

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD WITT  
CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT  
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KSU Oral History Series, No. 75  
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Part 1 – Thursday, 21 August 2008  
Location: CETL House, Kennesaw State University

TS: Today I'm interviewing Leonard Witt who won the KSU Foundation Distinguished Service Award in 2008. Len, we start with everybody just asking them to talk about their background, where they grew up and where they went to school and things like that. So let's start with a little bit about yourself.

LW: Okay. Well, I was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, a coal mining town. Most of my relatives on my mother's side were Polish and some coal miners mixed in there. My dad, he's actually from near here; he grew up in Talladega, Alabama. It's interesting that when we moved down here I got reintroduced to all the Witts. Do you want a little history of that? It's kind of interesting.

TS: Yes, sure.

LW: So my mother is Polish-Catholic . . .

TS: What's her name by the way, and his name?

LW: They're both dead, and her name was Stella Pearl Witt.

TS: Stella Pearl. Maiden name Pearl?

LW: No, it was Frankavitz. They spelled it so many different ways that it's hard for me to keep up with exactly how she was using it in her time. Most of the family go with Frankavitz now, but, originally, it was almost more like Franckewicz or Frankevicz. I have seen both ways, and I am sure there were other spellings too.

TS: And what is your father's name?

LW: Harry Witt.

TS: So it sounds like a little different ethnicity.

LW: It was a different ethnicity, especially in the time when they got married. Neither family was very happy about this.

TS: Okay, so she was Polish.

LW: She was Polish-Catholic and he's Russian-Jew.

TS: Okay. I thought he might have been redneck.

LW: No, no, the reason why he got down here is interesting. I found out a lot of this history because now that I'm here there are all these Witts around from Alabama and all, but Wolf Witt, his father's brother, I believe, moved down here first from Philadelphia and started a dry goods business. Then he invited brothers and cousins to come down and start their own business, but they all had to be far enough part that they weren't competing.

TS: Yes, yes. This is about as standard a practice as you can get

LW: Right. So given that, there are Witts that stretch from Birmingham, Alabama, and all the way up to Chattanooga.

TS: And all in the dry goods business.

LW: Not any more. They're in all different things. Bur originally.

TS: They all got here around the turn of the century, I guess.

LW: Yes, I think they did. My father was born in 1911. He was born in Talladega. My mom's side of the family, her mother was Polish, but born here, and her father was actually born in Poland. They were first generation immigrants, basically, and they spoke as much Polish as they did English, or maybe more.

TS: My wife's family is from Buffalo, and she's got cousins of Russian-Irish ethnicity whose last name is Uraskevich. The older generation pronounced it either u-ras'ke-vich or ur-es-kay'vich.

LW: Correct. They keep changing. So I always have to go and look at the spelling. I know the Frankavitz with "vitz," but that's sort of the Americanized version of it.

TS: Okay. So you were going to tell some stories about them.

LW: Yes, I can tell a couple of stories. My mom, first generation, grew up in the Depression era, and she had to quit school when she was thirteen to go work in the silk mills. Silk mills in Pennsylvania . . .

TS: I've never heard of silk mills in Pennsylvania.

LW: Yes, they used to have them. In fact, we were up not too long ago in Massachusetts, and we went to Lowell to look at some of the factories, and they had these. But it was really hard for her to leave school. I thought when my daughter was thirteen what it must have been like for her to be pulled out of school.

TS: Yes, it's incredible.

LW: Right. So she went there, but her sister, fortunately, got her a job at the Hotel Sterling selling newspapers and magazines behind the stand.

TS: Beginning of a journalism career for you.

LW: Well, there's a connection here that I kind of like, so now I get to tell it publicly. She self-educated herself, basically, by reading the *New York Times* every day and all of these different publications. So later my dad and she moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania, and that's where I really grew up is Allentown. It was economically a step up from that era in the 1950s. Allentown at that time—this will probably interest you as an historian—was bullet proof economically. Everyone would say that. “Hey, we've got Mac truck, we've got Bethlehem Steel here, we've got Kraft”—and all of those things.

TS: That would be there forever.

LW: That would be there forever. Well, all of them are gone now, but when I was there, they were all there. So it was a pretty prosperous time to be growing up. My parents had me and my brother and my sister. My dad just worked for a carpet place selling carpet—retail store. My mom would help out every once in a while, but they were able to send the three of us to college debt-free for us. That was the promise; if we worked when we were in high school, they would send us to college. It's hard to believe now. So that's what happened. [They were first generation], but the three of us got sent to college. I went to High Point College in High Point, North Carolina.

TS: I looked on the website first of all to find out where High Point College is—college then and university today. It looks like a beautiful campus.

LW: Yes, there was just an article about it in the *Chronicle of [Higher] Education*. They've got a new president who graduated from there a long time ago, made a lot of money, promotional and stuff, and he's got a \$250 million building program for this little college, which was 1,200 students when I went there.

TS: I think the website says 3,300 today.

LW: Is that right? Well, actually, I just ran into somebody from the communication department at a conference. They're getting a brand new communication department, and the *Chronicle of Education's* article is actually pretty funny because they have a Director of WOW, and his job is to make sure that the students there are involved in campus life. They have a concierge on campus. I actually made a little video for my old fraternity brothers. It's a college now that's on the move, at least financially. I went to school there and got out of school. I was not sure what I was going to do. It was a turbulent time in the country—this was 1966 that I got out.

TS: How did you get to a Methodist school in the first place?

LW: It's a long, interesting story that I'm almost embarrassed to say now, but when I was in high school, I think it is part of being the first generation, but I was not a scholar in high school or anything. I said, "I don't know if I'm ever going to college." And a guy up the street, Gary Uhlmann, whose sister was at High Point, said, "You should apply there; you'll get into High Point." This is even more hard to believe—I applied, I got accepted, never saw the school.

TS: Until you got there?

LW: Until I got there. I still remember the moment when my dad and my mom took me to the bus station, a sixteen hour bus ride from Allentown, and him waving with tears in his eyes, and me getting down there and showing up at three o'clock in the morning on the campus, and nobody was around. So I sat on my footlocker until morning, until the campus opened, and there I was.

TS: They're selective nowadays in enrollment. Or maybe they've always been and found your application attractive because they wanted diversity of different parts of the country.

LW: I am still in touch because of the Internet with a lot of my friends from there. In fact, we had a reunion for them. We have a place up in New Hampshire, and I had a reunion for them not too long ago. Fifty of them came out, and they're all doing well in all kinds of professions. So even then, it was this little Methodist school, but it drew from New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, and, of course, from North Carolina and Virginia and the South. But mostly I would say North Carolina and north up to Pennsylvania, so it was geographically diverse. It wasn't diverse in terms of ethnicity at that time because those were the years when it was just making the transition.

TS: Sure. So you're saying '66 you got out, and we're in the middle of the Vietnam War, and there was turmoil.

LW: It was the middle of the war, and I'm just waiting to get drafted, basically.

TS: Had the turmoil reached High Point College?

LW: No. It had in the sense that we were all going to be drafted, and so everyone was apprehensive about it.

TS: But no protest movements?

LW: There was no social consciousness wake up then, and that's the interesting part. So I came to New York, and for whatever reason I just didn't get my draft notice when everybody else got their draft notice. I was hanging around New York waiting to get drafted. Somebody said, "Go to the Board of Education; they need teachers." I went. Somebody said you could get a C certificate so I said, "Well, do you have a C certificate?" I don't know where that term came from. The woman said, "No, I've never heard of such a thing." I said, "Okay." Then she said, "You've heard haven't you? We

have a special program, if you have a degree—six weeks, eight credits, and we'll put you in a classroom in September.” This was like June, so six weeks, eight credits at the then City College, now the City University of New York. They promised me three things: that when I got this job, because I was a male, they would put me in third grade or above—that was back then; that I would be teaching in the borough that I lived in—I lived in Manhattan; and that they would pay me at the end of the first month. I got assigned to the Southeast Bronx from Manhattan, they put me in a second grade classroom, and they lost my paycheck at the end of the month.

TS: Well, at least you got deferred.

LW: I got deferred, and it was a very, very important part of my life. In those days you could be really, really naive coming out of the 1950s into the early 1960s and just not have a clue as to what was going on. We talk about our students being naïve. My wife [Diana L. Westneat Witt], because she came from a more educated family, and her step-father now was a professor at Yale, she was more aware of what was going on. But if you came out of a town like Allentown, there was a very good chance that you were . . .

TS: What you're describing sounds very familiar to me. I graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1964, and grew up in Knoxville, and the world was quite different back then.

LW: Yes, it's almost embarrassing to say it now. All of this stuff was going on, and we weren't aware of it.

TS: I remember when we had our first hippie on campus. Everybody turned around and stared.

LW: Right, right. But now I'm in New York and have met some friends.

TS: New York is the center of everything.

LW: It is the center of everything.

TS: Including protests.

LW: Including protests. A couple of people I know started saying, “You should be reading this; you should be reading that. You should be reading this.” A lot of books such as Frantz Fanon [*The Wretched of the Earth* (originally published in France in 1961; English translation 1963)] about Algerian [colonialism and the struggle for independence] and all of these different books that I should have been exposed to in college, but I wasn't.

TS: Did you identify with Jewish culture, Polish culture or . . . ?

LW: No, we actually grew up Catholic. My dad wasn't a strictly religious Jew, but he always made sure that he went to the High [Holiday] services every year. Because of being up in

Wilkes-Barre and Allentown, just my mom's family was there. So we were brought up Catholic but not in Catholic schools and all.

TS: I was just thinking—that flourishing Jewish culture in New York—whether you were a part of that at all? But I guess not.

LW: All of my life I have been—and I don't even think of it often—immersed in various cultures. It's true that a lot of my life influences have been as much Jewish as they have been Catholic. In fact, we're connected again with the [Witt] family, like I said, here. My brother [Barry Witt] got out of college and went to work for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation [FDIC] and then decided to go into selling men's clothing, wholesale to retail. He went to work for a company called McGregor, which is still around, but was much bigger back then. Then it turned out that my dad's side of the family heard that he was in the business. Billy Cohen called him from Isaac Cohen and Sons, a top-coat company in New York, and asked if my brother wanted to go work for them. So he worked for them for a long time. In fact, my dad worked for his sister and brother-in-law in Allentown, and they ran this carpet store then.

TS: So he didn't stay in Talladega very long, I guess.

LW: He grew up in Talladega, and he left when he was, I don't know, in his twenties or something.

TS: Okay, so in their married life they were always in Pennsylvania.

LW: Correct. They met in Wilkes-Barre, Northeast Pennsylvania. He had his own business, but then things didn't work out, so he came to work for his sister for the rest of his life. He was never totally happy doing that, I don't think, working for his brother-in-law, but he worked hard.

TS: Well, when I grew up, the University of Tennessee recruited a lot of football players from the coalmines in Pennsylvania, so they had some exotic names for Knoxville in those days.

LW: Well, football is so big. It's hard to believe that when I was in high school they would travel from Allentown, Pennsylvania to Philadelphia schools; they would travel up to New Jersey; they were playing all over the Northeast. Our high school stadium—they built a new stadium for 25,000 people, and they would fill it: new stadium. It was like a million dollars back then, which is lot of money, but then they built another high school and it sort of faded.

TS: Okay, so how did you get out of teaching elementary school in New York? And what grades did you teach?

LW: I taught second grade the first year and then fifth grade for the other years. Then after I had done it for about three and a half years, I realized I wasn't going to teach and didn't

know what I was going to do. So I went back to school to get a master's degree in sociology from the New School for Social Research. It was a great time to be there, again, because all this turmoil is going on, and it's happening in the street, and there are really smart people teaching the courses there. I did that and then also came to the conclusion that I'd never met a sociologist in my life, and where would I get a job. At the same time there was all this turmoil going on. I used to go to the second floor of the New York Historical Society. They had a beautiful little library up there with nice, oak tables, and no one was ever there. I would go in there every day because by this time I was substitute teaching. So I had a little free time. It's hard to believe that you could be a substitute teacher in New York and live in Manhattan. When I was teaching, it cost me \$125 a month for an apartment, and I had my own apartment. So anyhow, I would go up there. All of this turmoil was going on, and I was trying to make sense of it. I would sit there and write every day. It was an important part for me because, frankly, when I was in college, I never wrote that much, and writing was never an important part of my life. But I'd go up there, and I would be having what I thought at the time were revelations—miraculous stuff because you're sitting there, and you're writing, and you're writing, and you're writing, and new ideas are popping out. These ideas don't come to you in conversation usually; they come to you when you're having these little internal conversations with yourself. Whether or not those ideas were profound, I thought they were at the time. I still have the notebooks, and I should go back and look at them because it'd be a little historical document anyhow.

TS: Save them and put them in the KSU Archives.

LW: There you go. But maybe they'd be too embarrassing to me.

TS: Yes, when I give away my old books, I always look through them and see what notes I wrote in the margins to see if I need to scratch them out before I let anybody else see what I might have said thirty or forty years ago.

LW: Right. I'm sure these would embarrass me today.

TS: Still, if you can get beyond the embarrassment, it could be a real interesting window into the age.

LW: I think so, and I should go back and look and go back and do what historians would do and find out what other people were writing and saying at the same time. Then I could personalize it because I would have some of these notes. It's probably me whining about the weather or something.

TS: Well, everybody having these revelations was as nutty as a fruitcake back then.

LW: Yes. So there I was in the midst of all this, and I'm writing, and I realized that I didn't really want to be a sociologist. I had completed all of my coursework. All I had to do was a master's thesis. But I decided this just wasn't for me. Then I tried all different kinds of writing forms. I would try and do kids books and fiction and science fiction, and



I realized that journalism was probably going to be the way I was going to go. I had sold a couple of little essays. I tell my students this one story. I may as well tell it. It's this little anecdote about how my first published piece got published. In *The Village Voice*, which was then the alternative newspaper. . . .

TS: All right.

LW: It wasn't published in there, oh no, it wasn't published in there. There was an ad in there for *Biplanes*, and they'd pay fifty dollars for a piece. Fifty dollars back then was what I got paid for a whole day of substitute teaching. So I sent this nice, cute, little essay about sounds, violins versus noises—the city noises, the screechy subways, and all. I sent it off to the *Biplanes*. So the guy called me up from there and said, “Hey, we're going to publish it, and we can pay you fifty bucks.” I thought, “Wow, this is really great.” At the end he said, “By the way, have you ever published pornography?” I said, “No.” He said, “Okay, just asking.” Then he told me where to come and pick up the papers. At this time Times Square was still pretty seedy, and there was a seedy little walk up hotel in Times Square. I knock on the door, and he gives me the check, and he gives me the two papers from the *Biplanes*. Well, it's a pornographic newspaper for bi-sexual men. Then, in the middle of it . . .

TS: And you didn't know that?

LW: No, I had no clue. Then in the middle this was my little essay, which could have been in the *Christian Science Monitor* about sounds versus noises. In the middle of this thing there is my little essay with little cupids floating around it. I thought, “What is going on?” So I got home, and I told a friend about it, and he says, “Well, you know why they published it don't you?” I said, “No.” He said, “Because to get it through the mail they have to show that it has some redeeming value, and they were using your story as their redeeming value.” So as I tell my students now, make sure when you write something now it has some redeeming value [laughter].

TS: Needless to say, you didn't write too much more for them.

LW: No, that was just this one little thing.

TS: That was your first publication.

LW: That was my first published piece. I got paid for it anyhow. Then there was a paper on the Eastside of New York, which is still there and is still not very good, but it's called *Our Town*. It was one of these handouts, but it was a newspaper. I got in touch with him, and he said, “Yeah, you can write. We can't pay you, but you can write.” So I wrote stories. I remember the first story I did was with Mayor [Edward Irving] Koch, who was then a councilman for the city [from 1966-68; U.S. Congressman, 1969-77; Mayor, 1978-89]. He was at a PTA meeting, and how I struggled over that story. This was prior to computers and even electric typewriters, so I had my little manual typewriter. At two

o'clock in the morning I'm typing away and not getting any progress and telling my wife I can't do this.

TS: Married and still not bringing in much income.

LW: Well, we weren't quite married at that time; we were then living together in New York City in the apartment. So I went to sleep at two o'clock in the morning, couldn't sleep. This is just a little, dinky story, but it was my first. I had to get up at five. I wrote the thing, and they took it, and they published it. So then I kept writing more stories. My soon-to-be in-laws had a place in Sandwich, New Hampshire. We have gone up there a lot. It's a beautiful place. We still go up there. They have died, but my wife and her two sisters [still own it].

TS: Is it in the mountains?

LW: It's in the White Mountains, yes; it's just perfect. When I retire, though, I'm going to have to retire with my wife and her two sisters [laughter]. So, anyhow, we have this place in New Hampshire, and they had it then. We'd all go up there for holidays to visit. I looked in *Editor and Publisher*, which is a trade magazine, and it had a job for journalists for the *Carroll County Independent*. I applied for it and got a call. There I was on Ninety-sixth and Amsterdam. We were living in a Mitchell-Lama building, which is middle-income housing in New York City, which meant we were the first tenants in this apartment. So there I was, and within a few months we were living on a dead-end road on Conway Lake in Conway, New Hampshire, and I was working as a journalist without ever having taken a journalism course.

TS: From public housing in New York?

LW: It wasn't really public housing; it was middle-income subsidized housing. In fact, it's now reverted back to private housing. They had some sort of thirty-year lease or contract on it. We still see it when we go to New York. It was great. We were on the nineteenth floor, and we had a balcony overview of the Hudson River. But it was very noisy, at that time especially. New York is actually quieter than it used to be. There used to be people blowing their horns constantly, so it was extremely noisy. Then suddenly we're on this little, dead-end road on Conway Lake in a little cottage that had just one register between the kitchen and the living room—one big register that blew hot air in. But this was where it could get to twenty or thirty degrees below zero, and it wasn't insulated. So we often knew which way the wind was blowing from.

TS: Oh my.

LW: We were young then. So that was my first job, and I spent three and a half years there. Again, no formal journalism training, but it was a perfect job. I covered the northern part of this county. The office was in Center Ossipee, New Hampshire.

TS: Okay, that's got to be an Indian name.

LW: Yes. I only had to go down one day a week. I was paid full time for the week, and I covered everything and had to do it, but I had to go down to the office just one day a week. So I was pretty much on my own to figure out where the stories were and what the stories were. So we did that for three and a half years. Then we just realized that I wanted to move on. I wanted to try freelancing. My wife Diana wanted to go back to school. She was the other connection to the *New York Times*: my mom got her education through the *New York Times*; my wife, when I met her—we met at the altar of a church where they were having a block association meeting at, I think, Seventy-fifth and Central Park West—was the indexer for the *New York Times*. So that was another kind of *New York Times* connection. I'm one of the few people who didn't have any money whose wedding announcement was in the *New York Times* because, if you worked for the *New York Times*, you'd get your wedding announced in the *New York Times*.

TS: How about that?

LW: Yes, that was a big deal. You can look it up in the index that she used to do. Back then, I don't know if you remember, but every year the *New York Times* put out this big, thick, five or six inch red book called the *New York Times Index*, and that's what she did. We were up there. She wanted to go back to get a degree in library science at Simmons College in Boston. I wanted to try freelancing. So we left Conway and moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I tried freelancing for a year, and things weren't going well. I made, I think, \$1,200 bucks. I conceived these really well-written stories, but I just couldn't figure out how to do it.

TS: So Portsmouth is within commuter distance to Boston?

LW: Yes, it's about an hour away. Actually, she had a friend there who she would stay with for a couple of days and then come back, but, yes, it's just a little bit more than an hour north of Boston, whereas Conway where we lived was about two and a half hours. Conway is really up in the mountains, but it was beautiful.

TS: So you're freelancing. Is that when you started a master's program at the University of New Hampshire?

LW: Yes, because I didn't know what I was going to do. A friend of ours who has a place next to the farm that my in-laws had—Stephen Dobyns is his name, and he's a well-known poet—told me about the University of New Hampshire. He said, "You should go here. They've got a great program under Don [Donald Morrison] Murray." Anybody who knows about writing, especially teachers who teach writing—knows about Don Murray. He just recently passed away [on 30 December 2006], but he was the guru of teaching teachers how to teach writing. He was just a great man. By this time I was no kid. I was in my thirties and trying to figure out what I'm going to do with my life. I didn't know if I really wanted to go back to graduate school. I decided not to and then decided I would. Fortunately, Don Murray took me in. I was really fortunate in that I got to teach freshman composition for the first year I was there. It was a two-year program,

and then the second year [I taught] sophomore composition. This program was really writing intensive. It's through the English department, but it's a master's in non-fiction writing. So I wrote and wrote and wrote, and my writing was getting better because I was working with students. I would find this out later on, but it wasn't a lot different to work with students on their writing or work with professionals, especially the way Don Murray had set it up.

TS: Do you think it's good for students to get a straight English degree as opposed to a communication degree, if they want to write for a newspaper?

LW: It worked for me. I haven't mentioned my kids, but I have two kids, Stephen and Emily Witt. My daughter, just two weeks ago, started the master's program at Columbia University in journalism. But now we don't know that there's going to be any journalism jobs, which I will get at as we go on.

TS: I interrupted you; you were talking about Murray.

LW: Don Murray. And you asked me if I thought [an English degree was better than a communication degree]. It worked for me because I wasn't interested in the daily grind of doing daily journalism. I was more interested in magazine writing and deep feature writing, so in that respect it helped.

TS: So you never really did daily journalism other than that first three and a half years, did you?

LW: No, not as a reporter. And that first three and a half years was a weekly newspaper. When I came to the University of New Hampshire and I was teaching and doing my master's degree, because I was older, I felt like I wasn't doing enough here. So every Friday I worked for a paper there called *Foster's Daily Democrat* [headquartered in Dover, New Hampshire]. Some people thought I worked there full time because I produced so much. It had the privilege of being the oldest newspaper in America [founded by Joshua Foster in 1873] with the family name in the masthead that was still owned by the family. It was Bob Foster at that time, and I think the [family] still owns it [currently owned by the George J. Foster Company]. Most places have been sold off. So I worked there, and then I also worked Friday nights and Saturday nights as a waiter just trying to make money. I borrowed some money from my brother Barry to go to school. He was the one selling men's clothing and actually making a living. You wouldn't think he could, but he made a really good living and retired at forty-two years old.

TS: Wow.

LW: Yes, unlike me. So I went and got the master's degree, came out of there thinking finally I'm going to get a great job, and actually found myself working as a stringer for the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*. This was a daily job reporting. It was awful because I had to go fifty miles to file my stories, and I just covered this little part.

TS: Still no computers?

LW: Actually, this was the very first. I don't know if it was a computer, but this was why I had to go up and file the stories. I had to drive these fifty miles, and they had a little box there with a green screen on it that you would type in your stories. Then that would transmit that story in to their files. So I don't know if it was even a computer or just a transmission box, but it was getting close to it. For me, one of the big luxuries was that my wife was book indexing—freelancing in a job for the *New York Times*. So they sent her an IBM selector. Oh, my gosh, you could type, and then you could hit this button, and it went back one space and made a correction for you [laughter]. This was such a luxury because you didn't have to redo everything. This job was not paying me very well, and it didn't look like I was going to get a full time job at the *Portland Maine Press Herald* and my wife was pregnant with our son. We were just in a dither. We didn't know what was going to happen. I saw an ad for the *Allentown Morning Call* where I grew up. It was for a copy editor, not a reporter. I got the job. I had been away for seventeen years. They thought I actually knew something about the city. I didn't know that much about it when I showed up there again. I got the job, and it was a step up from my other job, but this was a job where I was the night obituary copy editor, and I worked from six o'clock at night until two o'clock in the morning from Tuesday to Saturday. I was proud of it and happy that I had a job. But because I had this experience doing these long feature stories and that master's degree—and this is where it all came in—and working with students, when John Lennon was shot, the music guy and I said, "Let's put together a special section on this." We put together this special section, and people took notice of me. "Maybe he shouldn't just be a night copy editor on the obituaries." So I worked my way up, and eventually by the time I left there I was the acting city editor for the paper. Then I became the editor of the feature section which was called *a.m. Magazine*. This was from 1979 to 1984. Finally, I was on a career path. I was no kid by this time. I'm on a career path, and I'm getting real wages. At the time the *Allentown Morning Call* was really a beautifully designed newspaper. Newspaper design was really just coming in, and the feature section would be the best designed paper. So I'd often get invited to conferences to talk about that. I went to one, and I said, "If you took the *Allentown Morning Call*, and you crunched it down, at the end of the week you'd have a really great Sunday magazine." I said this at a conference in New York. At the end of it, Linda Picone from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* came up to me and said, "Would you be interested in applying for the editorship of the *Sunday Magazine* at the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*?"

TS: Wow.

LW: That's what I said too. So off we went. I got that job and did that for six years, I was the editor of the *Sunday Magazine*. What I thought was going to be a career of magazine writing now had, basically, turned into a career of editing.

TS: Hope your house was insulated by this time.

LW: Yes, yes! Well, it was the same weather. The weather was not really different than from New Hampshire.

TS: I guess not from the mountains of New Hampshire.

LW: Right, both places were very cold. I was so stupid when I moved there. I moved to a house on a corner, so I had to shovel the whole corner rather than just a little piece. In fact, when I went and applied for that job, it was minus eleven degrees when I arrived in Minneapolis, and it never got above that. So one of the people said . . . .

TS: They probably figured if you took the job when it was minus eleven you could cope with it.

LW: Actually, they were thinking, if this guy takes this job in this weather there's something wrong with him [laughter]. So I was there for six years running the *Sunday Magazine*. It was a great job. But, then, Sunday magazines used to be really thick and big. This is important: this was an indication—no one knew it then—of this slow decline of newspaper business. There was a time when the Sunday magazine was really thick. It had many color ads that had to go in the paper. The coupons were there and the liquor ads. But then along came the coupons, and then along came color throughout the paper. Then along came the city magazines taking away the quality ads. So, by then, the only thing we had left in that paper was cigarette ads. Then one day they disappeared, and somebody looked at the magazine balance sheet and said, "We can't do it any more." At the time, five cigarette ads—ten thousand dollars each per page because the paper then had a circulation of six or seven hundred thousand on a Sunday—[brought in] fifty thousand dollars times fifty weeks or \$2.5 million per year. So that disappeared, and so did that job. Then I was thinking whether I'd get absorbed in the newspaper, and I get a call from the publisher of *Minnesota Monthly Magazine*. He asked, because the word had been out that the Sunday magazine was going to disappear, if I wanted to go to work there. Again, it was just like suddenly it was from an *a.m. Magazine*, which is like a little feature section in a newspaper, to *Sunday Magazine* in the *Star Tribune*, which was a magazine inside a newspaper, to an honest-to-God slick *Atlanta* type magazine or a *Philadelphia* magazine. I was editor there for six years. My life tends to go in these little six-year cycles.

Then, when I was doing that project—and this takes us to the public and civic journalism project—we were writing a lot of stories about people getting killed because this was 1990 through 1996 when I came here, and there were a lot of homicides going on. We were pretty good at it, these narrative stories. Then one day I woke up and said, "I'm not going to do any more of these stories ever. They're not informing anybody; there's not news; there's just no reason to do them." I came up with this idea, the Minnesota Action Plan to End Gun Violence. I went and talked to some people and actually got some funding for it, and we put out a special thirty-six page section, no advertising, no experts at all. We just went out and talked to six hundred people around the state, all over the state, and had these forums and all. I didn't even know it was public journalism at the time. The people came up with these ideas, and we did this special thirty-six page

section. It changed the way I was going to practice journalism from then on. The *Minnesota Monthly* is a for-profit wing of Minnesota Public Radio; I should have mentioned that. After that succeeded I sent a letter to Bill [William H.] Kling, who is really well known in public radio circles. He's turned Minnesota Public Radio into this juggernaut public radio, and I told him we should have a public journalism or civic journalism program at MPR. He agreed and immediately sent a letter over to my boss saying that he'd like me to come over to Minnesota Public Radio. Then for six years I ran this civic journalism initiative. I was the executive director of the civic journalism initiative at Minnesota Public Radio where we brought people together to talk about public policy issues and tried to persuade the journalists to reach out deeper into communities and not just talk to elites. So I did that for six years and then that came to an end.

TS: Before we go on to the next step, I know you've talked about this and taught about this before, but journalists traditionally, I guess, only interviewed elected officials, college presidents, elites, you were saying. . . .

LW: They tend to do that. Civic Journalism or Public Journalism started in 1988. It was a reaction to the Michael Dukakis, George Bush election. A woman named Charlotte Grimes, who wrote about it, called it a sleaze and trivia-dominated election. The problem was that the journalists went along with it. The spin-doctors were pretty much running the campaign, and the journalists were willing dupes. So along came people like Jay Rosen and Buzz Merritt [W. Davis Merritt, Jr., former editor of the *Wichita Eagle*] and a group of academics and journalists basically—Cole C. Campbell—he was a newspaper editor [former editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and former dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno] and Jay Rosen is professor [of Journalism] at New York University and still well known. So they came up with this reform movement, civic journalism, and said, "Look, it's time for you all to find out, instead of these issues like the flag and patriotism and all of these sorts of issues that the people aren't really, truly interested in. If you go and ask them, what's important to you, they'll say health care and education." So the idea was that we'd go out to the people and talk to the people and then when the politicians or the spin-doctors would start talking about the flag or prayer in the schools or whatever those hot button issues were, the journalists could say, "But I just talked to one hundred people, and they said this is the question they want to ask; and it's about health care or education or whatever else." So that was the beginning of it. But it was hard to do because you had to assemble these people; you had to make sure that you had a balanced audience that you were talking to. So it was an expensive operation, but that's what I did basically for those six years.

TS: That's really only twenty years ago, if 1988 is when you said all this started.

LW: Right, that's when it started. But it was always a battle because the journalists don't want outside people setting the agenda for us. That was kind of the thing. Or they would say, "Well, you're saying go out and talk to the people, that's just good journalism." We would say, "Yeah, it is, but you're not practicing it." That was the argument. People like Jay Rosen, he's a pretty feisty guy, but he was always battling the journalists. But not all.

There was the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. The Pew Foundation put up ten million dollars over several years to help make this initiative work in different ways. It was waning, and my job at Minnesota Public Radio—I could see that it wasn't going to last forever. It was coming to an end. By this time in my career, I always thought the last days of my career, I think in terms of these five year plans that I do.

TS: You're making me nervous because you've been here six years.

LW: No, I'm not going to leave this job. This is it! [laughter] This is my terminal job. No, I'm going to stick around here because I really, really like what's happening here and the possibilities, and there's a lot of important work that has to get done. So I had, even by about the early 1990s, thought that I'd want to teach. I put together a book called *The Complete Book of Feature Writing* [Writer's Digest Books, 1991], which I still use. I went out and talked to feature writers and got thirty of them to agree because I had been putting out this thing called *Style* for the American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors, I put out a journal for them. I just volunteered and did it. I would get people to write for that. I knew if I could get them to write for that I could get them to write for a book.

TS: A book that teaches style?

LW: This book is how to write features. It's called *The Complete Book of Feature Writing*. Everyone wrote a different essay, and I coordinated it. A lot of times you get a lot of people writing, and it is distant topics that don't seem to hold together, but this holds together really well. I got a lot of best feature writers from around the country to write for it. That was in the back of my mind that some day that I want to teach, and it would be good to have this little credit. So my job at Minnesota Public Radio was coming to an end. I didn't know quite what the next stage was going to be, but I always knew I wanted to teach, so I went to see somebody at the University of Minnesota that I knew, and I said, "What do I have to do to get into academia?" She said, "Well, the first thing is you go to the AEJMC, which is the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and look and see what kind of jobs they have posted." So this was like February 14, 2002, I think it was.

TS: This is going to their website?

LW: This was going to their website. And there was a job for Kennesaw State University, which I'd never heard of before. I read it, and I told my wife, "I'm the only person in the country who meets all these qualifications that they're asking for." I don't know too many other people who would do it because they wanted somebody who had journalism experience and who knew about public journalism, had an advanced degree—not necessarily a doctor's degree but had an advanced degree—and also could do some fund-raising. Because I'd worked for public radio I knew a little bit about that. But then at the bottom of the ad it said to be guaranteed to be considered for this position applications have to be in by February 15. This was the 14<sup>th</sup>, so I was really busy that night. By now the Internet was around, so I was really busy, and I sent it off, and sure enough. I think



Keisha [L.] Hoerrner was the person who received the e-mail, and I said, “I think I’m the only person that I can think of who can meet a lot of these qualifications.” She said, “It looks that way too.” So I got the job. It’s the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication; that’s the job.

TS: When did you come down for your interview?

LW: It seems like it was probably in March, somewhere in there.

TS: So it was not eleven degrees below zero.

LW: No, no, it was quite beautiful. We walked around, and then later my wife came down. The first neighborhood we walked through we talked to a woman on the street there doing some stuff. Surprisingly, we moved into that neighborhood. It’s right off the Marietta Square. It’s a nice, little old house. We like older houses, so it’s perfect. So I had this job as this Distinguished Chair.

TS: You could tell them you were a southern boy; your father was from Alabama.

LW: You know, sixty miles away. It’s hard to believe! One of my relatives here, Barry Katz, got in touch with me, and he introduced us back to the bigger Witt family and clan. We had known him because we weren’t totally out of touch with my dad’s family because when I was five years old we drove from Allentown to visit the relatives in Birmingham, Alabama. It’s hard to believe that little old Dodge car that had no air conditioning driving from Allentown—this was before my sister was born—it was my brother and I, my mom and my dad, and my grandmother and my uncle. That’s how you used to travel back then. You all packed into a car.

TS: Did you think you were going to another country?

LW: Oh, yeah, I was little then; I was like five years old. That’s just about it. We had seen Barry maybe one other time. So anyhow, here at Kennesaw was an endowed chair.

TS: You were starting to explain the Robert D. Fowler chair. Tell who he is.

LW: Okay. And this is where the *New York Times* recurs again in my life. Robert D. Fowler owned the *Gwinnett Daily News*. He had bought it when I think it was still a bi-weekly; it wasn’t even a daily. He and his wife Judith bought the paper. They built it up just as Kennesaw itself, the university was growing. So was the whole area, and so was the *Gwinnett Daily News*. The *New York Times*, apparently, wanted to go to war against the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and they bought the *Gwinnett Daily News* for I think one hundred million dollars.

TS: So the Fowlers had plenty of money.

LW: The Fowlers had plenty of money, and the thing didn't work out for the *New York Times*. Robert Fowler died, and Judith came to the university and basically offered \$500,000 to set up this endowed chair.

TS: Fowler has been editor of the *Marietta Daily Journal* at one time.

LW: That's correct. So, there was the *New York Times* indirectly subsidizing my job.

TS: Fowler actually headed the twenty-eight person committee that got the bond referendum through in 1964 to create Kennesaw Junior College.

LW: Correct. So they had this combination. At the time it was supposed to be a match; the state was supposed to match that. They were tardy in doing that, but President Dan [Daniel S.] Papp came and talked to one of the local legislators. This year, the second \$500,000 was given to it. Along with that becomes the title of eminent scholar, which kind of scares me in some ways.

TS: Oh, so it took just six years to get that match.

LW: Yes, and I got tenure last year, so it all came together.

TS: Oh, okay, so what is your title now?

LW: It is Eminent Scholar and Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication.

TS: And Associate Professor of Communication.

LW: That's correct, that's all there. My job before at Minnesota Public Radio was executive director of the Minnesota Public Radio Civic Journalism Initiative, but I think my new title is actually longer, finally.

TS: Well, we'll all have to bow down whenever we see you with a title like Eminent Scholar.

LW: It's scary [laughter].

TS: Okay, 2002, just out of the blue you looked at the ads at the right time, saw Kennesaw, got the job. Kennesaw obviously wanted somebody that had lots of practical experience, and that was far more important than a Ph.D. or the academic type credentials.

LW: Right, this was set up a little differently because it was a separate endowed chair. The faculty of the Communication department defined this job. They worked with Craig E. Aronoff from the Coles College of Business, who was running the search.

TS: Oh, that's right because he's got a background in journalism. His bachelor's degree was in journalism from Northwestern University.

LW: Okay. So, anyway, he headed the search committee, and I got the job.

TS: And the position was really advertised as someone who was going to do public journalism, wasn't it?

LW: It was going to move public journalism forward and also help Kennesaw State and the department get better known. That was part of the job description. They asked if I would be writing, and I said, "I always write; it's just part of what I do." It was an interesting time because when I arrived here public journalism was waning; people weren't even using the term nationwide. Because this Pew Center for Civic Journalism, which was the catalyst—they did workshops, and they gave prizes [the James K. Batten Award for Excellence in Civic Journalism]—the Pew Center was going to disappear in the spring of 2003. So what I had decided to do is that I invited twenty-four of the top practitioners and academics in public journalism to come to Kennesaw.

TS: Public and civic are the same thing?

LW: Same thing, yes. Public journalism, civic journalism, the same thing.

TS: So twenty-four of the leading practitioners of public journalism came to Kennesaw.

LW: And academics. Both combinations.

TS: And that's 2003?

LW: January of 2003. They came here with the express idea of having what I would call a navigation tool for public journalism to take it into the future. We developed a charter, and it was supposed to be a professional society for journalists and academics interested in public journalism. We had another meeting in the summer at the AEJMC, which is the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. That first year that I came here I volunteered to be the vice chair for the Civic Journalism Group then, and now it's the Civic and Citizen Journalism Interest Group. So we met again, and somebody said, "I think that public journalism is book-ended. It started in 1988, and it's going to end now, and that's going to be it." But Jay Rosen was there, and he said, "We've got to keep the flame alive; let's not give up on it." Also in that year, 2003, before I had these people come here, I did online forums to discuss the idea. Then, when they would come here, we wouldn't be wasting a lot of time on issues that we could work out online. Forum notes are available at <http://pjnet.org/forum/>. The Charter Declaration can be found at <http://pjnet.org/charter/>. Photos of the first Public Journalism Network meeting are at <http://www.kennesawsummit.kennesaw.edu/>. A summary of the meeting can be found at <http://pjnet.org/summit/>. An op-ed piece I wrote just before the summit is at <http://www.kennesawsummit.kennesaw.edu/opedpiece.htm>. More links are at <http://www.kennesawsummit.kennesaw.edu/>.

Griff Wigley had run the forums for me, and I had known him from Minnesota because he used to do all the work for the *Utne Reader*. I don't know if you're familiar with the

*Utne Reader*. The *Utne Reader* is kind of the *Reader's Digest* for progressives; they would go and find all these liberal articles. They were one of the first places to do online forums. They had the Utne cafes and salons, and Griff actually started it. This is important because in March of 2003 he called me and said, "Len, you ought to start a web blog, you ought to start a blog." I said, "What?" He said, "You ought to start a blog. That's the only way you can get the word out on what you're doing." I didn't pay much attention to him, but he kept insisting, and so eventually I started PJNet.org for the Public Journalism Network.

So I kept writing about issues, and it became a really important part of what I do because it became a public file cabinet. I would recommend this for any journalist. I just did a panel on it not too long ago. Anytime I came across any kind of popular literature, academic literature, scholarship, I would write about it at the blog, and then I would have all my references there, and it was like this file cabinet. Somebody at the Poynter Institute [for Media Studies] talked about writing where he had a shoe box where he would put everything in there. It was almost like a compost heap. You would keep throwing stuff in there, and eventually, somehow, it would mature into fine soil. This had the same sort of thing. So when I had to give a lecture or wanted to write something, I could do searches and find it in there, and it didn't disappear.

TS: How much time a day do you spend on your blog?

LW: Then I was probably spending a couple of hours a day, at least, somewhere in there. By the time I would read and find the right stuff to post up there, maybe more than that. At first, I would do a search for public journalism, and I would come up on page fifteen of Google, and I would think, "This is a waste of my time." I would tell Griff that, and he said, "No, just keep doing it, you'll see what happens." So I kept doing it, and the way this thing works is if one of the big boys who has a lot of readers and a lot of links picks it up, it moves you up in the algorithms that they use. Then after, I don't know, a couple of years of doing that, if you typed in public journalism, I came up first on Google, which meant, I tell people, I own this international franchise for public journalism. So, often, if anybody around the world wants to find out about public journalism, they will send me an e-mail or they'll pick up a part of what I write. Another indication of that is I got a call a couple of years back from a guy in Ecuador who asked if I'd want to come down there and do some workshops based on my blog. I mentioned to him a price that I knew he couldn't pay, and he said, "Well, we can't pay that." I said, "Okay, here's the deal; if you can fly me down there, and you get me an apartment for three weeks, I'll come down and do a week's worth of workshops. Then I'll hang out in Ecuador." So that's what we did. It was quite nice. I had a little apartment in Quito, and he took us to the beach, and my wife came down and my son and his girlfriend at the time, and we traveled around Ecuador. But really it was to do this weeklong workshop on public journalism.

More recently, about a year ago, I started coming up with this idea of Representative Journalism. Because this blog helps me keep current on everything, I think I saw before most people that newspapers were in dire straits, and they might actually disappear. In fact, a lot of this movement, I ran a big conference in Toronto first on the fusion power of

public and participatory journalism: <http://pjnet.org/toronto/>. I think that was in 2004. About sixty people came to it. This was just before the AEJMC conference; it was a little pre-conference. Then the next year I got a grant with Cole Campbell who, unfortunately, died unexpectedly in an automobile accident about a year ago [5 January 2007], but he became the dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno. We got a grant together on restoring the trust in journalism. Part of that grant was to do this conference in San Antonio for the AEJMC. I realized things were so bad that I came up with the idea of a wake up call: [http://restoringthetrust.org/final\\_report.shtml](http://restoringthetrust.org/final_report.shtml). It was really to announce to the world that journalism was in deep trouble, more than anyone realized. More than 100 people came to that and a lot of the big players, people like Craig [Alexander] Newmark who did *craigslist* was there. If you don't know *craigslist*, if you were under thirty you would know *craigslist*.

TS: I would? Well then enlighten me.

LW: I'll tell you what *craigslist* is. Craig Newmark out in San Francisco put up this online site that is very searchable for anything you want. So if you want to figure out who has a sofa for sale, you go to *craigslist*, and you can find them. Well, this thing became so popular—it was giving away free classified, basically—it's worldwide now. Somebody said it's probably worth fifty billion dollars if you ever wanted to sell it or monetize it. He only sells ads for real estate in New York City, and he's still making several million dollars a year off of it. But it pulled the chair out from underneath newspapers; that was the first sign that newspapers were [in trouble] because the bedrock of newspaper foundation is classified ads. Phil [Philip] Meyer, who is a professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina, wrote a book called *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* [University of Missouri Press, 2004] and he said, "You can't compete with free." That was one of the first signs that newspapers were starting to bleed because all these classified ads were now disappearing. Then you had things like *Monster.com* which was for jobs and *craigslist* and that was the first time. Phil Meyer actually gave me the name for the wake up call that we were talking about. He was one of the speakers there and Jay Rosen and people from the *New York Times*. The final report is on the PJNet website. That was going on, and it was helping Kennesaw. I promised I would help get the name of Kennesaw known. When you have a conference, and one hundred people are there, and, probably, sixty of them are from universities—then I also held an AEJMC winter conference for young scholars—anybody—but a lot of young scholars and people who are going to graduate school came to Kennesaw. In fact, eighty of them came to Kennesaw from eighty different universities.

TS: Did you do it over at KSU Center?

LW: No, I did it in the Clendenin Building. I'd been to a couple of these before, and often these academic conferences are a little rag tag, and people eat off paper plates. So, for these graduate students, I thought I wanted to make it a special performance. We did it in a really nice building; we had meals; and we ate off china; and we did something up at the Jolley Lodge, had a little reception for them; and people still remember it. We were

just recruiting for people, and people are saying, “Yeah, I was at Kennesaw.” In fact, Dr. Birgit L. Wassmuth, who’s our chair, that’s how she found out about Kennesaw. She had come to this thing and was so impressed that when the job opened she applied for it. So I was fulfilling that service mission there on getting the university known. Blogging all of the time, building up, having this kind of franchise, and then I came up with this idea maybe two years ago of Representative Journalism because I saw the bottom was falling out. The question I started asking was what will journalism be like when only the journalism is left? In the past 80 to 86 percent of journalism has been subsidized by advertising. They’re decoupling now. Journalism and ads are growing further and further away. At the time what I was saying seemed extreme. I thought they were going to totally disappear, and I’m still semi-convinced that that’s going to happen because there are easier ways to reach me than to put an ad next to some news copy that I might or might not read. So that model is changing. I talked about who was going to employ journalists. I had just done an interview with Howard Witt—no relation to me—but he was at a conference and I heard him speak.

TS: From the *Chicago Tribune*?

LW: Yes, he works for the *Chicago Tribune*. He’s a correspondent in Houston, Texas. He went and did this story about a fourteen-year-old Black girl who shoved a hall monitor at her school, and the judge sentenced her to seven years in prison. That same judge a couple of weeks before—whatever it was—sentenced a white girl to probation after she intentionally burned down her parents’ house. He wrote this story, and out of nowhere he started getting all these e-mails, tons of e-mails, and he didn’t know where they were coming from. Then he found out it was from the Black blogosphere. All of these Black bloggers had seen this. I did a video interview that I used a little Flip camera—part of this whole digital revolution—and I asked, “Howard, three weeks?” He said, “Twenty-one days.” She was out of jail because so much protest was going on. He said that would not have happened in the past if he didn’t have this digital Black blogosphere.

Then he did the Jena [Louisiana] Six story, which was about these [Black] high school boys who had beat up another White student, and they were going to be charged with attempted murder. Even though the kid was beat up, he came out of the hospital that night and was fine the next day. So he wrote that story. But this time he went out and e-mailed a lot of people in the Black blogosphere and told them what was going. And that itself [led to] 26,000 people self-organized from all around the country. Nobody knows who the leader of this was. It was just self-organized from the blogosphere. They came to Jena, Louisiana, to protest this and got some racial justice done.

Then Howard said to me, “But you know, with all these cutbacks”—and the *Chicago Tribune* has been bought out by this guy named Sam [Samuel] Zell, who is really a real estate guy and doesn’t seem to care about journalism—“my job is probably going to disappear here in Houston, and they’re not going to support this job.” Why would the *Chicago Tribune* need a bureau in Houston? This is happening everywhere. To me, Howard was almost like the poster boy for what could happen, because the blogosphere played an important role, but [it wouldn’t have happened] if he hadn’t done the hard work

of journalism. He said, “Writing about civil rights is never an easy issue. It’s a complicated, nuanced issue. You really have to understand all the different sides.” Well, if we keep cutting back on what we pay journalists, you’re not going to have a Howard Witt in a place like Houston, and that fourteen year old would still be in jail. But you can do this with a thousand things.

So I started writing about the idea—this was before Howard Witt—of the thing that I call Representative Journalism. If you have an underserved community, let’s say it’s a city like Northfield, Minnesota, and I’ll get back to that in a minute, or it’s an area of passion or it’s an area of topic interest, so it could be like endangered species in Florida.... I was reading about the St. Petersburg paper [*St. Petersburg Times*], and they’re having cutbacks. They actually fund the Poynter Institute [founded in 1975 by Nelson Poynter, publisher of the *St. Petersburg Times*], which is for continuing education [for journalists and aspiring journalists]. The for-profit is owned by a non-profit. The person who owned it [Nelson Poynter] had turned it [the controlling share of stock in the Times Publishing Company] over to them [the Institute] in a will at one point [at the time of his death in 1978]. Even this paper is losing circulation and money. There was a story in there about one of the reporters who said at the end, “I’ve been able to cover endangered species around the state. That’s a little specialty they’ve allowed me to do. But I won’t be allowed to do that in the future.” So will a thousand people in Florida—this is Representative Journalism—be willing to put up, let’s say, \$100 each to pay for a journalist to cover that issue? If we can do enough of those around the country, we would provide a basically full service hub. You get your community together, and we’ll actually even help you get your community together, but if you can get the money, then we will do all the editing and be the firewall to make sure it’s ethical and sound journalism, and it’s not a P.R. operation.

So I was writing about this, and then out of nowhere—this is one of the great things about having a blog too, as well as a public file cabinet—I got a comment on my blog. It’s from Ruth Ann Harnisch, and she said, “Len, we can make this happen.” Well, I didn’t pay a lot of attention. Then I got a phone message, “Len, we can make this happen. Let’s do it.” So I said, “Who is this person?” I went and looked it up, and she’s a former journalist from Tennessee who now is married to William Harnisch. He runs a hedge fund, and they have a ten million dollar family foundation. Ruth Ann really likes my idea. I had a little video there that said, “Steal this idea” and told people, “If you like the idea go ahead and just take it because I don’t want to do it; I just want to write about it and talk about it.” She kept saying, “No, Len, you’re the only person who can do it because you really understand it; you’ve got to go do it.” She kept insisting, so I gave in and said, “All right, let’s see what will happen.” She gave me a nice grant to hire our first journalist/fellow. Her name is Bonnie Obremski, and she’s twenty-five years old. We’re doing it in Northfield because this is where Griff Wigley is and because he knows about online communities. He runs this blog, and they wanted to have a journalist who could write for the community in ways that the local paper would not. So she just wrote her first really long story that I saw today that’s the beginning of it. She’s been there about a month or so but just getting [into it]. And we’re trying to figure it out. It’s interesting because in the past, if we hired a journalist, we would hire the journalist and

the community would be stuck with them. But in this particular case, these three people who run this blog with Griff—they always get mad when I don't mention the three of them, so I have to mention Griff Wigley, Tracy Davis and Ross Currier, and they're really three very, very smart people, so we're really lucky. They wanted to have their own journalist. So now we're trying to work it out. Even when we hired her, she had to go and interview with these three people running the blog on the phone, and they all agreed that she was a great person for this. So now we're out there trying to do it. But for this thing to really work well, we would need a hundred of these. So then I could come to you and I could say, "Tom, you're interested in Civil War history," or whatever. I'd have to try and find, what topic would you pay \$2.00 a week for for a journalist?

TS: That's a good question.

LW: I know it is. It's a hard question for a lot of people because people are not used to, and that's why most people, when they heard this idea originally, just blew it off because they don't think anybody is going to pay for news. Well, they're not now because they get it for free. But when Howard Witt and that journalist who's covering the endangered species and, I don't know, I think it was 20,000 or 9,000, an enormous number of journalists' jobs have disappeared in the last year. When they're no longer doing it, you're not getting it for free any more. So what I say, you pay for a haircut. It costs you \$100 a year at least for a haircut. You're going to pay for news at some point.

TS: Maybe I would pay for reporting on historic preservation.

LW: Yes, see, so whatever it is. You pay your \$2.00, okay, and not only do you get your reporter, but you're also helping support ninety-nine other reporters. Then you can do your own little page, and we'll individualize it as much as we can. But your area is getting covered for sure. So that's the idea behind it; will people pay for anything? That's the big question. In fact, that's my research question of the year now because I've been saying this without doing a lot of research. I want to go out and find out how much people are paying right now in general for subscriptions and all. Most of the common knowledge is that people won't pay for news, but I'm not so sure of that.

TS: I'm just trying to think, the *Marietta Daily Journal*, nowadays they just do it automatically off my credit card. I think it is \$114 a year or something like that.

LW: Right, right, right. But we're never sure whether people are actually paying for the news. When I was in this business, if they didn't have the *Sunday Magazine*, we wouldn't get a call necessarily. But if they didn't have their coupons, that's where they would get called. So you're never sure if people are really paying for the news or the whole package or the experience of walking outside to get the paper, the ritual, you know. So those are some of the things that I want to research and just try and find out how much people might be willing to pay. Now there are models out there: there are public radio models, public television where people do. In Minnesota 97,000 people pay about \$100 each because they love Minnesota Public Radio so much that they're willing to put that money up. There are other places—Marketplace on public radio, a group of people from



around the North Carolina Research Triangle raised money for an innovation reporter. So people will pay for areas of interest.

TS: I was just thinking, public radio, they just about run you crazy those two or three times a year when they're doing their fundraising.

LW: Right. It's not going to work if we just throw an electronic newspaper up on their doorstep, basically; it's going to have to be a community. So, like you said, historical preservation. So the writer is part of the glue to keep that community together, but we're doing this already in Northfield. It doesn't even have to be a finished story sometime; it can be a part of a story. Then you probably know more than the reporter does when it comes to historical preservation.

TS: What's the name of Griff Wigley's blog?

LW: They have a blog called *Locally Grown*, and it's in Northfield, Minnesota: it is [locallygrownnorthfield.org](http://locallygrownnorthfield.org). I picked that because I knew Griff. I didn't want to try and go out and establish new relationships with people I didn't know. Eventually that might have to happen. So if this idea at one time sounded a little bizarre, it isn't any more because this newspaper thing, with so many people losing jobs. In October I've already been invited to three different conferences to talk about the idea, and all of them are about entrepreneur newspaper jobs. The latest one was the Society of Environmental Journalists. It's interesting because it's an experiment, and it might not come out the way I hoped it would or thought it would. But we're doing it, and we're going to see what happens. I'm much more involved in it than I thought. There are possibilities because Ruth Ann still likes this idea, and her husband is interested in giving money to Baruch College in New York, which is part of the City University of New York because that's where he graduated from. I don't know if I should even be mentioning this now, but there's a possibility that we will be working with Baruch, and they might re-grant us the capability to be like a little center so that we can do this thing more formally and see what happens. You got a scoop right there because nobody else knows that. I don't know, whether or not it's going to actually happen, but that's the conversation that we're having right now.

TS: Well, unlike your daily newspaper, by the time all of this goes online it's probably not going to be a scoop anymore.

LW: Well, maybe I'll have to update it then.

TS: Maybe so.

LW: So I think that kind of brings us up to where we are. It seems like I've talked an awful lot.

TS: No, this is great. Why don't we talk a little bit about, you've been here six years; how many classes do you teach a semester?

LW: If I told you that you'd want to reach over the table and probably try to kill me.

TS: No, no.

LW: I have a very light teaching load. I have one course a semester.

TS: So that was the deal when you came here.

LW: That was the deal when I came in.

TS: Just one class a semester.

LW: Yes, but the idea was that I would be doing what I do now. So in addition to all those other conferences, the last two years and this year too, I put on a conference called SoCon07 and SoCon08, where I partner with a couple of people in the community.

TS: Southern Conference? What does that stand for?

LW: I don't have a clue. I don't think anybody does. Somebody said, "Let's call it SoCon07." And we said, "Okay."

TS: Really? Nobody know what it means?

LW: Not really. It doesn't really have a meaning; it's just kind of like a name. It might have been Southern Conference, but if I say that, then those people from the Southern Conference will come after us. I think we were just kind of playing around, and somebody came up with those letters and said, "Let's just call it SoCon."

TS: Sounds like something the government would do—a bunch of bureaucrats.

LW: Yes, but these were PR people that I was with. So this is all about social media.

TS: Maybe it's social, social conference.

LW: Maybe that was it. I was there when they did it, and somebody said, "Let's just call it SoCon07." And we said, "Okay." But we didn't even try to think this is short for something else. So this is a conference that we held, and it was Jeff Haynie and Sherry Heyl. Sherry was running this little meeting, and we were both at an Atlanta Bloggers Association [Atlanta Media Bloggers], I think it was called. She said, "We should have a conference." And I said, "Well, if you're going to have one, let's do it at Kennesaw." Because I always wanted to be opportunistic if these things happen. So we developed it, the three of us, the first year. There was a dinner the night before at the Marietta Conference Center & Resort. We thought for the dinner maybe twenty-five people would come. Well, ninety people showed up for the dinner, and then the next day over two hundred came here to the Kennesaw campus. It was un-conference and semi-un-

conference, meaning that people could determine the topics that they wanted. It wasn't structured. There weren't a lot of talking heads. It wasn't big panels where people would come together. Well, people loved it. So then we did it in year two, last year, which was SoCon08. We had it down at Maggiano's in Atlanta, at Cumberland Mall, and we had to close it down with 160 people who came for the dinner, and almost 300 people came to the campus the next day. We're going to do it again this year.

My overall mission here was to work with the community and try to keep the idea of public journalism alive. It's interesting about public journalism because even though the name has faded, many of the people who were really in the forefront of it are in the forefront of this citizen journalism movement. My job at Minnesota Public Radio was kind of analog in that I was bringing people, physically, face to face. Now they have this thing called Public Insight Journalism where they have 13,000 people signed up who they e-mail to, and they're all involved in it. After I arrived at Kennesaw, I wrote a paper for the *National Civic Review* entitled, "Is Public Journalism Morphing into the Public's Journalism?" When I was practicing public journalism, the DNA was not right; it didn't have thumbs, you know what I mean? We knew we wanted to get this thing to happen, but we couldn't make it happen. Then along came all these things on the Internet and all these new tools. Suddenly, the DNA changed, and now it has thumbs. It doesn't matter any more whether journalists reach out to the public or not. It's a moot question because now the public has all of this special power, and that's what I look at too—all of this thing of trying to get journalists back to work. I think I was real interested in citizen journalism for awhile, but now I'm more interested in, not necessarily preserving journalism the way it was because maybe it needs to be reinvented, but to make sure that those important issues in our lives, sort of what Howard Witt was doing or the endangered species or all the great investigative journalism—the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is great at investigative journalism—if all of that stuff disappears, all those crooks are going to be feeding at the trough in ways that we never saw before.

TS: Okay, so back to where I was going with this, you're doing a lot of scholarship, a lot of service in this job, you teach one class a semester. What are the classes that you teach?

LW: I've been teaching a feature writing class. But two semesters I taught this class called the Marietta Experience. You can go and look at it; it was online.

TS: I think I went and talked to one of your classes once.

LW: You did. Even twice maybe we brought them over because you were telling them about the history of Marietta. So I taught that class twice, and half the students were communications students and half were visual arts students. My students went out in the community, collected information, and the visual arts students designed it. But I did two things when I did that class, I took them out and showed them official Marietta. We went and talked to the police department, and then the mayor's office and the city council were really good. They would put together panels for them. But then I had the students cover their own communities in groups. They were in small groups of four or five, and they went out and covered communities. The first year one was a Hispanic transition

neighborhood. One was the last day of the Clay homes [public housing project]. And one group decided to do the Town Square in Marietta. Before Clay homes were ripped down our kids in this class—they weren't kids necessarily—really documented what that was like, those last days. It's a little historical document and it's on the Internet at [mariettaexperience.com](http://mariettaexperience.com).

TS: Right. And they've built, I think, condos that they can't sell on that site.

LW: I like to ride my bicycle a lot, and I rode my bicycle through there the other day. They had like six condos, but it looked like about one-sixth of the whole thing was developed, and the rest was just sitting with grass growing.

TS: And I don't think they've sold a single one of them yet.

LW: Well, I wouldn't buy it at this stage. So there are several places around town that are like that. So that was a really good experience for my students. Afterwards, we put on a little reception for anybody who was in that first year. The mayor came up, and some of the Latino people came up, and I think we had a hundred people. It was really a big thing for the students. This was in the visual arts class. They all came in, and each computer screen had the Marietta Experience on it. These people just flowed into there, and they sat down and started reading the students' papers, their stories, and they loved them. One of the things that we wanted to do—when I came here we had media studies, and I've been pushing for the idea of a journalism program—and other people in the department too—but I wanted to make sure it had this citizen component to it. So this year, after two years of really working at it hard and pushing for it over all the years that I've been here, we now have a new concentration in the Communication department called Journalism and Citizen Media. All those students are going to take digital fundamentals. Dr. Heeman Kim is teaching video. Stephen "Jake" McNeill is teaching video also. Josh [Joshua N.] Azriel is teaching audio. The capstone for this new Journalism and Citizen Media is going to be that Marietta Experience. It's really called Multimedia Visions of Community, but it's built on that. But now we won't have the visual arts students. Our Communication students for this new age will have to develop their own websites and everything else. The idea behind it is that they will come in, and at the end of their three years or five years, whatever it takes to be a senior, they'll come in and showcase their work. That's the first thing they'll get graded on—show me two things that you're really good at—and then the students in that class will choose who they want on their teams based on this little showcase. We'll still take them to official spots, but then they'll have to pick their neighborhoods to cover. And not only that but based on the theory and research, they'll have to decide what kind of platform they want to use. It could be Internet, but they could do all their stories on mobile phones in the future. They'll have to explain why they're doing the stories, why they've decided to do it in print or why they've decided to do it visually. So it's pretty exciting, and hopefully they'll have a little portfolio. It'll take a couple of years to get it totally worked out.

TS: Well, have we talked about the things that you got the service award for, do you think?

LW: I think so. I've done four or five big conventions, national conventions during the period that I've been here. The blog is really service, I think, although it really helps me with the scholarship that I've done. I've never skirted on department stuff. I've been on I don't know how many search committees for new people—it seems like I spend my life reading through portfolios, hiring new people, and that's time consuming. Tenure and Promotion and all. I was on the search committee for Feland [L.] Meadows, who got the Goizueta Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education. So I think I've done a lot of those things, and it's kind of natural to what I enjoy doing anyhow. I don't like to tell people this, but I was the social chairman for Theta Chi at High Point College, and I think doing these conferences it's still somewhere in the back of my mind being a social chairman for conferences [laughter].

TS: Tell me a little bit about your impressions of Kennesaw. You've been here six years now. You never heard of us before six years ago. What's your impression about the intellectual life at Kennesaw, for instance, and has it changed any in the six years since you've been here?

LW: Okay, let me just start with coming down here. I had never heard of Kennesaw. One of the things that I think I'm a little proud about now, if you're in a journalism department anywhere around the country, you probably have heard of Kennesaw. I think I'm safe [in saying that]. I know so many people, so that's one good thing. But I came down here and was very, very pleasantly surprised by the school, maybe in the same way as when I showed up on the footlocker at High Point College all those years ago. The place was different than I expected it to be and entrepreneurial. That's what I really liked, that if you had an idea here—this was when Betty [L.] Siegel was here—if you had an idea you weren't discouraged, usually.

TS: She was an entrepreneurial president.

LW: Yes, and you weren't discouraged. If it was a good idea you could make it happen, sometimes slower than I like because this is academia and all. I think the other thing, the colleagues that are here, people like yourself and a lot of other people, are really honest to God scholars doing really good work in what had been like a teaching environment, and people didn't have to do as much scholarship, but they were doing it anyhow. And now, as we know, scholarship becomes more and more important. The new faculty that we've been hiring, they're really pretty super. When we go and interview people too, we're competing often with the Research 1's. I think our real strength is a lot of people who do research, but don't want to be in an R-1—Kennesaw now is becoming more and more appealing to them because research is still important, but it's not the end all and be all in all things. If they like to teach and they like to associate with students, you know . . . . Impressions are—when I arrived here it was a commuter college although even when it was a commuter college it didn't totally look like one.

TS: Well, '02 was the year we changed.

LW: Yes. Well, nobody's living on it though.

TS: No, they hadn't been built. I guess maybe they were under construction when you arrived for your interview.

LW: I don't think they were under construction when I got here.

TS: And then I guess they opened up in the fall of '02.

LW: Okay, I guess they were under construction then. So we went from zero students living on campus to about 3,500 now, somewhere in that range, and it's going to be . . . 5,000?

TS: I guess eventually. I don't know where they're going to put them.

LW: Yes. Well, were you there when the president said there's another ninety acres [we're about to acquire]?

TS: Yes, I had heard that they were trying to accumulate that [between I-75 and I-575].

LW: How many acres are here now on campus?

TS: Let's see, we started out with 152, and I think then when we got the thirty across Frey Road it became 180-something, but we've got 200-something now I think.

LW: So ninety acres would be substantial. That would be pretty big. But my overall impressions of Kennesaw, I'm really happy here. I wouldn't want to leave. I don't see myself even retiring for a long time. I'm really active in doing the things that I want to do, and I see real potential for setting up some sort of center, growing this. We were just interviewing people at the AEJMC for a new journalism job, and there were four or five people in there who I'd love to see come here out of the ones that we interviewed. Who knows, we'll probably have thirty or forty people apply for it. Of course, you've been here a lot longer; you've seen all the changes.

TS: I've been here for a few of them. But it's interesting, it's changing very rapidly now, I think, and it has been the last decade or so, although it has always been on an evolutionary course.

LW: Well, this is a real sign of growth. Today is the first day that I was not able to find a parking space for myself.

TS: Yes, you have to get here early if you want a parking space.

LW: I was looking around everywhere for a parking space. Usually I'd find something somewhere. I have to get a new strategy for finding parking spaces.

TS: You'll have to get here early.

LW: And the students, it's interesting; I think the students have even changed in the six years since I've been here.

TS: Because of the residence halls?

LW: I think the residence halls and the writing—everybody is always complaining about the writing's getting worse and worse, but in my class the writing seems to have gotten better.

TS: That's what I find in my classes.

LW: Really? And I think when I first arrived here I couldn't say that. I saw a lot weaker writing, but now overall, the writing is [better]. We ask them to do a different kind of writing too because they know in my class you can do well as long as you go out and do the reporting. If the writing isn't great, if you've gone out and gathered the facts and everything else, you're not going to hurt yourself in this class. But if you think you can write and not go out and gather any information and just be cute and write really well, you're in trouble, you're in deep trouble. So they have to go out and collect information and write that in a way that's appealing to readers. So I'm just kind of overjoyed with being at Kennesaw. I can't think of a better job anywhere.

TS: Fantastic.

LW: That's how my feeling is.

TS: Maybe that's a good way to end the interview.

LW: Excellent.

TS: Thank you.

LW: Well, thank you. This was fun.

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
KSU Oral History Series, No. 75  
Interview with Leonard Witt  
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott  
Part 2 – Tuesday, 8 January 2019  
Location: Center for Sustainable Journalism, Kennesaw State University

TS: The interview today is with Leonard Witt. This is an update to an interview done in 2008 for our KSU oral history series. Len, last time we talked all about your background and how you got to Kennesaw. You were already doing some amazing things and had won a Distinguished Service Award at Kennesaw. We are in the Center for Sustainable Journalism. Why don't we start by talking about the center? When did it start, how did it come about, and what is its purpose?

LW: Okay. I just read through our last oral history. It was a lot of anecdotal stuff. If that's okay, I'll do that.

TS: Absolutely.

LW: We left off with meeting Ruth Ann Harnisch. Ruth Ann Harnisch and her husband Bill [William F. Harnisch] run the Harnisch Foundation [founded in 1998]. At that point, I was just getting to know Ruth Ann. She had underwritten a small project for us that we were running out of Minnesota. She had always told me, "Len, you know, Bill is really tied to Baruch College in New York City. That's where he went [for a B.B.A. degree], and that is where his money is going. You are not going to get much." I said, "Fine," because at that time I was happy doing what I was doing. She then asked, "If you wanted to do something eventually, what would it look like?"

I was thinking, well, modest. I talked to Karen [K.] Paonessa [assistant vice president of advancement and foundation programs]. She said, "Len, write what you really need. Think your big vision. Give that to her, and see what she says." So that's what I did. I wrote this big vision, and it was a continuation of the idea of growing citizen involvement in journalism and, more importantly at that point, trying to figure out how to sustain journalism in general. I had talked about jobs [in journalism] disappearing and important places [and topics] not getting covered, anything from endangered species to things like juvenile justice, which I'll get to in a second.

I laid out a plan for her, and I sent it to her. Then she invited me and Geanne Rosenberg [Belton] from Baruch [College] up to her husband's offices. Geanne was also talking to Ruth Ann, and that's how we knew each other. We came in and were sitting at a conference table. Ruth Ann was down at the end of the conference table. She was talking to us, and then she said, "Len, I want you to take a picture here. Take my camera." I took her camera, and then her husband walked in. They wrote a million dollar check for Geanne's [Harnisch Collaborative Future of Journalism] Projects for Baruch College. I was taking a picture of that, and I thought, "Wow, that's pretty cool."



Then she said, “All right, Len, I would like you to come over, and Geanne, you take the camera.” She gave me a check for \$250,000. I’m thinking, “Wow!” It was totally unexpected. There, Geanne and I are walking out to get coffee afterwards with \$1.25 million in our pockets. I talked to Ruth Ann, and I was getting ready to write a press release for that \$250,000 dollars, saying how it would be seed money, and we would look for other funding. She said, “Len, you don’t get it. This is the first installment on that \$1.5 million you asked for.”

TS: Wow!

LW: Exactly.

TS: You were going to get more than Baruch.

LW: Baruch might have gotten more over a longer period of time because that might have been their first installment. I’m not sure exactly what happened. We received \$1.5 million spread over five years, so about \$300,000 a year.

TS: When did this start?

LW: This was in 2009, I think, that we got the money. Then we started the Center for Sustainable Journalism in 2010. I was looking for a topic to cover, and I wanted it to be something around civil rights. Then people told us, “That’s a pretty big topic. You’ve got a small staff and a small budget to do it.” Then we asked, “What would be a civil rights subset that we want to do?” We look at women’s issues and everything else.

Then I decided on juvenile justice. It is probably the civil rights issue of our time, but people say that about a lot of issues. But in this case it is true. A lot of minority kids are incarcerated. Treatment is unequal. There are things like the school to jailhouse pipeline. If we did something wrong when we were in school, you got a kick in the pants maybe or suspended for a couple days, but it would be an internal school matter with your parents.

TS: And they are getting arrested?

LW: Now they get arrested. They have these special resource officers in all the schools. It’s going to get worse now with Parkland [and the shooting on February 14, 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida]. There are going to be more resource officers. The more cops you have in schools, the more kids are going to get arrested. They tend to be overwhelmingly kids of color. So that is one of the issues. At the time, frankly I didn’t even know that was an issue, but we knew we wanted to do juvenile justice issues.

TS: How did you get interested in that?

LW: I’ve always been interested in civil rights issues.

TS: But why juvenile justice?

LW: It was because when we started looking at the span of things, we realized this was an issue that was not being covered. When we first started this, people would tell us in the field, “I used to get a call from a reporter every week. Now I never get a call from a reporter about this issue.” The reason is because they [the news media] keep cutting back. So priority for readers probably is not to read about juvenile justice.

I gave it this clunky name, the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange (JJIE)* because I wanted it to be a place where everyone exchanged ideas. The concept that the audience collectively knows more than the journalists.

When we mentioned juvenile justice originally as a topic, people were thinking juvenile delinquents. That was a term that people used. But we have come to understand juvenile justice as this place that intersects with mental health, substance use, or LGBTQ issues. A ton more of those kids get arrested because they get kicked out of their house, and once they get kicked out of their house, they are on the streets, and they get arrested. So homelessness, immigration, indigent defense, what they call disproportionate minority contact—way too many kids of color get arrested, trauma, victimization are all intersecting issues.

TS: And adults as well.

LW: Yes, plus it is also a long list of women’s issues and girls’ issues that intersect under this rubric of juvenile justice. The first editor was Ellen Miller. She left after a couple years because she had been in television and got a good television offer in, I think, Ohio. Then John Fleming came on board. He’s our executive editor, and he really helped set the direction that we’ve gone. That was probably in 2011 he came on, I think.

John has a very interesting history. He went to Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. His parents ran a newspaper in Alabama, and he went and covered places in Africa for Reuters. He came back and worked for the *Anniston Star*. The *Anniston Star* is the most progressive paper in Alabama, often referred to as the Anniston Red Star. Even during the civil rights era, it was the one paper that came out for integration in the Deep South.

TS: It seems like Anniston was one of the places where the Freedom Riders were attacked [by an angry mob on May 14, 1961].

LW: I think it was. Then John took on this project called the Civil Rights Cold Case Project. He did it with Hank Klibanoff [journalist and Emory University professor].

TS: So they try to go back and investigate the case of somebody that got murdered fifty years earlier during the civil rights era?

LW: Jimmie Lee Jackson is one example. He was in the movie *Selma*. He was shot in a [Marion, Alabama] café by a state trooper.<sup>1</sup> Nothing ever happened over the years. They would go out and look at cases like that. In John's case, he went to interview [the Alabama state trooper] James Bonard Fowler. He confessed to John.<sup>2</sup> He told him what happened, and he got sentenced to jail [for six months on a charge of second-degree manslaughter on November 15, 2010]. He [was released one month early due to health problems requiring surgery. He died in 2015, a little over four years after his release, of pancreatic cancer].

TS: Why did he confess?

LW: John was just a good interviewer [laughs]. He just started talking to him, and he told him what happened.

TS: He had no sense that he could go to jail for it?

LW: Maybe he did. Maybe he did. I don't know that whole story, but it's an interesting story. You can talk to John about it, and he will tell you more about it.<sup>3</sup> They did a series of these [cold cases]. The idea behind it was not so much to get people prosecuted. If that happened, it happened. But really the goal was to try to track down all these people from that era, because nobody was doing it. Everyone was dying off. So finally they were able to talk to a ton of people, white and black people, about that era. A lot of the white people were repentant. They felt bad. Of course, the black people felt outraged. That era, it's hard for people to understand, I think, right now, but it was a reign of terror. It was so awful. You know that as a historian.

TS: Of course, they were cold cases because the police and the courts looked the other way at the time.

LW: Hank Klibanoff did a good series of podcasts [produced and funded by WABE in Atlanta] called *Buried Truths* [in 2018 and 2019]. Klibanoff used to be a managing editor at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He is really well known. He also put together a book about that era and the reporters entitled *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil*

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The shooting occurred on February 18, 1965. Jackson died eight days later. His death is credited with being one of the causes of the Selma to Montgomery march the following month, which, in turn, influenced Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

<sup>2</sup> John Fleming, "The Death of Jimmie Lee Jackson," *Anniston Star*, March 6, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: In his March 6, 2005, story, Fleming says that Fowler "doesn't fear the possibility of prosecution." Fowler told Fleming that his conscience was clear because he thought it was self-defense, even though Jackson did not have a gun. He was angry because television documentaries called the shooting a murder, and he wanted to give his version of what happened.

*Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* [Knopf 2006, co-authored with Gene Roberts]. It is really a book I think you would enjoy reading. I would recommend it to anyone. *The Race Beat* won a Pulitzer Prize [in 2007]. It was all about the reporters who were covering the civil rights era and how it started.

It went all the way back to a guy [Gunnar Myrdal] who the Carnegie [Corporation of New York] funded from [Sweden] to come and look. I mention some of this because it had a bearing on why we were picking civil rights. He came [beginning in 1938], and wrote this report for the Carnegie [*An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, published in 1944]. He said the problem is people around the country just don't know how awful it is in the South, when it comes to this reign of terror. He said it needs more publicity. Hank talked about the history of this particular time. *An American Dilemma* had a lot of influence. It's central idea was that if you expose these issues and people know about them, they are going to treat them differently [because America's racial policies conflicted so starkly with its liberal, democratic creed].

That was a basis for us. Also during that period, some enlightened newspaper editors got together, and they put out a newsletter, monthly or whatever it was, and they tried as hard as they could to make sure that both sides were totally represented in this, and both sides read it. It had a really important influence again on integration and segregation issues of the time. In the beginning, John and I would refer to that as [an example of] what we wanted to do. We wanted to put out this thing and show people this underbelly of the youth justice system. Things are happening that people don't know are going on, and they happen all the time. That's why we picked juvenile justice. That was part of the reason. It was happening to a lot of kids, and it still is.

TS: I'm assuming you are doing this with a hopeful attitude that if people only know what's going on, they'll do something about it.

LW: That is true. Also, we didn't know it at the time, but very fortuitously, this one issue actually [interested] both sides around the country, right and left. There is a group in Texas called Right on Crime [a national campaign of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, in partnership with the American Conservative Union Foundation and Prison Fellowship that offers a conservative approach to criminal justice]. There are a lot of liberal groups interested in the topic of justice in general, youth justice in particular, but also just jailing in general. Hundreds of thousands of people [are incarcerated]. There are more people in jail now than ever before.

It is dropping because of recognition that it doesn't work, and it's expensive, and there are other ways of conducting this business. You can either punish somebody or you can try restorative justice where people come together at a table, talk about the issues, and try and get more community alternatives. We write about incarceration a lot. The number of kids being incarcerated since we started this has dropped dramatically. Part of the reason is that the [John D. and Catherine T.] MacArthur Foundation started this Models for Change Project [in 2004]. But also places like the Annie E. Casey Foundation are trying

to make sure that eventually there never will be another, what they call, “kid prison” around.

There are funding dollars out there, and MacArthur Foundation invested a lot of money in the “Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice,” how to change youth justice systems. Then it decided that it was going to go out of business in that particular area. It wanted to look at jail reform because now a lot of people are thrown in jail, and they sit in jail because they almost don’t have any rights when they are in jail. I’m not talking about prison sentences. These are people who are not tried, most of them, and they’re sitting in jail. Somebody just can’t make bail and sits in jail, only because they’re poor. It’s worse than a debtor prison.

At any rate, the MacArthur Foundation was making this change. John and I went to see them and talked to them and said, “Look, we do this *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*.” At the time, we had about 400,000 unique visitors a year. Now we’re up to 750,000. We said, “What we would like to do is take all of your research and build a research and resource hub, so people can come to our site and read a story, let’s say about indigent defense and youth, and maybe some commentary. Then they can follow the pathway to these deep layers of research at the hub.” Legislative researchers, for example, could do deep dive research. MacArthur agreed to do that. So over the years, they gave us about a million dollars to build this research and resource hub.

TS: Wow!

LW: It was this legacy hub, which still works. Dr. Heather Pincock, who is in the School of Conflict Management here, and a couple of her graduate students, now oversee that. We just got some new funding from the Kendeda Fund. They are located in Atlanta. They just gave us \$150,000 spread over two years to cover gun violence prevention in youth in the Deep South. We are going to build a resource part of the hub now, looking at that issue too. When people come and read our stories and commentary about gun violence prevention, some of them might want to go and see the research. I jumped ahead there. But I’ll go back [laughs].

TS: We started talking about the Center for Sustainable Journalism, and got off on John Fleming. I guess what you were really saying earlier on in the interview today and I think last time too is that newspapers are changing in this country. They don’t have the staff that they used to have, and lots of stories don’t get reported. Your job with the center is to make sure that those stories can be covered. You were talking about endangered species last time, and juvenile justice a few minutes ago. The goal is to find ways that those kinds of stories can be covered, and that you can do it in a financially stable way, I think you said.

LW: We’re trying. The sustainability is the hardest part. That is what Ruth Ann gave us the money for. Frankly, if it wasn’t for foundations funding us, we wouldn’t be in business. Before I was involved in this, I was involved in the civic journalism movement and other movements. As it turns out, when we started out *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*,

people all over the country were starting these small nonprofit news organizations. There are more than 180 of them now.

We're all part of the Institute for Nonprofit News. We're a member, and it helps figure out business solutions for us. It is funded by the [John S. and James L.] Knight Foundation and the Democracy Fund, and a bunch of other funders. They run business seminars and how to cover stuff. We just went through [a fundraiser for the Center for Sustainable Journalism], thanks to them. They helped facilitate it. The Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund, and several other funders gave matching money. We could get up to \$25,000 in matching money. You contributed to that. We were \$800 short of the total match, but we still exceeded \$24,000 in matching funds. That came the closest maybe to when I talked about trying to get one thousand people to give one hundred bucks each. We got 175 people to help contribute to this. In the end with the match and incentives, we raised more than \$61,000. We did such a fine job that the NiemanLab housed at Harvard University included us in an overview of best practices in nonprofit media fundraising. [*50,000 first-time donors? Here's how four nonprofit organizations used NewsMatch to the fullest by Christine Schmidt, March 2019.*]

TS: That's pretty good.

LW: It is good, and we're getting better at it.

TS: Was it mainly people on faculty here?

LW: No. There were some faculty members. There were some family friends. There were people who liked our journalism...

TS: I was going to say if you got 165 faculty members to do anything...

LW: Right [laughs]. But there were some. Heather Pincock from the School of Conflict Management was really helpful. Several people there contributed. Then also readers contributed, people who were interested in the topic. One of the [KSU Foundation trustees], Judith Moen Stanley, has been extremely helpful. She found us and has become a real advocate for us. She helped with some of the fundraising. Next year we plan to do better.

Some of those 180 nonprofits are enormous. Some are like ProPublica, which gets millions of dollars in funding every year. They do investigative reporting across the country. Then there is the *Texas Tribune*, which covers just Texas. It only covers politics. So, if there was a shooting that happened in Texas, they wouldn't cover it, except for the political fallout maybe. They are very successful. We are midrange in our success. Ruth Ann gave us that \$1.5 million spread over five years. It ended in 2014 basically, and she said that after that, she wasn't going to fund us. We constantly are in contact, and we talk to each other, but her funding interests have moved on to other topics.

TS: She's given you enough.

LW: She gave us enough. We still talk to her. She gives me advice. I call her all the time. That ended in 2014, but we've been chugging along at about anywhere between \$800,000 and \$1 million dollar a year budget.

TS: Wow.

LW: We raise all but about 15 percent of it which comes from the university, mostly my salary. The university pays my salary, but everything else is what they call soft money that we raise from outside sources.

TS: Of course, you've got the [Robert D.] Fowler [Distinguished] Chair [in Communication], I guess.

LW: The Fowler chair I do not have anymore. [I am not as involved in] the School of Communication and Media because I became much more active, basically, running a million dollar a year business. We have right now five full time employees. You'll see students coming in and out of here. We have more than ten student employees. We also have a bureau at the City University of New York, located in Manhattan at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. Craig Newmark's name came up in the earlier interview. He is the one who started *craigslist* that undermined journalism [by reducing newspaper profits from classified advertisements]. He is always criticized. He was even criticized for giving \$20 million to CUNY recently. This was in the last year [June 2018].

TS: They criticized him for that?

LW: Yes, because they said, "Why are you taking money from this guy who ruined the whole business." But he didn't. His business model was just a smart business model. He has always been active, so he gave \$20 million to CUNY. The Tow Foundation funds us to run our New York Metro Bureau at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY. They funded it the first time for three years.

TS: I wondered what the Tow Foundation is. I saw that name on your list of supporters.

LW: That money was made by Leonard and Claire Tow. Leonard started a cable company [in 1973 named Century Communications Corporation. He sold his interest in the corporation in 1999, by which time it was the fifth largest cable company in the country]. Claire has passed away, but Leonard is still here. His daughter, Emily Tow Jackson, runs the foundation now. They would put on seminars for people who are covering youth justice issues, and we went to one to learn more about juvenile justice issues; this was when we were still new. We ran into Emily there. I had a conversation, and that turned into \$85,000 a year for each of three years to start this bureau at CUNY.

Daryl Khan is the bureau chief, and he has been from the beginning. He is a distinguished lecturer at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, and he is just this old school, self-avowed hard ass. The only students that would come to him are ones that really want to learn because he forces them to do really good journalism. They've done fantastic journalism for us. He has too, and they've broken some really important stories in New York City. They get invited in WNYC [New York Public Radio] every once in awhile on the Brian Lehrer show to talk about what they've done. We've made a real presence in New York. The Tow Foundation liked it so much that they funded us three years and another three years, and just this fall for another three years. Now we're funded through 2021.

TS: How much time do you spend fundraising?

LW: All of my time. There is a funny little story. At the end of an interview by a journalist, Craig Newmark looks at his phone. "Oh, my goodness, I have fifty new messages." The interviewer says to him, "How many of those are asking for money?" He said, "All of them." So there is competition out there.

TS: In the first interview we talked about *craigslist* and how you can find what you want with *craigslist*, so you don't advertise in the newspaper anymore, and newspapers have lost a lot of revenue. So if they are trying to make a profit, they have to cut back on reporters.

LW: Everyone knows now, but at the time they didn't. I had a little flip phone that I pulled out of my pocket when I was giving a talk one time. I said, "You know what? There is going to come a time where you are going to say to that flip phone, 'Find me the best barbecue place near me,' and it will do that." This was before people had invented it. I said, "If that is going to happen, why is anybody going to ever advertise in a newspaper again? Why would you do it?" Actually, that then became true because now you do ask, "Where is the best barbecue place?" I do it all the time.

TS: Yet there are still ads in newspapers.

LW: There are still some ads, but not like before. Some of them, the national newspapers have found models. They are more and more putting up paywalls [to restrict access to content to paid subscribers]. It was always for free, and that wasn't working. They were going out of business because they weren't getting any advertising, and they weren't getting any subscription money. Now they put up paywalls. You get to see four or five stories, and then if you want to see more than that, you have got to pay. If you go to the *Wall Street Journal*, you can't see any of their stories unless you pay.

TS: With newspapers nowadays, you can get the paper online instead of the print copy, and it's dirt cheap really to get them online. I'm just wondering if they are not making more money because I'm paying to read newspapers that I wouldn't have been paying for otherwise.



LW: They are not making as much money, but some of them are doing well. The ones that are doing well are the big national newspapers. The *New York Times* has really figured out a model, and it looks like they are going to survive. [Jeffrey Preston] Jeff Bezos from Amazon bought the *Washington Post* [in 2013], and that has gotten a lot better. I subscribe to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. I subscribe to *Los Angeles Times* because we do stuff in LA for our projects since the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange* is national. The *Seattle [Times]* because we just got some funding from Seattle from the [Jeff and Tricia] Raikes Foundation, to cover homelessness and youth justice. Three foundations have kicked in on that.

I'm a [University of] Minnesota Golden Gophers basketball fan, so I get that paper too, because they cut me off after five articles. I had said in that earlier talk that I thought people would pay for news. They will pay for news. They weren't paying for it recently because they could get it for free, but if everyone puts up a paywall, if you want news, you're going to pay for it. There have always been about 23 percent of the people who are news junkies. I think they will pay for news. We are all still trying to figure out the best funding model.

We also produced these stories for other publications. This wouldn't have happened ten years ago even, but with cut staffs they need excellent content. We go to places like the *Anniston Star*. We go to places like the *Birmingham News*. We go to the *Clarion Ledger*, and most recently the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Sojourners Magazine*, National Public Radio, Georgia Public Broadcasting, and a lot of other large and small publications. We do stories for them. They take our stories. We do the story, and we publish simultaneously with them.

TS: I meant to ask you about that. Who is the audience for what you do, and how many subscribers do you have?

LW: I've got to talk about the other publication that we have. The *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange* is one, and *Youth Today* is the other one.

TS: Then there is something else that is photographs that I didn't quite understand. That's free, I guess.

LW: I'll explain that. It's called *Bokeh*. We always try and get the worst names. It is a term in photography. It means the background is slightly out of focus. That's part of the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*. That's our photo blog basically. I'm going to talk a little bit about that because it built into a teaching thing. But we were talking about *Youth Today*.

TS: That's where you've got a New York bureau and a Los Angeles bureau as well.

LW: Both of those bureaus, and the Los Angeles bureau was a two-year experiment that is now over. That was funded by the California Endowment, and that was at USC, University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and

Journalism. Both of those places report for both of our publications. In 2012 I heard that *Youth Today* was going into bankruptcy and was going to go out of business. *Youth Today* has been around now for more than thirty years. It was a publication that was aimed for people who work with youth when they're not in school: Boys Clubs, Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts, etc. I was thinking it has a subscription base. It has an advertising base. Maybe because we're aiming for sustainability, we should get something that we can maybe earn some money on. But it was in bankruptcy. People said, "You don't want to deal with bankruptcy."

Peter [C.] Canfield was a lawyer then at [the Atlanta office of] Dow Lohnes LLP. He is at Jones Day today [since January 2014]. He assembled a *pro bono* team of lawyers to help take *Youth Today* out of bankruptcy. They wrote a really good plan for us. This is a really top law firm. At first we wanted to partner with another group, but they decided they didn't want to partner with us. Then when it went into bankruptcy court, they filed a paper contesting our take over. They claimed that they would be a better owner. So we had to go back to Dow Lohnes, and they got us hotshot lawyers in Washington where the case was being heard. Originally, the bankruptcy court would have [let us own it] for seven years, but when we came out of that contested hearing, they gave us ownership of *Youth Today* into perpetuity. So we own it outright.

TS: Wow.

LW: That was the idea, so now we had two publications. It was hard enough doing one, so now we had two publications, but there is a lot of synergy between the two because *Youth Today* used to write about youth justice issues all the time, as well as a lot of other issues. So, we have the two publications. They're both still under the same editor, John Fleming. We have a network of freelancers around the country and our bureaus who write for them. We had a full-time Washington correspondent. Now it is a little less than full time because it always depends on funding. And students do some work for us. We produce some three hundred stories and videos a year, between the two of them. Then we solicit a lot of commentary. We go to professors, experts, people in the field. Leslie Lapidés, who is our managing editor, is really good at helping people write decent commentary, which is hard to do.

TS: Are they doing commentary for free?

LW: Yes, because we can't afford to pay them.

TS: But at least they get their name out.

LW: They get their name in print, and they get to write about their topic. Some of them are advocates. Some are researchers. It could be youth themselves. We had a contract with a group in California called InsideOUT Writers. These are people who've used writing to straighten their lives out after they were incarcerated. So they've done stories for us. There is another group called The Beat Within. So we get youth to write with us. Locally, there's another group of students called Vox Teen Communication. Rachel

[Alterman] Wallack is the founder [in 1993]. She teaches diverse groups of youth in high school on how to be journalists. It's an after school program, so it fits really well. We've worked with them. We send our professional videographers; our favorite is Roger Newton, a former student of mine. He works with the VOX students, so we get that kind of youth work as well. The mantra in the funding world is they want to get youth themselves telling their own stories, people from these marginalized communities, rather than somebody like me coming into a community I don't know a lot about. And even if I did know a lot about it, I would never have the visceral experience of living in that community to tell their own story.

TS: That's why you go in with these people.

LW: Yes, but it's not the same. The questions we ask are going to be different. The ways we approach the stories are going to be different, and the way they approach us is going to be different. We try to enlighten ourselves as much as we can, but there's a movement—and I'll talk a little bit about this—that we are really a part of to teach more minority students how to become journalists and tell their own narratives. Now we're on the verge of becoming that. Our total audience right now is we have about 750,000 unique visitors come in and look at our two products. It is about 1.5 million page views. That doesn't count what goes on in Facebook or when other media use our stories and videos.

We did a story out of New York [in February 2017] about [hundreds of] high school students that left school to protest [President Trump's] Muslim travel ban. That story in a few days had more than two hundred thousand views on Facebook. We did another story recently in New York City. We found out that there was a young woman, nineteen-years-old. She was still in high school because of some issues that she had in her life. She was walking to school in the morning. Two cops jump out of the car. They think she is a truant because it's after 9:00 in the morning or whenever school starts. They say, "Give me your ID." She said, "I don't have to give you my ID. I'm going to school, and if you want to follow me to school, you can follow me to school, but I'm not giving you an ID. I don't have to."

That turns into them wrestling her down to the ground and throwing her into the police car. She's a small woman. She's not fighting at all. She is just, I would say, resisting arrest, as she should have maybe in this particular case. Normally, what would happen is they would put a charge of resisting arrest and a couple other charges on her. She would come to court and have this draconian decision to make of, "I know that I'm right, but if I fight it, I could get sent to jail for five years. So I cop a plea and take some lesser charge, and it's on my record forever." This is what happens to these kids, and nobody sees it. Well, this particular case, there was a surveillance camera that got the cops wrestling her to the ground. It was pretty obvious that she was not at fault. The DA [district attorney] finally dropped the case. But we wrote this story, which enlightened [readers]. That got picked up by Reddit, which is a social media site. It is really well known. Because of that, in twenty-four hours that thing had more than 200,000 views.

- TS: So somebody can read one story without paying for it, and then if they want too many ... I saw you had a \$65 a year subscription rate.
- LW: That's for *Youth Today*. This story was on the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*.
- TS: Is there a subscription rate for that?
- LW: No. It is totally free. We're going to [reconsider] eventually ... It gets confusing. What we've done most recently, the Wallace Foundation is another foundation. They have funded us like the Tow Foundation for five years, and they just renewed for another two years of \$100,000 dollars a year.
- TS: Who is the Wallace Foundation?
- LW: The Wallace Foundation is a big national foundation that is most interested in after school issues. So they fund our *Youth Today* project. Half of their funding every year goes to sustainability and half to us producing editorial. This last year, they funded us to redesign the *Youth Today* website and to help us build a paywall on that, because we're charging, like you said, \$65, but people could come and read it for free online. Now we built that paywall, thanks to the Wallace Foundation funding. The new website is just going gangbusters. The new design increased our page views by 60 percent. It's stickier. People are reading more stories just because of the design. It happened overnight. We've just installed a paywall, like the *New York Times* and everyone else. You come to *Youth Today*, and you can read five stories, but once you've reached that, I think, in a month, then if you want to read more, you have to pay. We're hoping that will up our number of subscribers. Between advertising and subscriptions, we're still on the low end. It's a little over \$100,000 that we bring in, which isn't enough to run it, but it's ...
- TS: That's a lot.
- LW: It's a lot, but doing journalism is not cheap. If you want to do a really good story, and you want to have a really good writer, it's a dollar a word.
- TS: You're very entrepreneurial in what you're doing.
- LW: We try to be. For everyone in this field, one of the things you have to figure out is every possible revenue stream that you can. For us, the university gives us a little backing, and we are in the Center for Sustainable Journalism right now. Before that, we were in the new Social Sciences Building on campus. We are right adjacent to campus. They came to us one day and said, "We need this space over here [in the Social Sciences Building] for faculty offices. Would you guys be willing to move?"
- TS: There is a real shortage in that building. It opened in 2006, and almost immediately there was a shortage of office space.

- LW: We were spread all over, and we said, “Yes, maybe.” We wanted to go to Town Point, and they said, “No, come look at this Chastain Pointe place that we have.” It was just a warehouse. It had a big corrugated door in the back that lifted up for trucks to come in and unload. I don’t know if this would happen today at Kennesaw State, but still it was real entrepreneurial. They gave us three architectural firms to look at it. We knew we wanted a Silicon Valley kind of open space. We knew we wanted a conference room like we are sitting in here right now, so that we could run little seminars and have meetings. The university just built this. These architects designed this absolutely stunning Silicon Valley kind of space. You can see it. It’s just amazing.
- TS: Yes, John [Fleming] gave me a tour before you got here. He was talking about all that.
- LW: If you look up, you can see some of the open ceiling and the plumbing pipes and conduits.
- TS: I guess John [A.] Anderson was the architect for the campus at that time.
- LW: Yes, he wasn’t the architect, but he was the one that oversaw the facilities [assistant vice president for facilities]. There were three firms that made proposals, and they allowed us to choose one. We chose the Heery architectural firm. They just did everything that we requested. We’ve been so happy about this space. It is underwritten by the university, and so is the rent and utilities.
- TS: So when students or the public come in, it looks like a newsroom.
- LW: It’s like newsroom. Our students come in here. Right now, I think we have ten or twelve employed. A bunch of them sell subscriptions for us. Some sell advertising for us. One does this photo blog, and another student does social media for us. We just brought in an intern who is going to be doing writing for us, journalism stuff for us. Another works as fundraising apprentice for us.
- TS: When you say they sell subscriptions, how do they go about doing that?
- LW: They get on the phone and Chelsey [Tabakian] Odom is our business operations manager now. She started here as a student selling subscriptions for us. She was so good at it, then she started selling advertising. Then she was so good at that and everything else [it was obvious that] she is just a natural manager. We hired her, basically, to run the business side, and she’s doing a fantastic job.
- TS: Is this a teaching model for what reporters at the *Marietta Daily Journal* or any other newspaper are doing?
- LW: The Knight Foundation came up with this idea. Eric Newton was the consultant there [who championed], this teaching hospital model, where you bring them in, and just as you would be an intern in a hospital working with professionals, you would do the same thing [for communication students]. They come in here and work side by side with

professionals. They do the work, and then they grow into professionals. That's the model that we try and use ... and this is true at our bureau up in New York, and the one we had at Northwestern [University] for a while, the one in California, and now we're talking to people at the University of North Carolina about another one there.

You are expected to do high quality professional work. We'll mentor you to help you do that. We don't expect you to just come and do that kind of work. We'll mentor you. Our students who work for us, for example, in New York, Daryl [Khan] is their editor. He gives them the assignments. Often they come with their own assignments. He helps them edit the stories and get them in shape. Then the stories come down here. Leslie and John work the stories a little bit, send them back to them again, and then eventually they get published. Most often, you would have no clue that they were done by students. You would think they were totally professional journalists. For example, that story of the young woman who got wrestled down in the street was done by a student.

Then another story was about a woman in New York, in Suffolk County [on Long Island], the deputy police chief, who used to be a prosecutor. She is a black woman and said, "I can't prosecute yet another black male. I just can't do it anymore." Then she came to work for this police department and set up this group meeting where youth come in. They meet with adults, and it helps straighten their lives out. That story was so good that it got on WNYC, and its audience listened to it. We can name about ten stories like that. It is another example of a story where we did the story for ourselves and it got picked up by WNYC. There are hundreds of thousands of people who listen to that. We have other audiences too that don't show up in our own audience counts.

TS: I guess it's always a question of who is the audience for what you're doing. Is that the goal, for these stories to be picked up by larger publications?

LW: If we go and talk to the funder and say, "Here's our audience, it's 1.5 million." Their question is, "Fine, so what kind of change is that going to help make?" That's the question they ask. We show them, with the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange* as an example, that over the years more than four thousand people have opted in to our newsletter. They've taken the time to write their names, their title, and their organization, and their email. People don't do that lightly. We don't push it as much as we should. These are solid gold people. These are judges. They're prosecutors. They're people who work with kids in after school programs.

TS: So the people who can make a difference are reading it.

LW: What's the proof? Because they've taken that time to sign up for us. That is a really big issue that when we talk to funders we can demonstrate changemakers read us. That's one issue. Then also the fact that the *Christian Science Monitor* will pick up one of our stories and send it out to a national audience. That's another peer review kind of thing. That's the way we think of it as peer review.

TS: That's a good way to think about it.

LW: Then the funders, knock on wood, many of them keep funding us. That's the other peer review because we have to go back in different cycles. Tow Foundation will be nine years. Wallace Foundation will be for seven years soon. Annie E. Casey Foundation is going to be the same amount of time. Park Foundation too...

TS: What does the Annie E. Casey Foundation do for you?

LW: Annie E. Casey gives us about \$50,000 a year. It is dream money because if you're in any kind of nonprofit, and if somebody gives you money for operating expenses, it means that it is not project oriented. You can use it any way you want to meet your budget. That gives us a lot of flexibility.

TS: You know, some of these names, whenever I'm listening to the *PBS NewsHour* on television, Annie E. Casey and all those names are the ones they rattle off as their backers.

LW: You'll hear the Wallace Foundation and the Park Foundation, another one that's funding us. We're just up now up for another round of funding.

TS: I don't know anything about the Park Foundation.

LW: Park Foundation is basically a regional foundation, but they're also interested. I think [Roy Hampton] Park [Sr.] made his money in journalism.<sup>4</sup> They're interested in New York and North Carolina, but also in media and justice issues, so they have been funding us. It's an interesting story, Bill Bondurant, William [L.] Bondurant is in [Chapel Hill], North Carolina. I knew somebody to whom I said, "You guys got funding from the Park Foundation. How did you do that?" He said, "You should go talk to Bill Bondurant." He's a trustee [and secretary/treasurer]. We had a conversation, and that turned into funding, which has now lasted for about five or six years. He's our advocate. We asked \$10,000 for operating, and then \$10,000 a couple years ago was spent for raising the age in North Carolina. North Carolina and New York were the only two states that were left in the country where you could be tried as an adult for crimes you committed at age sixteen. Most places were age eighteen. Because of brain science, experts are saying people aren't really totally mature until they're age twenty-five. So you should be thinking of juvenile justice in a different way.

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<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: Roy H. Park Sr. was a journalism major in his undergraduate days at North Carolina State University, where he edited the school newspaper. Upon graduation, he worked in public relations and advertising, first in North Carolina, and then in Ithaca, New York. In 1949 he teamed with Duncan Hines on Hines-Park Foods, the company that revolutionized food preparation with its Duncan Hines Cake Mix. After Proctor & Gamble purchased the company in 1956, Park moved into the field of mass communication, where he built an empire of radio and television stations, daily newspapers, and other publications. His wife, Dorothy Dent Park, was president of the Park Foundation from 1994 to 2010.

TS: Some are not totally mature then.

LW: That's true [laughs]. You think of all the stupid things we all did before age twenty-one, at least. That's what gets a lot of kids in trouble. They do something stupid. Judge [Steven C.] Steve Teske [Clayton County, Georgia, Juvenile Court], who is an advocate of ours and writes a lot of commentary for us, often says, "We have to look at two sets of kids. Scary kids need to be put away. Society has to be protected. But most kids, including every teenager I ever knew, just get us mad, but they shouldn't be criminalized for that because that's the job of a teenager."

TS: Maybe they're trying to get attention when they make you angry.

LW: Right. That's the job of a teenager though to get you mad. Any teenager does that. We have been prosecuting those kids, and we shouldn't be.

TS: I saw something in the paper the other day about somebody making terrorist threats to the Cobb NAACP, and it turned out he was thirteen-years-old in Douglas County and supposedly an excellent student.

LW: This happens over and over again. These kids do stupid stuff. A lot of the stuff, like I said before, in that school to jailhouse pipeline, is stuff that all of us did, that could have gotten us prosecuted and changed our lives and wrecked our lives. That happens because once a kid gets arrested, it usually changes their lives fundamentally, even in their minds. Their minds get changed. Then they get frog-walked out of school. It is just embarrassing. They don't want to go back. So these are issues that we write about everyday, and they need to be written about.

TS: Another of your supporters, Conrad [N.] Hilton Foundation—what persuaded it to back you?

LW: Hilton Foundation was interested in two issues. One was foster care, and one was substance use. Substance use is big, opioids and all. They funded us for a couple years to take a look at foster care issues and also to take a look at substance use. Two separate funding streams.

TS: Then there is a Robert Bowne Foundation.

LW: The Robert Bowne Foundation is an interesting little story. I was in New York, and I saw this Bowne Foundation. I went to their website, and it was a broken down website. I tried to make an appointment with the executive director [Lena O. Townsend]. She finally said, "Yes, I will see you." Frankly, I thought this was going to be a waste of my time, but I went to see her, and she said to me that they were going to go out of business. I said, "Really? Let me tell you what we did for the MacArthur Foundation and their legacy project. We took all of their stuff." I gave her this long explanation.



She said, “Oh, my goodness, Leonard, I’ve been waiting for you to walk in this door for two years because we didn’t know what we were going to do with all of our stuff. We just thought it was going to be stuck in boxes and put away in the New York Public Library. We built a hub for them on *Youth Today* because their interest was in after school programs. That turned into close to \$800,000 worth of funding. We wrote about the issues, and that funding just ended. It’s nice because we can report to them and let them know that their money was well spent.

TS: Great. Let me ask you, we’ve talked about a number of things that you’re doing here. I gather the center is the focus of 90 percent of your effort nowadays. What is your relationship with the [KSU] School of Communication and Media nowadays?

LW: We still work with them and other places like the [KSU] School of Conflict Management, [Peacebuilding and Development]. But mostly I’m running a million dollar a year business, and I teach a little bit.

TS: I wanted to ask about that. When we did the first interview, I guess your original contract was for one course a semester.

LW: Now, frankly it’s even sometimes less. But I’ve had some, I think, stellar successes with a couple of things. I received a grant a couple years ago to tell youth justice stories in virtual worlds. That means using avatars to tell these anonymous stories. It was a \$30,000, very competitive, grant in journalism innovation. We brought in students. There were twelve really diverse students. They came, and the idea was we worked with Gwenette Writer Sinclair, who had, years ago, built Kennesaw State University in the virtual world, when there were a lot of people using virtual worlds to tell stories. She had been contracted, and I had talked to her. When I was writing this grant, I thought, “Where is she? What is she doing?” I talked to her, and she was really interested in this project. We got it funded, and she was really the driving force behind teaching the students how to use virtual worlds to go in and build scenes and all. You can basically make a place like Kennesaw State look like Kennesaw State in a virtual world on the computer.

TS: Why do you do that?

LW: The idea behind it is because you have to keep kids anonymous, but it would really be nice to tell their story. Then you watch their story as if it were happening in a movie, but it’s avatars that are telling their story. But they’re anonymous. We did this, and we did a really good example. We wanted to work on an example, so these students were working on it. This guy who I had tape-recorded at a meeting told a story about when he was thirteen years old and how a cop chased him down and punched him right in the face. We were able to recreate that scene with a cop chasing him down the street into a junkyard place, and the cop hauling off and punching him, and recreating the same street that it happened in Chicago in this virtual world. I’ll give you the link for that later on. [See the students’ process blog at <http://virtualworld.jjie.org/>]. So that was our testing.

Then we were going to try and find some youth to do a story, a thirteen-year-old or whatever, and keep them anonymous to tell the story. We went to a lawyer [Stephen M. Reba] to ask him if he knew of any case. He was at Emory [University] at their [Barton Law Center Appeal for Youth Clinic]. He said, "I would rather you do this story," and he handed us this stack of papers. It was a foot thick. He said, "This is a kid. He was in foster care his whole entire life. His name is Christopher Thomas. At age fourteen [in February 1999], he was involved in an armed robbery. Somebody was shot, but wasn't killed. He was a tagalong, and he was sentenced to forty years in prison."

TS: I was going to say twenty-five to thirty years.

LW: Forty years in prison. He didn't pull the trigger. So this stack of papers told everything about his life from the age he was two, because that's when he started going into foster care, and all of the troubles he had his whole life. We documented every minute almost of his whole life. The students did this. They took all of these papers, and John Fleming was helping them on the editorial side. Gwenette was helping. We created this into a virtual world project, but we also did an investigative piece and told his story. It was such a rich, rich story. I'm so proud of the students here. We put it on the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*, and it just told how poorly the state dealt with Christopher Thomas.<sup>5</sup> He is a black youth.

TS: Which state was it?

LW: Georgia. He is a black youth. He gets passed around. He really wanted to live with his grandmother and grandfather, but he got too hard to handle. So when he got sent to foster care places, he thought in his own mind, "If I act really crappy, they are going to throw me out, and I'll get back to home with my grandmother and grandfather." Actually, a psychologist figured that out too, eventually. But it didn't quite work out that way. They sent him to this foster care where the mother would lock him out of the house at 8:00, and they wouldn't let him back in until she got back from work at 4:00. There were three of them. The natural son and then the two foster care kids. You just see the state didn't have a way of knowing how to handle him, and they still don't. The end result is he has been a ward of the state since he was two years old. Anyhow, this is a student project, and the students did a really fantastic job on it.

TS: Did it do any good?

LW: I don't think so.

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<sup>5</sup> Kennesaw State University Student Project Team, "The Christopher Thomas Story: The Story: A Robbery, Trial & Incarceration: Man Still Fighting 40-Year Sentence for Nonlethal Crime as 14-Year-Old," a project of the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*, Center for Sustainable Journalism, Kennesaw State University, GA, copyright 2019 by the Christopher Thomas Story, Wanderer, a WordPress Theme by Press75, ctstory.jjie.org.

TS: So he is still in prison?

LW: Yes, but at least people know about him. Nobody would have heard that story before if it hadn't been for us. He is like if you sent somebody off to a gulag in Russia. Nobody would have known about it, and nobody would have cared about it. Now people know about it. Georgia Public Broadcasting had us on and talked a little bit about it.<sup>6</sup> So that's our thing. We would like to see a direct result from our stories, but sometimes you don't. If nothing else, I guarantee you, twelve students coming out of Kennesaw State University have a different interpretation of what life is like for a lot of other people that they wouldn't have had. Some of them might have understood that, but most of them didn't have a clue. I tell people that between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five, what you learn then, that changes who you are.

There's this great story about Lyndon Johnson, when he just got out of college—the same way that when I just got out of college and was teaching in the Southeast Bronx—he was teaching poor Latino boys. Everyone said that's why he eventually signed the Civil Rights bill because of what he had learned during that transitional period. So that's the kind of experience we try to give students who work here and in New York and other places.

Another class I teach here at the Center for Sustainable Journalism is called Publishing in the Digital Age. You had mentioned *Bokeh* before. The students show what they're good at doing, and then they break into groups. Then John [Fleming] comes in and Chelsey [Odom] our businessperson comes in and other people come in and tell the students what our challenges are. Then those students, acting as consultants, pick one of those challenges for their group. Then they go and try to address that challenge and to figure out a solution for it and to write a report about it. Then they give an oral report. They have to do a lot of research. We don't want them just talking.

TS: Are these like internships that they are doing?

LW: The virtual world got funding. We actually paid the students \$750 to be part of that class. They worked so hard on that! But the Publishing in the Digital Age is a class that I devised. The students get academic credit. As I said, I tell them what some of our challenges are, and then they go and do a report. One of those challenges we had was this *Bokeh* thing, this photo blog that was dead in the water. Nobody was looking at it. Nobody was doing anything about it.

TS: You didn't originate it?

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<sup>6</sup> According to the students' reporting, Christopher Thomas was thirty-one-years-old and still in prison in 2019. His attorney, Stephen Reba, was actively working on a possible parole as Thomas approaches the twenty-year mark of his incarceration.

LW: We originated *Bokeh*, but we didn't do anything with it. The people who started it weren't doing anything with it. It was just sitting there, and it was just a mess. We thought there was some real potential. This one group of students said, "We'll try *Bokeh*. We'll take a look at it." They came up with the idea of using Instagram, which is a digital place where you can look at photographs. By putting *Bokeh* on Instagram people around the world could see what we were doing. We could also find photographers who are really good. The student report said, "You can build up novice photographers' careers by putting them on your Instagram site."

It was such a good idea that we hired another student, Ali Sadar. Ali comes on, and he uses their report as the fundamentals for starting his thing. He builds it into this just absolutely great site. Here is this mundane photo blog, and that now is great. A year ago Ali organized a fundraiser for us. I told you earlier about the Knight Foundation news match for \$25,000. We kicked it off now with a *Bokeh* art show down at a museum in Atlanta. One year it was at a bubble tea place, and then this last year it was at a gallery. People come, and they donate to us and all.

TS: What is a bubble tea place?

LW: You know, bubble tea. It was like a tea café. They had a site for a little art museum to hang student work. We had three students. Two of them are affiliated with Kennesaw. One was not. We did the same thing this year. We showed their work, and people came. This year we had over one hundred people come. With [Daniel J.] Dan Paracka [director of campus internationalization in KSU's Division of Global Affairs], there is this possibility of funding [through the Year of Morocco at KSU, 2018-2019]. It made it through the first round, and now it is in the second round of setting up a project with women in Morocco and women here at Kennesaw State, each telling their stories and using Instagram or *Bokeh* as their place of elevating their stories. This all happened because of a student project. Otherwise *Bokeh* would be sitting dormant. That is an example of us working with students. You have to demand research. Otherwise, they will come up with some weird idea. In this case I force them to tell who has done stuff with photo blogs, and where did they get their funding, etc.

TS: In our administrative structure, whom do you report to, if anybody?

LW: That's a good question. I really report to the dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. It was [Richard] Vengroff [dean, 2006-2012] originally, and then [Robert H.] Robin Dorff [dean, 2012-2018], and now Kerwin [C.] Swint is interim dean. That's on the center side. Then for my academic teaching side, I still report to Barbara [S.] Gainey, who is the director of the school [of Communication and Media]. She is the one who does basically an annual review on teaching, scholarship, and service. But, primarily, to make the center run and what we're doing and funding and all of that, it's through the dean.

TS: Are you still holding a lot of conferences like you were before?

- LW: Not anymore. The focus has changed. It is a business. You have fifteen people working for you, and especially after raising the money for it there is not much time left. Conferences are incredibly time consuming and they are once and done.
- TS: So in your annual review, do you call this service or what?
- LW: It's a mix. I would say mostly service, but there is scholarship that's involved in it—practical, hands on scholarship, applied scholarship, creativity.
- TS: Do you write any articles for professional journals?
- LW: I have not recently.
- TS: You don't have time, I guess.
- LW: Here's the thing though. For Kennesaw and the School of Communication, writing grants is considered academic scholarship. I have been successful with twenty-eight of those grants, and I've written probably fifty or sixty of them. I'm constantly writing grants.
- TS: I bet they love you for getting so much external funding.
- LW: I hope so.
- TS: I'm not sure how much we're raising now. In a [July 7,] 2015 interview I did with [former president Daniel S.] Dan Papp, he said that we were at \$16 million for grants signed in FY 2014 and \$13 million for off-campus research funds actually spent in FY 2014. It must be more than that by now.
- LW: I think with Ruth Ann [Harnisch]'s money, since then, the Center for Sustainable Journalism has raised more than \$6 million. This past year was a good year because some of the funders were renewing, and then we brought in two new funders. I'll just give you an example. Park was \$30,000 in renewing. Annie E. Casey was \$50,000 in renewing. Tow Foundation was \$300,000 in renewing. Wallace was \$200,000 in renewing. I don't want to leave anybody out. Raikes Foundation came on new for the homeless and youth justice project. Vital Projects [Fund, Inc.], a brand new funder, gave us \$100,000 to cover sentencing in Florida. Then the Kendeda Fund came in for \$150,000 dollars over a couple years to cover gun violence. Scripps Howard [Foundation] gave us \$5,000 as seed money to start examining a way of making KSU a powerhouse in investigative journalism training.
- TS: When you get these grants, do you get all the money or does part of it go to the university?
- LW: There are indirects. If it is a national, government foundation, they have a set amount that you get for indirects. These are private foundations, so it is usually up to the private

foundation. Some will say, “No, I am not going to give you any indirect money.” Indirects are the same as facilities and administration expenses. Some have been as high as 15 percent. Some of that funding helps underwrite KSURSF, which is the Kennesaw State University Research and Service Foundation, because they do some of our behind the scenes budgeting. They sign the contracts. We’re not a legal entity, so they sign all our contracts. It’s a bureaucratic nightmare often, frankly.

TS: I bet.

LW: They get a portion of that indirect money, and then some of it comes back to the dean, and then some of it comes back to us. We have to pay for our phones and all that kind of stuff. There are some things the university doesn’t pay for.

TS: But you’re not paying rent on the building?

LW: We don’t pay rent. So I think over the years, I have to take a look. I would say over \$500,000 has been sent back to the university, and then a portion of that comes back to us. We’re supplying the university with money. It’s not like we’re just always asking the university for money. We often do, but we often don’t get it either.

TS: How much do you actually get from the university? You mentioned your salary.

LW: They pay my salary, and that’s pretty much it. Sometimes there has been another \$20,000 that they give. You know, it helps.

TS: Do you get any flack from the community for some of these stories that you’re doing?

LW: Actually not much.

TS: Are you under the radar?

LW: I don’t know why. I know one time we did. Somebody, and you can guess who he is, who has helped fund the school in the system. I think it was he who wrote some sort of email. I just passed it on, and the president took care of it. He said, “We’ll deal with it.” When [President Samuel S.] Sam Olens was here, I got involved in some of the action against him, frankly, lawsuits against him.

TS: I think I do remember seeing your name in the paper.

LW: Right. I wrote about that because I thought it was an unjust thing. But even the term “social justice” for a while got banned on campus. I don’t know if you know that. You couldn’t write it into certain...

TS: Yes, but I can’t remember the details now.

LW: That's what we write about everyday is social justice issues. I would say we're very, very, very fortunate. From the first time when I wrote to Dr. Papp that we were going to do this, I said, "We are going to do real journalism, and there are going to be consequences maybe." The university has supported us in that way, all along. They've never come to us once and said, "Calm down."

TS: It's academic freedom, isn't it?

LW: It is academic freedom, and it's journalism freedom. Something new is happening now, and I would say it is a transition period for us, and maybe for me too. David [G.] Armstrong runs something called the Georgia News Lab. He started at Emory [University], and he brings together diverse students from all the universities, including now Kennesaw, Emory, the University of Georgia, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, [Georgia State University, and Mercer University]. He teaches them how to do really good investigative journalism. You want to talk about some hot potato stuff that he's done with them. He left Emory and went to Georgia State University.

John and I had been talking to him for a couple years and said, "Why don't you come up here? It would be a good partnership with us." He was doing great projects, and everyone here loved the work that he was doing, so he decided he would come to Kennesaw State a year ago [in August 2017]. So he has brought the Georgia News Lab here. His students do these investigative projects, and they do them in conjunction with investigative editors at the *AJC* [*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*]. Then they get published in the *AJC*. For example, one of the stories was about the Atlanta BeltLine and how a certain portion of its funding was supposed to be for mixed income housing, and it wasn't. They broke the story. He teaches them how to do this deep paperwork dive, and he's done now a long series of stories. These students' bylines show up in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

TS: So is he in the School of Communication and Media?

LW: He is in the School of Communication and Media [as journalist-in-residence and senior lecturer]. Soon he is going to join us as part of a collaborative effort with the Georgia News Lab and the Center for Sustainable Journalism. That could change my role of what I'm going to be doing in a way that we have planned for a while. I can't do this forever. So eventually there will be a transition. The goal behind this is he's got his doctorate [PhD, University of Texas-Austin, 2000]; he is doing his teaching; he has got a really good plan. We always thought in our earliest business plan of moving from a center to a teaching institute, and do more of that Publishing in the Digital Age type classes. Criminology people should be running a class out of here in journalism, and the Conflict Management people should be here. With our *Youth Today*, people from Early Education should be here and from education in general, because all of our stuff keeps mixing [with other disciplines], but they are not. So the long-term plan is to integrate even more into the university. This summer the geography department is going to run a geo mapping class in conjunction with the *JJIE*. That's a great start.

- TS: I guess the concept is that an institute has a much broader mission than a center.
- LW: Right, and it's a teaching institute with the hospital teaching method. Then we could start providing our own credit courses out of here. That is how institutes work.
- TS: Oh, so he would become the executive director at that time? And, if so, what would you be?
- LW: We're not sure. Maybe go off to pasture somewhere.
- TS: Oh. I find that hard to believe.
- LW: I think it's time. I'm not a kid, as you know from looking at some of the dates in the interview [such as bachelor's degree in 1966].
- TS: Do you have an advisory board?
- LW: We have not had an advisory board, but we are going to do one now. That's one of our issues is to bring on an advisory board. Judith Moen [Stanley] has been really helpful in that. She has agreed to help put one together, and we have some other people that are going to be too.
- TS: Are you talking about retiring some day?
- LW: Let's just say there is no public announcement, but if we are talking about this transition period, it's a good time. The center is doing really well. When you're running a nonprofit, there are times where you think, "Oh, my goodness, we are not going to be here next year. We are not going to have enough money. Where is the money going to come from?" This happens to anybody in a nonprofit. You're constantly worrying about it. We've gone through those periods, and they are no fun. Now we're in a period where we're really in a very stable period, probably more stable than we have been in a long time. If there were a transition, this would be a good time. [In fact, Witt in March officially submitted his retirement paperwork effective June 1, 2019.]
- TS: I was just thinking in the corporate world, people retire and they become chairman of the board.
- LW: Yes, that would be a possibility. I don't know. We've thought of different prospects. In some ways, I think if I did leave, it would be better for other people to run it. Otherwise, I would be too interfering in it.
- TS: You said in the interview ten years ago that this was going to be your last job, after you had moved around every five years or so.



- LW: I've been here seventeen years now. It is just that time flies when you're having fun. Honestly, there couldn't have been a better job. There just couldn't have been a better job. But it can't last forever.
- TS: Consolidation didn't have any effect on what you're doing, did it?
- LW: No. We've been, in many ways, autonomous. Because we do our own fundraising, we have a lot more latitude. We don't ask for a lot from the university.
- TS: I've been asking folks about the turnover at the top with all the many presidents we've had in the last two or three years. Obviously, with Sam Olens, it must have been uncomfortable here when you were criticizing the way he was chosen.
- LW: I never felt it, to his credit, and to everyone else's credit. I was expecting that people would come after me with knives, and they never did. At least from what we could see, no one ever did anything negative.
- TS: Sam Olens himself said that he wished that they had done a national search.
- LW: Right. He wasn't fit for a very academic life, and that became pretty clear. Hopefully, the university is on better footing again, because working with Betty [L.] Siegel was just like a dream world. She was, "Let's go do it. I love that idea." If you failed, that was your problem but, "Let's do it."
- TS: I think everybody is hoping that Pamela [S.] Whitten is going to be here for a number of years, and that we have some stability.
- LW: The last few years were not good years [for KSU]. Our goal for the center though is to definitely become more integrated. We often thought we should be with the whole university because our mission, and this goes way back to the beginning when I was originally hired, was to help Kennesaw expand its reputation. Many of the major foundations in the country, everyone that I've talked to, knows who we are. Every major journalism school—we have a partnership with City University of New York and the University of Southern California; we're talking to the University of North Carolina—they know who we are.
- Everyone in the juvenile justice field knows who we are. The Annie E. Casey Foundation puts on an annual conference for their Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative. When John and I first went there, the first couple years, it was like nobody knew who we were. You get down, thinking, "These are our audience, and they don't know who we are." Then the last few years we've gone, and we sit down at a table at the banquets and stuff, and someone says, "Oh, my goodness, you're the editor of the *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*. It's the first thing I open everyday." It is like what a good feeling.
- TS: For sure. How do you think Kennesaw has changed over your seventeen years here?

- LW: It has gotten bigger. When I came here, it was fifteen thousand students. It was much more entrepreneurial when I came. It continued that way. Then we hit a spot where, I would say overall, that kind of charging forward spirit is not there as much as it was before. That's just me talking to people. I never let those issues bother me because if you do, then you don't do anything. I just ignore it and go ahead and do what we are going to do. That's why we've been successful here [at KSU]. I don't know what the reputation is now after all the different articles over the last couple years, but as an academic institution, I thought it was on a roll. People were doing great stuff.
- TS: Not so much on a roll now?
- LW: I don't know. We are [in the Center for Sustainable Journalism]. We're still doing fine. I can't speak for everyone else. You would have to speak for everyone else, but I think it needs an injection of "let's go; let's be somebody special." I don't know that that message is coming out right now.
- TS: It's sad if that's the case.
- LW: What do you hear? You're probably more plugged in than I am.
- TS: Probably any institution loses some of its entrepreneurial spirit when it has been around as long as we have now—we are beyond fifty years; and, like you say, we have become very big. I would hate to be a new faculty member coming in here now. What I always valued about Kennesaw is exactly what you were talking about. If I wanted to do an oral history project, I did an oral history project. Nobody had ever done it before here, and I did it the way I wanted to do it. I always got total support from the administration for what I was doing.
- LW: Right, Kennesaw had all these little autonomous groups doing special stuff, and when you add it up, it became really important. That is what helped grow the university. In this digital age, sometimes what appears as chaos can produce some really great stuff.
- TS: I run into people that seem like they have a morale problem on campus nowadays. Yet the ones I interview are people that are doing fabulous work like you are, and there are just an amazing number of them that are doing creative, wonderful things.
- LW: Yes, across the campus. Like I said, Dan Paracka [and the Division of Global Affairs] might work with us to get this funding for the Moroccan women to tell their stories. You know, I think the university will survive.
- TS: So you are trying to figure out what you are going to do for your future then.
- LW: I think I am. I got a granddaughter finally, my first grandchild. She is two years old. We visited her over Christmas. I want to just mention my two kids, by the way. At the time of the first interview, I had mentioned that Emily had just gone into Columbia University

Graduate School of Journalism. She wrote a book called *Future Sex: [A New Kind of Free Love]* (Macmillan 2016)], which I as her father find hard to read, but it got excellent reviews. Stephen followed her into the journalism school at Columbia and got his graduate degree. He put out a book called *How Music Got Free: [The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy]* (Viking Press 2015)]. It is all about the MP3 files and how people started stealing music. It got a lot of really good reviews too in all the best places.

When I started my career, I wanted to become a writer like they are now. This comes back again to the *New York Times* story. Emily was a good friend of Arthur [Gregg] Sulzberger [A. G. Sulzberger]. He is the new publisher now of the *New York Times* [as of January 1, 2018, succeeding his father and grandfather, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr. and Sr.]. She actually traveled with him to Cuba years ago. This story of my mom getting her education in a little magazine kiosk at Sterling Hotel and the *New York Times* keeps recurring. Emily eventually was a writer for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, one of the publications for the *New York Times*. She was a contributing editor. We went from my mom selling the *New York Times* to Emily being on the staff.

Then most recently, she went to the editors of the *New Yorker* and said, “Look, there used to be a time when you all sent a reporter out to do the first draft of history. You had somebody in Selma, for instance. You don’t seem to be doing that very much, and I would like to be the person to do that.” They were like, “Yes, but we don’t know.” Then the shooting happened in Parkland at [Marjory Stoneman Douglas] High School. They sent her down. In over a week, she produced like four magazine style stories for the *New Yorker*. I said, “Emily, I thought you said you weren’t a fast writer.” Anyhow, by the third story, in her bio at the bottom, they said Emily Witt, staff writer for the *New Yorker*. So she worked her way into it. That’s where she is now. She’s a staff writer for the *New Yorker*.

TS: Fantastic!

LW: My son writes for newspapers like *Financial Times*. I think he is working on something for *Rolling Stone* [Magazine] right now. [*Tekashi 6ix9ine: The Rise and Fall of a Hip-Hop Supervillain*, January 16, 2019.] They both have excellent writing careers. I just wanted to mention that.

TS: Is there anything else you want to add to the interview?

LW: Just that who knew sixteen or seventeen years ago that I would stay here at Kennesaw so long. I think I accomplished a few things, and I feel pretty good about it. One of the things we didn’t mention is that over the years here we’ve employed more than 80 students, and every one of them gets paid. Because of the mentorship, we think, and because of the payment, we have an almost 100 percent graduation rate with those eighty students. That’s an accomplishment that really makes us feel that we are doing something.

TS: That's fabulous! I've learned a lot today. I think that Kennesaw needs to publicize what you're doing a lot more than we have.

LW: We often felt that's our problem too. The [KSU] Foundation trustee, Judith Moen, when she came to us, said, "I've never heard of you guys." She said, "Somebody in Gwinnett County said, "You should look at *Youth Today*; you guys publish it." She said she didn't even know it. She used to be a journalist. She came over here and fell in love with what we're doing, and now has become our biggest advocate. We kept saying from the beginning, "We should attach Kennesaw's name to the work that we are doing nationally." I think that is going to happen. But we will see.

TS: Good.

LW: I've got to tell you that you do fantastic work, and I'm so privileged to be able to sit here and talk to you.

TS: I'm glad we discussed doing this update because I had no idea it had been ten years since we did that previous interview.

LW: I know. I thought it was a few years ago. I looked it up, and it was 2008.

TS: I'll tell you what. You have redefined your career since then.

LW: It's interesting, isn't it? I've run this business in a later stage in life when most people are doing nothing.

TS: Just think, if you had gone into banking or hotels or something, you would probably be a super millionaire by now.

LW: Yes, but I don't know if I would be as satisfied as what I'm doing.

TS: Right. There are other kinds of wealth.

LW: I don't need a lot of money. We do the stuff that we've been able to do. My wife Diana and I take a bicycle ride in France every year.

TS: You're still doing that?

LW: Still doing that until I can't.

TS: Okay, fantastic!

LW: Again, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

TS: Thank you.

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