaster on May 4, 1970. I remember myself coming up and going into the law school, if I may interject this, and Jerry Weiss rushing out. I said, "Where are you going in such a hurry?" He said, "We're going to Kent State. They just shot some students." And you know, it stunned me. As you say, it was an interesting and challenging time.

Talk a little more about this, because I know you were deeply concerned. I recall talking to you about this over the years, of your humanity and your concern for other human beings. Can you give any more ideas of what the students did then?

I remember one night there was a rally of some sort; it must have been in the gym right across from the law school. Suddenly I got this call at home, "Mrs. T, come down immediately--they're going to burn down the law school." Well, I ran down, and Hersh Koslov was there. I said, "What's the matter, Hersh? Why'd you call me?" He said, "Well, they're talking about burning down the law school," and Ovid Lewis and Sidney Jacoby were writing books at the time. And they were afraid that all their records would be destroyed. But they never burned it down. I remember carrying the law school files in the trunk of my car for three days, because we were afraid they were going to do something to the law school.

Did you have any feeling that it was specifically against our law school, or was it against the symbol of the law? Or were there some things that agitated and were going on in our law school students?

Well, it might have been a combination of all of that, Ollie. They were unhappy with the law school. They were very disturbed because of what was happening outside. It might have been a combination of the two.

Did you get a feeling of what disturbed them specifically about the law school?

Well, I have some things upstairs that would help remind me. Well, you remember, we had Bob Sheahen, who was such an activist. He was also, well, I'd better not say anything. [laughs] I don't know, they were just interested in things other than themselves, let me put it that way. A lot of the people who were very active in the Vietnam era are still doing public service work. You have Ed Tetelman in New Jersey, Bob Gross in New Hampshire, Chuck Guerrier here--these people are humanitarians and are not interested in making a lot of money and being a big shot. They went to law school because they wanted to help people and they're still doing it. I think now people are more concerned with getting a job with a large corporation or a large law firm and making a lot of money and living it up. These kids were not interested in that, and they still aren't. They want to make this a

better world.

You indicated the transition of the concerns of students in the old law school where we were and now in the new law school. Let's look at the students in the new law school. Do you have any feelings from your experiences about their concerns? You've just expressed them sort of generally, but do you have anything specific, for example, that would support--undergird--that feeling?

Well, there's this constant striving to be number one in the class. You know, these people don't realize they were all number one in undergraduate school and they're competing against other number ones. And, as I say, they're just interested in being number one and getting a good job with a big law firm and making a lot of money. Now there are exceptions. In every class there have been exceptions. And they've been the activists. They have been concerned with public interest law, with helping the poor, with helping the needy, with doing good for humanity--that's probably the general term for it. There are concerned people. Unfortunately, there aren't very many of them.

I wonder if it's the environment of the law school that has stimulated that--Gund Hall, let's put it that way, really a palace compared to what we had on Adelbert Road--

May I interrupt a minute? When we first moved into Gund Hall, you know that big block of granite that says "George Gund" at the head of the pathway there? One of the women in the library wanted to know what that was. And I said, "That's a crypt where George Gund is buried and you have to genuflect every time you go by." She believed me for a long time.

Do you think it's that environment that we have? The larger number of faculty that makes it a little less intimate, you know, in the faculty-student relationship. Or is it the wider environment of our whole society--materialistic?

Oh, I think it's a combination of the two. People are very impressed when they first come to the building--because it is a lovely building. But I think it's more an office building than a school. And I think a lot of them come with the idea that they're going to make a lot of money and the school looks so nice, this is going to help me do it. And of course we have some faculty who are widely recognized, and they come for that. But it's a combination of the two--it may be the times. But, there just isn't that old school feeling there.

Now you've been in on the beginning of the renaissance of the faculty, the enlargement of the faculty, the new people that have come--what interesting experiences have you had with faculty members, individual faculty members?

Well, I think faculty members are the most egotistical people I have ever met. And I think it's too bad that our faculty has so many factions, that they can't get together on anything. I think that's to the detriment of the school. You know, everybody has his own idea,

and this is the way it should be, and this is the way I want it done. And if it isn't done, some of them will pout, and some of them won't speak to others. They're very childish, as far as I'm concerned-- maybe because I'm older than most of them, I don't know. But my dealings with them have always been pleasant. Oh, there are one or two--like Spencer Neth who never gets anything in on time. But Spencer's the kind of guy that if he's late with his exam he'll run it off, and he'll collate it. He won't have his secretary stay after or not go out to lunch and do it. So Spencer Neth I can forgive. And of course Morrie Shanker with his utmost secrecy on his exam drives us NUTS! Absolutely, every time we get an exam from Morrie it's marked "Restricted." This has been going on for 20 years! I remember in the old law school he used to call me into his office, and he'd lock the door, and go over the exam with me--because at that time I was typing all of them. That's something that has changed. I used to type all the exams and then run them off or send them over to the print shop. Of course now, and especially now with the new IBM machine they have in the print shop, it's a snap. We don't have to worry so much about security because there's no scrap--all the sheets come out right. So pissed off! His "Restricted"--every exam! I should have saved all of those. I could have wallpapered my living room with his "Restricted" notes. Well, they're funny.

Now there's another way to identify the people you've been in contact with, and that falls in the category of alumni--people who have been students and then gone out into the world. And I know you've had a wonderful relationship with them that began when they were students. That wonderful party that they had last Saturday for you, just an indication that they don't forget you when they become alumni. Have you had any particular experiences with alumni? You're not recording their grades any more.

No, I'm not. Well, Ed Tetelman, who lives in New Jersey-- I'm very fortunate in that I have a cousin who has a summer home on Long Beach Island in Jersey. So we've been going there for the past eight years, and every time we go we meet Jan and Ed. Either they come to the island or we go to their home, or we meet half way. And I've seen some of the others. Of course some of them have come back to the school as instructors. Steve Bulloch, Jerry Weiss, Susan Jaros--there have been quite a few of them, so I've seen them here. And of course every place I go I bump into somebody. My mother used to say, "Is that one of your boys?" Or "Is that one of your girls?" Yeah, they're great! They really are. A couple of years ago my car was towed from Bellflower because I had parked on the wrong side of the street. Well, I wasn't going to let them get away with that. So I protested the ticket and I went down to the Justice Center. I couldn't take two steps in any direction without somebody saying, "Mrs. T--do you need help? What can I do for you?" And one of our alumni defended me. Not that I needed it, but Mark Hoffman took the case for me. And I was walking through the Justice Center and somebody way at the top of the escalator yells down, "Mrs. T, are you here again?" And of course my fondest, biggest dream has been that I'll be called for jury duty, and the prosecuting attorney, the defense attorney, and the judge are all alumni. And I wonder what would happen--

Now Irene, you have gone through this transition period, when the computer was introduced into the law school as it is in our whole life. What changes did you see with the introduction of the computer in the work of the registrar?

Well, for one thing it made the class lists much easier, the drop-adds at the beginning of the semester. We could get them in and out much faster. Of course we had to have all of this programmed, and it took a while until the programmer and I could get this straightened out right. As far as grades are concerned, we still do them manually--on the computer and manually, so that we have a check. Because it's very easy to make an A- or an A+ or a B- or a B+--you forget the minus, you forget the plus, or you type the grade in wrong. So we still do it manually as well as on the computer. We have a check that way. In many ways it has made the registrar's job easier. But then too if something happens, like with our writing requirement now, where we don't know how many semesters it's going to run-- Now in some cases it's taken care of in one semester, and in other cases it goes over two semesters. Well, you can't just tell the computer that it's over two semesters for the whole course. Because not everybody has the same requirement. In other words, there can be 12 people in a class, and maybe 6 of them will complete the requirement in one semester whereas the other 6 will go over two semesters. Well, the program is not sophisticated enough to pick out which ones are taking it for how long, and the registrar's office doesn't know which people these are until the end of the semester. So it's not a lack of communication. I guess the professor himself doesn't know who's going to finish it when.

I think what I hear you saying is that when you use the computer you certainly can't personalize the thing. Everybody's got to be in the same boat and measured by the same number of oar strokes, as it were.

Right. Or else you're going to have 200,000 programs set up. It's the programmer who has to set these things up. We can only do what he has programmed. I'm not making myself very clear. Now we have some courses we know go over two semesters, so we have that programmed. I was going to say, the computer will not compute grades if there's one grade missing. In other words, if the student has 4 courses and we have grades for 3 courses, the computer will not figure out what that student's GPA is until we get all the grades. Which is where the confusion comes in with the writing requirement. Which leads to other problems: you can't do class rankings, you can't do GPA's, there are many things you can't do unless you have all those grades.

What you're saying is, you have to satisfy the computer, and then the computer can help you a great deal.

That's right. The computer has to be programmed. But you cannot get all these exceptions in the computer. We had another problem with rankings, with the second-year rankings. Now to rank a second-year student, he has to have completed so many hours, and there can't be first-year grades in that--a whole mishmash there-- Well, there were so many exceptions that we just couldn't program it. And if it were

programmed, it would take three times as long to get the final figures. That's why, do away with the second-year ranking! And now with the part-timers, there's more of a problem with ranking. You can't rank anybody as a first-year student until they've had 24 hours. Some of these people may take two years to get the 24 hours. Then it's going to take them two years to get another 24 hours. So they'll be ranked with three different classes. The only way to rank a part-timer is when he graduates.

Well now, if you think of anything more, in the months ahead--or years ahead, because you're going to have a long life, with the exercising you're doing--you put it in a note and send it to me.

Will do. I'm sure there are other things that I just can't think of right now.

Everybody that I've interviewed so far has said that, and they've all taken the vow, as it were, to supplement in writing little things that come to their minds.