

Angee Reeler Interview

November 9th, 2007

Shepherdstown WV

Mark Madison: Our first question is going back to the very beginning. When and where were you born?

Angee Reeler: I was born on Thursday, January the 6th 1949 in Charlestown General Hospital in Ranson, WV.

M: And who were your parents and what did they do?

R: My parents were the late Oscar Daniel Reeler Sr. and Mary Ann Johnson Reeler. My dad was a World War II veteran and then later became a technician in the Urology Department at the Martinsburg VA Medical Center. My mother became an elementary school teacher and she taught at the Jefferson County School System for thirty-three years before retiring.

M: And tell us a little about your early years. Where did you spend them and how did you spend them?

R: My early years? Well most of my early years was spent in Charlestown where we lived and in Harper's Ferry. My dad's mother, my grandmother Reeler, lived in Harper's Ferry and we spent most of our childhood years between the two towns. We just played outdoor games and we were just typical kids raised by Christian families. We attended a lot of vacation bible school, Sunday school, those kinds of things. Just a lot of outdoor activity and fun. I grew up with extended family in the neighborhood, and there were no restrictions on play. We could venture out without fear. Times have really changed.

M: Are there any books or hobbies or things that influenced you as a younger girl?

R: The only book that I could ever remember just being big enough to read and being taught was the Holy Bible, and it still is the road map for my life.

M: When did you start reading the Bible? How old were you?

R: I was about eight. Eight years old when it was introduced to me.

M: And when you were a young girl, what did you want to be when you grew up?

R: I wanted to be a school teacher like my mother, and I later I think around early high school I decided that I didn't want to be a school teacher. And that was okay. And I used to love to play office and always typing and those kinds of things. And one day I decided I wanted to be a secretary.

M: That's great and you followed your passion.

R: And I followed my passion, yes I did.

M: Well you mentioned high school. Which high school did you go to and when did you graduate?

R: I attended the former Charlestown Senior High School. It is now Charlestown Middle School on High Street in Charlestown. I graduated in the class of '66.

M: Did you have any favorite teachers?

R: I did. Actually, in high school, my favorite teachers were my business class teachers. [Delmer Pearl], [R Caughtry], [Bill Cline], [Willard Martin], and my journalism teacher [Gail Props].

M: Well that's wonderful. I'm sure those teachers would very impressed that you remember them.

R. They're still living today. Four of the five are still living today. Yes, I see them often.

M: So after high school, how did you come to work for the federal government?

R: Okay, I graduated from high school at 16. I had to beg and plead my parents to sign my work permit to allow me to accept my first job at 16 years old. I took the civil service exam as a senior in high school, and already had my job before I graduated high school. And they allowed me to go off to the big city to Washington, DC and I started working

for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Federal Housing Administration was my very first tour of duty.

M: Did you drive back and forth to DC?

R: I did not. I lived in the women's wing of the YMCA in Washington DC.

M: As a sixteen year old?

R: As a sixteen year old. It was very exciting. I didn't have my first apartment until I turned eight teen.

M: Now you've worked for the federal government for how many years?

R: Forty-one years.

M: And can you just tell us all the agencies you worked for?

R: Yes. Department of Housing and Urban Development was my first agency in South West Washington. I went from there to the National Park Service in Harper's Ferry. I came back home for a while. And I worked there for several years at the training center. And went from there back to Washington DC to work for the US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission. I spent quite a few years there. And I went from the EEOC back to Harper's Ferry where I now came home to reside and make home for my family. And I worked with the National Park Service Interpretive Media Design Center for a number of years before coming here to NCTC.

M: What attracted you to NCTC?

R: I think that the thing that most. It was going to be a national place where natural resource conservation professional s would all congregate and work toward one common goal. And just be, you know, a place where exchange of communication and to build relationships and partnerships. And that really excited me. I wanted to be a part of that.

M: Too excited by the new mission?

R: So excited. New mission. And the Fish and Wildlife Service being another Department of the Interior guardian of the nation's jewels and property. It just excited me. And working so many years for Park Service. I was just ready for change and new challenges. And a desire to be the director's secretary.

M: We were lucky. Of course you didn't know what you were getting yourself into.

R: I feel lucky as well.

M: Well you mentioned the desire to be the Director's Secretary. Who were some of the individuals who influenced your career?

R: That influenced my career to be a secretary? Well as I said, in my high school years, my business teachers. I excelled in high school in shorthand and typing. Office practice, business math. English, journalism. And those were my strengths. And my instructors always encouraged me to pursue those. And I made good grades in those subjects, and it later helped me develop. It kind of helped me [unknown] where I wanted to go with a career because I did do them well. I felt that I could put them to good use. They were a big influence on my career and my parents of course who always supported whatever choices I made.

M: Well that's great. What were some of the highlights for each of the agencies you worked for?

R: Each of the agencies? I think that being sixteen and straight out of high school and all excited about having a first job. I was just ready to dive in and hit the ground running. And to put those skills to use. I was encouraged. I always had mentors at all the agencies. I was very blessed to have mentors that guided me along and encouraged continuous learning. To just do the very best job I possibly could do. At HUD my highlight of course was starting at sixteen. Being a [clerk] stenographer, I was often called on to attend management meetings in lieu of the division secretary. And that really was a highlight for me. When I went to the National Park Service at the [unknown] training center. I had the privilege of sharing an office space with Arthur Freeman Tilden. I can just remember Freeman.

M: For some people who don't know who he is, do you just want to remind us?

R: Well Freeman was the National Park Service author. Wrote many books and he also was well known for his books on interpretation. And the guru of interpretation for the National Park Service. And Freeman used to come several times a year to the [unknown] training center to occupy office space there. He had an office at the Harper's Ferry [unknown] training center. And he was just a wonderful person. And he had an attaché who used to accompany him. And we just became very good friends. That was a highlight. And being able to work with the superintendent's secretary very closely. And that was great training for me being fresh into government service. When I went to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the highlight there was working with all the organization that set the policy for equal opportunity and employment. And we dealt with a lot of cases and things like that at the branch I worked in. I was a stenographer and a transcriptionist. So it opened another whole world for me. To be able to utilize that skill. And when I came back to Harper's Ferry Center to the Media Design Center. I was a division secretary. It was the first time I had been in a front line position. And I did interesting things in that division. We wrote perspectives for each of the parks. And the team that I worked with and supported, those guys, traveled all the time and were on the road. Of course they would bring back the document, and me not being able to get out of the office. Just sitting there just brought me, just drew me into the project. And I did that for fifteen and a half years. And that was exciting there. And when I left Harper's Ferry at the Design Center, I was selected to come here as a secretary. My highlight here of course has been being the Secretary to the Director of the NCTC and just meeting so many people from all walks of life. And just providing good customer service, just being a team player. It's been wonderful.

M: You've had a lot of highlights. I never knew that about Tilden. I think that our people too all read his books.

R: I have his book somewhere. I don't know where it is.

M: But it really is. It is the central book on how to do interpretation.

R: He's on the first people I met when I went to the [training center] in the Sixties.

M: He's somebody I wish we had an oral history with.

R: Oh yeah definitely. He had a very humble spirit. Just a wonderful person. I will never forget that.

M: That's why I like doing these oral histories. There's a lot of stuff too. Just to do an overview of your career, what was the high point of your forty-one years? If you had to pick one high point. I know there were lots of high points, but if you had to pick one that you remember.

R: I have quite a few. I have two actually. I can't really narrow it down to one. Of course one high point was being selected to come here as Rick's secretary. That was just the ultimate because I always dreamed of working for a director of an organization. And that came to be. And my other highlight, I want to say was being nominated and selected as one of the National Park Service top administrative professionals. And I received my award on the National Mall at a ceremony with thousands of people. And those two have been the highlight of my career.

M: Those are amazing highlights. [unknown] Were there any low points in your career?

R: Well I had several, not very many low points. I used to work for a supervisor that later had some mental issues, and he hijacked a plane. He was an employee of the EEOC. And he ended up hijacking a plane. Took it all the way to Cuba. Spent many years in federal prison and died there. And that was a very low point. He was one of the most wonderful people I ever met in my life. And another low point was living in a city and working for HUD and going through the riots of '68 in the streets of Washington. It didn't affect my employment so much but we missed so many days because of it. And all of the turmoil at that time. And that was of course surrounding the death of Dr. King. And I went through the '68 riots in Washington as an employee at HUD. But other than that, everything's been positive and upbeat. And those were just low points, but things that are memorable.

M: In forty-one years two low points aren't too bad.

R: No that's not bad.

M: So when did you move to DC?

R: I left in 1966. I graduated in June of '66, and two weeks after my graduation, I started.

M: Let me just ask you a question that we haven't..I'm delving off into another question. How has DC changed since the '60s? What was it like in '66?

R: Oh boy. As I said, my first few months in the city I lived in a women's residential hall of the YMCA in Washington. And I could walk all hours of the night. I was two within the shadows of the White House. The Executive Office Building. Right at the hub of the city. I sat many nights reading in Lafayette Park. Never had any unpleasant moments. I used to catch the train every weekend from Washington to Harper's Ferry to come home to my family. And it was just a different time. We have so many other external things now that did not exist when I was there that long ago.

M:Must of been a [unknown] time for a woman to be in Washington DC. Very Exciting.

R: It was an exciting time. And me being a country girl going to the big city, I had a lot to learn. But I never had any unpleasant experiences and that's memorable as well.

M: That's wonderful. Well we've been looking kind of overall at your history and so on. And one of the things we wondered is in forty-one years, is there anything you wish you'd done differently.

R: The only thing that I can say I wish I've done differently was to go ahead and pursue a college education as my parents had desired and gotten my degree in Business Management. And, as I said, I desired to be a court transcriptionist. A Federal Court transcriptionist. And that's the only thing I would have done differently.

M: You can still do it now. You're very young.

R: And I still can do it. Yeah. I can still pursue that.

M: What was your most humorous experience? [unknown] had no funny experiences. We're a very serious agency.

R: I've had a quite a few.

M: Is there one you'd care to share with us?

R: Well of course yes. I learned to make sponge cakes out of car wash sponges by a former supervisor that I had here at the National Conservation Training Center. And that was quite humorous. And here at NCTC, over a weekend, I purchased a set of steak knives. And I had thought that I left them at the store where I purchased them. I went back to the store to talk to the clerk, and we couldn't find them. And after about a year, I stopped at the security. One of our agents one morning coming in. And he just happened to look down between my seat and the column in the middle, and he spotted these knives. And he said to me, "Angee, that's kind of strange," Well there was a set of steak knives I had driven around for a year. So he called over to Rick. Yeah that's the joke we have about the knives. Cause carrying concealed weapons. It's funny that they both have happened here, and they just brought a lot of joy to me.

M: That is funny. Well let me ask you. You worked for a number of different agencies. Was there one that you enjoyed working for most?

R: The highlight for me has been here at the National Conservation Training Center. As I said, it's because I desired one day to work for a Director and I saw that dream come to life.

M: Well in this next question does not come from me. It's from Peggy.

R: Oh it's from Peggy.

M: What do you really think about Rick Lemon that you're willing to say on tape?

R: That I'm willing to say on tape? I have wonderful things to say about Rick Lemon. He is just one of the most powerful leaders I've ever met. And I tell him this all the time. I've told him this a lot and it's sincere and from the heart. He leads from example. He is a leader who walks the talk. You know he is just so supportive. He allows you to be creative. He encourages teamwork. He's fair. He's just genuine. It's just been, he's just a true leader. He's a mentor to so many and respected by so many. And he's just a powerful person.

M: So why would you ever retire?

R: Well, it's not going to be easy leaving Rick. But this new season of life is awaiting me, and I'm excited and he's not going to be far behind me.

M: That's a good answer.

R: We might have to cut that out.

M: You've had a longer career than almost anybody that we've encountered out here. What would you tell others that were thinking of following in your footsteps? What advice would you have?

R: Nothing I have. Not the profession that I've chosen I would like to say to administrative professionals to take pride in the profession. Take pride. This is a profession we chose. To always just feel good about being. I've always seen administrative professional as the foundation, the very foundation upon which an organization survives. And if you are a good strong frontline person, and can have an open mind and be willing to change and willing to learn in things and take risks and take leaps in whatever, and just have a pride in it. As I certainly have. And it's nothing wrong about being an administrative professional. And it used to be a traditional female profession, but we have seen that change over the years. And just take pride in it and be the very best that you can be to support the leaders of organizations. It does have a payoff. Just take pride in it.

M: I've heard you speak on this before Angee. That's right, it is the foundation.

R: It is the foundation upon which, I think, everything else is balanced. Because if you can be that strong foundation, everything else will flourish.

M: You mentioned something interesting. You said it used to be a female job. In forty-one years, you've seen a number of changes in administrative professionals. What are some of the things you noticed?

R: One, anything technology is a biggie. I'm still to this day very challenged in that area. Enough to get my job done I guess. But over the years, you know, when I entered government in the 60s, of course, it was still the days of electric typewriters and some

office manual typewriters and things like that. I think technology. With the way life is flowing, we have to have an open mind and be able to grow. More than anything, the profession when I entered in the 60's was predominately female. You didn't see a lot of male administrative support staff. And so that has changed. And I think basically, society has proven that you don't have to be a gender to do the job, number one. And if you come with strengths that are required, it should not matter. If that's where your passion is and you wanted to give it your all. It should not matter. And I think that's what kind of broken the . . . And salaries now are pretty comparable for both. Presidents have assistants. Everyone needs an assistant. That's one big thing. I think that traditionally, it's not a gender thing. It's a person that has a desire to do the job. And I think that's the biggest change I've seen is that people are willing to do it and do it well.

M: When you've mentioned your training and so on,. you've mentioned things like short hand and typewriters. And other people may have no experience at all.

R: Computers are probably now the thing that kids today are learning on. I learned to type on a manual typewriter. Manual typewriter with the [unknown] machines. All kinds of machines. All kinds of machines. Hand mimeograph machines. Carbon paper erasers. You might be able to relate to some of that. So they don't have a clue. But sometimes when I go to job fairs that I've attended and talk about the profession. I always throw in something like that for this generation. So it's good for us to never forget where we begin and how we start. And as we evolve and grow. And so I always manage to get that in. When I started...And like my children always tell me, way back when. But they kind of always come to you after you speak about those things. That was so good to hear about that. That was enlightening. Just to hear about how you started. What was out there. The tools you worked with. That the job got done. And that's the key thing. Is that no matter what era we have been in, the job gets done. Gets accomplished.

M: We appreciate that. What legacy do you hope you've left behind?

R: The one legacy more than anything is a legacy of service. Service is the word. See the internal customers and coworkers as customers as well. As external customers. Just be available and make yourself available to serve and to grow. And to keep an open mind and take risks and see out of the box. And another legacy is just to be the very best you can be and be honest. And have trust. Be trustworthy. Just be you is all it requires. And support the mission. that your organization has. Be a team player all the way. I did buy a

memorial brick that's in that courtyard. And when people look at that brick and they see my name, I just want somebody to say that she made a difference here.

M: We know that. You don't have to buy a brick for that. We talked about this a little informally before taping, but what are your plans for the next phase of your life?

R: Well, when I first go home, I'm going to rest. I'm going to take a little rest period. I have so many things that I'd like to do. I want to work with my church more. Community organizations. Volunteer there. I'd like to become a kindergarten aide in the Jefferson County school system. I want to go back to researching my family history and writing a family paper. Enjoy my hobbies. And that's going to be just about my new season of life. Having fun. That might be a good thing. I always feel like I just want to be connected in some way. I have a genuine love for people. And I never want to isolate from never being able to interact on a daily basis with someone. And to help somebody each day in some way. Be it a phone call, smile, visit, an errand, or something. Just truly live a life of service is what I'm hoping to do.

M: What are you going to miss the most?

R: My NCTC and Fish and Wildlife family. More than anything.

M: We'll still be here.

R: Yes and I will be here.

M: Let me ask you one more question.

R: They'll probably be like Angee did you really retire?

M: Because you've had a long career and you've been with NCTC since the beginning. What changes have you noticed in the ten years the NCTC has been around?

R: The change. Well other than aesthetics. People still need us. People are still coming, and that excites me. And the biggest change I think is some of the technology. We weren't quite where we are. A lot of emphasis has gone to outreach and things like that. And we have the big initiatives with children and nature. And people connecting people

with nature. And that's very exciting. That's a new and exciting thing. And I think more than anything is just seeing people filtering out of the service and a new generation is being prepared to carry on the mission of the organization. And as you see yourself in that position and leaving, you just hope that somebody is being prepared to continue the good works that have begun here.

M: That's great Angee. I don't have any more questions. Is there anything you wanted to say in your oral history that you didn't have a chance?

R: Well I think that I've covered just about everything. I can't think of a stone you haven't...

M: Well Angee thank you so much.

R: Like I've said, it's been the highlight of my career to be here.

M: Well this has been the best oral history I've ever done. I've learned a lot and it was really a pleasure. So thank you.

R: Thank you.