

RUTH

Interviewer: So, while you were there you sued the University, you won the suit for discrimination against woman.

Ruth: Yes.

Interviewer: Now you are going to a second lawsuit.

Ruth: The second lawsuit had to do with my suing the University of Northern for failure to promote me to full professor. And I had done all the things they had asked me to do at UNI, which was basically to start the Social Work Program there. I set up that program and I had told them when I decided to take the job that I did not have a doctorate but I could set up the social work program without a doctorate. Talk to him, I could set up the social work department without a doctorate, so I did that. And so I put in a request for a promotion to full professor which was denied.

Interviewer: You have a legal battle here against the university. This is big, this is big what you are fighting for.

Ruth: Oh yes, because full professor is the highest you could go. I didn't win that suit but the finding was that I had the qualifications for a promotion to a full professor because other persons had been promoted to full professor with fewer qualifications than I had. I had articles written, I had articles accepted for publication. I had received numerous awards and all of those were noted in my request for promotion. And the finding was that they should look very carefully at my qualifications before I was turned down. And, um, basically, um, I did apply again for promotion for full-professor and I was granted it at that time.

Interviewer: what time was this? You approximately?

[Pause]

Interviewer: Because you came to the university in '70, 1970.

Ruth: To UNI?

Interviewer: Yes.

Ruth: I came there in 1969. And I stayed an assistant professor until '72 and I became an associate professor in '73.

Interviewer: Ok. All right. And then the lawsuit would take place in the mid-eighties. That's when the lawsuit took place.

Ruth: I think so.

Interviewer: Yes. It took place in the mid-eighties. I think was 1985.

Ruth: I think was it I wasn't sure.

Interviewer: Yes, that was it. I believe it was '85. Ok so now tell me how does this lawsuit affect your relationship with your colleagues? And how would it affect the rest of your career before you would resign from UNI?

Ruth: Well my colleagues were supportive of me. In fact, all of them signed my request for promotion. Dr. Maypole and Dr. Greene and all of my professors were supportive of me.

Interviewer: Ok, good. Now, knowing all this despite the fact that you lose the lawsuit and you do not receive the full professorship because you do not have the traditional PhD. But clearly your track record demonstrates that you are worthy of such promotion. In fact, I know that Simpson College would later on would honor you an honorary doctorate.

Ruth: Honorary Doctorate from Simpson College in 1990.

Interviewer: That's right, so you would get it.

Ruth: I had become professor and acting head of that same department of social work in the fall of 1988. And then I resigned in 1990 to become professor emeritus.

Interviewer: Then it would take Simpson, which is a very respectable, tremendously respectable college to come along and give you what you so much deserved. To award you this, they awarded you something that you worked hard for, clearly earned based on your own merit, track record and things like that. So this is a great accomplishment.

Ruth: Yeah, I think University of Northern Iowa kinda bowed their heads when that happened.

Interviewer: In fact, there are some other things I want to talk about regarding your track record itself. Some of the things you did within the community. In fact, the Courier, we have an article in the Courier Monday, August 5, 1985. There is a photograph with you and three other individuals. The heading of it is new substance abuse program aimed at black teens. Here you are doing community service. Tell us a little about this program that you were involved with. Why was the program important and what was your role?

Ruth: Substance abuse was quite prevalent in our community and I took a particular interest in substance abuse because my father was an alcoholic and so over the years I had always worked in substance abuse. And I got two or three awards for doing work in that area. There was not a particular place that blacks could go to call their own for treatment. So I worked with Melvin Scott who worked with teens to set up a place for them to go and to have coffee and just sort of move around together and relate together.

And as I remember, those teens became mentors to other teens who had stopped or if they didn't stopped they tempered their use of alcohol. And young men or young women who became mentors to them would invite them to this meeting place they could go.

Interviewer: This is good because this is the first type of program in Waterloo. So this is the first and here you are leading. You are on top of this thing, this program for a problem that we have in the community here. Tell me a little about the Head Start program that you started. I know that you were involved in that. Year round to be exact, the year round Head Start program that you created for the youth also.

Ruth: I don't remember too much about starting the Head Start program.

Interviewer: Tell me your role in that Head Start Program in getting that going or expanding it. Or why was it important?

Ruth: You mean in getting get to go year round?

Interviewer: Yes, exactly.

Ruth: Because many of the parents didn't have the skills or abilities to give their children a head start in a year round program. Most of them worked or had children older than them who were not young enough for the head start. And most of the parents were so involved in other things in their lives, just making it, that they did not have the time to give to a head start program.

Interviewer: This is important because of your role in the welfare system. You were an advocate of the welfare system. And this is another perk, a tool that people are able to use to survive and get ahead. Ok. I am looking here at another article from the Courier it is titled, "Expectations low on federal report on welfare reform." I know that during your time working for the system, the welfare system, and those things that you did for the city of Waterloo effecting change. How did you deal with all the negative criticism?

Ruth: I had real difficulty dealing with what was criticism that was aimed at the AFDC mother. I remember writing our articles and saying that AFDC mother is 90% better than you think she is. Because most of those mothers cared for their children. They many times didn't know how to transfer that caring to their children. They didn't know how to let their children know that they really cared for them. And that's why I knew that the AFDC mother was 90% better than folks think she was. They didn't know her, they didn't get to know them like I did. As their worker I got to know them, I got visit them in homes, I got see that cared about their homes, keeping them up. And I knew all the good things about the welfare mother that they didn't know. I had the opportunity to get to know them, which I valued.

Interviewer: Because also I know that there is another article that talks about in fact, as you continue to advocate for the welfare system in a different capacity. So here you are a

social worker and then on the ground in the university and in fact you would go to the highest level and would be elected to the county board of supervisors.

Ruth: Board of Supervisors. And one of the reasons that I really wanted to get on the Board of Supervisors, because in that position you get to make the rules, you don't just interpret them. I needed to be where I could make the rules. And that is why I wanted to be on the board of supervisors, because we made the rules.

Interviewer: Because you ran for it in the eighties and you lost, and that's ok because you run again the next term. And you were elected.

Ruth: Yes I was elected.

Interviewer: Landslide, it was a sweep. So you win it and in the mid-eighties. And then to go on you'd be appointed to the Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors.

Ruth: No, I was elected.

Interviewer: No it is my understanding that you were the first...

Ruth: Yes I was the first black to be elected at large in Black Hawk County. Which meant that all of the towns in Black Hawk had to vote for me.

Interviewer: And this is bigger than that because in fact your impact on the welfare system as a whole was state wide.

Ruth: Another reason it became state wide and I know about it, is because at the University of Northern Iowa where I taught social work for twenty years. Students for that program have taken jobs all over Iowa. When I think about it, when I chose going to UNI, I remembered that most of the students that graduated from UNI lived and stayed and worked in Iowa. And that is one of the reasons that I chose that because I knew that I could influence the education of the social worker and have her carry that on with her into her job. And over the years I've got lots of letters from students who graduated from that program. Where they're working and what their doing and what role their playing and I'm so proud of them.

Interviewer: That is very impressive because here it is you are making a tremendous impact for the good on all levels. In fact, you came in and you reformed the welfare program in Waterloo, developed it. You spearheaded the reform and developed it. And in fact, it became the model that many other cities begin to use and form to use as theirs as well.

Ruth: And the welfare office that I ran was written up many times by the state as the best welfare office in the state of Iowa. I was really proud of that. That was probably one of the reasons that they recruited me from Wartburg. They knew about my program.

Interviewer: You are a very attractive candidate. So this women see this and she pulls you and gets your skills in Wartburg. And the students benefit from it. And UNI sees the same thing, you had the skill set that the entire university could benefit from and you come in there.

Ruth: It was good for me to learn that most of the students that graduated from UNI lived and worked and stayed in the state of Iowa. They helped me know that I could influence the delivery of service to people all across the state and I was proud of that.

Interviewer: So you are the first African American female to serve on the Supervisor Board for Black Hawk County. You were to come in and develop a social work program for the University of northern Iowa.

Ruth: And incidentally that program which was an undergraduate degree now has a Master's at UNI for social workers. I found out that after I left they applied for a masters and got it.

Interviewer: So you laid a foundation for them, so now the social work program is very successful.

Ruth: Its very success at UNI.

Interviewer: Now lets talk about some of the recognition that you got. I know that KKBG had banquet in your honor.

Ruth: Yeah I got the KKBG award. I got the KKBG Outstanding citizen in 1981.

Interviewer: Let's talk about that. You are getting an award that is honored by a major, the biggest black radio station in Iowa. They recognize your contributions to the community, to the black community, to the city, to the statewide contributions.

Ruth: Outstanding Citizen of the African American, Afro American broadcasting, KKBG.

Interviewer: Ok, now you get this award. You get this award from KKBG recognizing your contributions. We know that NAACP also honors your...

Ruth: Past, Present, Report Award.

Interviewer: Let's talk about that for just a minute, your role in NAACP. Let's talk about that here.

Ruth: As president, um, I helped a... it looks as though I'm always involved in losses. I helped to file a lawsuit against the Waterloo school district. And it had to do with a number of things. Like classes taught, no Black history classes taught at high schools. And it had to do with low achievement of Black students. And they have, over the years,

been moderating that. And I remember that Robert Smith who was on the board of education kept records of achievements going up by Black students. And I don't remember exactly what it was that we were unhappy about with school district. I know that at the time when they were trying to desegregate the schools, it was at that time that we did workshops called, Desegregation Works, Let's Make it Work in Waterloo. IN the NAACP we did numbers of these workshops.

Interviewer: So here you are in National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, active in this program, weren't you president at one time?

Ruth: I was president.

Interviewer: So here you are working on desegregation of the Waterloo School systems. This is big, what was your biggest challenge, who was the biggest challenge?

Ruth: A couple of school board members wanted to keep what was called segregated sites. And NAS called neighborhood schools and they, uh, and in fact two board members were heading that. Which was basically to keep Black kids in certain schools and certain areas. At one time Grant School was an all Black school. And I worked on that, getting that, Grant School, making it a school where they could bus in white students to Grant School. And for a while I remember saying, sometimes I would joke about it. They just have one little white student going to Grant School, I said they needed to bus him somewhere else. Since they were busing people, they needed to bus him someplace.

Interviewer: So this started the process, and here you are you are in the center of this. You are leading the way to break down segregation in Waterloo.

Ruth: I did a lot of that through NAACP.

Interviewer: I know that the NAACP also recognizes your work, they honor you, they had a reception for you book. You wrote a book.

Ruth: Yes, I did.

Interviewer: The title of your book is,

Ruth: From Mother's A Child to University Professor: The Autobiography of an American Black Woman.

Interviewer: Very good book, I read the book. Tell me what was the biggest challenge about writing that particular book.

Ruth: As I think back about it many of the things about growing up on welfare, I didn't realize how punitive that system was until I was out of it. In fact, many of the workers, many of the visits that the workers made to my home, I think back were just to check on my mother. And I think of those years, even though welfare enabled us to survive and

live, it was good. But I realize that the system was involved in doing things that were punitive. And as I say that I didn't really recognize most of that until I wrote the book. And some of that had to be pointed out by others that were reading my book. In fact, one of the people that wrote the forward say that she didn't agree with the system at all. And I grew to recognizing that system was punitive. But she had written that she was glad I had wrote the book because the story needed to be told.

Interviewer: I think that it is a very inspirational story. Here you are raised on welfare, grow up and become highly educated, become a student that is successful. You do everything that is said welfare prevents people from doing. You don't become dependant on the welfare system. The criticism that you have had to deal with over the years, and you work so hard to dispel the myths and the stereotypes. So you are a living example of that. What was the thing that you liked about the book you liked the most?

Ruth: I think I liked most working with my clients who were on welfare. I liked working with them and writing about them that were on welfare who were my clients. I really like writing about them.

Interviewer: Their experiences.

Ruth: Those experiences with them.

Interviewer: Probably was the drive of your day. The human contact, the human interaction. Again, it is a wonderful book.

Ruth: I'm glad you had a chance to read it.

Interviewer: It is another one of your many accomplishments. Let's talk about one last one. There are so many. Let's talk about one last one. You were in Iowa's Women's Hall of Fame. You were inducted into that.

Ruth: I was inducted into Iowa Women's Hall of fame.

Interviewer: Tell us the story of that experience. What was it like? This is a huge accomplishment here.

Ruth: The hardest thing was for me to be quiet about it and not tell anybody about it until the day I would be inducted. And so I would start, oh you know what happened, and then I would remember I was not to tell anybody. Because I needed to invite people to my induction but I couldn't tell them I was going to be inducted. Because the letter sent to me specifically said, do not mention this to anybody.

Interviewer: And so they tell you, and you have to hold the excitement in. And so when you were able to let the excitement out. At the event you are able to really relax and enjoy this huge recognition. What was that like to know that you accomplished something like this?

Ruth: Well when they read, they had a script that they read, and when they were reading the script of all the things I had accomplished and done, and I kept thinking are they talking about me? And I wondered where they got all this stuff, I know they had to do their research, induct me into the hall of fame. But it was something to sit there and listen to all the things they were saying about me. And I do remember that they had the Golden Cups there that we received and I kept looking at them wondering, "is that what we get?" And my attention was all on listening to the things they were saying about me and the things that I had done and that was to me, "Where do I go from here?"

Interviewer: Ok. Well, again another great accomplishment for you. It has been a pleasure hearing about your story, hearing about your accomplishments, learning more about you and it has been an honor sitting here and interviewing you knowing about all the things you have done and all the things you've done for the community.

Ruth: Thank you.