INTERVIEW WITH LYNNE SAUNDERS

MARCH 24, 2009

KEK: Hi, this is Karen Kalnins. I’m a reference librarian at the Oklahoma City University Law Library and today I will be interviewing Ms. Lynne Saunders. She is a law clerk at the federal courthouse here for Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange. Judge LaGrange is the Chief U.S. District Court Judge here in the Western District of Oklahoma. And we are here in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Today is Tuesday, March 24th, 2009 and it’s a little bit past ten o’clock here in the morning and as I said before we are in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This interview is part of the broader 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 Ms. Saunders.

LS: Thank you, glad to be here with you.

KEK: Great, I was so pleased when you agreed to this interview this morning. So, what drew you to the law Ms. Saunders?

LS: I have a very diverse background. I thought I wanted to be a doctor when I went to college, undergrad. I went to University of Maryland College Park and I was also in ROTC and I ended up graduating, not getting into medical school so I had a four year commitment with the Air Force as an officer. And that’s how I ended up here in Oklahoma. I was stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi first and then met my husband down there who is from New York and he got transferred to Oklahoma. I joined him in Oklahoma in 1980. I was in the service for two more years. Once I got out I did a variety of different things. I had earned my M.B.A. at OCU while I was in the Air Force. So, I thought maybe I would go into management. I worked in a management training program which I didn’t really like too much so I ended up going into real estate. First, as an associate working with a broker in commercial real estate, and then I got my broker’s license. I decided to manage rental properties because I had a lot of friends in the military who couldn’t sell their homes in the early eighties and so they rented them out and I managed them for them. During that time, in ’86 my son was born, I was doing my thing with the rental properties, toting him along, and doing a lot of volunteer work in the community. And I don’t really know what it was that struck me, that made me decide to go into the law. I had always been told that I talk a lot and I’ve always been a good writer, and I decided I really wanted to learn more about the law and see what I could do with it to help people. I enjoy helping people. So, I would have to say that was probably my motivation to go to law school. There were no other lawyers in my family, blood relatives. One of my cousin’s husband is a lawyer and he was the public defender in Lake Charles, Louisiana and was just elected this year as a district judge there in Louisiana. So, I didn’t have much of a role model as many kids do
that have lawyers in their families and grow up around the law. But I took to it like a duck to water. When I started I knew I was in the right place, I just absorbed it, loved it, just couldn’t get enough of it. I absolutely enjoyed law school; I had a ball at OCU.

KEK: That’s great, that’s great to hear. Now what made you decide to go to OCU?

LS: At the time I was able to stay home with my son and go to school at night. My husband worked during the day and then I could go at night. There were some times when that schedule didn’t work and I actually brought my son to classes with me while I was in law school. So, it was the flexibility to be able to be home with him and then go to school at night.

KEK: Tell me about your time at OCU.

LS: I think I was probably one of the rare few that really did enjoy law school. I’ve always enjoyed learning. And, I was in a unique position I think, because going to school at night, your colleagues are a totally different crowd than during the day. You’re dealing with people who have jobs, who have families, who had other careers, who are working, and are very serious about the study of the law, and doing what we needed to do to do well. There was no time to be frivolous; we had too many responsibilities for that. In my first semester of law school I became quick friends with several people; there were about five of us. We formed a study group and our study group stayed together through the whole three and a half years of night school. That helped a lot. We were competitive, we helped each other, we pushed each other, and we all did extremely well. And I enjoyed learning how to apply the law with the outside experiences that were shared with people like me who had worked before going to law school or were working, had families and could bring a wealth of knowledge from the outside world into the classroom. I really am glad that I went to night school and would encourage anyone that could to go into night school because of the different types of people you meet. Typically, in the day school you are going to have kids that are just right out of college and don’t have much experience in life. Life experience enriched my time at OCU Law School.

KEK: It sounds like it, it certainly sounds like it.

LS: It did, truly. And I loved it, I loved it.

KEK: That’s wonderful. Are there any professors that you remember or that influenced you?

LS: Oh, I remember lots of professors. The one that was the toughest on us was Joe Weeks. We had him for….what are your first classes?

KEK: Property, contracts, torts.

LS: We had him for contracts and we had him for evidence, evidence I believe. And he was probably one of the most unique professors that we had, very, very tough. Very tough, scared
everybody to death but truly made us learn, truly made us learn. And to get a C out of his class was just phenomenal, which is what I got the first year. They graded really tough back then, I don’t know how it is right now. But he was something else, he really made a big impression upon me about the law, the love of the law, to really analytically think about things. The funniest story I have to tell about him is in our evidence class he had told us all year, all semester, and at that time they kept prior exams on file at the library and he kept telling us all year, “Make sure you look at those exams of mine.” And I’ll never forget our study group studied the exams he had on file. The last exam we studied, the night before the test, was the test he gave us the next day. It was exactly the same.

KEK: You’re kidding.

LS: We looked at each other when we got our papers, we were like, “Oh my God, how could this be? How lucky could we be?” Unbelievable. And there was a big brew-ha-ha in the class about it because one of the students, I can’t remember her name, actually raised her hand and told him, “Professor Weeks, do you realize you just gave us the exam that you have on file?” He said, “Yeah, I know what I did.” And then she said, “Well, I didn’t study it, I didn’t see it.” And several other people said, “This isn’t fair.” And all he said was, “I told you over and over again to look at those exams.” And the five of us of course aced it.

KEK: Congratulations.

LS: That’s my funniest law school story.

KEK: That is wonderful. Well see, he gave you the advice all semester.

LS: Kept telling us.

KEK: Kept telling you.

LS: You’d be a fool not to look at those exams.

KEK: That’s right.

LS: I also enjoyed Professor Bernard. I took professional responsibility and something else with her. But I enjoyed her tremendously; she had quite a different view of things. And then, Dennis Arrow, loved him, he was crazy but I loved him. I enjoyed constitutional law tremendously because of him. And then finally, my other favorite professor, well, I had two more. Emmanuel Edem taught us trial practice. Me and my partner we just could never take it seriously. And we would give him just total headaches but we had a ball in that class. And, Andy Lester who I had for criminal law and state and local government. And to this day Andy and I are the best of friends. So are Emmanuel and I. Emmanuel is one of my mentors. And I just enjoyed, truly enjoyed school, it was one of the best experiences of school I ever had.
KEK: That’s great to hear. How important do you think was your study group to your success?

LS: Very important. I think finding people that you can bounce ideas off of, who pushed you to continue even when you were tired and worn out, and didn’t feel like doing it anymore. You had that continuous support from your friends, “We can make it, we can do it, you can make it, we’ll help you, let’s study this, let’s study that, let’s work on our outlines, let’s compare.” It was like being on the battlefield and you’re with your unit and you’re going through the battle, through the fire, but you’re not alone. And I would encourage anyone to try to find that kind of group or several people or even a buddy to study with because it gets so hard and it gets so overwhelming at times that you have to have someone there for you that knows what you’re going through. All of us had spouses and things like that but you don’t know what it’s like until you’re going through it. And to be able not to go through it alone is a blessing.

KEK: Absolutely.

LS: And I think it made a big difference for us.

KEK: Now what year did you enter law school?

LS: In the fall of 1990.

KEK: When did you graduate?

LS: December of ’93.

KEK: What were your plans after law school?

LS: Well, I thought I would get a job. I graduated number one in my class but I didn’t get a job. Unfortunately, I have that dubious distinction of being the only number one in her class that was not given a job when she graduated. I don’t think that’s happened before me or since.

KEK: How, why do you think that happened?

LS: I think that happened because of racism. Back in ’94, and I must say I think things have changed a lot now, I clerked with many firms. I clerked with, I was at the top of the class after the first semester and so naturally I was sought after and I clerked with lots of firms. Andrews Davis, McKinney Stringer, I actually worked with them all through the second and third year of law school. I worked during the day for them and went to school at night. I clerked for Feriot and Gum and I did a legal internship at Legal Aid. At the time, I was not given a job but I interviewed with Crowe and Dunlevy. By the time I graduated, basically what I was told was that there were no positions by these firms because of the economy.

KEK: You’re kidding.
I'm not kidding. And one firm, Andrews Davis, hired Judge Thompson’s daughter instead of me because of course he was a federal judge. But she didn’t graduate number one, I did.

Exactly.

It was a very difficult time for me. Probably the first time that I was really knocked to my knees by racism. If I were not capable or not able to do the job why was I in the law firms, working all through law school? So, I knew it had nothing to do with my ability. But it did profoundly affect me. Even Legal Aid didn’t want to hire me because they said I was probably not going to stay. But eventually did make me an offer. I went to work for them, and then for my judge, Vicki Miles-LaGrange when she first took the bench and had been my mentor from my first semester of law school. We met my first semester in law school and I worked for her while she was still in the Senate. I also worked for her in her law firm. And then when I started getting these other offers from big firms she said, “You need to spread your wings and get out there and see what it’s like at the big firms” and things like that. I thought I had done everything right. Anyway, it was a very, very, difficult time for me trying to keep my self-confidence up and believe in myself. I knew the law, I was a great student, I was an excellent student and I did excellent work or I would not have been at those firms. So, I had to accept the reason that I did not get a job offer. It was very difficult but with the Lord’s help, I was able to and when my judge was nominated for the federal bench she asked me to come with her. And so I actually joined her in 1994, November of ’94, when she took the bench as one of her law clerks. I was with her for the next four years. This is my second time around with her.

So, you were with her from ’94 to ’98…..

to ’98. In ’99, I went to work for Crowe and Dunlevy. I guess having the clerkship on my resume made a difference. But I went to work for Crowe and Dunlevy and was with them until 2005 or ’06, probably 2005. When I went to work for them I worked on the aircraft title section practicing title law. That’s where they had a position opening and that’s what I went in and started doing. But then I moved to different departments. I worked for Michael Stewart who was over the corporate and banking divisions, and I did a lot of banking law for him. And then their need for more litigators kept increasing so I was finally moved into the general, civil litigation, and employment law areas. One thing that I learned about myself is that I love the pure law. I love the pure law; I have a passion for it. I was an excellent researcher and writer and being a law clerk was the job that was meant for me, but I felt I needed to get out and get real-life experiences besides just research and writing for a judge. It took me quite a few years to realize that I did not like litigation. I tried it, I kept doing it, I worked hard at it but it just wasn’t my forte. So, I left Crowe and I thought, “Well, let me try a smaller firm.” Went to work for a short time for Robert Alexander who is an African-American attorney here that has a thriving practice in medical malpractice and product liability litigation and also a good friend of mine. Robert had been at Crowe years before I had. When I was at Crowe I was the only minority
lawyer there. I worked hard while I was there to increase their awareness of diversity and why it made good business as well as good sense. And I do hope that the seeds that I laid while I was there turned out to be fruitful. From what I can tell they were. I worked for Robert just for a short time. Again, litigation, I disliked it so much that it made me physically ill. And I knew that those were the only jobs that seemed to be available. I left Robert’s firm and went to another firm, Hilgen and Brewer because at the time they advertised a job opening; they needed a researcher and writer. I had worked with Michael Brewer when I worked at McKenney Stringer years ago, so he knew me. They hired me and I loved them. Everywhere I’ve been I’ve just loved the people. Crowe is one of the best places in the world to work and they have the most phenomenal people in that firm. They did everything to help me and I’ll never forget it. I still have many, many good friends there as well, as Robert and Mike and Carolyn. But again, they needed the litigation help, and so that was what I ended up doing again. And then I guess I came to a crossroad in my life. Am I babbling?

KEK: No, no, you’re fine. We’ll go back and I’ll ask you, because there are things that I want to go back and ask you about but please go on.

LS: Okay. I’m just telling my story. I came to a crossroads at the end of 2006 that I needed to get out of litigation because it wasn’t healthy for me and it wasn’t what I wanted to do. I was trying to do stuff that was making me sick and so dissonant with what I really wanted and how I wanted to practice law and what I wanted to use the law for. So, I decided, to see if I could get a job in state government, in a legal division or something like that which may not be as much litigation, maybe not be as pressurized. I happened to apply to the Oklahoma Tax Commission. The reason I picked the Tax Commission is because of the years I had volunteered to do taxes for the IRS under their volunteer income tax program. That program allowed you to work with low-income people, help fill out their taxes, and get them filed, and things like that. And I had very complicated taxes myself which I did, so I had a lot of experience in tax work. I applied for the legal division, and at the same time something told me to apply for this position that’s called “taxpayer assistance representative.” The taxpayer assistance representative position in the problem resolution section allowed me to work directly with the taxpayer to help them resolve problems that they had with their tax accounts, with their income tax, and all other areas of tax including sales tax to estate tax to beer and cigarette licenses and things like that. But we worked to resolve any of the problems taxpayers had on their accounts, such as if too much money was withheld or money wasn’t coming into their accounts or they were having trouble electronically filing their reports. I was there 20 months, I got there in March of ’07 and I had an absolute ball. I was turned down by the legal division twice and the reason I was given was because I was overqualified. But I think the Lord had certain plans for me and I had so much fun helping the public.

KEK: What kinds of things did you get to do?
LS: People write in, they call; they e-mail questions about different types of taxes, questions about their accounts, I would have to research their accounts. I learned the computer system so that I could research and find out, “Did we receive that payment? Did we not? Are they owed a credit? How do they set up their accounts?” You’re talking to people face to face, over the phone, and through e-mails, lots and lots of e-mails, answering those or writing to the taxpayers. We also spent a lot of time working with another section where the taxpayers walked into the tax commission to get their taxes done. So, those are the kinds of things that I did. I did do a lot of research on tax law and of course I enjoyed the research, that was fun. But I think what it did was kind of renew my soul that I could use my skills and talents, God given skills and talents, to help people again. And I absolutely loved the people I worked with. State employees get a bad rap. I had never worked with such, and I worked long hours as a lawyer in these big firms, I had never worked with just ordinary people that worked so hard and such long hours and were required to do so many things with so little and being paid so little. I take my hat off to those people and will never allow anyone to say in my presence that state employees are worthless because I was one of them and I was with them and I know how much work we did for no money at all. And, it is a public service, that’s what we do. And, my bosses were phenomenal, supportive, glad to have me there. When I left, they told me, “Don’t hesitate to come back if I ever want to.” What ended up happening is the judge called me and since she was going to be Chief Judge offered me a position back here. And of course I wasn’t going to turn that down because this is my dream job. So, I just came back to work for her in December of ‘08.

KEK: Wow, so you are fairly new back here.

LS: I’m fairly new back here but it’s like being back home. I’ll never forget the days that we had when I was first here.

KEK: That’s right, that’s right and you have those photographs here…..

LS: to remind me.

KEK: Exactly, exactly. Let’s go back to when you were in law school or when you graduated, you said you graduated number one and you had all this experience and you didn’t get a job offer when you graduated. Now, how had you been treated I guess during law school, did you notice any sort of difference in how you were treated as a woman or as a woman who was an African-American woman?

LS: Not at all, not at all.

KEK: What about during your work experiences during law school?
LS: I don’t think that I was treated differently. Most of the time I was one of the only minorities at these firms and I didn’t experience at that time or realize any racism or any kind of differential treatment while I was there at the firms.

KEK: How important do you think it was for you to get that experience during law school, to actually work in firms?

LS: Absolutely invaluable. I tell everyone and I’ve been working with some of the OCU law students. I recently did the mock interviews with them for Gina Rowsam. And we also talk to young law students, particularly minority law students that come here and ask for letters of recommendation from the Judge or just want to see what we do and intern or clerk. I tell anybody and I have told people, the more experience that you can get in the real world of law while you are in law school, the better off you’ll be. I mean, what’s a law firm going to do, hire one person that knows where the courthouse is or the person that doesn’t know where the courthouse is? It’s an invaluable experience and certainly you would be looked at with great favor by the firms when they see your resume and realize that they don’t have to start from the bottom. So I would encourage anyone who has an opportunity, whether it’s paid for or not, to try to get some type of internship, clerkship. It also brings alive the law to you from the academic standpoint to real world practice. And you are better able to understand the law academically when you see it in practice. So, I would encourage anyone to do that.

KEK: Now, how did you handle, this, the fact that you did not get a job offer when you graduated?

LS: Not very well. Like I said, it brought me to my knees. I didn’t know what to do. The reason Legal Aid finally hired me was because someone interceded on my behalf. So, I wasn’t jobless long, because of course you graduate in December, you’re busy preparing for the bar in February. So, once I passed the bar and was sworn in, in April, I do believe I went to work for Legal Aid sometime in April, toward the end of April. But someone had to intercede for me and say, “Hire her.” It hurt, it hurt a lot. But for my friends, my mentors, it may have devastated me to the point that I wouldn’t try again. But I had people in my corner, lots of support, a lot of help to get through that time.

KEK: Well, I’m so glad that you didn’t give up.

LS: I’m glad I didn’t.

KEK: It certainly would have been, the legal profession here in Oklahoma City would have been the poorer.

LS: I appreciate that.
KEK: I think we’ll go ahead and take a break, we’re about halfway through. So, we’ll take a break and then we’ll continue on.

LS: Okay.

KEK: Hi, this is Karen Kalnins again. I am still here with Ms. Lynne Saunders. She is the law clerk to Chief U.S. District Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange and it is still Tuesday, March 24, 2009, it’s a little bit before 11 o’clock here in the morning, it’s about 10:45 or so. And this will be the second half of the interview here with Ms. Saunders. And I wanted to ask Ms. Saunders about her experiences. You said your first job was at Legal Aid, what kinds of cases did you handle there?

LS: I was in the consumer law protection section and we provided legal services to people that can’t afford to pay for legal help. I did a lot of work on landlord/tenant cases and consumer sales issues such as representing clients against their landlords or trying to prevent evictions. I tried to retrieve money for people who got scammed by advertisers or sellers of defective products or didn’t give them the product they thought they purchased, that kind of thing. So, the seven months I was there, I was in the consumer protection section and landlord/tenant also fell under that purview. I had a lot of landlord/tenant cases which I thought were interesting since I had been a landlord so long.

KEK: Yes, did your real estate background help you?

LS: Oh yeah, yeah. As I’ve gone on, I know that God has put me certain places for a reason and the experiences I’ve had in each place have always come in handy wherever I go. So, I certainly had a very successful time there in those areas because I knew the law so well in those areas. Again, I was fulfilling my mission to help people by using the law. Helping people is really what I wanted to do with it. It’s not just necessarily to make money for big companies or prevent them from being sued. This may be out of turn but I, while at Crowe, I was doing civil litigation and employment law; most of these big firms are defense firms so they are representing the corporations. But in my heart I was a plaintiff’s lawyer and I was for the little guy. Thankfully I got the opportunity, when I was at Crowe, to meet an extraordinary man; his name is D. Kent Meyers, who started this organization called Oklahoma Lawyers for Children. I became an Oklahoma Lawyer for Children and what we did was provide legal representation to children in child abuse and neglect cases. We worked closely with the Public Defender’s Office in the juvenile division and Kent started this program which has grown over the years to hundreds and hundreds of volunteer lawyers that represent these children. Parents have representation, the state has representation, but who speaks for the child? And it really became a point of contention while I was at Crowe because at one point I had 15 children I was representing. This meant going to court with them, home visits, seeing them in the shelter, checking on them in foster homes, and I was all over the city checking on my children. I took it very seriously.
**KEK:** It sounds like it, how time consuming was this?

**LS:** Well, it got in the way of my billable hours. And I’ll never forget, bless his soul, Mike Stewart died last year suddenly, I was working for him at the time, he was the partner who was in charge of the banking law, corporate law. I remember he and Kent sitting in Mike’s office one day talking about all the time I was spending on my children’s cases. And they were arguing about, “Well, she’s spending too much time on them.” And Kent said, “Well, I like what she’s doing, she’s protecting my children.” I was like, “Okay, you guys have to make up your minds what I’m supposed to be doing here.” And Mike, I remember him saying, “If you want to help children, you should be a social worker.” And Kent is like, “Don’t tell her that, I need volunteer lawyers.” It was a very funny scene that I’ll never forget and we had to compromise and I had to cut back on my cases, handling children. But, I am absolutely sure that that was my mission. I never had so much fun with the law and enjoyed using it so much as I did in representing those kids.

**KEK:** Why do you think an organization such as that, such as Oklahoma Lawyers for Children, is so important to have?

**LS:** Oh my goodness, here in Oklahoma for example, we have one of the highest child abuse rates in the country. The Lawyers for Children is so necessary because our juvenile division, the public defenders there, just like with the social workers, are overwhelmed and they can’t handle all the cases. There are just too many. And so someone has to pick up the slack and step in and be willing to provide the representation these children need. And if it’s not us, who will it be? So, we are very, very important to the process, extremely so.

**KEK:** What kinds of things, let’s go back to Legal Services, what kinds of things did you learn in that first job?

**LS:** When I was clerking at the law firms in law school I was always going to court with people or working on cases, I didn’t get to go to court and do anything. But at Legal Aid you’re thrown out there baby, this is your case, you take it all the way through. We had too many people that needed help and we had never enough staff. You just had to be strong, be brave, know that you could do the job for the people you represent, and just walk into court like you knew what you’re doing. And we had a lot of respect from the judges because they knew the work that we did which helped a lot. And just learning more and more about the law in different areas, getting that courtroom experience, and of course, learning how to work with your clients, communicate with them, and help them, especially those that are poor and needy and don’t understand what’s going on. You learned how to communicate, you learned how to explain to them what their rights are, what we could and could not do. It was a great learning experience.
KEK: Now, let’s move on to your first time here as law clerk for Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange, explain the role, to somebody from the outside, who’s not familiar with the role of a law clerk to a federal judge, what is the role?

LS: Our role is to provide counsel to the judge and to help her with her cases by researching and drafting opinions for her. She hears both civil and criminal cases, federal criminal and civil cases. And so, what happens is, when lawyers are in litigation they’re filing briefs, motions for summary judgement, motions to exclude, motions to compel, all those kinds of things. Our job is to go through all those motions, read them, research the law, and draft opinions for the judge. During trials, if it’s my case that’s going to trial or in trial, I’m going to be the one that has the jury instruction conferences with the lawyers and answer all the questions that they have. As the case progresses, they’ll talk to me since I’m handling their case. We sit as bailiffs for the jury if it’s a jury case. We sit in on all the hearings that occur during the course of the litigation and advise the judge and research the law, so that she can make rulings. We are her eyes, ears, arms, legs, to help her administer justice. It’s a phenomenal job.

KEK: It sounds like it.

LS: Best job in the world.

KEK: And how many law clerks does a federal district court judge have?

LS: Most of the federal district court judges have two law clerks. The chief judge gets three. I am not only a legal law clerk; I’m an administrative law clerk because as chief judge she has to basically run the courthouse. She is over the court clerk’s office, the probation office, the U.S. Marshalls, the federal public defender’s office, and she has to answer to Washington and report to Washington on all kinds of things to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. My judge deals with all the issues that come up in the courthouse and just the machinery of it all, from security to automation, to our case management system, and all the types of issues that come up. So, she is allowed a third law clerk to help her with the administrative duties that go with the title, chief judge. Now, I remind you that doesn’t stop her regular judge role. She has her full caseload to handle as well as the chief judge duties. As an administrative law clerk I have a caseload as well, not just helping her administratively. So, that is why a third law clerk is provided the Chief Judge because you’re basically doing two full-time jobs.

KEK: Exactly, it sounds tremendous.

LS: It is tremendous.

KEK: And what is your personal caseload like?
LS: I have criminal and civil cases that I have to do the work of a law clerk on. It’s no different from what the other law clerks have. I may not have as many cases as the other two law clerks because that’s all they do are the cases, but I have a substantial amount.

KEK: And what is the average amount that the chamber, I mean that the judge handles per year? Do you have any idea, any sense of the total amount of cases?

LS: How many cases?

KEK: Yeah, the total amount of cases she handles.

LS: I mean typically most judges are going to have several hundred cases. In cases with pending motions that are coming in all the time because it’s litigation you can easily have 200 or so pending motions in any given month which we are all working on, trying to get them ruled on and out the door. I remember though when she first came on the bench, she came on the bench in ’94, this practice I think has changed but, at that time the other judges were allowed to give us their “dog” cases. So we ended up with the worst of the worst cases and the other law clerk that was with me, Jane Eulberg, and I spent hours and hours and days and days and weekends and nights preparing these cases. And they were the worst of the worst cases and so many of them were already set for trial. We were doing trials back to back to back for about a year when we first came. I mean there was no rest. They really did that to us, I said, “Hm, hm, that’s alright.”

KEK: That’s right, you all were busy bees.

LS: Totally overloaded, but we survived and my judge became a phenomenal judge even though she came in as a baby judge. When I left she wasn’t a baby judge anymore.

KEK: That’s right, she learned.

LS: We learned, trial by fire. And even to this day we’ll run into lawyers and they’ll say, “Lynne, weren’t you on such and such a case? That chicken advertising case that we had when your judge first went on the bench.” We had some of the craziest cases in the world. And the lawyers remember and we remember and we’re like, “Yes, I do, unfortunately, still remember that.” But we had the time of our lives; we were in heaven and a heck of a team together.

KEK: Tell me about one of your most memorable cases in your first time as law clerk.

LS: One of my most memorable cases was this case where the FTC was after this very wealthy Oklahoma family. I can’t remember exactly what the issues were, but the FTC filed suit against this family. It was a very old, established, wealthy family in Oklahoma City and I don’t remember the issue that the FTC was after. It had to do with their business and monopoly, antitrust violations, all kinds of stuff like that. But I’ll never forget that case because we were
approached many times, and of course this was not right, by people trying to influence us in the case on the defendant’s behalf. We even got phone calls from lawyers or “associates” as they called themselves from out of state.

KEK: You’re kidding.

LS: No, I’m not.

KEK: And what were they trying to convince you of or ……

LS: To rule in their favor.

KEK: And what was your reaction to this?

LS: Document everything that happened and follow the law. That’s what we did.

KEK: Does that happen often?

LS: No. That’s why that one is so memorable. And I remember the lawyers and the players.

KEK: I’m almost speechless because that is one of the things of course that they talk about in ethics and in professional responsibility when you are in law school is that is simply not done, it’s illegal to……

LS: It’s done.

KEK: Very interesting.

LS: We documented everything.

KEK: And so how long then were you with Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange the first time?

LS: Until ’98. From ’94 to ’98.

KEK: And then you said you went on to Crowe and Dunlevy.

LS: Went to Crowe and Dunlevy.

KEK: And, what kinds of things did you learn at Crowe and Dunlevy because that was a completely different setting, it was a large law firm, and as you mentioned previously you had a certain amount of billable hours that you had to put in.

LS: The workload is tremendous. Of course you have all the support that you need though, support of staff, technology, the latest and greatest technology. The experience I think that was most valuable for me was being out in the legal community, meeting lots of lawyers, getting involved in committees, and things like that where you work not just with cases, but you work
with lawyers on different types of projects. It expanded my horizon by getting to know people in the legal community that you could pick up the phone and call and ask for help or work with on a case. Because of the volume of work, the billable hours, you learn quickly how to be disciplined and manage your time. I was exposed to quite a few different areas of the law that I had never been exposed to before so I learned a little bit about this and a little bit about that, so most issues weren’t foreign to me when I saw them. And you learned the people, you learned a lot about the people in the practice of law. Who are the good lawyers, the best lawyers, who do you want to emulate, what is it that makes them so good in the jobs that they do? I learned a lot in those areas while I was at Crowe and made some very good friends as well.

**KEK:** Now, you have had both at Crowe and your time as a law clerk and again here, you’ve had a lot of chances to observe other attorneys in action, what do you think are some of the qualities that make someone a good attorney whether that’s as a litigator or working as you do now with the pure law?

**LS:** Some of the qualities that I think are important include always being prepared. Those lawyers who put the hours in to truly prepare their cases were the most successful. And it takes a lot of time and energy to do that. From the very beginning of a case, having to find out all the information you can about the background of the case, maybe getting experts involved, interviewing witnesses, preparing clients, preparing well-written briefs and motions that have been researched solidly, and you’re stating the law as it is in your briefs, not trying to advocate so much that you cross the line as to what you’re telling the judge the law is and why it should or should not apply to your situation. Other qualities to me of a good lawyer besides being prepared and besides having excellent research and writing skills, is professionalism and civility. And I think you had one question on here about, “What do you think are some of the most important things about the legal profession?” At that time, when I was at Crowe, there still were a lot of issues about that. Problems with people going crazy in depositions and calling people names and disrespecting people and not being gentlemanly or womanly in this adversarial process. So a good lawyer, the best lawyers, never lose their professionalism, never lose their civility toward others. Realizing it’s a process, an adversarial process, an intellectual adversarial process based on the law and the facts and it should not be personal. So, those are the things that I’ve found to be most important for a good lawyer. It’s not your oratorical skills or whether you are like Perry Mason out there in the courtroom or not, but it’s how you treat people, that’s more important, in my opinion.

**KEK:** Hear, hear on that. How was that experience at Crowe and Dunlevy, you said earlier that you were the only minority there in the law firm at that time and you said you were treated very well, you had the support, but…. 

**LS:** I should say minority lawyer, we did have a minority guy that was in our automation department.
KEK: Yeah, you were the only minority lawyer, what was that experience like for you?

LS: It was fine. I didn’t feel like I was treated any differently, I didn’t feel like I had to watch my back or be afraid or feel like I was going to be treated differently from any other associate or anything like that. As a matter of fact I think that my being there had a lot to do with the diversity issues and making partners and people aware of why diversity is important, even to the bottom line. And, I got them involved in a diversity forum that we had down at OU. I was constantly raising the issue and just making people aware. And I don’t think it’s because necessarily that people are racist, I think that they just don’t think about it, they don’t think about the disparity that goes on when the firms are headed by white men and it’s just in their purview or experiences. People are the sum total of their experiences, and if they’re not used to being around people of different races or colors, it doesn’t mean that they’re bad people it’s just that they have never experienced that. So, I think that what I tried to do while I was there was raise the consciousness on the issue. Here we are the largest law firm in Oklahoma at the time, and you only have one black lawyer? One minority lawyer? That’s not good. And they started to listen, they started to listen. Now today they have, I just had lunch with one of the young attorneys that’s there, they have about four or five. That’s a big deal.

KEK: That is a big deal.

LS: They’ve started a minority scholarship, all that kind of stuff. And, I’m real proud of Crowe and Dunlevy. And I hope that my time there had a little something to do with it.

KEK: I’m sure it did. Why do you think diversity is so important in the legal profession?

LS: Because you serve a diverse population. Of course we all have heard the census figures that minority groups are starting to get larger and larger in this country. I may be able to relate better to another African-American for the betterment of the firm, than someone else. Or, the companies that we serve realize how much diversity is, how important diversity is, the corporate world has seen that. You can reach out to a bigger client base if you have faces like the people that you’re representing. The corporate world looks at it as best for the bottom line. We need to understand that’s the same way it is in the legal profession. If for nothing else, it’s best for your bottom line. Yes, it should be altruistic, but we can be realistic here and realize that when you have faces that mimic the people that you serve, you have a better opportunity of getting the business from people that look like me or look like a Hispanic or an Asian person. As the demographics shift, it becomes even more important, and the demographics are shifting in our country.

KEK: That’s right.

LS: So, instead of burying your head in the sand, do something about it. It’s good business.
KEK: Absolutely, absolutely. Now, you said that you started here in December of 2008, what kinds of things did you see that had changed from your first, your first tenure here?

LS: Actually, most of the people that I left ten years ago are still here. One thing about the government is people don’t leave, they have great jobs. The security, especially in today’s job market, is a blessing. What I did see that was different is that we have now gone to a paperless system on filing, electronic filing of briefs, motions, papers, and orders. I like that, I think we need to get rid of the paper as much as possible because we were really bogged down in it. I see more technological support coming from the Administrative Office in Washington. There are not as many cases as we first had when I was here, not hardly. Really, the volume of cases I think is less now. Not as many cases go to trial due to settlement, mediation, settlement conferences, alternative dispute resolution. So, we don’t have as many trials as we did when I was here before.

KEK: Do you think that that is a good thing, a bad thing, or does it matter?

LS: I think it’s a good thing because I think litigation has gotten prohibitively expensive for the client. Typically the only people that walk away happy are the lawyers because they get their fees. Justice is not free, and I think it’s incumbent upon us as lawyers to be honest with our clients about their cases. And a lot of people want their day in court but it’s not a free day in court and if you can settle and still get some relief and some feeling of vindication, you’re better off doing that than trying to go all the way through to a jury. It’s just too expensive.

KEK: Do you think that has, the expense, do you think that keeps people away from the courthouse, I mean from even trying?

LS: You mean, filing a lawsuit?

KEK: Yeah, even filing a lawsuit.

LS: No, I don’t think that keeps them away if you’re talking about clients with money. The big companies that Crowe represents for example, they have the money, but even they are changing in the sense that they’re watching their legal budget and weighing their options as to, “Is it better to settle than to try to go all the way through?” Maybe they want to go all the way through to protect their image or whatever; they’re making all those kinds of decisions. Like I said, as lawyers, I think we need to be very honest and open and upfront with our clients about the costs of going through trials. When I was here before, and it’s probably the same now as far as civil cases go, we still get tons and tons of employment law cases, discrimination cases which are very, very hard to win cases. And to go all the way through trial and lose is not a good thing. So, I’m all for alternative dispute resolution for the client’s sake. I really am but they have to make the decision.
KEK: That’s right, that’s right. Now, just to switch gears just slightly, were you here at the time of the Oklahoma City bombing? Were you working here?

LS: Yes, yes.

KEK: And, tell me about that time.

LS: We had just gotten here in November and our quarters weren’t ready yet. They were building the fifth floor quarters for us, so were here on the third floor, in the inner part of the third floor just up the hall and down, there’s an inner corridor and that’s where our offices were. I remember, we park under Murrah Plaza, and I remember coming to work that day and I probably got here about 8:30 or so. And I was just getting off the phone with a friend, I was making plans for lunch and sitting at my desk and all of a sudden I thought I saw the walls move, like breathe. And I thought, “God, an earthquake?” And then something told me to move out of my chair, it was only God, I got under my desk. There was this big light thing, big thing, right over my head and it fell in my chair. Of course, we didn’t know what was happening, the alarms were going off, there was smoke and stuff everywhere. I remember calling for my partner law clerk, Jane, we were calling for each other. The judge was not in the building, she just drove in front of the building and Betty, at the time was her secretary, had brought stuff down to her because she had a meeting somewhere else. So, we grabbed each other and the marshals were running around, court security, trying to get people to the exit stairs, and I remember we left our purses; we left everything, and just made our way downstairs and couldn’t believe what we saw. All of the glass in front of the courthouse was blown out and as we walked outside, there was a hole in the Murrah Building. We could see right through it. It was absolutely chaos in the streets. Rescue people were trying to get here, people were just in a daze, didn’t know where they were going, didn’t know what was happening. I remember us walking across the street over here to, there’s a bank there, walking through the window because there was no glass there, trying to find phones to call people. One of our law clerks had a son in the daycare center and I remember him and his partner law clerk, Cindy Smith, running to the daycare. He was one of the 4 or 5 children that survived, thank God. But we did have someone in the court clerk’s office whose child died. And I remember not being able to get through to my husband, I remember my mom calling, trying to get to us because there were first reports that the federal courthouse had been bombed. So, my mom, I remember her telling me she said she had heard it on the radio; they lived in Maryland at the time. And she was like, “Oh my God,” so they were trying to get through to us but nobody could get through to anybody. Jane and I had started to head toward the direction of the Murrah Building and one of our law clerks, I think it was Judge Holloway’s law clerk, said, “Don’t go there, go back this way, you don’t want to see this.” So, he stopped us from going so that we didn’t have to see how bad it was. Then they started cordonning off the area and telling people to move south, and so we just started walking. Jane and I were just in a daze; we had stuff all in our hair, and our faces and everything. And we ran into someone, I can’t remember now, some of the lawyers we knew, and they took us to their office. I don’t even
remember, can’t tell you the name of the law firm now. But, it was not until then and they had the T.V. on that we found out what had happened. It was just surreal. But I remember it like yesterday.

**KEK:** It sounds like it. How did that event sort of change things here, I mean change things at the federal courthouse?

**LS:** Oh my God, the security went up like, just like it did after 9/11. It became a fortress. We were all impacted in some way. So many of us knew someone in the building who died. My judge went to many, many funerals. We went to the funeral of the little baby that died and that was all I could bear. I couldn’t go to any more. But, safety became top priority and of course, as you can see they built the federal building now where you can’t even get near it. You’re not allowed to park anywhere around us, more cameras, more magnetometers. We became a fortress.

**KEK:** And how did it affect you on a more personal level?

**LS:** I believe that I was saved for a reason, I believe I’m a survivor. It made it more real to me that God is in my life and is protecting me. I did not die that day for a reason, I wasn’t finished with what I had to do here. It was a real spiritual type of impact for me. I think that’s it, I think that’s how I can best explain it.

**KEK:** Well, Ms. Saunders is there anything that I have not asked about that you want to discuss or that you would like to talk about?

**LS:** Well, when I went into the discussion about what probably is the most important thing to me and what I do with my knowledge of the law, is that I have truly found out that I love the law with a passion. I love the pure law. I was even criticized once by someone at a law firm who told me that I write like a judge. Little did they know they I would end up being a law clerk writing for a judge. But I was criticized for that in one law firm and I’ll never forget that. To me, it’s a compliment. But my real passion, and I hope someday to be able to continue, is representing the children. I don’t like litigation, it’s not for me, but when I walk into a child’s court, I am on my game. I am in my arena. And I am a fierce defender of those that are weak, that can’t speak for themselves and I do believe I have this gift to be used in that purpose. The only bad thing about this job is I cannot represent my children. I can’t practice as a law clerk.

**KEK:** Okay, so you cannot work for Oklahoma Lawyers for Children while in this job?

**LS:** Well, I can, it’s limited though. I won’t be able to represent children while I’m here. And people say, “Wouldn’t you like to be judge or something like that one day?” The only judge I would ever want to be is a juvenile court judge so that I could have a positive impact on children’s lives. But, the Lawyers for Children can also help in other ways. I also, when
children are taken from their homes, particularly on a Friday, they have to spend the weekend in the children’s shelter because there won’t be a hearing until Monday morning when the parents have to come to court and DHS is involved and the prosecutors and the court decides whether or not the parents get their kids back or whether we are going to have a termination hearing. During that weekend that the children are in the shelter, and I’ve done this many times, we interview the children not about the abuse or what has happened to them, but to find out if we can find any relatives or other people in their lives they can stay with, that we can place them with temporarily until we can sort out the legal issues for the parents. And so, I do that, I have done that and I will probably start doing that again soon. That is very helpful because someone needs to talk with them to find out where we can send them. Many times they’re too small to talk. Many times I have just sat there and held babies and the little ones just so they wouldn’t be afraid because here they are snatched from their homes, the only environment they have ever known, even if it is a bad one, in a strange place. And I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction doing that.

KEK: Why do you think you’re so passionate about children?

LS: Well, someone has to speak for them. Our society, in my opinion, doesn’t value them like they should. We won’t spend the money up front to help children survive and thrive; we’d rather incarcerate rather than spend money for them to get good meals in the morning and pre-kindergarten, pre-school at the front end so that they have a chance. Our society needs to turn that around. Our prisons wouldn’t be so full if we would do something for the children at the beginning. I’d much rather spend money at the beginning than at the end, it’s a lot more expensive. I just have always been a voice for the voiceless. I have a similar passion for the elderly but my leaning is for the children. Why? I cannot really tell you I just know that it is. And I am very good at it and I love doing it and I hope that I had some kind of a positive impact on these little kids’ lives even though I don’t get to be with them very long. At least where they know someone cares about them.

KEK: That’s right. Is there anything else Ms. Saunders?

LS: I think that’s about it, I probably talked too much.

KEK: No, no you didn’t but I see that our time is going and I don’t want to take up too much more of your time. So, thank you so much today for your time. You’ve been so gracious.

LS: Absolutely.

KEK: I really enjoyed it.

LS: And I enjoyed talking with you.

KEK: And I enjoyed talking with you, thanks again.
LS: Okay.