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WOODS HOLE OCEANOGRAPHIC INSTITUTION

JUDITH MCDOWELL ORAL HISTORY

Interview by Frank Taylor July 23, 2003

Tape 1 of 3 transcribed by Arel Lucas, February 2005

1 TAYLOR: . . . 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. [Tape stops and starts again.] It's July 23 in '03. We're at the  
2 Archives at the McLean Laboratory to talk with Dr. Judith McDowell about her really eminent  
3 career here at the Institution. I think probably she has held more different positions than most  
4 people ever in this Institution. Judy, could you tell me a little bit about yourself from your early  
5 years, like where you were born?

6 MCDOWELL: Well, I was born in Manchester, New Hampshire, a small city in southern New  
7 Hampshire, actually New Hampshire's largest city, even though it is still quite small, and my dad  
8 grew up in the Bronx, met my mom at a USO dance in 1944. They were married three months  
9 later. She grew up in the house that we lived in. She was from New Hampshire. Her parents  
10 came from Ireland, as did my dad's. And we grew up in the house that her parents built at the  
11 turn of the century, and so I have a brother and a sister.

12 TAYLOR: Let me ask you first: what were mom and dad's names?

13 MCDOWELL: Oh, my dad's name was Joseph McDowell. My mom's name was  
14 Catherine[SP?] Sullivan McDowell, two good Irish names.

15 TAYLOR: [Laughs.] What did dad do for a living?

16 MCDOWELL: Dad was an artist, and he grew up in New York City in the Bronx, as I said,  
17 during the Depression, so there wasn't much money to go to college, so he became a steward on  
18 the Grace Lines, and he sailed throughout the Caribbean and South America. When World War  
19 II started, he joined the Army Air Corps, and because he had a real proficiency for languages he

20 worked in Intelligence in India, and he was stationed in India in the years before Indian  
21 independence. And then, as I said, he met my mom at a USO dance at Grenier Air Field on  
22 Thanksgiving weekend 1944. My mom was a schoolteacher. She studied zoology at the  
23 University of New Hampshire in the '30s. She actually spent quite a bit of time with um C. F.  
24 Jackson on the Isles of Shoals, and knew quite a bit about marine habitats, marine organisms.  
25 She graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1937, but there weren't many positions  
26 for women in marine biology and marine science, and she taught at all levels, from small  
27 country, one-room schoolhouses in rural New Hampshire to languages, math and English in high  
28 school, in Manchester, New Hampshire, to middle-school, elementary school, and she was a  
29 teacher all her life.

30 TAYLOR: Now, you say you had brothers and sisters.

31 MCDOWELL: I have a brother who's a year older, who's a lawyer in New Hampshire, and a  
32 sister who is six years younger, and she works for the U. Mass. Medical Center as their major  
33 gifts director.

34 TAYLOR: I ask this question every now and then, because I was really interested at one point  
35 when I asked a lot of the scientists here what their favorite subject was. I fully expected them to  
36 tell me chemistry or physics or something like that. I had an awful lot of them say it was  
37 literature or arts or something like that, and as an ex-science teacher that kind of threw me a little  
38 bit, and I was discussing it with my wife one night, and she said, "You know," she said. "To be  
39 a really good scientist is a very creative field, and that's where the art part came in." So you,  
40 even at an early age, I mean you had a mom that had some science. You had a dad that had  
41 travels but also had this artistic bent.

42 MCDOWELL: Yes, and he actually worked for a newspaper first for years after they were  
43 married, but he went into advertising and had his own advertising agency and had some big  
44 contracts throughout the Northeast in advertising, so yes, he came with an artistic bent. Actually,  
45 my mom's most interesting um aspect . . . . The thing that she liked to teach most was creative  
46 writing to third and fourth graders, and so yeah they did bring both these creative aspects, I think,  
47 to each of us, and we combined it with the science. Actually, my first aspiration was to be a  
48 fashion designer.

49 TAYLOR: Really!

50 MCDOWELL: And I think that if you looked at my high school yearbook that's what everybody  
51 thought that I would end up being. I liked to design clothes. I liked to design, work with fabrics  
52 and stuff, but I left that aspiration behind and went into science.

53 TAYLOR: Were you read to a lot at early ages?

54 MCDOWELL: Oh yes, um my brother starting school just a year before me, my mother read to  
55 us every evening. I read to my children every evening, and I learned to read at 4. I had just  
56 turned 4, because my brother was learning to read in kindergarten. So we've always had lots of  
57 books around.

58 TAYLOR: So there were books around, and there were creative people. There were scientific  
59 people that was all part of your growing up.

60 MCDOWELL: Sure there weren't too many scientific people around. I think my mom's main  
61 interest was she maintained that interest in the excitement of nature, so naturalist more than an  
62 analytical approach to science. You can see I'm very fair, and we would spend summers, a few  
63 weeks every summer at the coast in New Hampshire, and because I would sunburn very easily,  
64 we wouldn't spend the day just sitting on the beach. We would walk to intertidal areas, and my  
65 mom would tell us stories about being on the Isles of Shoals and having a lobster bake on the  
66 Isles of Shoals, and buying short lobsters for 10 cents apiece and all these great stories. She  
67 certainly knew so much about habitat and adaptation of organisms that she was really I think for  
68 all of us our first instructor in that area.

69 TAYLOR: And it's a wonderful area to do that in. My dad was a professional musician, and he  
70 used to play summers at the old Wentworth by the Sea.

71 MCDOWELL: Oh, we went there many times, yeah.

72 TAYLOR: And I would be out on the flats out there, looking at this, that and the other thing.  
73 What kind of discussions took place around the dinner table when you were young?

74 MCDOWELL: Oh, interesting, not about science, usually about sports, avid Yankees fan.

75 Everyone in our house was an avid Yankees fan, even to this day. Um culture. My dad grew up  
76 in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood in the Bronx and shared um cultural celebrations  
77 with many ethnic groups. His sister continued to live in that neighborhood until she died and  
78 saw the neighborhood transition from a predominantly Irish, Eastern European uh neighborhood  
79 to a Hispanic neighborhood. She continued to be a very active member of the community, and  
80 so I think for all of us an awareness of cultural diversity was very important to us growing up.

81 TAYLOR: And you had a really kind of rich cultural background with your folks in many ways.  
82 MCDOWELL: Right, right for my mom, growing up in the Depression in rural New Hampshire,  
83 or quiet New Hampshire. I don't think you can really call New Hampshire "urban" even to this  
84 day. But growing up in the Depression in New Hampshire, where her parents maintained  
85 gardens and raised chickens and had a very comfortable existence, even though it was the  
86 Depression. Her father worked in the mill all his life and was a common laborer and had a rich  
87 sense of family and dedication to his heritage, and dedication to the new land that they had  
88 settled. And my father's family, living in New York City, again a very rich dedication to family  
89 and heritage, but much more difficult times. That blending of both of their outlooks, I think,  
90 really left a strong mark on us as children, and my mother would retell these wonderful stories. I  
91 didn't know my maternal grandparents. They had passed away before I was born. I did know  
92 my dad's mother. I did not know his father. He had passed away, actually right after my brother  
93 was born. But retelling these stories of their childhood, the differences in their childhood. My  
94 dad's travels throughout the world, really, his time in India, what he saw in India pre-  
95 independence, what he saw through Central and South America as a young man, just these rich  
96 stories of their growth as children and how they met. And when my mother died, at her wake,  
97 hundreds of people came who had been her students during the years, the years before she was  
98 married, and outpouring of the love they had for her as a teacher, and even then I learned things  
99 about my mother that I hadn't known. I hadn't known that a woman, a teacher, once she got  
100 married, her contract was terminated. This would be in the 1940s, and one of her students, who  
101 was a sixth-grade student at the time, came and told my dad how, when she left that year, how  
102 she broke the hearts of all her sixth-grade students to know that she wouldn't be back. And those  
103 kinds of moving tributes to her as an individual.

104 TAYLOR: So you had really a very rich childhood in many, many ways, a nurturing childhood,  
105 one that hit a whole bunch of different facets, in an area that . . . . You kind of hedged when you  
106 said "rural." I can remember during that period. To get from Boston up to Franconia Notch was  
107 a half to a 3/4 of a day trip.

108 MCDOWELL: That's true. That's true. I mean we would take the train into Boston from  
109 Manchester, which you could do in those days, for a sports exhibit, or to go to an ice show or  
110 some other event, or go to the museum. But it was still a half-a-day venture, and we took the

111 train a lot. We would go to New York City a lot to visit family, but that was an all-day  
112 adventure.

113 TAYLOR: Now what was your schooling like in New Hampshire in those days?

114 MCDOWELL: I went to a parochial school, kindergarten through eighth grade, basically just  
115 one classroom per grade, taught by the Sisters of Mercy, and I went to an all-girls high school,  
116 again taught by the Sisters of Mercy, small school. My graduating class had about 75 students. I  
117 took courses at St. Anselm's College on Saturday morning in advanced chemistry, and . . . .

118 TAYLOR: While you were in high school?

119 MCDOWELL: While I was in high school. I think probably my favorite subject was chemistry.

120 TAYLOR: Do you remember who your chemistry teacher was?

121 MCDOWELL: Yes, Sister Benita[SP?], and she really encouraged me in chemistry. My claim  
122 to fame was I scored 800s in the advanced chemistry tests for SATs, but then I didn't go into  
123 chemistry. It didn't seem like . . . . That wasn't a career. I mean I really like chemistry. Even  
124 to this day I like chemistry, but it wasn't the career path that I wanted to choose. Um and then I  
125 went to Stonehill College.

126 TAYLOR: OK, before we get off the pre-college days. What kind of other courses did you like  
127 besides the chemistry? You mention chemistry, and I can understand that. To me, when I was  
128 teaching that particular subject--Mendeleev: that was the greatest detective story ever . . .

129 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

130 TAYLOR: . . . on his periodic table. I mean to this day I marvel at how this could come out. So  
131 I could see that part, which combined a discipline with a really creative sort of thing here. What  
132 other kinds of subjects did you like a lot?

133 MCDOWELL: Um, I actually didn't like biology at the high-school level. I don't like  
134 dissections. I don't like memorizing the muscles and bones, and so that probably was not my  
135 favorite course. I liked math and took quite a number of advanced math courses. I loved Latin,  
136 and took Latin every year in high school. So I guess Latin, chemistry, and math.

137 TAYLOR: It's an interesting mix.

138 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

139 TAYLOR: What would you do for entertainment? What did a young girl in New Hampshire do  
140 during that period to keep themselves amused?

141 MCDOWELL: I was pretty quiet. I read books, and there really weren't many women's sports.  
142 And my own children are great athletes because there are so many more options for sports, even  
143 at early ages. But I read books. I was very . . . . I designed clothes, and I would design clothes  
144 for all my friends. So I sewed and designed my own patterns, always looking for interesting  
145 fabrics to put together, so I guess those were my creative outlets. I'm not a very good artist, but  
146 I'm pretty creative with fabrics.

147 TAYLOR: Well, that's an art in itself. I have a friend that's a very high-level computer  
148 programmer, and her recreation is she has the old weaving machine . . .

149 MCDOWELL: Oh, um-hum.

150 TAYLOR: . . . and we got talking about it one day, and I said, "Gee, you really have to have that  
151 mathematical kind of mind in order to do this kind of thing that you're doing here . . ."

152 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

153 TAYLOR: ". . . on your loom."

154 MCDOWELL: Yes, I do weave on some small-frame looms. And you're right, you have to  
155 have an eye for color and pattern, but you also have to have the mathematical outlook to make  
156 sure the design comes out properly, and to be able to foresee that as it's developing.

157 TAYLOR: What kinds of books did you like to read when you were a kid?

158 MCDOWELL: Mysteries. Still do.

159 TAYLOR: [Laughs.] Well, my wife is a school librarian, and she always, [whispering] "Ask  
160 them what they read."

161 MCDOWELL: Mysteries, always mysteries.

162 TAYLOR: Who are your favorite writers?

163 MCDOWELL: Oh, women mystery writers--not only Agatha Christie, but contemporary  
164 women mystery writers: Carolyn Hart, um Marica Muller, Sue Grafton, and contemporary  
165 women mystery writers.

166 TAYLOR: Did you ever read Anna Pigeon?

167 MCDOWELL: I haven't read Anna Pigeon.

168 TAYLOR: I never got into mysteries, but if they have a location that I'm interested in, or they  
169 have an occupation I'm interested . . .

170 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

171 TAYLOR: . . . in, and Anna Pigeon is a national-park ranger, in the security that's in . . .

172 MCDOWELL: OK.

173 TAYLOR: . . . different national parks . . .

174 MCDOWELL: OK.

175 TAYLOR: . . . and she's in their security . . . .

176 MCDOWELL: I'll have to pick that one up. Nevada Barr is also . . . .

177 TAYLOR: That's Anna Pigeon's creator, Nevada Barr.

178 MCDOWELL: Oh, OK. Then, I have read them.

179 TAYLOR: Oh, OK. So, books, a lot of designing, good friends in those days?

180 MCDOWELL: Yes, I still have some of my best friends, the same friends I had growing up.

181 TAYLOR: When you go off to college, it's kind of an interesting period. You have to make a  
182 decision where you're going to go, what kind of courses you're going to take. Was this  
183 something you discussed with your parents a lot?

184 MCDOWELL: Yes, but we . . . . I wanted to stay in the Northeast. I wanted to stay in New  
185 England, and I wanted a small school that had a strong science department. Since I had gone to  
186 an all-women's high school, I wanted to go to a coed college, and so I chose Stonehill College.  
187 A good small school, had a good curriculum, and I applied to several others, but I was offered  
188 early admission at Stonehill as well as several others, and Stonehill was where I decided to go.

189 TAYLOR: My daughter-in-law's alma mater.

190 MCDOWELL: Oh, really!

191 TAYLOR: Yeah.

192 MCDOWELL: When did she graduate?

193 TAYLOR: Ahh, about 10 years ago now.

194 MCDOWELL: Long after me. [They laugh.]

195 TAYLOR: Well, she's a teacher now. You had taken some courses at St. Anselm's, . . .

196 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

197 TAYLOR: . . . and so you had a kind of a feeling for what college was going to be like. Now,  
198 what made you make the decision of what you were going to do in college, what your major was  
199 going to be.

200 MCDOWELL: Well, it was going to be a science major, and I first started out, maybe, to look at  
201 medical technology. And I think the one interesting aspect of being a student, even at an all-  
202 women's high school in the 1960s is the career advice that a young woman student would get:

203 nursing, teaching, maybe hospital lab. Weren't many other options there. Business wasn't really  
204 encouraged other than maybe secretarial work. But if you were a good student, going to go to  
205 college: nursing, teaching, medical technology. So I went with the original idea of maybe  
206 working in medical technology, but I don't like the sight of blood at all. It just . . . . I cringe and  
207 stuff. And so I majored in biology with a minor in chemistry and a minor in philosophy, always  
208 with the idea that, well, I'll do something with the biology, probably go to graduate school in  
209 biology. But it wasn't really until my senior year that I had decided to really focus on marine  
210 biology and had really realized that you could have a career in marine biology, um, because that  
211 was denied my mother some 20-30 years earlier. So I kind of stumbled on graduate school in  
212 marine zoology and been here ever since.

213 TAYLOR: Now I'm just thinking about this whole thing, given the particular era we're talking  
214 here. I know the era I came through schools, that you're right. You could have been a teacher.  
215 You could have been a nurse. There wasn't an awful lot of option beyond that. And I in  
216 discussing this with my wife thought many times of how many women I had taught with that  
217 were really brilliant women that could have done numbers of things, but that option wasn't there  
218 for them.

219 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

220 TAYLOR: And here at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, I thought of an awful of  
221 women that came here and had essentially what you'd call a secretarial duty, but in a real sense  
222 were almost running the department that they . . .

223 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

224 TAYLOR: . . . were in, and . . .

225 MCDOWELL: Exactly.

226 TAYLOR: . . . doing multiple tasks, but still being paid and thought of as a secretarial kind of  
227 thing, and I'm wondering how much internal . . . . Realizing again you were still 19-20 years  
228 old, but how much . . . .

229 MCDOWELL: Actually, 17. [Laughs.]

230 TAYLOR: Oh, [Laughs.] That's awful. [They laugh.]

231 MCDOWELL: Well, when I started college I was 17. My mother never . . . . Both my mother  
232 and father both said, "Whatever you want to do, that world will open to you." So it was never a  
233 limitation that these are the career options you need to choose. I was very interested in



234 biological chemical interactions and almost went off to a program in pharmacology at C. W. Post  
235 Long Island University, but the living expenses were high. They offered tuition waiver and a  
236 partial assistantship, and it just . . . . I was going to make enough to make ends meet, so in  
237 retrospect I was glad I turned down that offer, because I ended up going to the University of New  
238 Hampshire in zoology, and again could combine my interest in biology and chemistry, and it was  
239 a very successful graduate career.

240 TAYLOR: Now where did the changeover come? You said that you didn't really care for  
241 biology in high school.

242 MCDOWELL: Well, I didn't care for dissection, but I really liked biochemistry and physiology.  
243 I like working with living organisms. I didn't like basically working with preserved carcasses  
244 and stuff, so I liked the dynamics of biology, the physiological processes, understanding  
245 biochemical pathways, working with living organisms. I liked that, and I discovered that aspect  
246 in college, but dissections are still not my favorite thing to do.

247 TAYLOR: [Laughs.] Oh, god I can remember my first degree was in biology, and I can  
248 remember sitting there with a cat in the anatomy courses: name, . . .

249 MCDOWELL: Yes.

250 TAYLOR: . . . origin, insertion, action, nerve . . .

251 MCDOWELL: Yes.

252 TAYLOR: . . . supply, and . . . .

253 MCDOWELL: None of that interests me. I mean it's necessary information, but none of it  
254 interests me.

255 TAYLOR: [Laughs.] I hear you. I know exactly what you're talking about. Well, OK, so you  
256 made that switchover. You really got interested in the whole process of life and how things work  
257 . . .

258 MCDOWELL: Exactly.

259 TAYLOR: . . . and so not kind of a taxonomic . . .

260 MCDOWELL: Exactly.

261 TAYLOR: . . . sort of approach to all this. And then you picked the University of New  
262 Hampshire. What were the factors that made you pick UNH?

263 MCDOWELL: Uh, I chose UNH because, even though New Hampshire has a very small  
264 coastline, the University is located quite near a large estuary, and the department was relatively

265 small, actually there was only a handful of women in the department when I started. There were  
266 about 75 graduate students, only three women. But there were very few restrictions in terms of  
267 being able to take courses in earth science and chemistry, and so I could really kind of design  
268 what I had wanted to do. They had offered me an assistantship because of my undergraduate  
269 courses in physiology and part of my experience in physiology is I could build and repair a  
270 number of [laughingly] physiological instruments, and so I got this well-sought-after  
271 assistantship because I knew how to fix equipment. So my nonacademic skills but technical  
272 skills actually probably got me that first assistantship.

273 TAYLOR: Well, I have found in all these oral histories that that is one of the key ingredients of  
274 being here at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. You not only do the science, it's the  
275 whole equipment kind of thing that you get yourself involved in, too, which is kind of unique.

276 MCDOWELL: I think also, I mean I took almost enough courses for a chemistry major. I think  
277 probably chemistry was still my strongest undergraduate subject. I had taken all the way up  
278 through physical chemistry and had real strong math background as well as the strong biology  
279 background, so I think as a graduate-student applicant, they thought, "Well, here's someone who  
280 really has the chemical, biophysical and physiological aspects to really understand animal  
281 physiology."

282 TAYLOR: Um-hum, well plus that's another essential ingredient to being here at the Woods  
283 Hole Oceanographic Institution. You've got to pull a lot of disciplines in together.

284 MCDOWELL: Exactly, exactly, and that's what I think makes marine science and  
285 oceanography so interesting, is because it is a blending of so many disciplines.

286 TAYLOR: Who acted as your mentor during your years at UNH.

287 MCDOWELL: My advisor--the one who first needed help preparing his instrument--was John  
288 Fasner[SP?], and he ended up being my dissertation advisor, and he's still a great friend. At the  
289 time he was a young assistant professor with interest in physiociology, particularly . . . . His  
290 interest is in how algal toxins interfere with neurophysiology, but we just had a very good  
291 advisor-student relationship. We still are quite good friends. He had three young children at the  
292 time, and I think just as a role model, as a scientist I found him . . . . He always had enough time  
293 to go to his children's sporting events, or to read to them at school, but as well be a very  
294 respectable scientist, a kind of good all-around individual, and so he was my mentor there, and I  
295 think . . . . People say, did you ever have women as role models or mentors? I still must

296 attribute my mother as probably my first mentor and role model, because here you could tell how  
297 much she loved working along the shoreline, and she still kept those observations so rich in her .  
298 . . those observations that she made as an undergraduate student on the Isles of Shoals. She  
299 made those very rich stories that she maintained for many, many years. And you could see how  
300 much she still enjoyed that aspect, but she was always someone who said, “Well, if that road is  
301 closed because there are no opportunities for me, I will succeed down this road.” And she was  
302 always very uplifting, very positive outlook on life.

303 TAYLOR: So it really sounds as though she had an enormous effect on you . . .

304 MCDOWELL: Oh, definitely,

305 TAYLOR: . . . and your direction.

306 MCDOWELL: I think both my parent did. I mean my dad growing up poor in the Bronx in the  
307 ‘30s but yet becoming very successful and having the . . . He was very self-driven, self-  
308 motivated. His talent at learning languages, and he was fluent in four or five languages, his  
309 travels around the world and so both were very strong role models. He was very quiet, very  
310 serious. My mom was very jovial, cheery, but the combination was very important.

311 TAYLOR: Very much so. I don’t necessarily use the term “mentor” correctly. Everybody has  
312 their own definition of what a mentor is.

313 MCDOWELL: Of course.

314 TAYLOR: And I think of someone, when you’re going through that whole graduate process,  
315 you really need some help on how do you pick a subject, how do you get . . .

316 MCDOWELL: Uh-huh.

317 TAYLOR: . . . this written up, all that.

318 MCDOWELL: I have to say my advisor, John Fasner[SP?] was that person. But all of that came  
319 pretty easy. I mean I pursued what interested me the most and did it. Because my mother had  
320 always worked on our writing skills, writing has never been difficult; and graphing data, because  
321 of my dad’s artistic skills, graphing data: that wasn’t very difficult. Making a nice presentation  
322 wasn’t tough, so . . . .

323 TAYLOR: I’ve had several people here in these oral histories told me that their lack of writing  
324 skills they felt has really held their career back.

325 MCDOWELL: Oh, I definitely think that. I mean that’s why I think my mother was so  
326 interested in fostering creative writing at a very early age, and the last school she taught in, when

327 we were in college, she taught in a small neighborhood parochial school, and all of her students  
328 submitted some of their writings to national creative-writing contests, and many of them were  
329 very successful over the years in winning top prizes, and so she always fostered that. If you  
330 can't communicate through your writing, then it's really going to hold you back.

331 TAYLOR: Well, to this day, New Hampshire still ranks high in number of students getting very  
332 high grades in SATs and things like that.

333 MCDOWELL: They do, even though they don't put much money into education. [They laugh.]

334 TAYLOR: This is true. This is true.

335 MCDOWELL: I also say another role model was my father's sister, who stayed in New York,  
336 stayed in the Bronx, even after all the transitions in their neighborhood took place. She was  
337 single. She taught for almost 50 years in the same neighborhood parochial school, St. Luke's in  
338 the South Bronx, and she became the mainstay for so many of the immigrant families that came  
339 to the South Bronx. She became their rock, their link to a secure future, and um when she  
340 celebrated her 40th anniversary as a teacher, we all went to a block party in the South Bronx,  
341 where largely families who had immigrated from Puerto Rico and other islands, predominantly  
342 Hispanic population, had really, through their own efforts, created a fiesta in her honor. It was  
343 quite remarkable. And she stayed there with them. She was their constancy. As others would  
344 move out, she would stay there for years, and so there's someone who really had dedicated her  
345 life to teaching, and had dedicated her life to people in that neighborhood.

346 TAYLOR: You come from a really remarkably strong family background, don't you?

347 MCDOWELL: Yeah, well, I'll tell you about my grandmother. [Laughs.]

348 TAYLOR: I wish you would, because I was similar to you. I barely knew my mother's folks,  
349 because they passed away when I was young, and I didn't know my father's parents at all, which  
350 has given me a whole certain attitude as a grandfather myself, how much a part of my  
351 grandkid's [SP?] life I'm going to be.

352 MCDOWELL: Exactly. Exactly, well, let's see, my father's parents came . . . . My brother's  
353 doing a genealogy right now, and I never thought my brother would ever be interested in this, but  
354 he just all of a sudden, it sparked his interest, where ancestors settled and so forth. But my  
355 father's parents settled in New York City, and my father's mother had all these wonderful  
356 recipes that she passed on to the family, and she worked as a cook for a German family in New  
357 York City. So we have all these wonderful German recipes in our family that she handed down

358 over the years, but again very positive outlook, even during hard times. My mother's mother  
359 came here as a 17-year-old girl, worked in the textile mills in Manchester, came to Southern New  
360 Hampshire. She made enough money in the next seven years to go back to Ireland, build her  
361 mother a new home, build her aunt a new home. She had met my grandfather on the boat on the  
362 way over. They didn't marry until after she had made all this money to go back home, and they  
363 still had enough money to build the house that we grew up in. So you figure a 24-year-old girl,  
364 that's by the time that she had gotten married, had made enough money to go back and make a  
365 brighter future not only for her mother but for one of her aunts, and then come and establish her  
366 own roots, build a home and raise a family here, and quite remark . . . . And again, she from--I  
367 never knew her, but my mother's story of her is that she's very much like my mother, very . . . .  
368 "Oh, this family's having a difficult time. Go pluck a chicken and bring it down for Sunday  
369 dinner." And oh, I hated plucking chickens. But, they had resources that they wanted to share  
370 with the rest of the neighborhood.

371 TAYLOR: When I was a teacher I used to think no matter what I did with a young person to try  
372 and set them on a straight road, if you will, nothing, nothing approached strong family.

373 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

374 TAYLOR: And it sounds like a lot of your ability to make the kind of choices you made came  
375 from the fact that you had an incredible strong family.

376 MCDOWELL: Um-hum, very much so.

377 TAYLOR: One that looked out for each other, . . .

378 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

379 TAYLOR: . . . looked out for other people in the neighborhood, things like that, and that kind of  
380 frees you up in a certain way, I think.

381 MCDOWELL: Well, it opens . . . . I didn't travel to adopt our children until quite later, but my  
382 husband's family came from Poland, and even as a young boy he would help his grandfather take  
383 care of the farm, take care of the animals, and he has a rich sense of what it is to do farm work,  
384 growing up in Western Massachusetts. But when we adopted two children--one is now 10, one  
385 is now 12, and from different parts of the world--had no hesitancy to go to South America and to  
386 find our daughter. I had no hesitancy to go to Bucharest, Rumania, to find our son. Part of that  
387 came from our travels as scientists, but a lot of it came from travels that my father had done over  
388 the years. It's just another corner of the world. People are the same.

389 TAYLOR: I wanted to ask a question about going into the university level. Our backgrounds  
390 are amazingly similar. My paternal grandmother is from County [??] Cork and my mother is  
391 from Poland.

392 MCDOWELL: Oh, OK!

393 TAYLOR: And I grew up in that kind of household where Polish was spoken as the language.

394 MCDOWELL: We still speak a little Polish.

395 TAYLOR: And I went to, because I went to the Boston public schools, I never was in a  
396 coeducational situation. There were five all-male schools in Boston, . . .

397 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

398 TAYLOR: . . . and two all-female schools, and when I went into college and it was  
399 coeducational, I mean a girl, I almost said, "What's that?" [They laugh.] And I wondered, what  
400 was your reaction, after all those years of parochial school, to get into a . . . ?

401 MCDOWELL: Oh, well I still knew all my brother's friends. He went to an all-boy's school,  
402 but we still knew all the kids from the neighborhood, and it's interesting: today if you told my  
403 daughter she couldn't wear jeans to school, she'd just think that you were inhuman. We had a  
404 dress code. You could only wear slacks on campus on weekends. You had to have dresses and  
405 stuff. Boys needed jackets and ties, so it was a very different era. But I had lots of friends who  
406 were boys and girls. I guess the first time that I found myself competing with boys for grades,  
407 not competing, but first chemistry test. I had taken all this advanced chemistry, so I breezed  
408 through general chemistry, had scores that would put everything off the scale, and had some  
409 close friends who thought they were going to be science majors, and then after the first semester  
410 of general chemistry chose something different, and stuff. So that was kind of interesting, when  
411 they were having, seeing everybody's feelings hurt because I did better than they did on the test,  
412 but they got over it though.

413 TAYLOR: Let me ask your opinion on that, and this is an opinion based on my interest as a  
414 former teacher. For years and years and years, I've heard, "Girls don't become scientists. Girls  
415 don't do well at mathematics."

416 MCDOWELL: I did great in mathematics.

417 TAYLOR: And I've said, many, many times, I've said, "The best students I had were female."  
418 What is this?

419 MCDOWELL: I think it's more the encouragement. I think, even SAT scores, GRE scores, I do  
420 much better in the analytical subjects than the verbal. I didn't do bad in the verbal, but I always  
421 did better at math. And I think it's more what the expectations, and going to an all women's  
422 college, I mean these opportunities to take college courses on a Saturday morning were made  
423 available to me, whereas if I had been in a coed high school, they may not have been made  
424 available to me. I've just seen, on career days that I've done since I've been at the  
425 Oceanographic, it's still a very stereotypical um framework by which girls are geared one way,  
426 boys are geared another way.

427 TAYLOR: We almost teach to the boys.

428 MCDOWELL: I think you're right. I think you're right. I mean now that I have . . . . My son is  
429 going into seventh. He's a hands-on, very intuitive, likes activities in order to think about  
430 concepts, and I think we are gearing more to the kinds of hands-on activities. I think we are  
431 evolving our teaching methods to really track the seven different multi-intelligences, the  
432 kinesthetics, the interpersonal, the intrapersonal . . . .

433 TAYLOR: Gardner?

434 MCDOWELL: Yeah, the whole framework of teaching styles, and I sometimes think that the  
435 girls do get shortchanged, because we see different personalities of girls emerging, and they're  
436 not suppressed to all be one way any more, and I guess that's probably the difference. I see more  
437 introspection into girls' personalities, allowing them to be a variety of personalities. Well, we've  
438 always allowed boys to be a variety of personalities, but girls we put into a little cookie cutter for  
439 quiet, don't say much, just do your work. So I think for the better of both boys and girls, we're  
440 adapting our teaching methods to really be able to teach a cross-section of skills.

441 TAYLOR: You mention Charles [Howard] Gardner with his multiple IQs, if you will . . .

442 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

443 TAYLOR: . . . to which I totally subscribe, and thinking also of, if I had a student when I was  
444 teaching geology, that was much more of a visual person than a book-learner, sometimes I would  
445 have them actually paint mineral specimens and things . . .

446 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

447 TAYLOR: . . . like that, and they would come out knowing an incredible amount about that  
448 particular specimen, because they visualized. It was a different way of looking at it.

449 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

450 TAYLOR: But you came through in a period when all of this was really the stereotypical . . . .  
451 There wasn't an awful lot of creative teaching that you see now.

452 MCDOWELL: No, I again think of my chemistry teacher, who really just loved chemistry, and  
453 she saw that I picked it up quickly. I liked to analyze things, and she really encouraged that. She  
454 would give me extra problems that I just really liked working, like on those analytical chemistry  
455 problems where you needed the math to solve the thermodynamic portion. I just loved doing  
456 those kinds of things, so she would give me more and more to do, and this was when I was a  
457 high-school junior, so I emerged . . . . And she's the one who recommended me for the Saturday  
458 courses in advanced chemistry, and I could just see this evolving as being sort of a combination  
459 of the mathematical skills, but also your insight into solving a problem, and so I think of her as a  
460 key mentor at that time, really nurturing my interest in the math and analytical processes.

461 TAYLOR: So you had a mother and an aunt that really were kind of mentors in terms of a  
462 lifestyle . . .

463 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

464 TAYLOR: . . . and you had . . . .

465 MCDOWELL: And an acceptance of diversity and acceptance of hurdles to overcome, and so  
466 forth.

467 TAYLOR: And then you had one that was kind of an academic mentor in terms of . . . .

468 MCDOWELL: Right, right.

469 TAYLOR: You're very lucky, you know. [Laughs.]

470 MCDOWELL: Yeah, I mean, oh, about 10 years ago (when that was), I received an award from  
471 Girls Incorporated, like a science hero, and they said, because I was a role model for girls or  
472 something, and I said, "You know, I was really lucky, because I did have . . . ." I really  
473 considered that I had four strong women as mentors, three of whom I knew personally--my  
474 mother, my aunt Helen, Sister Benita[SP?], my chemistry teacher, and Rachel Carson, all  
475 through that period of time, and so to tell me as a student in the '60s that a woman couldn't  
476 succeed wasn't in my . . . . It just wasn't in my experience, because all four of these women had  
477 succeeded, and [slapping sound as of hands into lap] so . . . .

478 TAYLOR: Tell me about the Rachel Carson bit.

479 MCDOWELL: Oh, see, I was very interested in, again, the interaction of chemistry and biology,  
480 and her books . . . . I think she was a marvelous writer, but *Silent Spring* was published in the



481 early '60s. I actually gave that book to my high school. I was president of the National Honor  
482 Society, and I gave that book to my high school as a gift from the National Honor Society. But  
483 that was a great book to read as you were emerging an interest in how the environment shapes  
484 the biological response, and how chemistry and living systems interact, so again I couldn't figure  
485 out . . . . I mean her job was a fisheries biologist, which I thought [in a whisper] "My, how  
486 boring!" But the legacy that she left, I thought was quite remarkable, and so I followed a bit of  
487 the controversy in the *New Yorker*, between she and the uh . . . .

488 [END OF SIDE 1]

489 MCDOWELL: . . .ies and early '70s, when environmental programs really started to emerge,  
490 and the opportunities for graduate study in ocean science or graduate study in ecology, graduate  
491 study in environmental science--those all started to expand in the late '60s, early '70s, so that the  
492 opportunities I had at that time, graduating from college in 1969, I could really begin to  
493 capitalize on my interest in chemistry and biology, on the passionate pleas that Rachel Carson  
494 had written about. So it's really from the first Earth Day in 1970 that I really kind of formulated  
495 my interest in looking at the distribution of contaminants in the environment and their effects on  
496 living systems within that environment. So everything that led up to my choice of what will I  
497 work on, I think goes back to all those things that I did in high school and things that I read. If I  
498 had been a student 10 years earlier, I don't think it would have been as easy for me to evolve  
499 those interests, or I certainly couldn't have done it as quickly as I did.

500 TAYLOR: Because in that period, I literally could count on the fingers of one hand the number  
501 of women who had gained some fame in those fields. I can think of Rachel Carson. I can think  
502 of Margaret Mead.

503 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

504 TAYLOR: I can think of Eugenie Clark.

505 MCDOWELL: Right.

506 TAYLOR: And that's . . . . There weren't many more.

507 MCDOWELL: You really have to scour for more, and I did a seminar a few years ago for a  
508 women-in-history project, and it was related to um why women in biology might have a bit  
509 easier time and not feeling like they were so isolated, in the environmental sciences, compared to  
510 women in chemistry and physics. And so I really spent a lot of time going back, looking at  
511 women who had had a major presence in the biological sciences over the years. And you could

512 find some. I mean certainly women were receiving Ph.D.s in the biological sciences a hundred  
513 years ago, more than a hundred years ago, and they often could have a very strong influence on  
514 the field, but oftentimes they were tied to their husbands. They were a faculty member because  
515 their husbands were a faculty member, or they were a member of a laboratory of their husband's,  
516 but you could still find pioneers within the field who had made an impact on the field. And then  
517 when, during World War I, graduate schools were dominated by women, because the men were  
518 off at war. The same happened in World War II. But in many respects--and I think if you talk to  
519 women quite senior, at least when I've talked to women quite senior in the field, when I was a  
520 young scientist, they said they really had to make a choice. If they chose family, and they  
521 became a partner of their husband's in their own laboratory, then they didn't choose the tenure-  
522 track, faculty position. If they chose the tenure-track, faculty position, oftentimes they could not  
523 choose family, and so I think many of the instances where you do find individuals who have  
524 succeeded, it was a solo path. I mean they couldn't have the breadth of life or depth of life that  
525 maybe their male colleagues could have. So there's some pretty remarkable stories..

526 TAYLOR: There are, and I think back to, like you mentioned, your dad was in the Army Air  
527 Corps, which is an old name . . .

528 MCDOWELL: Right, right.

529 TAYLOR: . . . there were women pilots then, but most of the time they were allowed to taxi a  
530 plane around the field to bring it over for the real pilots . . .

531 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

532 TAYLOR: . . . to fly, and now some of that is starting to be recognized.

533 MCDOWELL: Exactly.

534 TAYLOR: But it's still, what you're talking about I think is probably still a major problem. A  
535 lot of women have to make some decisions that I don't think men have to make.

536 MCDOWELL: Um-hum. Certainly I think for our family, both my husband and I do  
537 everything. We share everything in terms of transporting the children to activities and working  
538 on homework and things like that. As I look around the community, most of the scientists with  
539 children--both mom and dad are helping with the homework along with everything else. And  
540 that's what's great about this community is that sense of participation in all aspects of the  
541 children's activities.

542 TAYLOR: Now, how did you . . . ? You mentioned just a minute ago, but I kind of want you to  
543 restate. How did you make up your mind what your dissertation was going to be about?

544 MCDOWELL: Oh, well, there was an interesting problem. First, as I said, it was sparked by  
545 this emerging of the environmental chemistry and interactions with ecological systems, and so  
546 there was this really interesting problem in the Great Bay Estuary of chromium from tanning  
547 wastes going into an estuary, and so I mapped the distribution of chromium throughout the  
548 estuary. I used that chromium distribution as a marker for sedimentation rate, so using it as a  
549 geochemical marker for predicting over time how much it had accumulated in the sediments.  
550 And then I looked at its interaction with organisms, and so it provided my interest in chemistry  
551 solving problems and [??] of geological systems.

552 TAYLOR: And kind of a unique place to study it, too, that . . . .

553 MCDOWELL: Yes, it is. So I learned a lot about estuarine dynamics, in terms of preparing for  
554 my dissertation. I learned a lot about geochemistry. I learned a lot about sedimentation,  
555 estuarine processes, biology.

556 TAYLOR: When I look at sediment, the things that happen with it--I just happened yesterday to  
557 read an interesting statistic that three of our major rivers deposit 320,000,000 tons of sediment a  
558 year out in their deltas, . . .

559 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

560 TAYLOR: And that [laughs] that can transport an awful lot of bad stuff out into the sea.

561 MCDOWELL: It can. It can. And I also think of, before the Clean Water Act, or just about the  
562 time of the Clean Water Act and other environmental legislation in the past, to basically make  
563 the connection between our land uses and the impacts we have on our waterways, so from a  
564 political-science perspective and a public-policy perspective, it was an interesting time to satisfy  
565 all these interests.

566 TAYLOR: You were looking at all these various strings . . . ?

567 MCDOWELL: I was looking at the geochemistry, the estuarine dynamics, as well as the  
568 biological impact.

569 TAYLOR: OK, and did you realize what a can of worms you were getting yourself into?

570 [Laughs.]

571 MCDOWELL: Yeah, yeah. **But** I worked pretty hard, and it worked out well.

572 TAYLOR: When you have to defend, is that a nervousing situation?

573 MCDOWELL: Oh, everything is nerve-wracking for me. I'm a very nervous person, but it  
574 wasn't that bad. Every time I have to give a lecture I still get as nervous doing that as probably  
575 the first time I ever did it, but um you know more than anyone about the subject, and if you've  
576 done your homework and looked at every aspect, then you'll succeed.

577 TAYLOR: OK, you've got that prized Ph.D. in your hands now. What happened then?

578 MCDOWELL: Well, first I looked for a job. I applied for a post-doc here, and I was an  
579 alternate. I said, "Well, I need income." So I took a teaching position at Framingham State.

580 TAYLOR: Across the street from my house.

581 MCDOWELL: Yeah, you know Val Hodgson[SP?]?

582 TAYLOR: Yes.

583 MCDOWELL: OK, Val was going on sabbatical, and I took the position to fill Val's position  
584 while she was on sabbatical, and I taught invertebrate zoology, marine biology and general  
585 biology, and I liked it, but I didn't get to do research much, and I liked my invertebrate zoology  
586 course, and I taught it [??]. I taught it from a functional viewpoint, so I taught structure and  
587 physiology. And I liked my marine biology class. The general biology class was OK, but I  
588 mean it was almost . . . . It was 500 students in the class, and it was how to entertain them. I felt  
589 it was more like how to be creative in entertaining more than how to deliver information. I  
590 reapplied for the postdoc here during that year, and was awarded a postdoctoral scholarship here,  
591 so a postdoc scholar here, as a first . . . .

592 TAYLOR: What was your reaction? I want to get that right off the bat. The letter came--or  
593 whatever it was . . . .

594 MCDOWELL: Great! Great! Yeah, I probably don't show much emotion, but it's what I really  
595 . . . . I really wanted to do that. Teaching is OK. I guess what I really wanted to do was maybe  
596 work for EPA. At least, I thought then what I really wanted to do was work for EPA. And once  
597 I'd taken the teaching position, October of that year, I had an offer of a job with EPA, and I said .  
598 . . . . But I had to take it then, and I said, "I'm not going to leave the teaching. That just doesn't  
599 seem right." I thought, "Well, I turned down what I thought I really wanted to do," but I had  
600 made a commitment and they accepted the commitment, and then I applied for the postdoc again,  
601 and I got the postdoc. Framingham had offered me another year teaching, um but I really wanted  
602 to do this instead, so I came here, thinking, "Well, maybe EPA will develop something else  
603 again," and then came here for a year and I've stayed ever since, so . . . .

604 TAYLOR: What was that first year like? When they offer you a postdoc, what are you, for  
605 someone who might not know, what would you be doing?

606 MCDOWELL: Well, I wrote my proposal on the application was to apply, develop  
607 physiological, or to make physiological measurements on larval organisms, so to begin to  
608 understand the physiology of very small planktonic larval stages of marine invertebrates, and so I  
609 had taken many of the techniques that I had worked on as a graduate student, and I scaled them  
610 down, and I developed some new techniques for looking at physiological processes, and at the  
611 time people said, “Well, nobody can do that.” But I was convinced that I could do that, and I  
612 did, and I worked with John Ryther and Joel Goldman on a project that they had just gotten  
613 funding for, and they needed to come in. They said, even if I didn’t get the postdoc that they  
614 were interested in hiring me to apply some of these techniques at this physiologic project they  
615 had, but I got the postdoc, so I came in and assisted them, but I also got to work on my own  
616 things, and I thought . . . . After a year they had funding to continue supporting me, and I think  
617 the one thing that you think. You get through your dissertation, and you say, “Boy you had a  
618 great idea and it worked,” and then you work on the next project, and you think, “Well, this is an  
619 interesting idea. I’ll get through another couple of years.” But you don’t ever think that you’re  
620 going to have enough ideas that will get you through a lifetime.

621 TAYLOR: A career. [Laughs.]

622 MCDOWELL: And then you slowly start to realize, and I think it probably took me just that one  
623 year to realize it. I’ve got many ideas. And so I was appointed to the staff as an assistant  
624 scientist in 1976, about a year and a half after I’d come here as a postdoc. And the ideas just  
625 have never stopped.

626 TAYLOR: Now you came here in the Biology Department?

627 MCDOWELL: Yes.

628 TAYLOR: All right. I wonder if you could reflect some on what the Biology Department was  
629 like then, and who was in it. I’m asking that for a specific reason. The Woods Hole  
630 Oceanographic Institution--and this is not a derogatory comment--but it does have some big  
631 names: Allyn Vine, . . .

632 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

633 TAYLOR: . . . this kind of thing? And as I do these oral histories I find some very, very  
634 respected biologists. Bob Hessler is an example, out at . . .

635 MCDOWELL: Um-hum.

636 TAYLOR: . . . Scripps now, and people like this, and several others, who would bring up a  
637 name like Howard Sanders, who they thought . . . . He's not one of the WHOI big names, but  
638 boy, some of those people in that original Biology talk about this . . . .

639 MCDOWELL: Yeah. See, I think of Howard as being one of the big names, although just  
640 because I think both personality-wise, his style, his contribution to science is so great. I think of  
641 Howard as being one of the big names. John Ryther was one of the big names, paper in *Science*  
642 on productivity of the oceans, and Holger Jannasch, Stan Watson. But what I learned early on is  
643 that I had read papers by all of these individuals, and held them on a pedestal. Well, they're just  
644 human. [They laugh.] And I could see arguments between them and discussions, and one goes  
645 off angry, they come back and apologize and so forth. So they became real people. And so the  
646 Department, I think, certainly had a lot of key indi . . . . Rudy Sheltema[SP?] still very active.

647 TAYLOR: We're doing his oral history now also.

648 MCDOWELL: Oh, yeah. Dick Backus, John Ryther, um Howard--all key individuals, but all  
649 very gracious individuals. George Grice--he was the Department chair when I first came, always  
650 very supportive.

651 TAYLOR: So you felt that you had come into a good community then, for you?

652 MCDOWELL: Oh, definitely, yeah. And a lot of the people who are now senior scientists--  
653 Larry Madin, John Stegeman, they were all new assistant scientists and stuff.

654 TAYLOR: New kids on the block then? [Laughs.]

655 MCDOWELL: So, yes, I think it has been a rich, engaging department.

656 TAYLOR: OK, now you stayed in the Biology Department.

657 MCDOWELL: I'm still in the Biology Department, so . . . .

658 TAYLOR: [Laughs.] There've been a lot of other tentacles out there.

659 MCDOWELL: Well, yes, but I'm still a member of the Biology Department, so that's basically  
660 where I've stayed for the whole time.

661 TAYLOR: OK, are you continuing research in biology?

662 MCDOWELL: Yes, I mean I have a lot of other jobs, but I still publish one or two papers a year,  
663 and have tons of data archived, and still working on . . . . I'm actually still working up data I  
664 collected when I was a postdoc. Every year I add a little bit more to it. But I have other projects

665 on adaptation of multiple populations in different habitats, and some chemical distribution data  
666 in mussel populations, and so there are number of different things I continue to work on.

667 TAYLOR: OK, I'm going to ask you about some of those as we go along with this, but had you  
668 met your to-be husband at this point in your life?

669 MCDOWELL: No, no.

670 TAYLOR: Tell me about that. Where did you meet?

671 MCDOWELL: Oh, I met him here at the . . . . Actually he's very quiet. [??] postdoc at the  
672 Oceanographic Institution, and . . . . In 1980 I was giving the Bigelow Medal Award to Holger  
673 Jannasch, and so I made a speech and stuff, and that's when he said, "Boy's that's really neat,"  
674 and so someone said, "Well, you should go ask her out." And two years later he asked me out.

675 TAYLOR: [Laughs.] Hopped right on it, huh?

676 MCDOWELL: Hopped right on it, very quiet, shy person, but great individual.

677 TAYLOR: OK, what's his name?

678 MCDOWELL: John Melongoskin[SP?].

679 TAYLOR: And how long have you been married now?

680 MCDOWELL: Seventeen years. Our anniversary was last Saturday.

681 TAYLOR: And you have two adopted children.

682 MCDOWELL: Two children.

683 TAYLOR: OK. How did you make the decision to adopt?

684 MCDOWELL: Um, well I guess I was getting old and stuff, but I think when you marry, if you  
685 don't get married till you're in your mid-30s, and we both come from very rich--not rich  
686 financially rich--but rich--emotionally rich--milies.

687 TAYLOR: The real rich.

688 MCDOWELL: Very supportive families, that certainly we wanted a family to have all that  
689 [claps] richness and enthusiasm for life, and so forth. And I think when you're faced with  
690 having to undergo fertility treatment, it's extremely painful, both physically and emotionally, and  
691 it's not much fun. We just decided, both as individuals, maybe coming from both having been  
692 nurtured by immigrant families who had come out of strife, we both decided that um we would  
693 pursue adoption because we felt that was a very positive way to build a family, and we were at  
694 my brother's house on Christmas Day in 1989, and we were just about to leave. Our family  
695 always gathered for Christmas, and he came out, and it was when I'd just heard on the news that

696 Ceaucescu had been executed, and so he came in and um our brother's not very . . . . We were  
697 all raised as Catholics and stuff, but I think my brother is probably the least religious of all of us.  
698 He came out and he said, "The anti-Christ is dead. Ceaucescu has just been executed." And we  
699 didn't really think we'd be going to Rumania, but what a remarkable point in history to have a  
700 madman who had persecuted these people for all these years. And I had had a Rumanian woman  
701 in my lab, um in the early '80s, late '70s, early '80s, and she was afraid that there were secret  
702 police everywhere in Falmouth, and trying to convince her it was OK, that there weren't secret  
703 police everywhere was very difficult. So here, a decade later, my brother makes this  
704 announcement, we decide two or three days later. OK, my birthday's right after Christmas, and  
705 my husband bought the *Adoption Resource Guide*, [??] start on this path, and um so we didn't  
706 think we would be going to Rumania. We thought we would go to Poland. We both could speak  
707 a little Polish, um we knew others who had adopted from Poland, but as we got closer and closer  
708 through the process. Ah, you have to do all kinds of things to get through that process. The  
709 source that we used, the convent-run orphanage in Poland, and it had closed, and so that option  
710 looked like that wasn't going to work, and then we discovered that Rumania had really . . . . All  
711 of a sudden they had opened the doors of all these children who had been left in orphanages, and  
712 an orphanage population exceeding 100,000, and that they were opening their adoptions to the  
713 rest of the world. So I think you learn . . . . I guess you have to be resilient in this whole  
714 process, because we were . . . . Once we decided, OK, we'll start looking at Rumania, within a  
715 week, we had an assignment of a six-day-old baby boy, so we got all the papers together, call  
716 FBI, where's my fingerprints, call INS. You get all these papers, and then, well, a German  
717 couple had gotten there first. And so we go on through the process. So um December 13 of  
718 1990, we had finally got back to the . . . got a referral, lost a referral a couple of times, got a  
719 referral of a 3-week-old baby boy, and it was interesting, because I was at a WHOI Education  
720 Christmas party, and I saved the invitation for some reason, then I put it in the baby book years  
721 later, because I remember coming back, having this message that we had this referral, and so we  
722 were ecstatic that we would probably would get him home in about another six weeks, and so we  
723 start to tell family and everything, and um about a month later he um got quite ill. He was only  
724 about 6 weeks, 8 weeks old, and he was hospitalized with vomiting and the hospital dismissed  
725 him and basically told the foster family there's no hope for him, just let him die and stuff, and  
726 they frantically . . . . It was a Rumanian woman and an American man couple, and so they went



727 all around Bucharest to find a hospital that would take him, and at the same time, the AIDS  
728 scare, and a lot of Rumanian babies having AIDS, because they had all these antiquated medical  
729 treatments that they were giving to people--blood transfusions and they had spread HIV virus to  
730 these children. So the family found an English nurse who had basically . . . working in a hospital  
731 for infectious disease in a pediatric ward, and she took him in, and at this time I mean he's  
732 dehydrated. He's very, very ill. So the next call we get. I just remember we were watching  
733 Super Bowl. My husband's a Giants fan. My dad was a Giants fan. My husband's dad was a  
734 Giants fan, as well as Yankees fans, so [Laughs.] . . . . So we were watching the Giants. The  
735 Giants were willing, and all of a sudden I said, "You know, I have a really sick feeling that  
736 something is wrong." And "Oh, you're just worried about him, because he isn't home yet. He'll  
737 be home soon." The next day we get a call that they think he's going to die. And it was such a  
738 tragic, tragic to think . . . .

739 TAYLOR: That you'd already kind of emotionally connected by . . . ?

740 MCDOWELL: We're very . . . . We don't even have a picture yet, but we were very  
741 emotionally connected. I mean we've already been through court by proxy, so he already is  
742 legally ours and stuff. And it just went from bad to worse, and he lost over 50 percent of his  
743 birth weight through vomiting, and they just couldn't stabilize him. He's only 8 weeks old, and  
744 so they say he's not going to make it. We said, "Well," . . . . My husband and I are very  
745 religious, and I said, "You know, I think if we just . . . . I just am not going to accept that he's  
746 not going to make it. We've come so far, wishing for this child. This child is our own. If he  
747 does die, I'm not going to let him just be cast off in Bucharest. I will go over and make sure that  
748 he at least gets a decent burial." And people said, "You need to let this go." The adoption  
749 agent: "You need to let this go. There are other children. There's hundreds of children." "No,  
750 I'm not going to let go of this one yet." And so I mean it was the most miserable two weeks of  
751 my . . . . And once we told . . . . I mean we had to tell our parents, and they were heartbroken.  
752 We had to tell our little nephews, my brother's children, who are now in their 20s. They were  
753 heartbroken. I think the only person I told here was Lauren Mullineaux in Biology.

754 TAYLOR: I know. She's coming up next week.

755 MCDOWELL: Oh, OK. And I'd never had this period in time I could feel so sad. Well, I just  
756 we just kept our hopes up. He was stable. He didn't get any worse, but he wasn't getting any  
757 better. Two weeks later our adoption case worker from Washington, DC called and said,

758 “You’re not going to believe it. He’s not out of the woods. They can’t believe that he’s still  
759 alive.” So I said . . . . They said, “You can terminate this assignment.” I said, “We’re not  
760 terminating. I don’t care. We’re going to continue to pursue this.” But we could never get the  
761 doctors to release him from the hospital. And so he started to stabilize, and then about a month  
762 later they moved him back to the pediatric hospital, and they couldn’t believe he was still alive.  
763 At this point he’s--let’s see--four months old, 4 lb and hasn’t had any calorie intake for about 2  
764 months. Turns out he’s lactose intolerant. And . . . .

765 TAYLOR: You know how fast that would have been discovered over here?

766 MCDOWELL: pH paper into the diaper. And there’s a great international adoption clinic at  
767 New England Medical Center, for an adoptive mom [??]. So I phoned her, called the caseworker  
768 in DC. She called Rumania, asked them to check this, asked them to check that. OK, showing  
769 with his eyes light and stuff. And that at this point the family in Rumania is just heartbroken  
770 because--I’ll show you a picture--this is a beautiful child. And so I said, “OK, [??] lactose [??].”  
771 “Oh, yeah, it turns out he is lactose intolerant, but there’s nothing we can do about it because  
772 there’s nothing . . . . We don’t have anything.” So I bought every case of soy formula in Stop &  
773 Shop and whatever other grocery stores were here at the time. It wasn’t [??] and I forget what it  
774 was. It wasn’t Star Market either--Purity Supreme, and called Swissair and said, “Can you get  
775 these to someone waiting for it at Bucharest.” This was their head of direct flight requests. “Can  
776 you get these?” They waived their fees. They just . . . . I bought all the formula. They probably  
777 had 50 cases, and they shipped it free. Turns out half the pediatric ward was lactose intolerant,  
778 and they have acquired some other infections through the water, like *Giardia* or something that  
779 either secondarily left them lactose intolerant, or they just may have a [??] so he started to gain  
780 some weight, and then I went over about five weeks after that, and he’d gotten up to 7 lb and  
781 then . . . . But they didn’t want to release him. They wanted to institutionalize him, because they  
782 thought that there was probably brain damage, and what they would do is institutionalize him  
783 until he was 3 or 4, and then make the assessment on him. Well, at that point there’s no way that  
784 he would survive, so that’s . . . .

785 TAYLOR: I’m going to stop it right there.

786 [END OF TAPE 1]