

R
154
M164
A3
2009

An Interview with Ruth Annette Mills

An Oral History Conducted by Lisa Gioia-Acres

Heart to Heart Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

©Heart to Heart Oral History Project
University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2009

Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Directory: Claytee D. White

Editor: Gloria Homol

Transcriber: Kristin Hicks

Interviewers: Emily Powers, Lisa Gioria-Acres, Claytee D. White

Table of Contents

These recorded interviews and transcripts have been made possible through the generosity of Dr. Harold Boyer and the Boyer Foundation. The Oral History Research Center enabled students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. Participants in the Heart to Heart Oral History Project thank the university for the support given that allowed an idea of researching early health care in Las Vegas the opportunity to flourish.

All transcripts received minimal editing that included the elimination of fragments, false starts and repetitions in order to enhance the researcher's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases, photographic images accompany the collection and have been included in the bound edition of the interview.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
Director, Oral History Research Center
University of Nevada Las Vegas - University Libraries

Table of Contents

Early life in Washington, D.C.; background on parents; comments on Blue Cross Blue Shield going from non-profit to for-profit status; college days; work and volunteer experiences; coming to Las Vegas, 1968.....1-5

Early memories of Las Vegas; office work at CVT Gilbert ES; joining League of Women Voters (LWV) under Jean Ford's presidency; brief history of LWV; integration of schools focus for LWV; enrolling in Teacher Corps to earn teaching degree; graduation in 1975; hired as sixth grade teacher at CVT Gilbert; mention of Edna Hinman, principal; facilitating parents' understanding of bussing students to sixth grade centers; disappointment in racist attitudes in Las Vegas; involvement in health care issues initiated by daughter-in-law's health and insurance problems.....6-10

League of Women Voters back President Clinton's health plan; started Nevada Health Care Reform Project, 1993; mention of Pat Van Betten, RN, Gilda Howze, AARP representative, Dina Titus and Barbara Buckley as supporters of new health care plan; examples of patients' rights violations and the need for Patients' Bill of Rights; Patient Protection Act passed around 1998; celebration held at home of Cynthia and Don Bunch.....11-15

Patients' right to appeal insurance decisions bolstered by passage of External Review Bill; second mention of Cynthia Bunch, RN, in regard to patient appeals; Valerie Rosalin noted as director of the Office of Consumer Health Assistance, established through legislation by LWV; further comments on the League of Women Voters and its support of the health care reform project it initiated; mention of Larry Mathias, lobbyist, and John Sasser, attorney; still involved as state health chairperson for LWV.....16-20

Opinions on Nevada's status in health care; mention of awards received; mention of Michael Moore (director); award for women's role model from Frankie Sue Del Pappa (Attorney General for Nevada); comments on motivation to raise consciousness through church and League of Women Voters; closing comments on rising to leadership roles and Universal Health Care.....21-24

Preface

Ruth Annette Mills was born and raised in Washington, D.C. She recalls the early years during WWII, her father's cancer and radium treatment under Blue Cross Blue Shield, his passing when she was nineteen, and her marriage that same year.

Ruth and her husband and family lived in Georgia, Texas, and Maryland before coming to Las Vegas in 1968. She worked as a typist for the Office of Education at one point and did volunteer work for her church, the Cub Scouts, and the League of Women Voters. She also worked as a clerk-typist for the Clark County School District, and eventually became a teacher through the Teacher Corps program. She graduated in 1975 and was hired to teach 6th grade at CVT Gilbert.

The school integration program was just beginning when Ruth was first hired as a teacher. She held the position of facilitator and recalls how angry parents were when they learned their children had to be bussed to sixth grade centers. Having been involved through her church with the Civil Rights Movement in other states, she was disappointed with the racist attitudes she encountered in Las Vegas.

Ruth's involvement with health care began when her daughter-in-law developed kidney stones and was denied treatment. In 1993 she started the Nevada Health Care Reform Project through the League of Women Voters in order to support Bill Clinton's health plan. Fifteen years later, over 100 organizations had come on board to support the League's coalition in favor of Clinton's plan, and her fondest wish is that one day Universal Health Care will be available to all Americans.

This is Lisa Gioia-Acres. Today is November 20th, 2008. I am here with Ruth Annette Mills to conduct an oral history interview for the Heart to Heart oral history project for the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

Hi -- Annette? Or should I call you Ruth?

I always say my friends call me Annette and people I don't really know call me Ruth.

What would you prefer for this interview?

You can say Ruth because that's what I've done in the health care arena.

Okay. So Ruth Annette Mills and I are going to discuss her involvement in the health care industry here in Las Vegas. But before we do that, I wondered if you would share with me just a little bit about your early life? And be as detailed as you feel comfortable being.

Well, as it relates to health care?

No. Where did you grow up? Mom and dad? Siblings?

I grew up in Washington, D.C. I have a brother and two sisters. I remember World War II. People didn't have cars then. Gas was rationed. My father worked for the naval gun factory. So he was a war worker. My mother stayed home.

When I was about 15 I guess my father -- they found out he had cancer. And he was going to die in six months. But my grandmother couldn't -- this was before health insurance. My grandmother could not accept it. So she found a doctor who was doing research and would use him as a guinea pig, really. And that was in the early days of using radium I guess to reduce the size of the -- they said the cancer was really big, the size of a grapefruit, in his intestines. So they didn't even bother to take it out or do anything. They just put him back and said that's it. So anyway, she found a doctor at George Washington University who would take him as a patient.

Do you remember what year this was?

This would have been in the early 50s. He died in 1952. So probably '48, '49 because he lived about three years then after that. But in reflection he would have been better off if she had let him go when they first diagnosed it because he was very sick and he had to wear a colostomy bag. And he was a very clean person. It was not good, you know. The quality of life was very poor at that time.

What did the radium treatments do for him?

Well, I really don't remember that part. I think they must have cut it out, removed it because he wore an intentional bag. However, an interesting fact is that he was one of the first people to receive health insurance through their employer. The federal government provided Blue Cross Blue Shield. And so there was no expense involved with any of his illness. We did have a home. And in those days people could sell their homes, which they could do today, to pay for medical expenses. But we were fortunate. We didn't have any problems on that. In fact, there was a cancer society then. And they provided bandages and some little things like that, too.

What were your mother and father's names, mom's maiden name as well?

She was a Lowe.

L-O-W?

E.

What was her first name?

Sarah, which is what I put on the paper. But that's okay.

And how about dad's?

Francis.

Mills?

No, no. Truitt.

Francis Truitt.

Yeah. I was a Truitt.

How did you spell Truitt?

T-R-U-I-T-T.

Okay. So what was that experience like for you and in your memory of seeing your dad go through that? And how did it affect your eventual interest in the health care field?

Well, it didn't make me want to be a nurse or a doctor. I think it gave me a sense of compassion for people who have terminal illnesses or just illness. You know, I've always wished that I had the gift to lay my hands on somebody and heal them. I wish I could do that. But I don't have that gift. So I think maybe out of all of that -- because I certainly felt bad about my father dying. I was 18 -- 19, actually -- by the time he passed away. And I got married later that year. I was married to my husband for 37 years before he passed away. Then he was with Blue Cross Blue

Shield.

So I testified awhile back when Blue Cross Blue Shield wanted to go -- oh, I can't think of my words today. They didn't want to conduct business the same way that they had for all these years, which was -- what do you call it? -- oh, help me out with the term, when somebody owes the public and then they want to change and become a business on their own. Catholic hospitals, religious things start out this way. Nonprofit; that's the word I'm trying to think of. Anyway, when Blue Cross Blue Shield wanted to become no longer nonprofit, for profit, they wanted to become for profit, then there were hearings here in front of the insurance commissioner. And I testified that I had been with them at that point in time for 50 years. I had been a client because I kept it. We got married. I had it. With my father I was covered. And so I was covered and I'm still covered today. Although I have Medicare, I have Blue Cross Blue Shield as my supplement. And it's been good. It's been a good health insurance company.

So I personally don't have any complaints about the health care system. But if I have any sense of compassion, it's for those people who don't have any health insurance and are being -- let me think of a nice way to put this.

You can be as descriptive as you like.

Well, I don't want that for all posterity. But they're not being taken care of. And this recent thing about UMC not caring for cancer patients -- we've been saying this for a while. If you can't afford health insurance, you die. So I'm getting ahead of it.

Before we get too far ahead, tell me about your early married life. Did you stay in Washington, D.C., and did you work?

Well, obviously not. I was a junior at George Washington University when we got married.

And what was your major?

Business administration. And I hated economics. I started out as a political science major. And then I said I'll go blind if I have to read all these books. So I'll change -- I wanted to do something where I could make a decent salary. And I was not going to be a teacher. I could have gone to Wilson Teachers College for next to nothing. But, no, I worked really hard and made enough money to pay my tuition every year to go to GW so I could get a degree in something where I could make money. So then I gave that up and got married.

He was in the military. Then he got out. So we did a little traveling, not a whole lot. He was down at Fort Gordon in Georgia for a while. And then we went to El Paso for some different stints. But we always came back. And we lived in the suburbs in Maryland near Andrews Air Force Base, Camp Springs, Maryland, before we moved here, which was in 1968. So we had started a family. We have three children. And they were not teenagers yet, but they were getting up close to that.

And did you work throughout?

Oh, no, no. I was not a teacher. No. I did do some work. You know, everything is government. Like in the summers when I -- before I got married I worked for the government offices, different ones. I worked for the Office of Education for a while, which was interesting. I worked for -- the Kennedys were involved with disabled children. I think the mentally retarded if I remember correctly. And I worked for this office. I was a typist. They would get inquiries from people about their children. And this office had these doctors, Ph.D. people to respond. So they would dictate letters and I typed up letters and sent them to people, which was an interesting job. Actually, I had forms and stuff. And so I did the letters for them most of the time. But it was fun. It was just nine to three while my children were in school.

And I've always worked a lot in the church. In fact, I'll invite you. On December the 14th, 2008, I will have been a member of the Daughters of the King, which is a religious order in the Episcopal Church, for 50 years.

Congratulations. Wow.

I invite you to come. Pat's been invited. I don't know who all will come. I'll give you an invitation before you leave.

Terrific. I'll just circle that and make sure to remind me.

So I've always been involved with some kind of volunteer work. I was a Cub Scout leader. We were into Scouts. As a member of the order we do a lot of for the clergy and work in the church. And I always wanted to be a League of Women Voters member because I thought they were intelligent women and got a lot accomplished in the world.

What was your first involvement? How did you first become aware --

I didn't join until I came here.

But how did you first become aware of them?

I read about them, heard about them and the things that they would do, you know, how they would get legislation passed. I knew that it was something I wanted to be a part of.

At this time of your life were you interested in the political?

Well, not the way I am now. I mean I had my favorite candidates and the ones that I wanted --

Did you and your husband discuss politics?

Oh, my husband did. And my family, we discussed politics and religion all the time. That was what we did at the table with any meal. And he was very astute and very -- not involved to the extent he's out politicking for candidates. But he knew what was going on. He knew foreign affairs. I just didn't have that much of an interest in it. But we talked politics all the time.

Were you and your husband on similar ground as far as political ideas?

Oh, yeah, definitely we were. We were like one. He was a wonderful man. I was young. He was three years older than me, and he helped me grow up. It's like we grew together. As you'll learn later on when I tell you more about me, then you'll know more.

So I understand then you became a teacher.

You want to know about that part?

I do. Talk about your life as a teacher.

Well, my children were teenagers by that point. But we weren't happy with the school system here. So our two boys went away to school.

So before we talk about that, you've got to tell me how you got to Las Vegas.

We thought that the desert here would be like El Paso, but it's not. It's a different kind of desert. We had been there a couple of times. Anyway, my husband worked with someone who had transferred to Washington from here, the Test Site. And he said, oh, how wonderful. He thought it was just a great place. So my husband, well, why don't we go out there and spend three years and then go somewhere else? He wanted to move. He wanted to move around. We didn't really do that in his lifetime. But he had this desire to do that. So he applied and we came out here. And we bought this house.

Where did he apply and where did he work?

Well, at that time it was the Weather Bureau. He worked for the Weather Bureau. They called it

the Weather Bureau. They changed its name and, I don't know, it became something else later on. So he worked with them and took care of their equipment. He was an electronic technician person and he knew all about -- he could fix anything.

And I don't believe I asked what your husband's name was?

Charles.

But you said they changed your husband's name to work for the Weather Bureau?

Huh-uh. The name of the Weather Bureau changed. I'm sorry.

No, no. That's my fault for --

Yeah. And then he went to -- well, I think from the beginning it was always secret. He didn't know what he was doing. He couldn't tell anybody, not that I cared. But he was always joking about it that it's secret work out at the Test Site.

Oh, so he worked out there. What year did you move to Las Vegas?

Sixty-eight. Yeah. When we drove down Fremont Street it was so hot. It was August. And those lights -- and I said how long are we going to be in hell, because I was sure that's where we were. I had to get -- it was a culture shock. I had to get used to the casinos, people gambling all night and all day. It was something else.

So while your husband was out working, you decided to go back to school to become a teacher?

No. I started to tell you when we put our two boys in private school, we needed the money to help pay for it. So I went to work for the school district. And I worked in the office. I mean I didn't have my degree, so I couldn't work as a teacher. I did have a background and I could type and do that, so I worked in the school office just across Rancho at CVT Gilbert. A friend of mine was in personnel and she helped me get the job. It was hard to get a job then. I always felt like that I looked too much like back east or something because I wasn't flamboyant enough to get into the gaming industry, you know, to get an office-type job. I went for interviews and I just couldn't get a job. Anyway, she helped me get a job. So I worked there.

By that time I had joined the league and I was nominally involved. And there were some really neat people. Jean Ford, if you've ever heard Jean Ford's name, was president of the league. And I remember going to a police-citizens seminar thing she held and I was so impressed with

her. As I said she was the president at that time. So I joined the League of Women Voters. I was nominally involved because I still had the children and I was involved with -- other things. Let's put it that way. And there was Dorothy. They named a school after her. Oh, and there were a lot of people that were just such good workers in the league.

Can you tell me about the League of Women Voters, what its purpose is?

Well, let me give you history on this. I believe it was 1920 when women got the vote. Was it '20, 1920? The women that worked on that, once they got it, and said, well, women don't know how to vote. They need to be educated. So the league was started based on the premise that people need to be educated voters. And so that's what the league does. It educates the voters. Number one, it educates them that they need to vote, that you've got to register and you need to vote. But, number two; they have positions on just about every issue you can think about from gun control to environment to health care. And that's what I've worked under, the health care position.

So it's an educational -- now, they also do lobbying for their issues. Once they take consensus through the whole nation on a particular issue, then we do have lobbyists and they do lobby. But not everybody wants to be that involved with an issue. But the local leagues and all leagues would have programs from time to time. It varies. We have one once a month. And I've got to get some information to send you a form and get you to join league. But every month we'll have a program on some issue. Month before last it was really interesting on taxes. Jon Ralston did the narrating I guess. But they had these four really great people who knew -- somebody from Chamber of Commerce, a lady from the Nevada Taxpayers Association and a couple other guys who have done studies on taxes. You're going to learn more than you ever wanted to know, Lisa. I'm sorry. But you get me talking about history --

Talk to me about what issues were important to the league to address back when you first started?

Okay. And I started to tell you that. It was the integration of the schools. NAACP had sued the school district to integrate because they weren't going to do it. And I remember I was new to them and they said, oh, we want you to go on the stand when we have the trial because you just look like -- whatever. I looked like back east. I don't know how else to say that. I was not the

typical Las Vegas.

I need to see a photograph of you way back then so I'll tell you because I'm from back east.

Well, I don't know what it -- at the time. And there weren't that many people here then. But they never did get around to calling me because the league filed an amicus curiae brief, which is a friend of the court. And they had meetings around town to find out what people wanted to do, in terms of integration of the schools. That was my first involvement with it. I went to some meetings and stuff, but I didn't really do a whole heck of a lot else until really much later.

So when did you become a teacher? How did that process take place?

Okay. Now, I went to work for the school district. And I worked there -- how many years? I can't remember. Not that long, maybe three or four years. And I saw this advertisement that they had something called Teacher Corps that you could apply for, which paid a little stipend and also paid for your school. And so I could afford to do it. I couldn't have afforded to pay for the school and give up my salary prior to that, and I thought, well, what a great opportunity. So I went into Teacher Corps. It was a two-year program and every night I said I quit and the next morning I said I'll give it one more day. It was so demanding, so demanding. I took 17 credits a semester. I worked 20 hours in the school. And I was supposed to have a community project, which was a Girl Scout troop. And I had three teenagers. It was hard. It was hard. But I did it. And it was all a range of ages from -- well, I graduated in 1975. So it was over 20 years later from the time I started GW.

And it allowed you to become a teacher with the two years' training. That's great.

Well, that's what it was. We were supposed to be agents of change in the school system. But they wanted us -- they kept having us take everything that was new. I mean economics, disability -- what do you call it? -- Special Ed. I mean they had all of these -- they kept adding courses. That's why we had such big loads. And we had to have, of course, a number of credits. I think there were about 20 people in the program, all ages. This really good friend of mine that I still have as a friend, even though she's much younger, were in the program together. And she was probably just going into her junior year. I was actually a junior, but I had to take all the courses that they offered. I had more than enough to get a degree in terms of credit. But I had to take what they offered.

So where did you go to school and work?

UNLV.

I'm sorry. I said that wrong. Where did you work as a teacher?

You mean after I got my degree?

Yeah.

Okay. Well, my old principal picked me off the list. And so I went back to CVT Gilbert, where I had worked in the office, which was kind of nice because I knew the teachers. And I just went around and asked each one give me some good advice.

And what grade did you teach?

Sixth grade. It was a sixth grade center, which was the integration project. That was what was finally decided that all sixth grade students would be bused to the former black schools in the black neighborhoods. And all the one-through-five children would be bused to white neighborhoods, which was totally unfair. But that was the way it was set up. And if you're going to integrate the schools at that time, I think that was the only answer. I don't know what else they could have done.

And, actually, I worked for Dr. Edna Hinman, who had -- oh, before the integration law was passed, she had -- it was a special school. And people could volunteer their children. This was at Gilbert. I can't remember what they called it. But it was special and they had better teachers, sort of like the magnet programs now in the high schools. And it was that type. They had, you know, the best teachers and all. So they got white people to bring their children there. And my daughter went there in fifth and sixth grade. Of course, in sixth grade then is when it switched over.

So I was working there at the beginning of the integration program. I was actually working there before the law went into effect. And then when the law went into effect, I was called the facilitator and I met the angry parents when they first came in. And they were angry people. They did not want to send their children over there. They had this impression that their child was going to be in there with all these black children. Well, ten percent of the population was black. Ten percent in the whole city was black. And so in a school of five, 600, however many it was, ten percent are going to be black. It's not like your child -- you know. Granted it's

in a black neighborhood -- it was. But nevertheless --

So during this time of your life while you're on this new career path, you're still involved with the League of Women Voters. And where are you heading in that realm while you were in the --

Well, let me say this, too. Prior to coming to Las Vegas, our church was involved with the Civil Rights Movement and we had the riots there, if you were old enough to know when they had the riots there. Anyway, it would have been in the 60s. That's when the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak I suppose. And so we were involved with that before we moved here. And I was very disappointed in this community, you know, with their attitudes, their racist attitudes. So I was glad to be involved with the league and what they were doing and at this school. In fact --

Then how did your involvement go from, say, the integration and civil rights issues into the health care?

Well, it's very simple. My daughter-in-law is English. And she married my son and they live here. She was a teacher in England. And she worked really hard and went to UNLV, did everything they wanted, got her teacher certificate, her degree and everything here. She went to work and during the first month she developed a kidney stone. She was in horrible pain and they had no health insurance. The school district said you have to work a whole month before your health insurance kicks in, so her doctor said, well, if you don't have health insurance, there's nothing I can do. And I said this is ridiculous. He gave her pain medication. And finally he said, well, okay, I'll put a stint in there so you can work and you won't be in such horrible pain. But you've got to get rid -- they were too big to pass. And so I said this is not right. This is not right that people who need medical care can't get it, people who don't have any money, who don't have any health insurance. And that's when I decided that I was going to work on health care. I was already in the league.

Right. So talk about that. How did they address that topic?

Well, finally, as far as she's concerned, just to finish that part of the story --

Yeah, please.

The school district insurance kicked in and she had some kind of laser thing. They blast them and do something. So that was that. But I was willing to pay, to mortgage my house and to pay

to have it done. And the laser-blasting place says, well, we don't accept any money. You have to have insurance in order to do that. So I called the company in Georgia that did it and I said, Can you give us a discount or anything? No, no, no. It was such an unpleasant experience all the way around with the insurance, with everything. So it thoroughly convinced me.

Well, then about that time the league was doing a national consensus on health care. This would have been in the early 90s. And their position basically is universal health care. Some people don't like me to use that term. But what they decided was they wanted health care for everybody even if it meant raising money by raising taxes, which was and even today is still a somewhat radical opinion in some people's minds. But not mine. But I've been working under that since they took that position. And this was not just our local league. This was the whole nation, all leagues coming to consensus.

About that time Clinton's health plan came on the table. The league, along with the NEA (National Education Association) and a lot of other organizations, supported his plan. And they asked us to get in coalition with organizations in our community that would support it.

So that's when I started the Nevada Health Care Reform Project. I had a league health committee. I think I was president of the league at that time. I'm not sure of my dates on that. I'm pretty sure I was because I had to know all the issues and I had to testify on all the issues. Anything that league takes a position on, the president has to be -- you know, one day I was testifying for the county commissioners. And one morning I testified on one thing and in the afternoon it was a totally different topic. And I thought they were going to say that woman is crazy; she can't possibly know enough to testify on both issues. But I knew enough. But anyway --

So what year was the Nevada Health Care Reform Project established?

I think we're saying 1993. I think that's what I --

And what was its position?

Okay. Well, it was to support Bill Clinton's health plan. And we started out with -- I don't know how much detail you want on this kind of stuff.

Whatever you feel comfortable talking about.

All right. I had a league health committee. And so we sent letters to every organization that we

thought might be interested in support of a health care plan because there were problems then. That was the beginning of the HMOs, which were supposed to solve this. So there were problems then with the health care system. Let's see. Where am I? Okay. So we called a meeting and we invited all these people and met at Charleston Library in one of their rooms. We had AARP. And I guess we invited the nurses. Pat was one of the early --

Pat Van Betten.

Uh-huh. We didn't have the doctors. We had the nurses. And we had -- oh, I don't know -- maybe a dozen or more. I think we might have had some union people there. Yeah, because AF of L, CIO, Nevada Education and, you know, some of the ones that were at national coalition I called to come for a local one. And we got a big sign and put it on the side of a bus, Nevada Health Care Reform Project. I still have it. And we went around to four congress people's offices and said we want the health care plan. You know, we want it now. We want health care change now. It was fun. I like to do stuff like that. Anyway, so that was the beginning. We got off to like a bang, you know, with that.

Well, then the plan failed. And I remember that September -- well, we met every month. The coalition met every month. But we weren't very big, you know, maybe a dozen or so. I remember the woman from AARP who said what are we going to do now? You know, the plan failed. I said, well, we're going to work in Nevada. And so we did. That was when the project really got off its feet I guess. But I have to tell you the same woman -- her name was Gilda Howze and she was -- you know, AARP was kind of militant. They were the White Panthers at one point in history, the militant seniors. Anyway, she was at this first meeting of the coalition.

And Ann -- oh, she's at Sunrise. She used to be national president of PTA. I'm sorry. My brain is not so nonfunctional as it is today.

That is okay.

Ann, Ann, Ann. It'll come to me eventually. You know why old people take a long time is because we have so much stored in our brains that we have to go back a long way. And you're asking me to go historically.

But anyway, she came to that meeting representing the hospital association. I had invited them. And they had taken out a full-page ad in the paper against Clinton's plan. And we're

going around telling our names and who we are. All of a sudden Gilda Howze from AARP said I know who you are. You're with the hospital association. And she tore into that woman. And I thought, well, this is the end of this coalition. It will never get anywhere.

So anyway, after the meeting was all over I called Ann up and I told her. And she said, oh, I didn't think we were going to join. But I just came to find out. They had sent her. She said I just came to find out what it was all about.

What is the Nevada Health Care Reform Project? How does it differ from the national?

There is no national.

Okay. So when you first started it --

It's the Nevada.

The Nevada. But you were there to support the national health care reform project?

No. I was there to support the league. The league had a national coalition. It wasn't called Nevada or national health care. It was just a coalition in support of Bill Clinton's plan.

I understand. I guess I want to know because I'm very curious as to what the Nevada coalition accomplished and what are you most proud of and what topics you are really pursuing.

Okay. I went ahead and put that down as something because I'm still -- I retired last October, a year ago, as chair of that. I did it for 15 years as a volunteer. And it was like a job. When I retired we had over 100 organizations that were a part of that coalition.

But we really -- we went through a period of time where we were studying what was going on in other states. Every time we'd come up with some idea about how we could have a health plan in Nevada ERISA, which is a federal law that says you can't touch any union money. In order to have a health care system that's a single payer, you have to have all the money put in one pot. This would be the same thing on the national level if they had a single payer. All the health insurance money would go into one pool. And so ERISA was one thing. We talked to the insurance commissioner and that was one thing that got in the way.

We wanted to do what Hawaii had done. Hawaii has like 98 percent of their people covered. And because of this federal law -- they got a waiver. But once they got the waiver, then they weren't going to let anybody else do that. So we can't do anything in Nevada. So

whoever comes up with a plan to cover everybody, if it means putting all the money in one pool, it's never going to work. Now, there may be other possibilities. See, you'd have to have Medicare money. You'd have to have all the money that goes into the system in order to pay for the services that would be provided.

So anyway, what have we accomplished? For a while we studied other states. And I guess, you know, maybe three or four years it was like we were kind of limping along.

Then we came upon -- and I think Pat might have brought it to our attention -- the Patients' Bill of Rights. That was coming into play. We got a copy of the one that the nurses in California had written and used that as our model. We wanted to get that passed in Nevada. So we asked Dina Titus, who was a friend of ours. And she said why don't you call on Barbara Buckley? She was new. So we called her to the meeting. I had never met her. As I said she was new. And she said, well, I'll look it over and then I'll come back and I'll let you know. So she came back the next month and she said I'll do it, but I don't know if I can get everything on the list. It's a long list of things that protect a patient.

Can you just give an example of some of them?

Well, the HMOs especially, but the insurance companies were doing bad things to people. The gag rule -- you don't tell a patient that they need something we don't provide because we don't want to have to pay for it out of network. That's called a gag rule for the doctors; giving doctors a bonus for not treating the patients. They're doing a lot of bad things. You think you're having a heart attack. You go to ER. They determine it's just indigestion and send you home.

Insurance wouldn't pay for it because you didn't really have a heart attack. But it's still very costly to go to the emergency room. So they were doing these kinds of things. I'd have to go look at my list again. But this we thought was very important since you don't have the right to sue an insurance company. Insurance companies cannot be sued. Did you know that?

No. Still?

They and baseball, so I've been told, unless they changed the law. But anyway, in the Patient Protection Act -- that's what we called it -- or some people call it Patients' Bill of Rights nationally. This was before they did it nationally. We were doing it here. One of the things that's in there is that you must be denied care by a licensed Nevada physician. And, see, the

HMOs -- some nurse in Arizona would look in her book and say, well, we're not going to cover this. Maybe because it was too expensive or whatever the reason was. And so if a licensed Nevada physician is going to deny you care, he's subject to being sued. You can't sue the insurance company, but you could sue him. So we kind of think we got that as part of it.

Oh, they fought us, the insurance, Sierra Health. I didn't think I'd ever forget that lobbyist's name, that woman. After it was passed she came up to me in Carson City and she said we've got to talk next time. I said what do you want to talk about, the right to sue? I didn't like her attitude.

So you got the Patient Protection Act passed.

We got it passed. Barbara worked really hard.

What year was that if you can recall?

It would have been -- what was it? -- '95, '96, '97, '98. It's been ten years now. Probably around '98 because it's been -- seems like forever now, a long time ago. Barbara -- that put her on the map. That got her started because people said it can't be done.

How many of the items that she felt she couldn't get passed --

We got them all. We got them all.

Wow. Amazing.

We had a big celebration party after it was over at -- I think it was at Cynthia Bunch, Don Bunch, at their home. And the president of the Clark County Medical Association -- doctors weren't part of our coalition until after that. After that they joined. Larry. Anyway, this president of the Clark County Doctors Association came up and knelt down at my feet and kissed my hand. He said they said you couldn't do it. And I said, well, it wasn't me. You know, it was the coalition. But as the leader of the group I got the notoriety of it. But it was the coalition working together. We filled the room. Barbara couldn't have done it without us. We had people coming and testifying about all the bad things that they were doing to them.

And Dr. Marlin, Dr. Tony Marlin, who is -- was head of Sierra Health, had his own private hearing up in Carson City with nobody else there. He was afraid of these people, and rightly so. He was the head of Sierra Health.

He's somebody I'm supposed to try to interview.

Well, good luck.

Yeah. I'm having to go through his PR people.

He's probably afraid of people. He's retired now. Maybe he doesn't care.

I don't know. I have a call into his PR person.

He's made a lot of money. He's a doctor and he started this and he's been named Insurance Man of the Year over the years. But anyway, we fought. It was a fight. It really was.

What other issues have you tackled?

After that we decided that -- we got the External Review Bill passed. We felt that was something that needed to be added to it. If you're denied care, you have the right to appeal with most insurance companies. But it's the same company that denied you the service that you're appealing to. And that doesn't make sense. So we got a bill passed that says there is a process by which you can have an external review. You can have doctors outside of the insurance company's system. Usually these are more bone marrow transplants or some kind of possibly experimental type thing. And the panel would be specialists in whatever that area is.

And it's set up -- well, before we did that we found that people just didn't know how to navigate the health care system. It's so screwed up. We had a phone and we were on television one time, no more after that. And I had the phone here. So I had a hundred telephone calls between Thanksgiving and Christmas from people who needed help with their health care insurance. Cynthia Bunch was a nurse and she helped a lot. Cynthia might be a good person from the nurses' point of view. She helped people with appeals and helped with a lot of that kind of stuff.

I really didn't do that much. One time she was out of town and I had this call into this woman. She said I'm supposed to have some kind of liver -- some kind of surgery in January. And the doctor says if I don't have it I'm going to die. And she says I got a letter from Pacific Care then and they said that I can't have it. And so I said, well, this doesn't make sense. And the only person I knew was the lobbyist at Pacific Care. So I called her up and I said what are you doing? See, they all knew her after the Patient Protection Act. So they were very nice to me. Anyway, I said what are you doing? She said, oh, we're having a reorganization here. I said, well, this woman needs this surgery. She said I'll take care of it; I'll take care of it. But I didn't

normally do that kind of stuff. Cynthia was in touch. They have people at these places.

So as a result of that and my hundred calls, we said we can't do this on a volunteer basis. We can't help people with their health insurance problems. So we wrote legislation and established the Office of Consumer Health Assistance, which is still going. Valerie Rosalin is the director of that. She's a nurse. And they tell how many people they've helped and how much money they've saved every year.

Are they located here in Vegas?

Oh, yeah, they're here. But they're for the whole state. They come under Office of the Governor and then Office of Consumer Health Assistance. And they also handle workmen's comp and -- is there something else?

So that was the number two legislation we got. And then the third one was the external review. So I kind of got ahead of myself.

That's okay. How easy is it for people in a situation, just an average person who realizes that they need help, how easy is it for them to find the resources that you provide?

It's not. Every time I talk to somebody -- and I'll give you one -- anybody that I run into and if I start talking about health care -- and I should carry these. I have folders with the phone number. But I tell them call the Office of Consumer Health Assistance. They can help you.

A friend of mine had to go to Texas. She had breast cancer and there was some special thing that they did there and they didn't have it here. Her insurance company wouldn't pay for it, so she was talking to me about it and I said call the Office of Consumer Health. She called them and they got it all straightened out. And they paid for it.

But it's not so easy for somebody just to find the answer.

Well, she got it through me. She talked to me and talked to me about it.

What do you think can be done to get the public more educated on that?

Well, the office works hard. The director goes around to groups and talks to them and tries to get the word out. And I do think it's better than most of the state-run offerings. I don't know what other to call them, but things that you could use if you knew you had them. The state keeps them a secret and then they don't have to pay anybody anything to do anything.

What kind of issues did you push and were not so successful in getting passed?

We got all that we tried for. Now, we haven't tried since External Review. They did talk about this last year. They talked about that we need to look at the Patient Protection Act again and maybe there were some things that need to be tweaked up on that because insurance companies vary. They have people paying them a lot of money to figure out ways to make more money.

Have you ever experienced any backlash from these large insurance companies, the corporates, the ones with money? Have you personally or has the league experienced anything?

For one thing, the Nevada Health Care Reform Project is its own project. The league started it and the league supports it. In a sense, we've always felt it was our baby, mainly because I was president. In fact, the bylaws stated -- and that's one reason I was there so long -- that it had to be a league person as president because we were nonpartisan. And some of the groups -- for example, Nevada Nurses Association and SEIU nurses are sometimes at each other. It wouldn't be good to have one of them or the doctors, you know, to have one of them lead it -- I mean Doctors Association, their representative -- or even to have a union person. It might not be a good thing because the person represents -- it is nonpartisan, no attachment to any of these entities or groups.

But I said I just can't do it any longer. I'm in dialysis three days a week. And that takes a lot of time for me. And that was like a -- just keeping the addresses. They change directors of different groups all the time. And to keep it updated, we met once a month and notifying them and doing the things. And then handling, you know, anything.

We didn't submit new legislation after the External Review Bill. But we testified and we kept up -- one of our jobs was to monitor what was going on in the health care in the state. And Larry, as you've been told, was so valuable because he's --

And this is Larry Mathias.

Yeah. He's right in the -- I think he said he was on 32 boards. It's ridiculous. But he used to be head of human resources or something many years ago. And now he's their director. You know, he's not a doctor. He's their lobbyist. But he was valuable to have. But I mean we had others. We had John Sasser from the north. He's with the Washoe Public Defender's Office or something. He's an attorney up there.

One of the questions that I have for you is now that you are on kind of like the other side of coin as a patient going through some health issues, what has your experience been like and what's the quality of your care?

I am very blessed. My whole life I have been blessed with good health care. And I don't see any reason why you or anybody else can't have the same thing I have.

Was yours outrageously expensive?

\$15,000 a month for dialysis. Of course, they don't get that much.

But I mean was it expensive to provide you with health care? And why can't every American or every Nevadan have that?

Well, before I went on Medicare, which has been a long time now, I was paying \$75 a month for Blue Cross Blue Shield. And as a teacher the school district gave it to me for free. So I've never invested in insurance. It's never -- and even today -- I don't know what Medicare is. It's probably about 70 -- I think probably it costs me a couple hundred dollars a month for what I get. I've never had to pay anything. I don't even have a co-pay. I don't have -- my medication is mail order and I get a 90-day supply for \$35. Or if it's a generic, it's ten dollars. And I'm diabetic. I take three kinds of blood pressure medication, three dialysis kinds of vitamin, I don't know, special things. I mean I take a lot of pills, a lot of medication. And that's all it costs me. I mean I can't even get enough to claim it on my income tax. It doesn't amount to that much money. And I don't pay anything.

So when did you retire from working at the league?

I love your clock I have to say for the record.

Well, you've been here for an hour.

Well, a year ago October I retired from the health project. I can show you the gold clock they gave me.

I bet you're still active in some way.

Well, I'm still on the list. Larry said I was going to be -- what do you call it when you're the ex-president, "still have a vote" kind of thing? Yeah. And I talk to the director from time to time. I don't want to get in her way, but, you know, when I see something and I think she needs to know about it or if I have a concern or whatever.

I'm the state health chair for the League of Women Voters. And so I still have to keep up with things. In our local league, now, our little health committee -- and I call it my state health committee because they're not doing anything and the league is up in the north -- is working on obesity in children. And we got a piece of legislation passed last go-round. This was from league, now, not the health project. And it's just a little thing. But, of course, there's always somebody there to fight you on it.

We wanted the school nurses in the state to test height and weight of children. They don't do that. I mean now we got it passed for three years. They would do it for three years. They want to be paid more money if they're going to do more work. And it's not a big deal. It is not a big deal. They have a whole team that goes to a school and does it there. Anyway, we got that passed last session. And we're working on it again to have it extended. We'd like it to be permanent.

Why do we want this? Because people who want to do -- especially like the health district has been with us on this, the university, they want to do research and they want to get grants to do research. And in order to do that you have to say we have X number of obese children in this state and we need to develop programs to help them. I mean we all know that they're there. So that's why we've been working on that with our little league thing. I call this little because I don't think it's anything like what the health project did.

Now, this next time we have this idea. And if I could get to talk to some people about it -- you know, they want to raise taxes. So let's put a tax on junk food. Maybe if they had to spend more money, they wouldn't buy as many candy bars and sodas.

Is the organization in any way involved in the recent smoking issue in restaurants and --

Not really. No. I haven't pursued it. There are enough people. I'm sure the Cancer Society and, you know, enough groups working on that.

How do you decide what issue is going to be one that you're going to campaign for?

Well, we have a position statement. And we're always working for a change in the health care system, let's say, just in general. But also in there is preventive health care. There's mental health care. There are other areas of health care in the position statement. And so I'm working under preventive with the children's obesity thing.

Very interesting. Do you see any end to your involvement or are you just going to keep on?

My son says I'm the "Eveready Bunny."

He's probably quite right.

I don't know about that. Today I don't know why I feel fuzzy.

What is your opinion of Nevada as a state progressive in these issues in health care?

Well, since -- this is silly. We're always at the bottom. But since we got that passed to do the testing, we moved up to something like number two in the nation of states who have passed legislation to do something about children's obesity. Isn't that silly? I mean I think it's silly. This state is at the bottom in health care. But I guess that was a good thing that they did pass that.

But now whether or not the nurses will let us continue it and do it -- I mean when you're doing research you don't do it one time. You've got to find out ten years from now whether that made any difference. If we tax junk food, is it going to make any difference five years from now even? Will more people be eating and drinking it or will they cut down on it? So, anyway...

Is there anything that I haven't brought up to ask you that you'd really like to make sure we know about you or your work?

You mean in terms of health care?

Yes.

That's probably it. You know, I got an award from the AHEC.

What is that?

I think it's Adult Health Education Committee. Anyway, I didn't know who they were. But many names get thrown -- I said I think some organization is just looking for somebody to give an award to. I don't deserve any awards.

Tell me what other awards you've gotten.

A number, a number of awards.

Can you give just some examples?

Well, let me tell you about -- this was so much fun. They have something at the Stardust. They had like a -- I don't know what it's called, a fair or something. And it was for women as I remember. Yeah, it had to be women. It's health education something. So they were giving

me -- I'll show the thing. It's really pretty. It's crystal. And so they invited me to come and everything. They say all these nice things about you and then you get up there to receive it. Then that was to be the end of it. And I said, well, I'd like to say something. And they said, oh, well, by all means. So I had all these people out there, you know, a captive audience, and I said I want you to repeat after me, "Universal health care." And all those people said universal health care.

Well, you know, when I started it was a dirty word. And it still is for some people. But I'm doing all I can to educate people about how much our health care system needs to be changed. Michael Moore and his movie, you know, that was great. Did you see it?

I did see snippets of it. And the man is a genius. You've got to admire him for his courage.
It was so right on target.

We're talking about "Roger & Me," right? The movie "Roger & Me"?

No, no. It was on the health care system. And he went to Guantanamo Bay and he went all over.

That's right. And I can't think of the name of it.

Me either.

That's okay. Michael Moore. It's out there.

But anyway, that was so much fun. What was your question?

Some other awards. Just name me a couple.

Oh, well, after we got the bill passed on patient protection so many years ago, Barbara gave me a really nice plaque. It's to the health project, but she gave it to me. When Frankie Sue was attorney general -- you probably don't remember.

Frankie Sue Del Pappa, I know that name.

She would be another historical person. She gave an award for a woman's role model award. It's really a pretty certificate. I like that. But I like the Soroptimist: A woman of distinction. I think that is what I'd like to be, a woman of distinction.

And tell me about the women of diversity.

Well, I thought it was 500 women.

One hundred most influential women in Nevada.

In the history of Nevada. In the history of Nevada because she went back to the Indian woman

or something.

And what was your role?

Health care. That's what she put me under. Well, that would be my contribution I would think. I've been very active in my church. So I think -- I hope I have made a religious contribution. I used to be chair of social concerns. And that was one of the reasons that I wanted to get into the league. Trying to raise the consciousness of people in the church is difficult. You know, don't put church and politics together. And don't upset my conscience. And I wanted to do something. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to hands on, you know, get out here. I don't want to just try to convince these people who say they're Christians and then forget about the poor people or the hungry people or whatever or the gays now in the Episcopal Church. Now we've got that. So that was one of the promptings because I was involved with that.

But, Ruth, what was it? Can you go back in time into your life in any way and find out -- Why health?

No, not even health. Why were you so interested in making a difference?

I don't know. When I was little I wished I could do one thing, just one thing better than anybody else. And I think I've kind of lost that.

Oh, I don't think so. I think you're just great.

I just wanted to be a tennis star, be an anything, but that I really -- I would love to work and be able to do that one thing, learn one thing.

I think you accomplished that.

Oh, I don't think so. Like a scientist or, you know, I would have loved to have been an astronaut. But for 30 years of my life I threw up on the plane all the time. So I knew I could never. But I was too old anyway.

But, no, I think -- and I was a leader when I was young. I was always -- I had a high school sorority. I was in Job's Daughters, a Masonic order. And I was an officer. And I was always in a leadership role for some reason. I don't know why. I just was. And so being a leader you -- I don't know. Maybe you're affected by that to want to do the best that you can and be a model.

Anything else that you would like to add for posterity? You know this is going into the

archives. We could say it together, those three words.

What three words?

Universal health care.

Oh, great. Great. Have I convinced you?

Yeah. Well, thank you so much. This was terrific.