Interview with Orenthal J. Denson
June 1, 2009

KEK: Hi this is Karen Kalnins. I’m a Reference Librarian at the Oklahoma City University Law Library and today is Monday, June 1, 2009. It’s about 3 o’clock here in the afternoon and I am in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma here in the law office of Mr. Orenthel J. Denson. He’s an attorney here in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This interview is part of the larger oral history project that the Oklahoma City University Law Library is sponsoring. As a part of that project we are interviewing attorneys and judges throughout the state of Oklahoma. So welcome Mr. Denson.

OJD: Well, thank you. I’m honored to be here.

KEK: Great. I was so pleased when you agreed to this interview today.

OJD: Well thank you, thank you. And actually I should rephrase that. I’m actually honored that you could be here.

KEK: True enough, because I’m actually in your office. Thank you for having me.

OJD: You’re welcome Karen. I’m honored that you are here.

KEK: What drew you to the law Mr. Denson?

OJD: All my preconceived perceptions of what it meant to be a lawyer drew me to the practice of law, coupled with my long standing desire to be a business owner. I felt that there is no better profession to go into where you can be an entrepreneur and actually practice your profession. And the fact that it is a profession too drew me. I wanted to be something professional. But when I matriculated to the Oklahoma City University in the year 2000 I knew at that point when I went in that my ultimate goal would be to practice law and own my own law firm. So it was just the practice itself, everything that I thought I knew about what it meant to be a lawyer and the opportunity to be an entrepreneur is what drew me to the practice of law.

KEK: Did you have any relatives who were attorneys?

OJD: None. I did have a first cousin that I never met who is a judge in New York. But I’ve never met her, but in my immediate family, no.

KEK: How very interesting. What were your preconceived notions of what an attorney did or what an attorney was like?

OJD: Someone who is powerful, someone who can make a difference in the world. Someone that everyone respected; someone that really had their stuff together; someone who was smart; someone who was intelligent; someone who had a glamorous life, who could jet set around the country and represent famous or infamous people. Someone who could make a difference in people’s lives. Someone who could just render power. It’s just the power of it that really drew me to it. And of course like most people Karen my perceptions were drawn by TV because I’d never really had any real law connections. I’d
never been to court, absent a minor traffic ticket I’ve never been inside a courtroom. I’d never witnessed a trial, so my perceptions like most people were drawn from TV. From the image you get from TV lawyers are always tall and handsome. They were always well-spoken and they had power. And more times than not they were the ones that saved the day. So who wouldn’t want to be that?

KEK: That’s right. How have those early perceptions compared to your real life experiences now that you’ve been out and have practiced law, how do those compare to one another?

OJD: Oh my, what a loaded question. They, the perceptions, are what I call somewhat erroneous somewhat highly inflated. The practice of law is the most challenging thing I’ve ever done. It’s the most challenging and it’s a lot less glamorous than what you see on TV. The courtrooms aren’t what you see on TV. The judges aren’t what you see on TV. In the real world it’s quite different, no regrets. I don’t regret it, but it’s just not as glamorous. I don’t have a mansion. I don’t have a limousine. I don’t have an entourage. And I haven’t had a chance to represent famous people yet or infamous people. But the power part is true. You do have a lot of power and the part that I like most about it, and this was a preconceived notion that stands true is that you can make a difference in people’s lives, a positive change. I do a lot of family law, so you can just imagine what my role is in the average kid’s life. So that part is true. The glamour part is a little, now, I’m a little, fairly new lawyer. So I haven’t had much of a chance to make as much money as some of the lawyers who have been out. I’m a 2003 graduate. So, what 6 years now, this September will be my 6th year. So I haven’t had a chance to really reach the glamour part of it. I’m looking forward to that. I would like to be able to travel the world. I would like to be able to take high profile, pro bono cases and I would like to give millions of dollars to my alma mater, to the Law School at Oklahoma City University one day so that’s yet to be determined if I’ll be able to do that.

KEK: Well hopefully you’ll reach your goals, if not for your own sake then for the University’s sake.

OJD: I love it. I love your honesty Karen.

KEK: Tell me about your time at OCU Law School. You said you began in 2000 and that you graduated in 2003. Tell me about that time.

OJD: I did. It was a wonderful time. I really, that was a smart decision to go to Oklahoma City University. Very, very, all the things that I had heard about the University that were good, was true. You know, it was just a wonderful staff, wonderful group of students. It had been a long time since I had been around that level of people because I was in property management, to be around so many attractive, articulate and intelligent people. My former students and also I’m speaking of the staff there at OCU Law. They are very particular about who they hire, who they expose the law students to. They do a good job. All the professors were A-1, the cream of the crop. The students were the cream of the crop and I was just like a kid in a candy store, just being in that environment. Because I knew Karen that it would be an environment that would foster positive growth in me. It’s so true about who’s in your life, who you are around. If you are fortunate enough to go to a school that really prepares you for your career path and coupled with just great people; smart people who really care about whether or not you pass the bar. Who really care about whether or not you make it through law school, who genuinely care about your overall being. That makes a difference. From what I’ve heard and you’ve certainly heard a little of this from Mr. McDaniel, you just don’t get that from the other two schools here in Oklahoma,
from TU and from the University of Oklahoma. My experience at OCU Law was not only different, but in so many ways better than my undergraduate experience at the University of Oklahoma. So OCU is definitely my school that I plan to one day give back to because I feel the school has given so much to me. The school adequately prepared me for the bar exam. The school showed in so many ways that they cared about my progress, my peers’ progress and that meant a lot to me. It really did. You know we’re spending a lot of money; we spent a lot of money to go to law school. And it’s kind of like a one shot thing, so the fact that I went to OCU Law in 2000 to 2003 really made a tremendous impact on my life. In fact I’d go so far to say that I probably wouldn’t be here today had it not been my decision to go to Oklahoma City University.

KEK: Well great, that’s wonderful. How did you decide to go to OCU Law School as opposed to going to the University of Oklahoma or somewhere else out of state?

OJD: Sure. Like most people I researched it, I used a lot of internet tools. And I’m big on word of mouth. I wanted to hear what other people had to say. You expect to hear good things from faculty members from any law school. But to hear what’s really going on you have to go to the students proper. And I’d gone to the students and the students had nothing but good things to say. I liked what I saw on the internet and when I visited the school during orientation I loved everything that I heard. Also both of my parents live in Oklahoma City proper. And of course OCU is the only law school that is in Oklahoma City and I wanted to be near my parents. So it was a combination of those factors. My research, the location of the school and all the good things that I’d heard about the school helped me reach the decision to go to OCU. In fact I didn’t even bother to apply at OU or Tulsa. I was just dead set on OCU.

KEK: Wow. Well that’s wonderful. So you made up your mind early.

OJD: I did, I did.

KEK: Now you are an African-American man.

OJD: Yes.

KEK: You are. Did you ever feel like you were treated differently at OCU because of your background?

OJD: Absolutely not. No, no, not at all. And in fact the other African-Americans that I went to school with, I think I can speak for them. There was never any kind of special treatment or different treatment because I was African-American and I would have noticed it. I grew up in a predominately mixed neighborhood my entire life; I never grew up in a predominately black neighborhood. And so with that being said, there was diversity at OCU Law, much like my neighborhood. You know you had African-Americans, you had white, you had a few foreign students like most law schools. But it was a good healthy mix of minorities. Now with that being said, of course it’s not ever going to be predominately minority, that’s not going to happen at OU Law, at TU Law or OCU Law. It’s never going to flip and the non African-American students will all of a sudden become the minority. So I knew going in, just common sense told me that there’s not going to be too many people who are going to be African-American, let alone African-American males. So it didn’t bother me. It’s not something that I pondered.
It’s not something that I thought about. There was just no special treatment or any adverse treatment because I was a minority that I’m aware of.

KEK: Well that’s good to hear. Were there any professors that you remember especially, that mentored you or that you had a special fondness for?

OJD: There’s two that I can think of. Professor Jones in LRW, I think she should be the school’s ambassador. If they ever had a professor that could be the ambassador, you know kind of like when there’s a big event, you want this professor to either host it or be at the forefront in meeting people it would be Professor Jones. In so many ways she’s very articulate, very accomplished and she just makes such a good impression upon everybody that come across her including myself. I was very, very impressed by her. To me, she embodied and still does all the good things that the practice of law stands for in terms of integrity, ethics, just the way she carries herself in such a professional manner. She’s always well put together. She’s very compassionate, just all the good qualities that I see in other attorneys and I see in the profession in general. Another professor that stands out is Professor Creel. I love him to death, I consider him to be almost like a father figure. And he again, all the things I said about Professor Jones, I could also say about Professor Creel. There couldn’t be two opposite people by the way, totally different, but they have so many good qualities. Professor Creel and Professor Jones, they were the icing on the cake. I felt like OCU Law already looked good in my eyes but the fact that they had those two professors was just cream of the crop, it was just icing on the cake. They were the cream of the crop and it was like them being the icing on the cake is what I meant to say. But it’s just not just them two, they are the two that stand out. But really, almost 95% of the professors I felt that way about. I was so impressed with how smart that they were. I was so impressed with how they really wanted you to get it for lack of a better word. They really wanted you to do well on the exams. They really wanted you to understand what they were teaching. I was just impressed Karen. I mean I ran across that more times than not. There were just a few, as with any school that you’re not as impressed with as you are with others. But they were not professors that I felt like in any kind of way hurt the school or that I regretted taking a class from. They were all great.

KEK: Well great, that’s wonderful to hear.

OJD: Yes.

KEK: What were your plans after law school?

OJD: To open up my own law firm and I have to tell you this story. It’s really funny Karen. I’ll make it short. It’s a long story, but I’ll make it short. I knew that I would not be happy working for someone else and I am not afraid of a challenge. I was not then and I’m not now. I knew that opening up my own law firm out of law school would be a daunting task to say the least. It would require a lot of hours, a lot of hard work, but then again I like challenges. I wouldn’t have gone to law school if I was afraid of a challenge, right? I said you know what damn it, I’m going to open up my own law firm and I asked 3 other lawyers to join me and to my surprise they said yes. And to this day I’m just like did I have one of those little hypnosis things? I asked them and they were Cynthia DeAntonio, Carol Rocci, and Tim Hayworth. We were going to be DDHR, Denson, DeAntonio, Hayworth and Rocci. We were all excited about opening up our own law firm and we were a little nervous, but we were so excited. Well it was going to be one African-American guy and one African-American girl and then one white guy and one
white girl. I thought, there was a plan behind my madness, but I wanted to appeal to everybody and I felt… I chose 3 people who were smarter than me. If they were smarter than I, then they were in and I feel to this day that all 3 of them were smarter than I and are still to this day and we were going to be DDHR. We went out and got a mailbox and we got our cards made and we really got into this; somehow it fell apart. They girls went their own separate way and Tim Hayworth and I decided to be partners and open up a law firm and we’d done no advertising. It’s been word of mouth. We did try advertising one time but we didn’t get any clients from it so we decided not to, because we didn’t need to. We just wanted to try it for the fun of it. But we ran a radio ad for a week I believe. But it’s really been a blessing because we have not had to advertise and I get, we got over 100 clients a year. And I still get over a 100 clients a year even in this economy. Last year I got 102 and I’m on track this year and I know we’re at that the beginning of June. And I’ll probably have about; I’m on track to get about 98 so far this year. We’re just going by word of mouth, no advertising. So it’s been a tremendous blessing Karen, it has been.

KEK: That is amazing. Now how did you prepare yourself for opening your own practice? Did you have internship experiences in law school?

OJD: Very good question. I did have, I had nominal intern experience in law school. I can’t really say that is what led me to open up my own law firm though. It was not a hands-on experience. It was more like making copies, typing and editing, doing a checklist and medical records. It wasn’t any intern experience. In fact I kind of wish I did have hands-on intern experience because I probably would have been better prepared. When we opened up our law firm I’m not even sure I knew what an entry of appearance was which is a main document that you use in every area of law. It’s a combination of guts. It’s a combination of being driven. It’s a common… I know you’ve heard this before, I know it sounds so much like a cliché but I know that if you really set your mind to doing something and you really want it bad enough, then there’s nothing in the world that can stop you. And I’m a firm believer in that and I’ll be honest with you, I’m being totally honest with you at the th… I know what, I could fail. You know, I could be open for a month. I’ll tell you a story, a true story. We threw a launch party and invited everybody that we knew. We invited people from OCU Law because part of the problem when you open a law firm is just getting the word out there that you are a lawyer. No one knew who Orenthel Denson was except my friends and relatives. No one knew who Tim Hayworth was. In fact most of the people at OCU Law didn’t know that we had our own law firm. So that’s the first hurdle that you have to get over Karen. You have to get over that; that “nobody knows who you are” hurdle. What we did was we threw a launch party and we were so blessed because we invited about 185 people and we had probably about 250 people show up. We filled the entire parking lot here and people had to park in the back. We had pizza and hamburgers. We even had a seafood section, tons of people. We made sure that nobody left without having a card, a little sheet with our card that says all the areas of law that we do. We didn’t give them just one card because we wanted them to hand them out to their family and friends and the phone has never stopped ringing since. But the day that we held our launch party, I’ll tell you about guts. My checking account was probably overdrawn about 12 or 15 dollars and that’s all the money that I had in the world because I just spent all my money on the bar study loan. So I had no choice but to start making money because I had no other money. And so sure enough, the cases came in one by one. It was a little nerve wracking going to the federal and state courtrooms and you had never done it before. So you had to learn very quickly. You had to come up to speed very quickly. I couldn’t have, I wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for the support of my fellow
lawyers. Oklahoma City has without, I haven’t done a survey or anything or a comparison, but I bet if they did a national study of how helpful lawyers are in particular states we would be at the top of the list because there’s no way Karen that I could have made it without being able to call….I would call people up and say “I’m Orenthel Denson, I’m a new lawyer and I have court coming up on Thursday, this is my quandary. Do you have time to help me? Do you have any kind of advice? Can I pay you?” No one ever took a dime. People not only helped, but they said “Take down my cell phone number. This is my office number, if you want to call me on Saturdays. Here write down my e-mail, e-mail me anytime that you want.” I got that probably about 97% of the time. I get people that are just over, just willing to help because of that and I was so touched by that Karen. I was so overwhelmed by that, everyone knows that if you start a law firm call me because I’m just so helpful. “Here are my forms, here’s my email, here’s my cell phone. You call me if you need help.” But it was the combination of the launch party, getting my butt out there and doing speaking. I love to do public speaking. When I did public seminars, I’d hand out cards. I would do a seminar and talk about family law. I would do a seminar discussing estate planning. I would do a seminar discussing…just anything, juvenile law and then you hand out cards. I’m a firm believer that if you hand out enough cards and I tell all new lawyers this, you should go through a box of cards, maybe 500 to a 1,000 a month if you’re a new lawyer because you’d be surprised, we had two callers the other day. One lady said “You remember back 3 years ago, waiting in line at KFC and I asked you what you did for a living and you gave me a card.” These are just two people just recently that I got within the last seven days who I handed a card just waiting in line in a fast food place. So there’s a demand for lawyers out there. You can do it and you can open up your own law firm right out of law school if you are willing to work hard, if you are willing to throw a launch party, if you are willing not to be scared when you are going into court. You know failure is not trying in my book. And if you try and you don’t succeed that’s not failure. But you fail when you want to do something, it’s a dream that you want to accomplish and then you don’t even try. So I didn’t want to be a failure. I wanted to be able to say if the law firm didn’t make it, I’m still a success because I tried.

KEK: Absolutely. And when you started out the law firm here with Mr. Hayworth what areas of the law did you want to focus on?

OJD: I wanted to focus on only 3, automobile wrecks, juvenile law and then business development. But then I soon realized to pay the bills you have to do at least 8 or 9 areas of law. So as a result of that, we expanded our area to include a lot, federal law, a lot of civil law, criminal law, which I never wanted to do. But now I have to do because I wanted to pay the bills. You just have to expand your areas when you’re a new lawyer to keep the money coming in.

KEK: What would you recommend for other new lawyers to do? I mean do you think it’s feasible to specialize when you are starting your own practice or would you recommend just staying in sort of one area?

OJD: Well if you specialize that’s the same as staying in one area of law and I think that generally that’s a mistake if you’re a new lawyer. You know generally you hear those law firms that are specializing in one area; it took many years to get to that point where they could just specialize to get to one area. They’ve built a reputation in that particular area that’s taken years to accomplish and I would think that would almost be impossible if you’re a brand new lawyer. I think that brand new lawyers and by the
way it’s beneficial doing different areas of law because you can’t truly tell whether or not you like another area of law unless you actually dabble in it. I found that I really like federal law but I had to dabble in it in order to figure out that I really liked it. You know likewise with juvenile law, likewise with general civil law, had I not dabbled in it Karen, I wouldn’t have known that I liked it. So I say, no, do many areas of law. Now if there’s an area that you just can’t stay in then don’t do it because it’s not going to be worth your time in just paying the bills if you don’t really like that area of law. But that’s how you determine if you like different areas of law. You don’t know whether or not you like cheesecake unless you eat it.

KEK: That’s true.

OJD: Same difference.

KEK: True enough. How difficult was it for you to learn all these areas of law while at the same time starting your own business and having all of these, sort of plates in the air at one time?

OJD: It was very difficult. I prayed to God that he could increase the 24 hour period to a 34 hour period in a day. Lord if I just have 10 more hours a day I could get everything done. That was the toughest part. You hit the nail right on the head, is trying to learn while you’re practicing; very, very frustrating. Then you learn that the lawyers even though they meant well they only told you 85% of everything you need to know. The other 15% kind of got you embarrassed in court or the statute didn’t really answer the other part. A lot of bumps and falls but you learn to pick yourself up. But at the same time because I was doing what I liked to do—what I wanted to do and still do to this day. I would imagine it would have been tougher on me had I not liked it. But because I liked it and loved it, even though it was tough, it was still rewarding. I remember when I would just read the family law statutes; to just read them to find out is there anything that I missed. Is there anything else that I need to know? You know in court, so…

KEK: Well it sounds like it. Now you mentioned earlier that you would call different attorneys for their help and their advice. How important do you think is it to have a mentor or to have sort of a pool of attorneys that you can call on?

OJD: It’s mandatory. It’s not optional if you want to make it for several reasons. Number one, just knowing what the statutes say and even watching other people in the courtroom is not enough. Anybody can read a statute or a group of statutes and understand them. But you have to have a mentor because in law, law is so fluid. So liquid, that it is not black and white. That it’s so fluid that there’s always going to be an issue no matter how much you’ve read. You can memorize the statutes. You can think that you know procedure. But there’s that one issue that you never thought of and the statute doesn’t directly address it. So it’s very crucial that not only do you have a mentor, but that you are intelligent enough to know where your weak areas of law are and what you need to be asking a mentor. What good is a mentor if you are not asking the right questions? So mentoring is everything but coupled with also being intelligent enough to handle that person, that mentor in a way that’s most beneficial to both of you meaning that you don’t call them every time you have a question, you don’t call them every day. You email them and you give them a chance to respond, rather than call them all the time because they’ll eventually get to you but it has to be mutually beneficial. You can’t worry the mentor to death but at the same time you want to have 2 or 3 people. What if you have an emergency question and you can’t get a hold of your mentor? I tell people to have 2 or 3 mentors in each area of law. So that if you can’t get a
hold of one you got 2 more tries to try to get a hold of someone. So very, very, very, very important. And there’s no better place to be a mentee, and that’s here in Oklahoma City because of the support for the average lawyer. You can pick them, I remember one time I was really stressed. I said oh my God I only have one mentor, I’m just going to pick this guy under DUIs and just be honest with him and say you know “I’m Orenthel Denson. I’m a new lawyer. You know this is my situation. Could you help me or advise me?” Never once did someone say no.

**KEK:** That’s wonderful.

**OJD:** Not one single time.

**KEK:** That is amazing. Yes. Now we talked about this before have you found in your practice of law, has your race or background ever been an issue or a stumbling block?

**OJD:** It’s really funny that you mention that. That’s a very loaded question; very, very loaded. I think it’s so important, gosh, it’s so important that you have people of integrity in that position because it’s a disaster when you don’t and it doesn’t bode well on the judicial system. It doesn’t reflect well on Oklahoma and more times than not Karen someone ends up being hurt in the real world by it. But what do you do? I’m just a lawyer. I guess I could file a judicial complaint every time but I don’t think that that would get me very far. You just suck it up and take it. I know that that doesn’t sound very intelligent, but you do. You just choke it up. You learn from it. I’m a true believer that there’s a silver lining in every situation and I actually learn and as unfortunate as those situations have been…and I run across them probably 30% of the time. But I’m never bitter. I never harbor hatred. In fact often times I feel sorry for the individual, because often times my clients are educated before they go to court. They know what case law says about their quandary, they know what the statutes say about their quandary. They know the weaknesses and strengths of our cases before we go to court. So when the judge does something that is not in line with the statutes I don’t have to say a word. My client already knows and would say hey that judge’s behavior was not… I’ve even had clients say “Was there anything going on between you and the judge?” I say “no.” But I can’t say I think the judge is racist, I can’t say that. I can’t make a comment like that to a client. But the few times that I’ve had awkward situations or where I think that my clients have been hurt, Karen you know it’s never cost me a client. Never, ever. Clients never have said well I’m going to go get another lawyer, one I think the judge likes or something. But I do think that there’s lots of racism unfortunately and I think it’s even more apparent when we go to these little small towns. You know, who are you African-American who thinks that he knows more than everyone in the court room? So I’ve learned to be crestfallen. I’ve learned to not sound so articulate before particular judges; without embarrassing myself or taking away from myself. I’ve learned to be a few minutes late on purpose as opposed to being there before the other lawyer gets there. I’ve learned how to, when a judge says something that’s not appropriate, sometimes it doesn’t matter how nice you are, no matter how diplomatic you are on putting on the record the correct way they’re just going to be upset just because you’ve had to correct them. So you have to really be able to size up your judge pretty fast and/or opposing counsel especially as it relates to the race issue because you can end up starving if you have a judge who is not impartial and did not do what she was supposed to do.

**KEK:** True enough.

**OJD:** I hope that answers your…
KEK: Oh it does. It does absolutely, absolutely. So what do you think, do you think that you’ve ever been ruled against based on your background?

OJD: Oh absolutely. Oh yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

KEK: How did you handle that?

OJD: Again, it is really important because keep in mind I’m an African-American in Oklahoma City. Most lawyers are not and a lot of my clients can afford to go to anyone and by the way most of my clients happen to be white. They are not African-American. The beauty in being African-American in dealing with that type of issue is this, as long as I’m competent, as long as I’m honest, which I will continue to be. As long as…you’ve heard the theory 2 wrongs don’t make a right and no matter how racist or biased that I feel a judge is for whatever reason Karen it just doesn’t exonerate me from being the best damn attorney I can be. My clients know that I am good. They know more times than not at least from a sound perspective, I sound better then opposing counsel. More times than not I have a better argument and more times than not I’m not going to go to court unless I have a sound position. I’m smarter than that. So usually when I go to court, it generally is in my favor. But the few times where I’ve had judges…I had one client who filed a judicial complaint against a judge and she deserved it. She was that bad and she was that racist and that biased. My clients are intelligent, they know. It’s no different than if you and I walked into a grocery store and you were behind me and the clerk obviously had a beef with me because of whatever. You know used the “n” word, you know he could say “I don’t want your kind in here” or whatever. It’s been that blatant almost before. That doesn’t take a rocket scientist standing behind me to know that there is something wrong. This guy is just trying to purchase a soda, he’s dressed appropriately, he’s nice. The store clerk’s behavior is not right. Well you could use that same analogy in court. My clients are intelligent. They know that I know the law. They know that I can answer their questions. More times than not I make sure that they know the strengths and weaknesses of our case and what case law says. I know what the statues say. So you have a judge behave in a manner that’s not “judge-like” for a lack of a better word, they can figure it out Karen and it doesn’t cost me any clients, thank the Lord it doesn’t cost me, but it doesn’t. If anything I’ve had clients apologize on the behalf of judges. I’ve had clients that say “Well I could have told you that judge was racist because they use the “n” word all the time. I know because he’s my brother’s brother-in-law, or sister’s husband.” You know I don’t get bitter. Do I get upset? Sure. Do I get disappointed? Of course, I expect just like I should go to court and be competent pursuant to the terms of Title 5 a judge should also be competent and behave in a manner that’s reflects well on the judiciary. But Karen we’re in the real world and it doesn’t happen that way all the time. Not to make excuses, because it’s unacceptable. But you just can’t be bitter, you can be upset and that’s normal for a little while. You can be disappointed for a little while but you have to just pick yourself up, brush off the dirt and keep going. And try to represent your clients the best that you can without there being too much tension between your client and the judge. I had a guy say, “I wanted you to know I filed a complaint,” but I refuse to go back before that judge. His complaint was honored by the way. The judge recused herself, had to. It’s unfortunate but I guess judges are people too. Not to make excuses, because when you take that oath of office you’re promising to be a particular way and do a particular thing in certain circumstances. But unfortunately in the real world they don’t always care about that.

KEK: That’s true.
OJD: And it’s very sad.

KEK: It is.

OJD: I’ve dealt with insecurities from…I remember seeing myself not standing up as tall, from the tallest guy in the room. If I’m in one of those small towns, not wearing my good suit because I don’t want them to think who is this city boy who thinks he……I’ve seen myself try not to sound as articulate or intelligent because the judge did not and you don’t want to make the judge feel uncomfortable. I found myself just doing little things like that. Bending my knees, just anything to just be a part of the group without being ostracized which is what happens. Again that happens to white city lawyers that go to small towns; there’s just different types of racism. There’s a guy, a lawyer that’s extremely short and he says he deals with racism all the time. He’s white, blond haired and blue eyed but because he’s 4’8” people treat him differently. So it’s never acceptable when it comes from the bench. You expect higher; at least I do. I expect a higher standard coming from the judiciary than I would from anyone else. I just do.

KEK: No I would tend to agree with that.

OJD: But for the most part, most of our judges I like and I think that they are fair. Now I’m not basing these comments on whether or not I prevailed. I’m not that silly or immature. You can’t win every case. I’m talking about Karen those situations that were blatantly either inappropriate conduct by the judge period regardless of the issues. Or they were just weren’t playing on a fair…I had a judge the other day say I couldn’t cross-examine a witness. And I said “Well your honor why not?” “Because you already had” and spit was coming out of her mouth and she didn’t look very judicial. I kind of felt embarrassed for her. She was chewing on a cough drop or something. And I said “Well the other lawyer had the same.” “No, Mr. Denson has not, remember you wanted to go to lunch break first?” And so it’s things like that where they show their biases and they are not very professional and you just go “ouch.” Come on, you’re a judge act like one. Behave like one. If you don’t care for a lawyer that’s fine but with all due respect that’s not why we’re there. We’re there to carry out but I’ve even had opposing lawyers say, “Oh that judge is racist or just ignore that judge.” But it’s unacceptable when you become a judge and you can leave that stuff at home.

KEK: Absolutely. Well I see that we are about half-way through so let’s go ahead and stop the interview and then we’ll continue on.

OJD: Sure. Okay.

KEK: Alright, thank you.

KEK: Hi this is Karen Kalnins. I’m a Reference Librarian at the Oklahoma City University Law Library and this will be the second half of the interview with Mr. Orenthal J. Denson. I’m still here in Oklahoma City here with Mr. Denson in his office. It’s about quarter to 4 or so here in the afternoon. In the first half of the interview Mr. Denson spoke about why he went to law school and how he came to set up his own practice and so on. And now I wanted to ask Mr. Denson, tell me about one of your most
memorable cases thus far. You said you’re a new grad, fairly new, out in the field, you’ve been practicing since 2003. Have you had any memorable cases so far?

OJD: I’ve had quite a few cases Karen. The ones that stand out the most are the ones where I make the biggest difference I feel; the ones where…I can give you a short example of a juvenile case. There was a juvenile case where…..the juvenile docket is separated into 2 different types of cases. You have the deprived cases wherein the parents have alleged, it’s been alleged that the parents have done something wrong to deprive the children of something, hence the word deprived. Then you have a second type of case called the delinquent cases where the children have allegedly done something wrong and not their parents. I had a case one time where a young lady was just headed to prison really, really fast. She was in high school. She had been a good kid up until the time she got into the 10th grade and like most 10th graders you fall under peer pressure. Well the bad girls accepted her. She was on the news, channel 9 news for stealing her parent’s vehicle. There was a high speed chase involving the police. She committed an armed bank robbery and of course she dropped out of school; all the things that would have gotten us killed by our parents. She was really headed down the wrong path and I decided to have a meeting with her; her parents were there of course for liability reasons. And I do this often in delinquent cases and I basically told her, “You know what, this is it. You’re at a point now where you can make decisions that will affect you for the rest of your life. You are no longer a kid. You’re going to have to decide if you’re going to go to prison and lead a life, that type of life. Or am I going to listen to the attorney and get myself together and get myself on the straight and narrow. Go to school and fix your hair up and dress appropriately; all the things that you used to do.” Well after she cried, there’s lots of crying and making excuses, very emotional, she promised me that she would be the best person that she could be. And that she’s not afraid to be disciplined, she understands discipline now. She’s going to, the lady now, she graduated last year, she had a 4.0 her senior year, got accepted to college, never hung out with the bad girls again and had a perfect attendance her junior and senior years at high school. Those types of cases stand out the most because again you make a real impact upon someone’s life. So I like those types of cases.

KEK: It sounds like it. What do you think finally went home to her? Your speech or just the whole series of events or what do you think?

OJD: You know Karen we’re attorneys and counselors at law and you’ve heard that before and it’s the counseling part I think that really made a difference. Sometimes we have to not to go off on a tangent but most successful people know how they are being perceived by the world. They’re pretty accurate. The least successful people don’t have a good grasp on how they are being perceived and they’re just not as self-aware. That’s a secret that I’ve found in life. I had to make her self-aware of her behavior and not only the impact that was having on her family and her school but the impact that’s it’s having on her reputation and how detrimental it is to her future because they don’t think about that and you’re living in the moment and you’re living for today. So you are not thinking about the future. You are not aware of the true impact that your behavior is having. So I think that’s what made the difference. It’s almost like putting a mirror in front you and saying this is you, like it or not this is you. Have you ever seen people say “My God I’m looking at that photo of me and I didn’t know that I’d gained that much weight?” You know it took a photo for them to realize how big they’d gotten. Well it’s kind of like that thing. I’m the photo of the weight gain, I’m bringing reality to you; more times than not they don’t like what they see. Often times they don’t like the way they are being perceived by the world and they just don’t think about it for 5, they’re not still 10 seconds long enough for them to think about it. It’s after that that they
break down and cry. We get into what is it about you that you don’t like because usually there’s some self-hatred issues there especially with females, with young girls. So I think that putting a mirror on her, making her self-aware of the true impact of her behavior how it’s not cool at all and the prospect of going to prison now that you are 18. There’s no more slapping you on the hand juvenile law. You commit a felony as an 18 year old or older and you’re looking at jail and prison time.

KEK: That’s right; it just gets far more serious.

OJD: It gets more serious. So I think it was a combination of the self-awareness and the prospect of going to prison that really changed her. But you get to them when they walk out crying especially when you have these big kids. These guys who come in and they are teenagers who are bigger than me. My God these teenagers are like young adults now. They have mustaches and goatees and they’re big. But even when you have the big guys come in they come in big and tough and they always leave crying and mellow because you have to break them down and those are the rewarding cases; I think that I’ve made a true difference which is my goal. I want to break those stereotypes that you hear about those lawyers that are only interested in the money, not really caring about the clients and I care about my clients just as much as I do about the money. I can’t say less or more but it’s important to make a difference.

KEK: It certainly sounds like it.

OJD: Those are the cases that are mostly memorable when you make a difference. Now the cases also that are memorable are the ones where the odds are stacked against you and you prevail, those always stand out too. You really feel like a lawyer then.

KEK: That’s right. Mr. Denson what kinds of skills do you think are important for an attorney to have, whether they want to start their own practice or whether they go to court often as you do?

OJD: Yes. I love that question. Very, very good question. I think that there are 5 things that are really important. Self-awareness is one. How loud, how soft you are talking, how articulate or not articulate do you sound. Being able to be aware of the judge and sizing up the judge, being aware of the case. You have to be an aware type person. You have to be very focused on now and what’s going on around you with the opposing side and with the judge so self-awareness is number one, or just being very aware. The second thing is that you have, I don’t want a lawyer who is doing it because he had to pay back his student loans. I want a lawyer who is doing it because he’s passionate about the law; passion is so important. It’s another thing that I think separates the marginally successful people from the very successful people; that you have this desire to do what you are doing. The third trait is working very hard. You can’t be afraid to work hard and it’s easy to work hard. It takes no effort to work hard if you are doing what you truly love to do. There are days when I go like I got to go home. I really could stay a couple more hours, I want to stay 2 or 3 hours. Well you don’t hear that from people unless they really like their job. Otherwise you hear just the opposite, “Oh my God and we got only 10 minutes and then we get to go home and I’m happy.” So you can’t have that mentality I think and be a very effective attorney because it’s going to come through. Judges aren’t stupid, your clients aren’t stupid. They’re going to know if you really want to be there or not. So then the last trait I think is just to be disciplined. You know the good lawyers, they have to be at work at 6 or 5 a.m. or whatever. They never take off work Karen. They work hard and they are very disciplined. They’ve earned their reputations from being effective and huge and being very popular. They’ve earned that just by their passion and their discipline.
So those are some of the traits that I think are a must especially if you are going to open up your own law firm because after all you are the boss. The buck stops with you. There’s no boss above you that says “Okay Orenthel you said that you’d have this turned in by Friday. You know this is Monday; you don’t have it turned in. What’s the deal? I’d hate to have to write you up.” You are your own boss so you have to be disciplined. You can’t have moments where you don’t get things done. No, that’s not going to work. But that’s unacceptable.

KEK: Absolutely. Tell me about some of your professional activities. Are you involved in the bar association?

OJD: I am. I’m a member of the awards committee. I’m a member of the family law division and I just joined the criminal law division.

KEK: How important are those activities to you?

OJD: I think that they are important to me because I’m such a new lawyer. I think in general they are very important to new lawyers. I tell everyone to be active if you have enough time. Oftentimes lawyers are very selfish with their time. They don’t believe in taking work home. They don’t believe in joining any law school club, but I think those things are beneficial.

KEK: Tell me has there been any advice that you’ve gotten along the way that has really helped you?

OJD: From Jim Calloway at the bar association. He said that your best advertisements would be word of mouth. He said to treat all the clients, first of all to be competent and treat the clients like you would want to be treated and that includes how you charged them and I think that that is so true. If you work hard and you run a very successful business and you work hard and you don’t cheat your clients; you’ll never have to worry about advertising. You won’t even in a bad economy you can survive. So when lawyers overcharge people and charge them 10 and 15,000 dollar retainers, I like that because it makes my job a lot easier. Because they are not going to pay that huge retainer they are going to look for someone like me who can do the same quality job but for 2 or 3,000 dollars cheaper.

KEK: Have you noticed any slack off in business because of the poor economy?

OJD: I have, but not, how can I explain it? Yes I have, but not drastic at all. More of a, I’d say under 10 clients less then I’d be at this time last year.

KEK: Well that’s not too bad.

OJD: No, not at all.

KEK: Is there any kind of advice that you would give someone just finishing up law school, just starting up in practice?

OJD: Just work hard. Work hard, work hard, work hard and don’t do it if it’s not your passion because you can do a lot of things with a law degree. You don’t have to practice law. Save that for people for
whom it’s their passion to practice law; I mean it’s something that they just live for every second. If you don’t feel that way, don’t bother because it’s not going to be rewarding.

KEK: True enough. Is there anything that I haven’t asked that you would like to say or that you would like to take about Mr. Denson?

OJD: No just that the practice of law is a wonderful field. I have no regrets about going into law. It’s not for everybody. But for the most part, I love being a lawyer. I respect and love the decision to go to Oklahoma City University and I wouldn’t do anything else but practice law so far. Maybe be an actor one day, a famous actor. I’m thinking about doing that, going to Hollywood and doing a little acting maybe one day.

KEK: Well that’s not a bad goal.

OJD: So maybe you might see me on the big screen, maybe you won’t, so…

KEK: That’s right. What do you think can be done about the judges in terms of changing them or changing their point of view?

OJD: They have to have a different system other then the judicial complaint system. That’s the only recourse and that’s the problem. I hate to say it but people who lack integrity, and I’m only talking about the judges whom I feel lack integrity, there’s only a few. They are not stupid people. They know how far to go, how to push the buttons and blah, blah, blah. We have to have a different system to weed them out other then the judicial complaint system. There has to be some kind of anonymous number that you can call and say “Hey on blah, blah day send someone to watch this judge’s behavior.” Because often times you can see firsthand what people are talking about if you are just in a courtroom without them knowing who you are. If they know who you are then of course they are going to be on their best behavior. But if you could send an anonymous person and say “Hey this is what Mr. Denson said and he’s right.” The judge can’t do this or the judge can’t do that. It takes the burden off the client to handle it any further because now the judge’s committee can take care of that issue. You don’t have to handle it any further. You can still go to the courtroom and practice without any kind of retaliation. But the way the system is set up now it’s just not very friendly in terms of filing a complaint. So I debated on filing a judicial complaint against a judge I felt that she deserved it, Well, well, well deserved it, a judicial complaint but I didn’t do it. I just could not bring myself to put it on paper because I felt that “Well my God if they don’t do anything then I’ll get retaliated against even further.” So I’m not trying to get retaliated against any further but that needs to change. And somehow they have to have some kind of system down where that changes. Do you agree?

KEK: It sounds like there needs to be something revamped there.

OJD: I think so especially when you have the same judges get multiples of complaints. That’s not acceptable. Not at all, not from a judge. Again you expect a high standard of conduct coming from a judge. And by the way, this is not ruling issues that I’m talking about where there’s some disagreement in a ruling. This is conduct issues which makes it worse.
KEK: Yeah it almost does because you are not quibbling with the results. You’re quibbling with the behavior on the bench.

OJD: Yes the judge’s behavior on the bench. I had a judge one time say, often times in family law we send things certified mail. And as serious as a heart attack, without even joking she turned and looked at me and said “Well just because you said that on that envelope had blah, blah papers and it doesn’t mean it had blah, blah papers. You could still be lying to me.” And I’m like “Well first of all I’m not lying and second of all how can I prove it if you’re not going to accept the certified…” It’s things like that that even the opposing counsel had a problem with what the judge was saying and said. She called me and told me. So it’s things like that that just make you disappointed.

KEK: It sounds like it. Mr. Denson do you have anything else?

OJD: No. That’s it. I hope I haven’t been too long-winded.

KEK: No you’ve been wonderful and I really appreciate your time today. I realize your time is valuable, so thank you so much for taking an hour.

OJD: You’re welcome.

KEK: I appreciate it.

OJD: Well thank you for having me Karen.

KEK: Thank you.