

DIANA NICOLSON TRANSCRIPT

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Damian Macey Interviewer

Transcribed by Donna Duzan, January 2018

D: This is Damian Macey with the Friends of the Library and I am here to do an oral history with Diana Nicholson. She did not grow up in Marshall but she has been a citizen of Marshall for a long long time. With that I will turn it over to .

DN: I was born in 1948 in Bloomington, IL and my parents were Willis and Helen Simpson. My father came to Marshall to pastor a church after living in Chicago, Freeport, Saybrook then Marshall. And lastly Springfield. Then daddy did move back to Marshall after we lost my mother in the 80's. I have lived here on and off since I was nine years old. I did leave for an extended time from 1964 to 1966. The years that I was not here I spent one year in Springfield and Newton and then came back to Marshall.

D: What was your neighborhood like?

DN: Oh, gosh, lots of good memories there. There was probably 25 kids that lived within a two block area. Our favorite thing to do was ride our bicycles to Drake's Locker which was down by the bowling alley, they always had fudgesicles and dreamsicles. I remember begging for money so I could go. Our neighborhood was full of fun, we would play baseball and basketball. Benny and Howie Johnson lived in my neighborhood and Howie became a pretty popular basketball player in college at ISU. It was a lively neighborhood, all the parents looked out for all of us, there was lots of adults around to break up any fights we might have.

D: What was your address, the neighborhood?

DN: I lived at 607 Chestnut Street. That caty-cornered from the catholic church. We lived in the parsonage of the Trinity Church that daddy pastored. Henderson's Bait Shop was in our neighborhood but the most favorite stop was Drake's. We would ride bicycles down to the railroad tracks down by Clark County Farm Service Evelyn O'Rourke worked there forever and she kept candy and chewing gum so we would hit there probably once a week too. Then in our neighborhood also was the bowling alley after it was built. About that time, Ida Athey and her family lived on that street which added another 5 or 6 kids. I also remember where Newberry's Coal was. It was so strange when that all changed. Same with the feed store that was on 5th Street.

D: You might mention Ida Athey's maiden name.

DN: Smitley, she was Ida Smitley Athey. They were well known in our area, if you needed anything, go to Athey's Store. She was a real plus in our Neighborhood.

D: And Granny liked to cook.

DN: Yes, always had cookies and pies and good stuff. Another place I remember is the welding shop. He wouldn't let us in because he didn't want us to get burned but, it was Sweet's Welding Shop. We would ride our bikes, there used to be a store on the corner there across from the jail where we would buy penny candy.

D: The one I can remember is Walter Volkers, he had a store in his house for a while.

DN: That might have been it. But Roy would never let us in when he was welding but we loved to watch the sparks fly. It didn't take much to amuse us !! Also Darrell Harlow had a store that sold penny candy south on route 1, and I remember going to the Dog N Suds and buying root beer for a nickel a mug. Those are my most outstanding memories.

I think my favorite teacher would have been Myrtle Shade, I loved her. Then as I grew older, you grow out of having favorite teachers, but she was my favorite in grade school.

D: Do you recall what grade that was?

DN: Fourth grade, fifth grade was Mrs. Fraker and sixth grade was Dale Davis, before he was the principal.

D: My mother taught at Martinsville and she taught for a number of years at a consolidated school, with Myrtle Shade.

DN: Isn't it amazing how you forget who was here and how things were. Now on the main strip the favorite place for the "bicycle gang" went was Davis's Bakery which was here for a short time but we got our fill of jam and donuts.

I went to school here from fourth grade to my sophomore year of high school. Then I moved to Springfield for my junior year and my senior year was spent in Newton, IL. After that I came back and started working for Doris Burkhardt and she used to be in the St James Hotel. I used to ride my bike up there and sit on the towel hamper and watch her do hair, I was fascinated.

D: Is that what inspired you to go into that business?

DN: Sure is, I thought I would love to do this someday so in 1966 she Tooke me on as an apprentice. And that program took a year and I got my license in 1967 or 1968. And have been a licensed hairdresser ever since. Of course when I came back, I met my husband. I was walking home from school one day and I was right in front of the catholic church and he stopped and asked me if I wanted a ride home and I said "I don't think so, I was only a block away, and I don't know you." He said "Well, your mom does." She worked for Sam Deahl in the Dentist office and she had known Leon for lots longer than I did. So that was the start, he took my phone number and started dating and lived happily ever after.

D: And his full name is?

DN: Leon Nicholson.

DN: (Looking at list of questions) Pastime and leisure after we married: The first year we were married, I got my first motorcycle, that would have been in 1968, and started riding a motorcycle, got my husband into it, and then we both rode until we had kids.

D: What was your most memorable trip on the cycle?

DN: I would have to say the Chattanooga Mountains. I was scared to death and never wanted to take a long ride again but it was beautiful riding through there.

D: Do you recall what time of year that might have been?

DN: Probably late August.

D: Milder weather then,

DN: You are not initiated on a motorcycle until you run into a downpour and that happened coming from Robinson but on the mountain trip we were probably gone eight days.

D: Did you have two cycles?

DN: I started out on a Bridgestone 90 the later I went to a 180 to a 350 to a 1200. Marshall is a good town to ride in because people pretty much look out for you. And the state park is just awesome.

D: Did you ever have any close calls?

DN: Too many, people have pulled out in front of me, have followed too close, people do crazy things, it just hasn't been "my time" yet.

D: Does Leon share you like for long trips?

DN: We haven't done that for a long time, his knees aren't good, he is just too incapacitating as far as riding probably for the last ten years. He feels comfortable locally, not out for long trips. He is afraid of having it go over when he stops.

Pets: my first pet in Marshall was from Basil Moore. I used to go down there and play in the casket room. Basil had a female terrier and we got the pick of the litter because we were kinda neighbors. I would go, too, to Crocks and buy penny candy, I had candy places all over town.

D: With all that candy, how did you stay so slim?

DN: Runs in the family, and with that first pet from Basil, I would have been 8 or 9, I have never been without a dog since then.

D: What was that first pet's name?

DN: We called her Spot, she had a black eye and a black spot on her side, she was one of my most favorite dogs I ever had. I think Gloria and I counted up one time, I have had through the years 9 dogs.

D: And ever one was unique and had their own personality.

DN: Describe my work experience: When you work in a beauty shop and Yoder's Cafe, with that window that slid up and down you could order food while you were getting your hair done.

D: That was located right where Monk's is now.

DN: Everyone thought that was so neat that you could order food from Libby's. I loved working in Doris's shop, and being around all the people, that was another thing that got me into hairdressing, I just loved to be around people. So when the beauty shop burned the second time, the first time we worked in Barney's Barber Shop, we found out that men gossip just as bad or worse than women do, we were there 3 to 4 months. At that time, he was getting into poorer health so we invited him to work out of our shop and he did that for 3 or 4 years. I think we entertained him. Then the second time it burned, she closed it down for good.

D: Do you see sharing a shop as you did, a forerunner of shops today?

DN: Yes, Doris was always ahead of her time, it is so common anymore for men's and women's shops to be together. But it was certainly not done back in the days when she did it. And a couple of men were pretty uncomfortable coming in at first so that is why we put him in the front part. But some men would just come in and ask how it was going and just talk like normal.

D: Did you or any of the hairdressers cut men's hair at that time?

DN: Yes we did and we kinda felt bad at first because of Barney but he could see that we were drawing in the younger crowd. Like Mayor Bloodworth, he always got his hair cut at a beauty shop. And some of the women were kind of intimidated having the men come in.

D: That was going to be my next question, did Barney do any women's hair then?

DN: You know, he did, he used to cut Barb Dailey's hair. She wore it really short and none of the women would get it short enough, so he used his clippers and cut it off. And it always looked really good. Getting to know Barney was probably one of the best experiences of working together. And he did use some colorful language, he did not mince words. He was quite a character. He was a major part of the beauty shop for 3 or 4 years then when he left we had it all to our own.

I would say working at the beauty shop was how I got to know Vera Bennett so well. I had known Chris and had run around with her but getting to know Vera was a positive experience in my life. My mother passed away at 55 and she kinda of became like a mother to me.

D: You mentioned earlier that your love of being around people brought you into the business but I don't think you said anything about the fact that people can also be very frustrating.

DN: Working with the public well-rounds your personality. And I really think Doris taught me many lessons in how to work with many different people. You were forced to work on people you didn't really like and eventually you found common ground. And Doris taught me how to get along with

difficult people.

D: With that type of business, I'm sure you had someone say "This is not just a bad hair day, this is a bad do" or whatever. Was that ever an issue?

DN: Damian, there was probably only three or four people that have been "pistols". I remember one lady who griped every week about something and I was standing behind her and she was complaining and I turned that chair around and got down in her face and I said "You know Marge, I've tried everything I know to please you and obviously it's not working so I suggest that you go to another shop and find another operator" She left that day and came back another day and never once complained again. I did her hair till she passed away. Sometimes you just have to let them know that you are not going to put up with them.

D: I'm sure many times you just had to bite your tongue to keep quiet.

DN: Many times I went into the bathroom and cooled down. Then about that time I kind of took up tennis. I remember as a child going over to the tennis courts close to where the catholic church was and Father Donohue would have his housekeeper bake us cookies, he was so kind to us kids. We would sit on the steps at the rectory and he would just talk to us.

D: He was very much a humanitarian and very outgoing and people were very drawn to him.

DN: He had a magnetic personality that just drew people in whether you were catholic or not. He knew no boundaries. That was positive experience. A negative experience in childhood was hitting the ball across the street into the yards. We got several people mad at us. Then the tennis court kind of got run down and I was real sad to see that happen because the tennis court was monumental back in that time.

D: Did you ever play in the courts down at the south school?

DN: Yes but it just wasn't the same. The net was different, the court was different, the lights were different. We would have preferred to just stay at the catholic church.

I can remember all the different people that would come and go in the restaurant. We didn't ever have enough time for lunch, we would walk in the restaurant and sit on the stools, raise the window so that we could see what the customers were doing. I remember John Snedeker he was in there every day, Verlyn Hurst was in there every day, Bill Cook was there too, there were regulars. Hurts had a junk yard across the street and they would come in every day. We would just always have conversations with the regulars and that was an awful lot of fun. But it's funny, I can still see John Snedeker sitting on the stool and making everybody laugh. That memory is probably the biggest share of my young maturing years.

D: Do you recall what the price of a meal would have been back then?

DN: Libby would run special for \$1.85 for like meatloaf, potato, green beans, a full meal. She would

have a lot of the working farmers and construction guys that were really hungry. One of the regulars was your wife's dad. He probably would come 3 or 4 times a week. He would drive his little goat in. One of the girls took a ride in that, that was Jake Meehling. And you would see him in his Jeep. He and John Snedeker would get a conversation going in there, politics or current events.

I am so glad that I was raised in Marshall with good Christian parents and good people around me. Then I came back and raised my children here.

D: You haven't mentioned anything about your sister.

DN: Yes. I have a sister. And I have two boys, Steve was born on July 4, 1969, and Tony was born in August 1970. Never had to worry about them, they grew up much as I did, rode bicycles, had lots of neighbor kids around. The meat cutter at IGA, Sam Speros, lived close by, he had 4 kids, we had Trudeaus, a lot of kids close by. I was gone all day, of course, they had no computers. They would get up at the crack of dawn and eat breakfast, watch a cartoon or two.

D: Did they ride motorcycles?

DN: No, they had a little go-cart first, then they had dirt bikes, then they went to 3-wheelers and finally we traded the 3-wheelers in for something to drive. Then they had to work and provide their own vehicles. So they gradually came up through the motor world. We took them down to Lawrence Gravel where they had big piles of rock and those boys would fly up over those piles of rocks and my heart would be in my toes. But what could you say when you do the same thing? But the boys have both said what a good childhood they had and with their dad having having cars and motorcycles, they were able to grow up with those. And we went several different places to car shows so they had a pretty well rounded childhood. I am sad today that it is all computers and you can't get the kids out much.

D: Did you have hobbies as a child?

DN: You know one thing that I was always attracted to was cookie jars. And my grandmother on my mother's side kind of influenced the cookie jar idea. She had an Aunt Jemima in her kitchen for years and I was always drawn to that cookie jar and when I got older and got an allowance, I started collecting them and I still do but I have gotten a lot pickier. I probably have about 50 now. Most of them are specialty jars.

D: Do you by chance, have your Grandmother's Aunt Jemima?

DN: No, I don't, the last time I check a price on one, it was \$300. Probably my favorite cookie jar is Maxine, on the Internet. Then I have got an animal cracker box jar that looks just like the animal cracker box. When I am done with them, somebody will probably throw them in a yard sale and that is fine. I've enjoyed them.

D: You mentioned cars, has that been a collection thing with both you and your husband?

DN: It's been a real passion for both of us. I don't do as much as I used to, we don't go as much as we used to, but there are 3 or 4 events/shows that we go to. And that is just in the summer months. So over the summer we do about 4 events. But we love it and it's something we have done together.

D: Over your garage door I think I have seen a sign that says "Pontiac Acres", what is the significance of that?

DN: We kidded each other when we built that 40 x 48 garage, about how quick it filled up, we needed acres and acres so that name kind of evolved. We quit when the garage got full.

D: Are most of the vehicles in there Pontiacs?

DN: Most are, there is an El Camino that he bought new in 1972 and a pickup truck that is probably a 1985 and it had some fancier work on it, he drove it to work, but the rest are Pontiacs.

D: What was your feelings and Leon's when they stopped making Pontiacs?

DN: We were tickled to death because our collection of them is going up in price. We were sad, too, but we collected the right brand because their value does just keep going up and up. So it has been a good investment.

D: Have you put any of them in the local parades?

DN: You know, we had one bad experience and during the parade route a kid with studs on his jeans jumped up and sailed across the trunk and we had to have it repaired, so we don't do parades plus you don't really want people to know what you have got because it has been known to happen that cars were lost to West Terre Haute so we keep it pretty quiet what we have.

D: You have a sister that you haven't told us about.

DN: Yes, Gloria is three years older, she has always been my protector and has looked after me. Mom and Dad would be too busy with church meetings and I was put into her care. She has given me a lot of good advice and it was wonderful to have a sister when our parents started declining. It would be hard to be an only child and handle that yourself. So we have had a pretty close relationship and it has gotten closer as we have gotten older. She does have a teaching degree but she worked in a library in Florida for ten years and we made several trips down. She loved that and they loved her. She has always been a good worker. So when we retired and came back to Marshall she started looking immediately and she found a job with the Marshall Public Library. Nancy Claypool hired her and she has worked here several years. So we have made a lot of memories together and it has been fun.

D: Has there been a person in your lifetime that has really changed your thinking, or helped you in setting your path?

DN: I would have to go back to Vera Bennett. She was wise and she said a lot of things that have stuck in my mind and still surface from time to time. I would say she was a big influence. We did a lot of

the Mello dramas together, remember doing dramas on the courthouse lawn, carrying chairs. I spent a lot of good quality time with the Bennett's. Cass as well, when Chris and I sang in a trio of Chris, Mary Kay Mitchell and me, we would practice out at Bennett's and Cass would play for us on the piano. So I spent a lot of time out there but I really got to know Vera later.

D: Did you get involved with any music of any kind?

DN: You know, I was always more in the sports venue, mom gave me piano/music lessons but I would want to go play basketball or baseball. And I probably bowled for 25 years. So I was interested more in sports than music. Although I love music and I sang in the church choir but sports was my choice.

D: You mentioned church, didn't your dad retire from the Congregation Church?

DN: Yes, he did. I think he has 60 years of ministry in and when mother died, he married Erma Brown, she was from West Terre Haute, and she encouraged him to retire. And I was really glad he did because he had several good years after he retired and still loved preaching and did weddings on request for 3 or 4 years. He had a good run at the Congregational Church, he was well loved and had a good time.

D: Is there some event in your lifetime that has had a profound impact on your life?

DN: I remember my grandmother telling me while reading from her Bible that there will always be wars and rumors of wars and it will be religious wars. And that has really shaken me to the core that America is not in control of our nation anymore. That has shaken me. It has shaken me that I have seen on e-mails and billboards that advertise the Muslim faith and I think we are more out of control than we even think we are. I feel safe living here in Marshall, IL because I think that we will be the last to suffer if there is suffering to be had.

D: I agree with you but it seems like we are not really safe anywhere with all the shootings in small communities, schools. And that is disturbing.

DN: It's bad to feel unsafe in your own nation. I would be afraid to go abroad. We had kind of a close call in Cancun the last time we were there. And I love to travel but not when I feel threatened. I think just the general world condition has shaken my roots and I have realized that we are not in "Pollyanna world" anymore.

D: Is there a modern invention or convenience that you feel you just could not live without?

DN: I'm sure everyone would say a microwave. I do have a memory, my mom, dad, Gloria and myself were in a bad accident when I was six and went to live with my grandparents for a year because my dad was in the hospital for that time, and Gloria lived with a family in Champaign, so I went down to the farm, that was in Newton, and grandma would do laundry once a month all winter long and she had one of those machines where you washed the clothes and then put them through the wringer. We would then hang them outside until they were frozen and then she said we would hang them by the heat in the house to dry.

D: I guess you are saying then that you really wouldn't care to go back to the "good old days".

DN: Certain things I would, some things like playing in the hay mow I wish my boys had got to experience, swinging on a rope back and forth in the hay mow, it was just good fun, calling the cows, milking the cows. So I'm sad that they don't have those memories. The year I lived with them, grandpa had one tractor and plow and plowed like 80 acres. Back then that was a lot of acreage. We churned butter, butchered cattle and hogs. I have lived long enough that I have seen a lot of changes. Some good, some not so good.

D: If you were abroad and someone asked you where you lived, what would you tell them about Marshall?

DN: I think of my town, Marshall, as almost time standing still. We've got a gazebo, we have got a band that plays on the courthouse square, we've got a popcorn machine, some of our original store fronts are still intact. But we have kept it progressive in some areas, we've got an Interstate with anything you would want close by, places to eat, motels, wonderful lakes. We gather round if someone is in need, so it's a wonderful place to live. Yes, you worry about your children being abducted as any parent would, you don't have to worry about drugs as much in our small town, we have a good police force and good protection in place. We pretty much have a safe haven here.

D: Thank you so much, Diana for sharing all your memories, that is exactly what we wanted you to do. People can come here in years to come and hear what your life was like.

DN: It has been fun.