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2007

An Interview with Barbara Givens

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The UNLV @ Fifty Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries

University of Nevada Las Vegas

2007

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2007

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Preface

Recorded interviews and transcripts composing the UNLV @ Fifty Oral History Project have been made possible through the generosity of CSUN (grant initiated, presented, and shepherded through the CSUN political process by Andres Moses) and the Libraries Advisory Board. Lied Library provided a wide variety of administrative services and the Special Collections Department, home of the Oral History Research Center, provided advice and archival expertise. The Oral History Research Center enabled students and staff to work together with campus community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives.

The transcripts received minimal editing. These measures include the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the UNLV @ Fifty Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
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Preface

Barbara Givens was born in California, grew up in Reno, Nevada, and moved to Las Vegas in 1952 with her family when she was 14 years old. Her father ran a small construction business here in Vegas until he retired about 15 years ago. Her brother Steve and his children live in Vegas also. Barbara graduated from Las Vegas High School and enrolled in the first matriculated teacher's program at the Southern Regional Division of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (now known as UNLV).

Barbara was involved in organizing the first "Rebel Yell", school dances in Las Vegas, and other collegiate activities in Reno. In her senior year, she returned to Las Vegas High to complete her student teaching.

After graduation, Barbara was assigned to Rancho High School to teach biology. She left after a year and a half because she had married and was expecting her first child. At that point in time, Clark County School District did not allow pregnant women to remain in the classroom. Fifteen years later she returned to the classroom, this time at Chaparral High. Concurrently, Barbara entered the Master's in Education program at UNLV, and graduated in 1980.

Barbara has always loved to travel and has experienced many wonderful trips to exotic places around the world. In retirement, she assists with special events at Hamm Hall and Judy Bailey Theater, goes on-line to offer her services as a biology tutor to high school students, and continues to plan exciting trips abroad. She also indulges in her favorite hobby – attending Star Trek conventions and collecting Star Trek memorabilia

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This is Claytee White. It is October 5th, 2005, and I am in the home of Barbara Givens interviewing her today. How are you?

Very good, thank you.

Good. We're just going to start off by talking about early life in Las Vegas.

Very good. Very good.

Tell me about your family first.

My family was living in Reno, [Nevada], during my grammar school years. Then we moved here to Las Vegas. My father [Fahmie, Michael] had a small construction company as the town was growing. The population was about 32,000 at the time. He continued on with his business until retirement, which was probably about 15 years ago. I came here when I was, I believe, 14 years old. That would have been in 1952, and I have lived here ever since.

Any sisters and brothers?

Yes. I have a younger brother, Steven Hampton, who retired from the Las Vegas Fire Department as a captain. He lives here in town, also. He has children, and recently became a widower.

I don't know exactly where you'd like for me to lead with this in the fact that I went to Las Vegas High School. At that time it was the only high school in town. All teenagers knew each other. There was no bussing to speak of except for public bussing because everyone was generally within walking distance. A few classmates of mine that did live out of town towards Blue Diamond-- way out of town, Blue Diamond-- were given some type of financial assistance for gasoline, for driving into town because it was so far.

It was sometimes rather dangerous when it rained. Roads would be washed out, and there was a lot of flooding here constantly. "The floods were always in control" was the joke. The only flood controls that we had were the "dippety-do's" at some intersections, which were supposed to take care of water drainage.

Generally speaking, most people lived and worked on the same side of the railroad tracks. If you worked on the east side, you lived on the east side. The reason for that is that the underpasses at Bonanza [Road] and Charleston [Boulevard], which were only two-lane, would fill with water when it rained.

There was no drainage in them, and they would have to be pumped out by the fire department, which took days, absolutely days. The streets that went over the railroad tracks, such as Spring Mountain

[Road], quite often were blocked with freight trains. We had a lot of freight coming through, so it could be a very bad situation, and there weren't that many streets going westward on the west side.

Now, I think one of the first communities on the western side of the track was-- let me think here for a minute-- Rancho Circle. Rancho Circle was created by Dr. Cherry, one of the first physicians here in town. He had bought five, ten acres of property and fenced it off and sold it to his wealthy friends to create their own little compound of what was considered the most exclusive housing in town. It was just a couple blocks away from University Medical. It used to be Southern Nevada Memorial Hospital, I believe. But otherwise, the western side of town was referred to as "Old Town." Now, this is not to be confused with Westside. Westside is capitalized. It was a segregated community that is now on the north side of Las Vegas because of the direction we grew. So everything gets a little crazy after a while. I have always lived on the southeast side of town. When someone says something is located at the corner of Jones [Avenue] and Sahara [Avenue], I haven't the slightest idea what they're talking about. I don't cross over the railroad track.

So do you still think that we have the flooding and that you have a problem if it starts raining?

When I purchased this house 11 years ago, this was just bare ground out here. I'm at the very south end of the valley off Spencer [Street] and Windmill [Street]. I came out and checked the terrain, the drain of the land, the streets. I picked this particular lot that's in the middle of the block because of its higher elevation. If you look out my back windows, you see the desert landscaping, and I have an artificial riverbed running through as just a decorative item. But I'll have people come over and say, "Well, when that fills with water, where does it go? Where does it drain?" I'll say, "It's not real," and they keep looking at it. Then they'll say, "Well, it must drain somewhere." I say, "No, it doesn't." But the funny part is that when we do have extremely hard rains, it will fill with water, but it's just drainage from the yard.

Every time I have purchased a house, I always check out the drainage because you can get hit really hard. There have been times when county commissioners or zoning commissioners have allowed apartment complexes to be built in flood zones. So besides always checking the elevation, I always advise newcomers when they're buying into a development to always buy into the interior. Never buy on the outer perimeter because the outer perimeter could be subject to rezoning. They could put in a bowling

alley in your backyard. They could put in a slaughterhouse. You never know how the zoning commission is going to change what's going to be up against your back wall. These people across the street from me are on the outer perimeter, and they were told that their houses would be up against one-acre estates. Then the commissioners changed their minds, and they went into smaller houses that were two-story. So my neighbors are up on a higher level, and they can look right down into their yards.

There are just some peculiar things about the town that hinges on small town mentality, good old boys helping each other, religious connections that were very strong. In my very first interview as a teacher, I was asked religious questions. Having lived here long enough and knowing the ropes, I gave religious answers. When I left the office, Harold Brinley was the coordinator for hiring teachers. He addressed me as Sister Barbara. He says, "Welcome aboard, Sister Barbara."

Wow.

I thought, oh, my...

Before I get back to that, I want to ask about Dr. Cherry.

Yes.

Was he part of the hospital staff, the early hospital?

I think the Las Vegas Hospital. I'm not sure if it was over on Stewart [Avenue] or Ogden [Avenue]. It was somewhere over there off Ninth Street. I'm not quite sure of the location. Yes, he was in on that. His son, Jack Cherry, became an attorney and married a good friend of mine, Shirley Wingert. The Wingert family, I think, was influential in putting together Nevada Power or Southwest Gas. They were married for a number of years. But Dr. Cherry was instrumental with that hospital and starting that particular community of Rancho Circle.

Do you know any of the other people who lived in the early community?

Well, I think one of the original families is the Laub, Mary Laub, and let me see... Her husband's name [William (Bill) M. Laub] I can't remember, but he's with Southwest Gas. No, I can't think of anything else. Now, Mary is a sorority sister of mine, but not from the same university and not the same year. We both are Kappa Alpha Thetas, but she was from Berkeley [California] and I'm from Reno.

Tell me more about once you finished high school. How did you decide on Reno?

I graduated from Las Vegas High School in 1955. At that time the only graduate programs available here in Las Vegas were night school classes for teachers so that they could renew their teacher

certificate. It calls for six credits, I think, every five years. Dr. James Dickinson along with Maude Frasier had gone in together to establish some courses for these teachers. Otherwise, it was a drive to Kingman or Flagstaff to do this. Of course, no degrees were granted. It was just credits, a loose assortment of credits.

So 1955, I believe, was the first year they started having a regular matriculated program, and I enrolled as a freshman. Our classes were held in various empty rooms of Las Vegas High School, in Frasier Hall, and in the Baptist Church on the corner. Our PE classes were held in public parks, tennis courts. There was an old bowling alley downtown on Third Street where we took one class in bowling. There were no automatic pin setters, so we had to set pins for each other.

So was this the physical education class?

This was the PE course, right, the physical ed. It was Saturday morning. When we'd come into the bowling building, the manager would go through the back where the pins were set and chase out the drunks that had been sleeping it off overnight and clean the place out for us. So then one person would bowl, and the other person would set pins. I learned how to set bowling pins. Then we'd immediately go over to a city park and play maybe an hour of tennis. Next, we'd go to, perhaps, a basketball court and play another hour. Saturday mornings were grueling because you had to do a whole week's worth of PE [Physical Education] at that one time.

During that time, we were using Las Vegas High School's auditorium. The upstairs offices were used for classes, registration, and faculty offices. Everything was upstairs, including our new little library for which someone had donated a huge set of books. It was something like survey charts for Mohave County. I couldn't believe how useless these books were for us.

But what I did really feel was unique that I wanted to tell you about is that on the corner of Tenth [Street] and Charleston [Avenue] was a coffee shop. This little coffee shop became our student union because it was closest to our makeshift classrooms. We'd go down there and have sandwiches and coffee and sit there and talk. There was a group of about seven or eight of us. I can show you their pictures in the yearbook that I have, the first yearbook that came out. Sitting there, we used to talk about how we needed some type of social life. We considered it a fully accredited university, our credits were recognizable throughout the United States, but we needed to get some type of social cohesion going here. We were known as-- what-- the University of Nevada Southern-- Southern Regional Division of the

University of Nevada at Las Vegas. So we were sort of an offspring of Reno. We were their southern cousins. With that theme, we took on a confederate motif, so to speak. We became known as "The Rebels." These are names we formulated over coffee in this little shop. Reno's [University of Nevada, Reno] colors were silver and blue, so we picked silver and red. They had a mascot that was a wolf, so we picked sort of a "Yosemite Sam" looking character and General Beauregard, very Civil War, confederate-type, the rebellious South.

Then we put together a few little dances. One I suggested, since it was Christmastime, was The Snowball. They still have it, as far as I know. Another one was called The Cotillion. These were very southern terms. Another student and I started typing up these programs of where there were going to be dances, when we're going to meet for coffee. We'd run it off of on a ditto machine, and we called that one little paper "The Rebel Yell."

Oh, wow.

That was the first newspaper. We just did all of these things, absolutely groundwork, just the very basic starting of what UNLV is doing right now. So this other classmate and I were, so to speak, the first editors of "The Rebel Yell."

So would you name that other person?

Yes. Her name was Becky Syde, S-y-d-e, I believe. I have her name and picture for you.

Good.

She has since passed away. All of our collegiate activities were in Reno, and that called for hiring buses and driving up to Reno for football games and any big time activity, which you know is an eight-hour drive if you make good time. I have a picture, again in the yearbook, of us sitting in the grandstands up there wrapped in blankets and everything we could get our hands on because we were freezing to death. We couldn't believe Reno would get so cold, and, of course, on the visitor's side we were in the shade.

Why were you on the visitor's side?

Well, our team was playing Reno [University of Nevada, Reno]. Or, you know, it might not have even been whether we -- I don't even think we had a team. I'll take that back. They put us on the visitor's side because we were not Reno.

I see.

We were visitors from the south.

How often do you remember going to various events in Reno?

Probably the two years that I put in down here, I went up about four or five times.

So two years, why two years?

I was here from 1955 to '57. At the end of 1957, I had exhausted the curriculum here in Las Vegas, and it was required for me to transfer to Reno, which I did as a junior. I pledged Kappa Alpha Theta. I started concentrating more on my requirements for my major and minor. I got all of the other basic requirements out of the way down here, and then I was at UNR [University of Nevada, Reno] a year and a half. In the second semester of my senior year, when student teaching is supposed to begin, I approached my advisor and I told him since Las Vegas and Reno are supposed to be working hand in glove, allow me to go to Las Vegas. I'll do my student teaching in collaboration with some more advanced classes they had down here by then, and then I'll come up and graduate with my class. He thought it was fine because he had something like 95 student teachers he had to corral all the time, whereas down here, I think there were only six.

So I came down here my second semester of my senior year and did my student teaching at Las Vegas High School, which was a place that I had graduated from only three and a half years before. Teachers would look at me in the hall with that look on their face like, ooh, we got a slow senior. You know, what is she putting in, five or six years as a senior? I'm telling them, "No, I am a student teacher back again among" ...-- you know, they were now my peers, and prior to that they had been my teachers.

At the end of my student teaching that semester, I flew back to Reno and graduated with my class. Much to my displeasure, some people were saying, "Haven't seen you around for a few days. Where have you been?" I said, "I've been out of town. I've been student teaching."

Nevada has always been a rather different state. I don't know if you've lived here that long, but every once in a while we do things that are a little different, and it throws people off. For example, the guest speaker at my college graduation in Reno was Carl Sandburg, the poet. Oh, yes. Among other things they did that was rather strange, Harrah's Club offered UNR [University of Nevada, Reno] an indoor swimming pool, I mean a very elaborate athletic complex. The only thing they asked for in return is that they would be allowed to put a brass plaque by the door with their name on it and that they had donated this building. They were refused.

Oh, how times have changed.

Yes. The locals wanted no connection with gambling. The money had to be laundered first; casinos taxed, the money sent to Carson City, put into the state treasury, and then allocated back to the university. Anything connected with gambling or casinos was severely frowned upon, even though many of them had parents, brothers and sisters, relatives that worked in the casinos and no one really thought less of them for it. But the educational system in this state has always frowned upon gambling money. I think it's because a lot of these people in the beginning were from the Midwest and their early beginnings frowned upon this kind of income. Yet, they would accept it if the name had been changed on it, earmarked.

Right. Tell me how you felt as a student here for those first two years. Did you feel that you were getting the same quality education that you would have gotten by going to Reno from the beginning?

I would have no way of knowing. I mean, I wouldn't have any comparison. I felt that the instructors were extremely adequate. Some of them were outstanding. One instructor I had in particular who is still well known at UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] is Dr. John Wright. He was a character. Now, I'm talking about Dr. John S. Wright, Sr.

Senior, yes.

I took many courses of European Civilization, England and the British Empire, six credits, Western Civilization, on and on from him. He was a very humorous man in that his humor was rather English or British. When he would laugh, he'd laugh with tight lips, sort of a chuckle, "hee-hee-hee-hee", like that, which he did constantly. It got to the point where, you know, what's funny? You know, I'm not getting it. But one of his little stories of World War II is that he and some fellow officers in the war were in Vienna, Austria, and they had an opportunity to-- I don't know whether they went in uniform; I'm sure they didn't-- sneak into the Vienna Opera House. He says, "We're sitting there watching this opera. We had a box seat, and we're sitting there very sly, hee, hee, hee, hee, (with this giggle of his). We look over in the next box, and it's filled with Nazi officers, hee, hee, hee." Well, we were stunned. You know, our mouths just dropped open. We just couldn't believe that he was sitting next to these Nazis and he thought it was so funny. But his teaching of history was delightful, and often we would meet at his house.

Oh, wonderful.

Yes. He didn't live too far away from my parents' house. We would drop in at his house, and we'd have little lectures. It was really quite nice.

Another instructor was Dr. Fred A (Fritz) Ryser. Dr. Riser had come here from a large university, I believe, for his family's health. He was absolutely shocked at the lack of facilities. Now, he taught biology. We had to go over to Rancho High School and use their biology labs after hours. That was the only facility. He was a pipe smoker, and they had drawn a big circle of chalk on the sidewalk outside the door that he had to stand in to smoke because smoking wasn't allowed on campus. He was my advisor, and I just thought the world of him. As time went by, though, he did transfer up to Reno [University of Nevada, Reno]. I think there is some facility named after him now.

Okay. So history was your major?

Yes.

And biology your minor?

Right.

Now, I want to ask you how that played out in your career in just a few minutes. What was the transition like for you? You've been to Reno several times. But what was the transition like because now you're living on campus for the first time? What was that like, leaving Las Vegas and going to Reno?

Well, I had lived in Reno in my grammar school years. I was familiar with the city, and I had relatives up there. So it wasn't that foreign for me. Family ties here were not real strong. So I didn't have any feeling of homesickness or what have you. It was mostly the cold. I mean, we were all freezing to death. There were about six girls from Las Vegas, and we all went into the same sorority house, I think, for camaraderie and we all froze to death. We were ridiculed, embarrassed, and belittled by the Reno people. If you're not familiar with this warfare that they have going on with the south constantly, that many of us in Las Vegas are not aware of, they just think that we're Sodom and Gomorrah down here. We were always being ridiculed about the way we dressed. We wore colorful shoes. They wore only black, brown, gray, or beige shoes, whereas I wore a pair of red shoes or a pair of green shoes. We were ridiculed for not wearing a full under slip. We wore half slips. You're looking at a culture in Reno that's influenced by San Francisco [California]. Las Vegas is influenced by Los Angeles, [California] so we were considered sort of a suburb of Hollywood to a certain degree. Las Vegas was a concrete slab with

houses put on it with no foundation, no roots. We didn't have a history --

That was figuratively and literally?

Yes, and it was in their minds. In fact, it still is going on because I returned in the late 1980s, maybe 1990, on a grant to the Mackey School of Mines for summer work. There were other teachers from around the state that had been given grants, also. Since we were all new in class, we were introducing ourselves around, and I immediately was attacked. Why isn't Las Vegas sending us more money? Why is Clark County gobbling up all the money? Why aren't we getting this? Why aren't we getting that? I said, "Listen, I'm a teacher, not a politician. You need to talk to your state legislature." They said, well, Las Vegas this and Las Vegas that. I said, "I know that you people really have some tremendous feelings against Las Vegas, but I tell you what, in Las Vegas some people don't even know that you're here." Then to add to it, I told them, "Some students will ask me, 'Where's Reno?' and I'll say 'I don't know'. There's no animosity from Las Vegas because we are so indifferent to you that we don't even give you a second thought. What's this business of conflict?" It got to the point where I finally told the instructor to the class, "I'm up here to take some lessons and attend as a student. I expect to be protected in the classroom. I would like for you to address these people and tell them to lay off." It was so bad. The cow county people are so anti-Las Vegas and I don't think people down here are even aware of it.

Not to that extent.

No. No, and they're obsessed, absolutely obsessed.

I think we're aware of the fact that UNR feels there is some animosity about UNLV. I think we know about that. And we know that sometimes it seems that the legislature is more favorable to the north. But other than that, I didn't realize that it would --

Oh, yes. It's really quite widespread. Also, up in the Reno area and the northern part of the state, most women are introduced by their first, maiden name, and married name. The maiden name gives family connection, indication as to what family you came from, and they are very proud after that. When I go up there, I always introduce myself as Barbara Hampton Givens so that they'll know who I am. Some families are very deep-rooted, and many of them come from rather humble beginnings. You know, they were miners or farmers or ranchers of some sort. But they feel that they have enough longevity that they have claimed some type of pseudo nobility for the state and that we're just a bunch of trampy people

that live down here, that we're immoral and crass, you know, everything that you can think of that's sort of Hollywood.

I think I would understand it more if they didn't have gaming. If they weren't the divorce capital, as well as we are, then maybe I could understand it. But we have the same industries.

Well, I think the turning point came with them when Las Vegas started to supersede them in population. They had always claimed themselves to be the largest city in the state. As Las Vegas started growing and the wealth started increasing and we surpassed them in everything, so to speak, they became extremely paranoid about it.

Tell me about your high school class, and I also want to know about the class that left Southern and went on to Reno.

Right. As I had mentioned before, there were probably about six girls that were from Las Vegas, and we all went into the same sorority. One of them was Karen Knudson, who was the daughter of Kale Knudson. K. O. Knudson Middle School is named after him. Another one was Kay Reid, who is now known as Dr. Jolene Jenson, who is in charge of the choir or vocal department at UNLV. Kay was a nickname. Reid was her maiden name. Jenson is her married name. She is now Dr. Jolene Jenson. She was my roommate in the Theta house. There were several others whose names are escaping me at the moment because I'm not in contact with them anymore.

Now, as far as the boys were concerned, a few stayed here in town to do their first years at Nevada Southern. One of them was Clyde Turner. Clyde went on into accounting, starting working at the Golden Nugget and now is Steve Wynn's right-hand man. He was at our high school--

He had to finish up at Reno also because the program was not complete down here. Another classmate of mine that went directly to Reno-- I don't believe he put any time in down here in Las Vegas and went directly to Reno-- was Richard Bryan. Richard was a rather ambitious young man. After becoming student body president at UNR, he later went on and became, I think -- he went into the district attorney's after law school. He's the son of Oscar Bryan who was our justice of the peace. Rich went to law school and then came back and, as you know, later was elected governor and U.S. Senator from the state of Nevada. He too was at the reunion along with his wife, Bonnie Fairchilds Bryan. Bonnie is also a sorority sister of mine, but she is from California originally.

Several other young men were here for a while and then went on up to Reno also to finish. That

seemed to be the mode of what had to be done. But the year after I graduated from UNR, UNLV, or whatever it was called at that time, did start granting degrees. There was one student in particular that stands out in my mind. I will show you her picture if you want to see it in the yearbook. Her name was Jeanne Chretien. Jeanie started as a freshman when she was about 35 years old. Her husband had been a political aide to one of our U.S. Senators from Nevada. She had traveled and had a great deal of experience socializing with the political front and what have you. So when she started as a freshman, she certainly had an advantage over the rest of us that were 17, right out of high school. Classes were relatively easy for her. Jeanne made A's in every class she took. She had a 4.0 at the end of four years. Whenever I went into a classroom and I would see her sitting there for the first time, I'd think, oh, my God, there goes the curve. That's exactly the way it was. If a ten-page book report was assigned, Jeanne handed in a hundred-page report. For her Girl Scouts, after they sold cookies, she took the whole troop to Paris. We're talking about an overachiever. She stayed on instead of going to Reno. She plugged it out down here and managed to get her credentials. She stayed on and received her bachelor's and her master's at the same ceremony. She went on to teach at Rancho High School, which was the second school that I was assigned to. When I got there, I thought, "Oh, my God, there's Jeanne Chretien." She was holding classes at 5:30 in the morning for special kids. She stayed after school until 5:30, 6 o'clock. At the end of every school year, she had all of her classes over to her house for dinner. I thought, "Oh, I just can't keep up with this." She was like my nemesis, the poor dear. She was an excellent teacher, and an excellent student. It's just that the competition was a little stiff for someone who was 17 to 21 years old.

I was 22 when I was at Rancho [High School], which was rather strange because I had one student who was 19. He had come back from the navy, and they didn't have adult education at the time, and they were just sticking these kids back in. Of course, he could not adjust at all. They had to remove him from the classroom after he threatened to strike me one day. I just sort of stared him down. So he had to be moved on. He was a little emotionally frustrated.

Now, we're talking about good teachers. Now, walking around your house a few minutes ago, I noticed that you are a master teacher. What does that mean?

My assumption is that it's a teacher that has a master's degree and/or who handles student teachers, having them come into the classroom where we act as a trainer for potential teachers prior to graduation. I have had them, good and bad.

Okay. When I look at teenagers today, sometimes I'm just overwhelmed with the way they live because it's so different from the way I lived when I was a teenager. How did you see that change over the years of being a teacher here in Las Vegas?

It was a drastic change. It was shock. I was at Chaparral High School when I returned to teaching after having been married. Chaparral at that time was considered a yuppie high school. It had a very high turnout for college. Both my boys went to school there. But gradually as the socioeconomic situation of the neighborhood changed and rezoning took place, taking in more apartment buildings across the Boulder Highway, we started getting in more "English as a second language" students and the socioeconomic situation dropped.

By the time I left in 1999, we were declared an inner-city school. We found that gangs were in the school-- you know, you really get an education. Sometimes the police will come and give the teachers new instructions about what the gangs are doing and fill us in on what's happening. Black gangs are usually a very happy-go-lucky group of boys that got together on the basketball court at whatever apartment building, complex they live in, or recreation area. They may get into mischief. They may even get into violence.

But you get into some of the Hispanic gangs, and they'll go back generations. These kids speak the same language. They have the same religion. They have the same background. They come from the same country. They know where they're coming from. They know their roots, and they know where they're going. Where they're going turns out to be the big problem. They come to school-- now, this is not all of them, by any means. I will tell you about an exception. Remind me to tell you the exception. They come to school with their own agenda. The girls' agenda is to have a home of their own, a place of their own with a baby and a man to care for them. I mean, 15, 16 years old. They're ready to start the family as traditionally seen in Mexico. The boys' objective is to get themselves a low-paying job that will pay for a car and as much sex as they can possibly get, and sometimes these two agendas cross each other.

Many of the black children--different religions, different backgrounds-- weren't sure where they came from. They didn't know who their relatives were. They were unsure of their history. They just knew each other and that was it. The Hispanic children, on the other hand, are very, very closely bonded together.

So academically trying to crack that-- example, this one boy in class, he's about 18 years old,

shaved head, about three pounds of gold around his neck, really tough, super tough, just looking, scowling, you know, burn holes right through you. One day he was just sitting there, looking so dejected. I mean, really unhappy, terribly unhappy. I sat down next to him. He looked so sad. I said, "Tell me what is wrong." That was one of the things we did. Fifty percent of my time was counseling. He says, "You know where I'd like to be and what I'd like to be doing?" I said, "No." He says, "I'd like to be back in Mexico in the field with my grandfather plowing with the mule." I'm looking at him, and I'm thinking we've got a 17th Century boy in a 20th Century situation and he is peddling just as fast as he can to try to keep up, you know, with his hair and his clothing and his jewelry, trying to keep up, where basically this boy is 2- to 300 years behind us, culturally speaking. He had been yanked out of that and placed into this environment. No wonder he is not doing well in his classes. It was just a shocking revelation.

Tell me about the exception to some of these rules.

Right. I had one boy come in class whose family was from Mexico. His father evidently excelled in government work and had a government rating of secrecy that was probably two or three notches above the president. He was in Vietnam wearing civilian clothes, and he was one of the last taken off the beach. He never did tell us exactly what kind of work he did, but when he retired, he went out to the test site to do some work. So he had very good clearance. His mother was a delightful woman. He had siblings and a real family life. Everything was very, very good. So this young man-- do you mind if I tell you his name?

Oh, no. Please.

His name is Ruben Saavedra. So he came into my class, this 14-year-old. I like to crack a few jokes once in a while, and Ruben was the only one laughing. His maturity and his state of mind far excelled everyone else's. He made straight A's in biology. Then later on, I think his senior year, he came back as my student aide. I asked him to be my student aide, and I got to know him really, really well. He was interested in medicine. So I called a good friend of mine, Dr. Hugh Follmer, who was an internist, and asked him what do you have because I knew he was active with the boy scouts. So he says, "I have a junior premed program." I said, "I'm sending Ruben Saavadra over." He says okay. So Ruben went into his junior premed group. Dr. Follmer got him a part-time job working emergency at UMC [United Medical Center]. Then later on I got him a partial scholarship, and he graduated as an M.D. [Doctor of Medicine] from the University of Nevada School of Medicine and became my family doctor.

Oh, whoa.

Yes. It brings tears to my eyes.

That is wonderful.

When Ruben married, he wanted to have a different type of marriage, something unique. So he had all of his aunts come up from Mexico and got about 30 people together, including myself, and we went on a Caribbean cruise. They were married in St. Thomas. Then we cruised on down to Barbados. It was a wedding party. Ruben and his wife are still dear, dear friends. It was just delightful. One of his aunts had been principal of a school in Mexico. So we're looking at educated...

So with that kind of background, with you having this kind of background, this kind of exposure, how are we going to level the playing field for everybody?

Well, you're saying education-- one size fits all. I think that's the criticism of the government program of "leaving no child behind" -- it just doesn't work. What you want to do is educate everyone to the very best of their ability, not the goals that you set for yourself as a teacher or a school administrator or what have you.

I had one girl who had checked out with an IQ of about 77. I think if you're a 76 IQ, you go to the school for the mentally retarded. This young girl worked very, very hard, and she made C's in my class. On paper, with her record, she shouldn't have been able to do that. But by bringing her to a C, I didn't leave her behind. She went ahead and started working in her mother's travel agency and sent me letters off and on through the years.

I had another boy who was a drug addict. He was unconscious most of the time in the classroom, head down on his desk, had his eyebrows and his ears and his lips pierced and his head shaved and all of the gory kind of clothing that you can imagine. I was always back there, shaking him. "Wake up. Wake up. Here's paper, pencil. Copy what I have on the board. I want you to listen to me. Come on, come on, come on." Many years later I was in a furniture store, and this elderly man was waiting on me. I looked over and here was this young boy, white shirt and tie, dark slacks. He was polishing furniture, cleaning, and he looked up and he saw me. He says, "Ms. Givens." He comes running over, and he throws his arms around my neck. He says, "If it wasn't for this woman, I'd be living underneath a bridge. My life would be a disaster." So here he was doing maintenance. Now, would an administrator or the president of the United States consider that you've achieved something? In my estimation, yes. Now, the crowning blow to this, if I don't go into tears about it, is that after he had hugged me and kissed me and hugged me,

he went back to work. The elderly man was just standing there and he finally says, "I just moved here to Las Vegas from New York where I taught special ed[ucation] for 30 years. I appreciate you."

Okay, yes. Did you have classroom experience before going back to get your master's degree?

Yes. I had a bachelor's degree, and I taught for a year and a half. I married during that time and was expecting my first child. At that time the Clark County School District would not allow a pregnant teacher to remain in a classroom. You talk about maternity leave, there wasn't even pregnancy time, so I had to resign. Yes. I had to resign. Fortunately, my husband was making a good living, so it wasn't a financial problem. I stayed home for 15 years. After divorcing, I returned again and got a--

How many children?

I have two boys, and I adopted a third one from school. Now, I didn't legally adopt him, but he came to live with us for six years, and I put him through college.

Oh, that's wonderful.

So I returned to teaching with a bachelor's plus 16 in 1977. By 1980, I had my master's. .

Where did you get your master's?

UNLV. Yes.

What was that like? What was the difference, now, being there in the 1950s-- no-- being there the first time you were there-- in the 1950s--

Right.

-- and now going back in the 1970s?

Yes, late 1970s. Well, the difference was in the program. In the 1950s, I was taking academic courses in my major and minor, whereas with the master's degree, it was back to those dumb education courses, you know, curriculum planning and all that kind of business. Some of the instructors are just so out to lunch that they're just down there floating.

Wow. Okay. So now, when you go back in 1977, what does the campus look like? Does it look different than it was in the 50s? What is the environment like? What is your social life like now that you are single?

Yes. Yes. We're looking at a 15-year hiatus. In preparation for that, I don't know whom I got in touch with, but it was dealing with handicapped children. They had a girl, 16 years old, who had just had

brain surgery for a tumor and in the process had lost her vision. She was completely blind. They needed someone to be with her. So I volunteered to be with her. "With her" means that I attended school with her. I walked the halls. I sat in class. I helped her with her notes. I made sure that when she went into the girls' bathroom, she wasn't molested or bothered by other students because she was blind.

It gave me an opportunity to get back into the swing of the classroom tempo, the social structure, what was going on. I found that my own sense of humor and outlook just fit right in again. Because of her surgery, her sense of balance was thrown off a little bit. So she had to hold onto my arm very tightly when we talked down the hall. She was bigger than me, so sometimes we would sway or swing. Some kid would walk by yelling, "Hey, are you two guys stoned?" I said, "You bet. We're on the best stuff you can imagine." And on we'd go.

Then the biology teacher insisted on a notebook from her. The notebook involved drawings from a microscope. I said, "You realize she's blind." He says, "Yes, but what am I supposed to do? I've got to have a notebook." I said, "Well, I have a degree in biology. Let me pass her off on these visual items because she can relate and she can tell me verbally. As I tell her, then she tells it back to me." He says, "But I absolutely have to have a notebook. That's all there is to it. A written notebook." I said, "Okay, we'll get you a notebook." Again, you know, I'm working the situation.

So we go down to the special room that was set up for blind students at Western High School. We get out her Braille typewriter, and she types up her notebook. Now, Braille paper is very thick. It's almost like a fine cardboard. When her notebook was finished, it looked like the Manhattan telephone directory. It must have weighed about ten pounds. I took the book in and slammed it down on his desk. I said, (pow!), "Here is her notebook." He looks at all these little dots, and says, "I can't read this." I said, "And she can't read yours." He says, "I will let you pass her off for this class, what she has related to you, as what she has learned in the class."

Her name was Debbie Anderson. She later went out to UNLV. She was taking classes with my oldest son, music appreciation, et cetera. They had given her a seeing-eye dog. She was standing on the street in front of the university one day with the dog and her boyfriend. The dog pulled her away from the boyfriend, out into the street, and they were both struck and killed by a truck. That is why UNLV has those flashing lights-- because of Debbie Anderson.

Why would the dog do that?

The dog was young, wasn't trained well, thought it was time to go evidently. Maybe she gave it a signal. Who knows? But she had her arm looped through her boyfriend's arm. He says the dog just pulled her right out into the street in front of this car or truck and killed them both. That was the starting of those flashing yellow lights in front

Wow. You have two interests that I'm very, very interested in. You like to travel, and you have a collection of Star Trek characters and--

Indeed. Indeed.

Tell me about the traveling. When did you first start traveling?

Well, I started my first year out of college where I took a trip to Europe for 80 days. I have a major in European Civilization, World History, so that just fulfilled a lifetime dream. I remember from the fourth grade-- no. I was even younger than that. I was in a one-room schoolhouse in Reno. The fourth graders were held in while the rest of us would go out to recess, and they'd be held in for history. I would stay and listen to stories about Magellan and de Soto and Vasco da Gama and Columbus. I was thrilled by the age of exploration. In fact, two summers ago I visited the tomb of Vasco da Gama in Portugal, in Lisbon. I'm telling you I could have fallen over dead with excitement, fallen dead at a tomb. My interest in history and foreign places was instilled in me as a child from this one-room schoolhouse. My teacher was Ms. Brown. She was not allowed to marry. Female teachers were not allowed to marry at that time.

And if they did, they had to quit.

They had to quit. Their place was in the kitchen, in the home. So Ms. Brown taught me to read. I remember the day I learned to read. We had had a full year of phonics. First grade was nothing but phonics just coming out my ears. Second grade, first day or so, she gave me a book. I looked at the book and I read. I looked up at her and I thought, oh, my goodness, I am reading. She read aloud to us every day from the classics. I think my interest in geography just grew and grew.

By the time I was able to afford travel on my own, I did. It was 80 days in Europe. I think practically every summer vacation, Christmas holiday, spring break, I was gone somewhere.

Where is the most memorable?

Where in Africa did you go?

I went to Nigeria and flew into the capital, Lagos, and then flew off to various larger cities on Air

Nigeria, which was later declared the most unsafe airline in the world. When I went up into sub-Saharan, friends of mine here in town had done that, a husband and wife teaching team. They had gone up into sub-Saharan, northern Nigeria, and started a middle school. They were there for several years. They got everything squared away and left. They had two children and they left. He says that within a very short period of time, everything just went right back the way it was before they arrived. They just couldn't sustain.

So when I was there, the governor of this particular province asked me if I would stay and start a teachers college. I sort of laughed. I thought, oh, you must be kidding. And I thought, no, this man is dead serious. He says, "We can't offer you the same salary that you got, but we'll provide a house, a car, and a driver and a cook and a guard." I said, "Do you know what kind of a chance I would have for survival as a single woman in a black Muslim country?" Northern Nigeria is Muslim. "I wouldn't survive a month here. Something would happen to me." And, of course, I didn't want to stay. You know, you'd come down with malaria and everything.

I don't blame you. Right now is not a good time. Now, tell me about the other passion in your life.

Star Trek.

Yes. I am now teaching Star Trek 101 at the OLLI [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, UNLV] adult education classes, Paradise Campus. Star Trek came to my attention when it first was aired in 1966, I believe, and I watched it at random times. The first show, you know, only lasted two years. They canceled them out in 1968. Then through popular demand and fan pressure, massive fan pressure, Paramount brought the show back as a syndicated series, showing it as reruns. That was in the early 70s.

The story lines deal with a great many social issues. Gene Rodenberry, the creator of it, was a visionary, so to speak, of a tranquil future for human kind for all life. Of course, that doesn't sell. Conflict sells. My oldest son is a Hollywood script writer with a degree from UCLA. He says the first movie they did—it was just called "Star Trek"—bombed at the box office because it was so calm and non-conflicting. So the money men behind this almost excluded Rodenberry from the second movie. They almost locked him in his office, and they came up with "The Wrath of Khan," which had, you know, a great deal of violence and intensity.

And that's what we like.

And it sold. It sold. Right. I continued watching the shows, becoming more and more engrossed in them. Finally they started doing small Star Trek conventions here in Las Vegas where they'd only have two or three celebrities tops, maybe one major one. They were at the Union Plaza Hotel, and I would go. I had a couple students that would go with me. They had to get parent permission. I probably would not risk that nowadays, taking a student out of school-- not out of school, but from school on the weekends. But then I went to a larger one in Pasadena, and it was huge. And, oh, I just loved it. It's a place where I find that I don't have to defend my interest.

Yes. That's correct. That's correct.

Everyone is of the same mind-set. You get in there, and you just relax, and you go, showie, I can really enjoy this. You know, it isn't really any more ridiculous than people who are Sherlock Holmes fans.

Yes. I don't think it's ridiculous.

Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle's character, goes into stratifications of club membership. They go into different stories like the "Red Headed Men's Club", you know, according to what stories were written. People that are just fanatics about, say, sports or whatever, you know, this just happens to be something you like to identify with. So I do go to the conventions.

Well, I think it's a perfect mesh for you especially with the science background.

Absolutely.

Did you ever think about becoming an astronaut?

Yes. I was part of "The Teacher in Space Program," which NASA sponsored. One of our teachers at school came in eleventh in the nation. I don't know what my position was. You find that in a lot of these -- and this is sort of sour-graping a little bit -- when you have to send in a written resume for anything -- teachers -- you find the English teachers are the ones who usually get it because they know how to write.

That's right.

She was an English teacher, and she did very, very well.

See, I would think they would want a science teacher.

I would, too. Anyway, I received a plaque from them and letters of confirmation of my abilities, and they sent me a lot of material for the classroom and what have you. My son was going to punch up

my resume for me. After the Challenger exploded, he says, "I'm sure glad I didn't have time." He was working on a script.

But anyway, I continued with it and have continued going to the conventions, mostly just locally because it can be very expensive. And as I told you, last year I won the Star Trek Teacher's Recognition Award.

What is that? Tell me.

For using Star Trek story lines in the classroom. Biology and Earth science are just ready-made situations for this particular type of material. We're into DNA. We're into the elements. They're looking at atmospheric pressure, and very different types of biological goings on. You know, why do Vulcans have green blood? Well, it's very obvious. It's because their blood is based on copper and ours is based on iron.

And so somehow you submitted an application?

Yes. Yes. A resume. They wanted a one-page resume of how I incorporated Star Trek into my lesson plans, and I told them. They even, as I said, had gotten into some social problems that I mentioned briefly because I said, you know, they don't apply that much to my science class. But again, at the same time, science is not an island, and we have to address many different issues that come along, such as homosexuality. Is this a genetically or an inherited characteristic? Is it a third sex? I don't know. But evidently, it is not choice. It is not a social choice of these people, nor is it being demented. Homosexuality has been with us and is found in the animal world, also. The studies of chimpanzees and other types of these close, in-depth studies of animals, they have found homosexuality among animals. So what's new?

This has been a rewarding interview for me.

Thank you.

This has just been wonderful.

Thank you.

Going back to UNLV, is there anything else that as a historian, looking at UNLV from its infancy to today, is there anything else that you want to say about the university and how it has changed or how it has influenced you?

The university, since I was 17 years old, regardless of where it was located, has always been the

core of my stability. Let's put it that way. When things go wrong or I'm having a turning point in my life, I turn to the university. When I graduated from high school, I had a very discouraging mother as far as higher education is concerned. She really wanted me to go off into something else that was not appropriate. I told her, no, I'm going to college. I always found it to be my life saver. This was my lifeboat, my life raft. When I divorced, I went back to the university again to get a master's degree, to help myself out, and to improve my quality of life. Even now that I'm retired, I have returned to the university because I have a lot of free time on my hands. So I assist with special events at Hamm Hall and the Judy Bailey Theater, plus teaching for the OLLI program.

Oh, wonderful.

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