

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Juliana Blackwell for the NOAA Heritage Oral History project on July 10, 2024. It's a remote interview with Juliana in Lovettsville, Virginia, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. I'm hoping we can start at the beginning if you can just say when and where you were born.

Juliana Blackwell: I was born in Silver Spring, Maryland. The hospital I was born in is right up the street from where NOAA headquarters is now. So, I spent most of my career in Silver Spring, and I spent my childhood growing up in Rockville, Maryland, just right down the street from Silver Spring. It may seem like I didn't get far, but I got a lot done in the interim.

MG: So, this has been your home base?

JB: Yes.

MG: Can I ask what year you were born?

JB: I was born in 1966.

MG: I just also wanted to wish you a happy early birthday. I know it's in a couple of days.

JB: Thank you. It is coming up on July 13th.

MG: Juliana, can you tell me a little bit about your family history and what you know about it? Maybe you can start on your father's side.

JB: Oh, sure. My parents both grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania in small coal mining towns. That was really the place that I knew most growing up because we always went back to Pennsylvania to visit my grandparents and other relatives. They both came from a family of nine children. So, there were lots of relatives, and many of them stayed back in the area. The interesting thing is that all of my grandparents came over from either Poland or Italy on the boat, on different boats, obviously, and settled in this area. My grandfathers were both coal miners. That was the family thing that I knew growing up. We didn't go on vacations anywhere. We went to visit family when we had time off and during the summer. I grew up really spending a lot of my childhood outdoors and enjoying just being with family. My father, Leonard Pikulsky, after he got out of the Army, ended up working in the US Postal Service. He got a job down in the Rockville area, which is why he and my mom, Barbara [nee Cafini], ended up settling in Rockville. Shortly after that, I was born, and they made their family home in Rockville. That's where I grew up.

MG: Did the sets of grandparents know each other? Did they live nearby?

JB: No. They lived three miles apart, but my parents didn't know each other until after they had gotten out of high school. They randomly met and fell in love and ended up starting a family and life in Rockville.

MG: Which grandparents were from Poland, and which grandparents were from Italy?

JB: My dad's parents were both from Poland. My maiden name is Pikulsky. That's where the "P" for my middle initial comes from. My mom's parents – one was from Italy. My grandfather's from Italy. My grandmother on Mother's side was from Poland as well. They did not know each other, I don't think, in Poland, but met when they were all in the southwestern Pennsylvania area.

MG: I was reading a little bit about immigration trends in southwestern Pennsylvania, and it seemed like there were a lot of families settling there because of the coal mines. Was that what brought the families over?

JB: I think when they came over, and they were looking for other acquaintances or distant family members to sponsor them or help them get jobs, the people that they knew were in those areas, and they were able – coal mining was a big thing. My dad's parents lived in Footedale, Pennsylvania, a coal mining patch – duplex houses, and they had a company store and the whole thing you read about coal mining communities. That's what he grew up with. There were nine children in his family. A two-bedroom half-a-house is where he started. My maternal grandfather worked in a neighboring coal mine in Fairbank. So, I feel very fortunate that they, my grandparents, made it through the Great Depression. They provided for their kids, and my parents provided for us and made sure that they did the best that they could to give us an education and a better life than they and their parents had.

MG: Did either grandparent have health effects from their time in the coal mines?

JB: My grandfather definitely had some lung issues. I don't know if they were completely diagnosed, but he lived to be in his late eighties. He was pretty tough. My other grandfather died before I was born.

MG: I always think it's convenient when the sets of grandparents live near each other because when you visit for holidays, you can see everybody, and you don't have to choose between the two families. Was that something you had the opportunity to do?

JB: Yes, absolutely. It was always going to the different grandma's houses and, again, visiting with other aunts and uncles and cousins. Often during the summer, especially on my mom's side, my aunts and uncles would bring their kids, and it was just like a big summer camp with the cousins. We went fishing. We camped. We did all sorts of things outdoors. That's how we spent a lot of our summer and winter vacations, too.

MG: Can you say again how your parents met? They grew up near each other but didn't meet while growing up.

JB: My understanding is my dad was driving by my mom's house, where she was living with her parents. He saw her outside with her sister, just stopped the car, and started talking to her. That's how they met. He just took a chance and stopped and started chatting. They started dating. I know that they both liked to dance, especially polkas. So, they would go out dancing and just hit it off, I guess. It was interesting because my grandparents literally lived three miles

apart. But back then, three miles was a long distance, especially because some of them didn't drive, right? They only went places where somebody else could drive them to, or they could get public transportation. So, a chance meeting, I would say, for my parents, luckily for me.

MG: How old were your parents when they met?

JB: My dad was probably in his early thirties. My mom was in her mid-twenties. My dad had spent, I think, four years in the Army as a military police officer. He did not see any combat. Texas was one of the places he was stationed. It was after he had gotten out of the Army and had done other jobs in different places around the country, living with his sister in Detroit, and just trying to find what to do with his career when he applied for a position in the Postal Service and was selected. I think all that was happening at the same time as he was dating my mom, and he ended up moving to Rockville first. Then, after they got married, she moved, and then they bought a house. My mom lived in the same house in Rockville until she passed away in 2020. So, a very long time, over 50 years, in the neighborhood.

MG: Well, tell me a little about growing up in Rockville and what it was like when you were young.

JB: It was a great childhood. We lived in a suburban neighborhood of Rockville called Wheaton Woods. There were lots of kids to play with. I remember riding bikes, playing outdoors, walking to Wheaton Woods elementary school, and having a great childhood doing kid things. I didn't realize there was a big scary world out there because everything just seemed very safe. My mom was a stay-at-home mom, so she took care of me and my sister and cooked, cleaned, and did all the house work while my dad was delivering mail as a letter carrier with the Postal Service. I would say my parents were very frugal. They were very intent on making sure that they saved money for our education and wanted to make sure – having grown up in the Depression era – that there was going to be enough for everybody to be able to live comfortably. So, there was a lot of just being careful with how they spent their money and what they did with their savings. They taught me the value of saving, looking ahead, and making sure that you live within your means. So, some really just great modeling on their part for me to be able to put that into practice, too, once I started down my career path and providing for my children -- and beyond, hopefully.

MG: Did that mean you had to get a summer job when you were a teenager?

JB: Oh, I wouldn't say "had to," but I definitely wanted to. Before I had a real job, I was cutting people's grass, babysitting, and doing all those young teenage types of things to earn money. When I turned sixteen, my parents let me get a part-time job at the Aspen Hill movie theater right up the street from where we lived. So, I got to be a ticket salesperson at the local movie theater, which was a lot of fun.

MG: Well, tell me a little bit about the schools you attended growing up.

JB: My elementary school, like I said, was Wheaton Woods Elementary. It was a little less than a mile away. We were supposed to walk there. Sometimes, we did as a group of kids. Often we

carpooled. I don't have a whole lot of memories about elementary school. Then, I went to middle school. It was actually junior high back then, Parkland Junior High School. I really got involved in playing sports, I would say at the junior high level – softball and basketball. I went to Robert E. Peary High School, which again was in Rockville, Maryland. Peary High School closed the year I graduated as a result of declining enrollment in the area because there just weren't that many kids to fill all the different high schools, and it was an older high school. So, unfortunately, I was the last class at Robert E. Peary High School. I was the class valedictorian. That was quite a way to end my secondary education. I have a lot of great memories about the school, about being on sports teams, playing softball, basketball, volleyball, field hockey, and some really great teachers, especially those that I remember that taught advanced science classes, advanced math classes – just superb teachers. I had an all-around just great experience as a high school student.

MG: Yeah, it sounds like it. Were you well supported in your studies of math and science? Were you finding advocates or people who were encouraging you?

JB: Absolutely. Again, the teachers primarily – because my parents did not go beyond high school education, they got to the point where they're like, "Well, I can't really help you a whole lot here with your homework." But luckily, I was a pretty good student. If I had concerns or questions, I had friends who were in those types of classes together, and we were able to help each other. I would say that the classmates that I had even back then were a pretty diverse group of friends. I got to learn just a little bit from them about the educational stuff, but also culturally about different families and different lifestyles that people had. I had one good friend whose parents were from India. So, learning about her culture and the great foods that her mom made was really a neat experience -- to learn something different than what I was used to as far as my family and the types of foods and things that we did for traditions and holidays.

MG: What about the proximity to Washington, DC? Did you get to go into DC quite a bit for field trips or for fun?

JB: Field trips, yes. My parents were not big on going into the big city. Here we were in Rockville with everything very close by. We would go into DC to the zoo. If there were folks that were coming in to visit us from out of town, we would perhaps go down to DC, but I did most of my field trips growing up with the classes in elementary school and junior high. It just wasn't something that my parents were very comfortable with because they didn't know the city growing up where they grew up in Pennsylvania.

MG: It doesn't sound like your parents were too politically minded, even though they lived near DC and your father worked for the federal government. What kinds of conversations were you having around the dinner table growing up?

JB: My dad was a working man, very much for anything that was going to make the working man in a better position. So, he definitely had a political leaning. I would say that they were both very aware, but they were not involved in a lot of political action type of things. It was a very low-key level of support, but they definitely had an opinion. My parents grew up in a very unique time. So, even having different types of people that we went to school with – different

cultures, different colors – it was new to them, too, as they were raising a family and trying to navigate what it was like to live in a suburb, let alone, close to a city. So, it was a little bit different. I think that they were very – I don't know what the right word is – careful, I would say, in not being outspoken. I'll just leave it at that.

MG: Sure. I think your sister Lori is five years younger than you.

JB: Yes.

MG: Tell me a little bit about her and your relationship with her growing up.

JB: Because she was five years younger than me, we were never really in the same school or had the same set of friends. So, it was a little bit of a challenge. She was always the little sister. I'd say she's always the cutest one. She's the most fashionable one. All through high school, she used to get mad at me when I would borrow her clothes because she always had better clothes than I did – better taste in everything. So, it was always kind of a prank. I'd be like, "Oh, I'm going to borrow this from her," and "Oh, I forgot to tell her that I borrowed that from her." She went to a different high school since Peary had closed. She went to Wheaton High School. Because I was away at college I really didn't have as much interaction with her in her high school years. I wasn't really there in person very much while she was navigating high school. She ended up going to the University of Maryland and also still lives in the area. She lives about half an hour from me now and hasn't retired yet, but is looking forward to that, too. So, she's close by. In fact, we're going to go to a concert together for my birthday, so I'll get to see her this weekend.

MG: Oh, fun. Who are you going to see?

JB: Jamey Johnson is one of her favorite country singers. It'll be a good time, a chance to get caught up, just the two of us.

MG: Oh, good. That was one of my other questions for you. What was the music or the things you were interested in at the time? Trends, fashion, and music, for example.

JB: Oh, I was a big Bruce Springsteen fan. That was my big thing. Listening to vinyl and 8-track tapes. Now vinyl's back. I still have all my old albums, not that I had that many, but I still have those. Having the mix tapes that you put into your cassette player in your car was such a big deal. Nowadays, kids look at cassettes and say, "What is that?" Bruce Springsteen kind of music, I would say, was probably the highlight for me as far as music goes. Other things that were going on then, from an entertainment perspective, I'm drawing a blank on it.

MG: Yeah, I think that will be a hard question for me to answer, too. I also wanted to say that in researching for this interview, I found a lot of family announcements in the local paper about when your sister was born and different weddings where your father was an usher. There is a picture of the two of you. I think you're equally as cute as your younger sister.

JB: Dressed in similar outfits? I'm assuming they were probably matching outfits.

MG: Yes, I saved a copy for you, and I'll send that along. How were you thinking about your next steps after high school? What did you hope to do?

JB: In high school, I was very determined that I was going to be a doctor. That was one of the reasons why I was very interested in taking these many science classes – anatomy, physiology – doing dissections, learning about all these things that I had hoped would prepare me for eventually a career in medicine. So, that was my plan. I loved math. I had always done well at math and enjoyed numbers – still do. But I was really interested in all the sciences. So, I took a lot of advanced science classes and looked for a college that would be something where I could be pre-med and then potentially go into a medical school affiliated with that college, which is how I ended up at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, outside of Boston, one for their pre-med program, and also potentially their medical school. My parents were hoping that I would stay closer to home, like Johns Hopkins or University of Maryland. But I was like, “No, I think it's time for a change.” I really just wanted to go up to New England and go to school in New England somewhere, never having been there before. I'm sure that they were scared for me and for them, but they were very supportive of me going to school wherever I wanted to go. So, it turns out that financially, it was able to happen, and I got to go to my first choice, which was Tufts University, and I spent four years there.

MG: How did Tufts become your first choice? I'm wondering even just literally how you were looking at colleges. It didn't sound like you visited Tufts beforehand. What did the process look like? Now, we have a lot of online options.

JB: Yeah. None of that then, right? [laughter] I applied to colleges before visiting them. So, I applied to Smith. I applied to Tufts. I applied to Harvard. I applied to Johns Hopkins, University of Maryland, and probably a couple of others I'm not thinking of – Boston College. Again, my parents said, “Okay. Well, if this is what you really want to do, let's go and visit.” So, we went to visit. We took a trip up to New England so that we could set foot on some of the campuses and see what my parents thought about it all. And we did. We went to Boston University, Boston College, Tufts, Harvard – drove around Harvard Square several times, trying to get our way out of there. That was just crazy because we were not used to rotaries and all the crazy driving up there – or what we thought was crazy driving at the time. When I visited Tufts, I just kind of knew. It just felt like the right size, the right location, kind of a campus unto itself, and it was in a neighborhood, not in the big city. I think my parents felt very comfortable with that, too. Just a beautiful layout and not huge, but very comfortable. So, that's one of the reasons I chose it. It was a beautiful campus.

MG: It is a lovely place. Tell me a little bit about your first year there and how you were getting adjusted.

JB: The first semester was great. Meeting people from all different places. My roommate was from the Montgomery County, Maryland area, so she went to a rival high school, but I didn't know her until I got to Tufts. There were others in my dorm that were from the local area. I got to meet people from all over the place, and that was really a great experience. I had never been to sleepaway camps or gone places where I was really exposed to that many different types of

people from all over. So, campus living and dorm living were really great. It was a co-ed dorm. Met some wonderful people there. Did some studying, too. That wasn't a problem. I ended up with some part-time jobs. I worked, believe it or not, delivering mail around campus to earn some extra money. Also, I went in on a newspaper business delivering newspapers with my boyfriend at the time, my boyfriend that I got the first year I was in college. We delivered the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* all around campus and basically made money doing that, as well as my side job of delivering mail. So, first semester was great. Second semester took a little bit of a turn, which impacted my entire career, I would say. My dad was diagnosed with cancer. He was given six months to live. We found this out at the beginning of my second semester of college. So, a lot happened that second semester. Before I started my second year of college, my dad had passed away. It was a very aggressive cancer, caught-late. Not like today when you can be diagnosed early on. You have all these preventative tests and things. That really wasn't the case back then, in 1984. So, unfortunately, I think there was a lot that perhaps could have been done if things had been caught earlier, but for whatever reason did not happen. That soured me a little bit on the whole medical health field for a while because it was just such a shock and such a huge change for us to have to – especially for my mom – take care of him while he was undergoing treatments. The doctors said he had basically six months to live, and that's about as long as he lasted. So, it was really a terrible thing to live through. That affected me for the rest of my college time. Again, being so far away from home, I was really, really not happy that I was that far away at that point. My parents were both very adamant that I go back to college, go back to Tufts, and finish my degree. I made a promise to my dad that I would do that. So, I did.

MG: Did you take any time off from school during this time?

JB: No, I didn't. Maybe I should have, but back then, it was just – I didn't really know what the options were. I think my parents were afraid that if I did that, I wouldn't go back. So, I went back. I made it. I made it through. I ended up finishing all my pre-med requirements. I ended up majoring in math versus a science because I felt like that was more of my calling. Then, I was still toying around with whether or not I wanted to go to medical school. It was after I graduated that I really had to stop and think about what I was going to do. I moved back to Rockville, back to the family home with my mom and my sister after I graduated college to try to figure out do I want to pursue going to medical school after a little gap. What do I want to do? So, that was really my break after four years of college versus taking a break before my second year.

MG: What an impossible thing to go through. I'm so sorry that happened to your family. How aware were you that the decision not to pursue a medical career was related to the loss of your father and your frustration with maybe the medical community?

JB: I was very aware that his illness and subsequent passing – I mean, he had some good doctors. I'm not saying that they were bad. Being in the hospital, seeing everything, going through it, and having some odd medical things happen by medical providers, it just – and I was angry. Honestly, I was just very angry that that happened. Here, everything is going so well. I'm in this dream college, and then, *boom*. I take things very hard. It was really hard on my mom, who, again, you know, was a stay-at-home mom/homemaker. So, finances were a

concern. Thankfully, they, again, saved and were very careful with their money. But it definitely had an impact. I just didn't know that I wanted to be thrown into medicine right then and there. So, as I said, I took a little bit of a break. But I would say that it definitely affected my pursuits. I'd also say that my grades probably weren't as great as I would have liked them to have been as a result of the stress, sadness, grief, and also trying to work hard so that I could make additional funds so that I had spending money and didn't have to burden my mom for additional money for anything. So, I was trying to help with the financial aspect of it, too.

MG: I was curious about how her life unfolded after your father's passing.

JB: She was a tough woman. She, like I said, she took care of the kids, took care of the house – took care of everything. What she ended up doing was opening her own daycare business in our home. She had been watching not only me and my sister but other kids. In order to be more business-minded and make sure that she was doing things aboveboard, she got her license to do daycare. She watched children and took them to school and had another round of kids that went through the house. She raised several other children, I would say. After she finished her daycare business, she also helped us with our young family and watched her grandkids, all five of them, sometimes at the same time. So, she was definitely a wonderful mom and very caring about not just her family but all children. That's how she made additional money to help pay the bills and make sure that my sister and I both finished our college educations.

MG: Oh, good. Were there other ways that the loss of your father changed you or your outlook on life? I sometimes think people who have experienced loss have perspective; they've been through something catastrophic, so they don't worry about a flat tire or some small inconvenience.

JB: I think I still worry about all those things, including flat tires. But on the bigger side of things, it's enjoying life and doing the things that you want to do and not waiting too long to do them. So, as a family, as we brought up our young children, doing beach vacations, doing things maybe not extravagantly or every year, but making sure that we made the time to do that. I'd also say it's probably one of the reasons why I retired this year. I'll be fifty-eight on the 13th, but I wanted to be able to spend time doing those other things that I didn't have time for while I was working full-time. I think that has definitely led me to spend more quality time now while I can because you never know what's going to happen.

MG: Can you go back to this newspaper thing you said you started? I was curious about that. I was also curious about the headlines around this time. You said it was 1984. So, was the AIDS epidemic on your radar then? Was that something you were reading about, especially being interested in pre-med?

JB: So, the newspaper business – again, I met Ben in my freshman year of college, and he was a year older than me. We dated during college for a few years. He was the *Boston Globe/New York Times* campus liaison. He was actually in the business first, but he was looking for someone to help him run it because it was delivering hundreds of papers across campus, like door to door in the dorms; it was backbreaking work. So, we teamed up and ran this business for three years together until I graduated. It was a great way to earn extra money and get a chance to



just learn a little bit more about the newspaper business and to read the *New York Times*, right? I mean, I never read the *New York Times* growing up; it was always the *Washington Post*. So, that was a fun business experience. The more people that subscribed, the more money we made. So, there was this incentive to really get out there and get people to sign up for the newspapers, one or both. That was fun. It was hard work. But it was a lot of fun. Let's see. The other part of the question you asked me?

MG: Headlines at the time. What was in the news?

JB: Oh, the headlines. That is a good question. AIDS. Apartheid. I remember there were sit-ins and things like that about apartheid at our university, as well as others. So, I think that was a big concern with Tufts University's investments in South Africa at the time. AIDS was up and coming hard and something that was very much in the news. I'll hopefully mention that again when I talk about my first job with the Public Health Service because that was certainly an ongoing thing in the office I was supporting. Those are the two. I would say, for the most part, during my college years, I was studying and working and just trying to keep my grades as high as I could. I wasn't really very active in what other events were happening. So, kept my head down and did my studying and working and didn't get involved in advocacy groups.

MG: Did you get involved in any other sports or activities? You mentioned in high school that you were an athlete.

JB: Not really. I didn't have a whole lot of extra time. So, no other sports or anything like that at the time.

MG: What else from your college years stands out to you?

JB: In order to balance all the math and the science, I got very interested in classical studies. So, for my fun classes, I took a lot of offerings related to ancient Greek and Roman literature and medicine and did a lot of reading of the classics. I probably couldn't quote anything today, but from a historical as well as a literary perspective, reading about the ancient Greeks and Romans gave me an escape from all of the heavy math and science that I was studying. There were even plays and comedies that we were reading, and I had some really fun times and some really great teachers on the classics study side of things that helped balance a lot of the weightier things that I was doing. Not that they weren't weighty, but it was weighty in a different way. That was a lot of fun. I still have a number of those books that I hope to get back to and at least skim, if not reread, in my later retirement days because I really enjoyed reading them and would like to go back and visit them again.

MG: That sounds like fun. I wonder if any of those stories or those classical tales were meaning-making for you, helping you understand the world, the heavens, and the meaning of life, those kinds of things.

JB: It gave me a little bit of a different perspective on religion, I would say. I was brought up Christian. But just thinking about what was there before Christianity, and what people thought of as gods and why they worshiped them, and thinking not just ancient Greece and Rome, but

then thinking about other religions and how that all fits together. I would say that it did open my mind some to what else is out there and why. Why are there so many different gods and different beliefs? How do they all fit together? I don't know that I have any answers, but the openness and awareness of different perspectives and what people are looking to and for in a religion. That opened my eyes to that perspective.

MG: Were you raised in the Catholic Church?

JB: Yeah, definitely Catholic, very formal religious upbringing. We went through all of the catechism classes, First Communion, Confirmation, and did all of that. St. Jude, now the Shrine of St. Jude, is the church that we went to. It is still there today in Rockville, and I was there not too long ago, as a matter of fact. I'm no longer a practicing Catholic, but am still Christian. I would say it was kind of nice to see other Christian religions that were not quite as formalized as the Catholic Church, especially when I got a little bit older and tried different churches to experience other types of services and hymns and be a little bit more open about the way Christianity is practiced.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your plans for after graduation. You moved back in with your mom and your sister. What was that pivot period like for you?

JB: It is interesting that you ask that question because my daughter Kate, my youngest, just graduated from college, and she is in that place that you're asking about now. I'm thinking and reliving what I did when I graduated from college and moved back home, which is what she's about to do – move back home, that is. I basically said, “You know what? I need a little bit of time off. I'm going to go cross country with my best friend from high school. We're going to get in the car, and we're going to just go for a month.” Again, that's what I did. I moved home. I'm sure my mom was really happy I was home. But she was really not happy that I was going to pick up and leave and go across country with one other person. This is, again, before cell phones, before GPS, before roadside assistance wherever you are. It had to have been scary for her. Right? I did it anyway because that's what I wanted to do. It was a great experience. I had the best time seeing the country; I had never been out west before, and I did a lot of camping and sightseeing. My best friend Michelle and I – my best friend from high school – had a great time. We got back safely. My mom was worried. I don't have a job. I don't have health insurance. All those things that moms worry about, right? So, it's like, “Okay, well, I'm going to start applying to jobs.” This whole healthcare thing is still in the back of my mind. What am I going to do? Am I going to go to med school? Do I want to get into the health field? Because of my friend, Michelle – and her mom who worked at the Department of Health and Human Services, also in Rockville, -- said, “Well, just fill out a government application and go and drop it off at the different HR offices in the building and see if any of them call you back.” So, I did. I filled out the government job application – I forget the form number [it was a SF 171]– but I filled it out. I walk into this huge office building. It's a split-level entry. You walk in the door, and you either have to go up half a flight or down half a flight to get to an actual floor. So, I'm like, “Well, I might as well start at the bottom, right?” I mean, here I am. I'm a college graduate without a job. I'll start at the bottom and work my way up. I went to the first, bottom-level HR office because there were five or six of them located throughout the building. There were all these different bureaus within the Department of Health and Human Services that were in this

building in Rockville. The very first office I walked into was the Public Health Service Commissioned Officer Corps Personnel office. They're the staffing office for commissioned officers in the Public Health Service, which I knew nothing about – absolutely nothing about. I walk in there with my application. I was almost hired on the spot. It was just one of those things. Why did it happen this way? I have no idea. But I walked in there. I met Iris – I think that was her name – who says, "You're looking for a job. Well, we're looking to hire somebody. Can you type?" I was like, "Type? Of course, I can type." It all just fell into place. I was offered, pending a typing test and whatever formalities I had to do, a position as a secretary, a GS-5 secretary with a special rate, which meant I was a GS-5 higher rate than a regular GS-5 with a scientific or mathematical field. Of course, I'll take the higher paying job, even if it's a secretary job. I'll start there from the bottom and work my way up. So, I never made it to the other HR offices in the building. I got my typing test done a week later, and I was hired by the end of August and started my federal career before the summer was over after my college graduation. Mom was happy I was living at home. I was working as a secretary. People were just phenomenal. Everybody knew that I was looking for something more than being a secretary, but starting there and learning the ropes about being a federal employee, what that meant, and what the opportunities were within the Department of Health and Human Services as well as other places led me on my path that I retired from. It's amazing how it worked out. The interesting thing about the Public Health Service (PHS) Commissioned Officer Corps is that it is a uniformed service of health care professionals who are doctors, nurses, dentists, sanitarians, and engineers. I'm forgetting some of the different jobs, but they're a commissioned officer corps that are assigned different places. Some of them are scientific, and some of them are operational. This opened up this whole new world of possibilities. It was through a PHS coworker there that I learned about NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] and the fact that NOAA had a commissioned officer corps that was science and math-based versus health medicine-based. So, one thing led to another. While I was working as a secretary, I was applying for jobs in the mathematical fields within the Department of Health and Human Services. There were a number of offices there working on grants for AIDS-related assistance. I don't even know what they all were, but there were a lot of grants that were being issued to help with the whole AIDS/HIV epidemic. I was looking at jobs in the math field related to that type of work when I found out about NOAA and its Commissioned Officer Corps, which I had never even heard about. So I went and talked to a recruiter at the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps and came home from that meeting with a videotape in hand with all the cool stuff I could do if I wanted to apply for the NOAA Corps. I was really pumped up about that – going to sea, being out in the field, potentially being a pilot – all the fun stuff that got wrapped up into this recruiting video, which I brought home to show my mom. I thought, "She is going to be so excited for me." I had her watch the video, and she started crying. [laughter] She was, I think, happy, but also like, "Oh my gosh, here she goes. She's going to want to go and do this, and she's going to leave." Of course, she wanted me to do what I wanted to do. But it also was double-edged emotions for her. So, I applied for the NOAA Corps position, and I was selected to go to officer training. It was after eighteen months of working for the Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Service as a secretary that I ended up being accepted into the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps through their officer training program.

MG: It seems like the position was custom-made for you, your skills, and your interests.

JB: I have to say, once I talked to the recruiter and learned about NOAA, I didn't look back on the whole medical health care field. I just said, "This is it." This is really what I want to do. I want to combine being out in the field, doing operational-type things, learning about ships, learning about the ocean, learning about whatever NOAA has to offer. It was just full speed ahead with that career choice. I was really happy I did that. I was also a little bit sad that here was this NOAA headquarters that was in Rockville at the time – not Silver Spring where it located today – which I lived very close to. I had no idea that NOAA existed. This was before the internet and before you could search online for all sorts of things. I was a little bit sad that there was something so great in my backyard practically, and I didn't know it as a high school student.

MG: Well, I think NOAA has trouble communicating and promoting itself to the community it serves, particularly during this time because it had gone from the Coast and Geodetic Survey, then there was ESSA [Environmental Science Services Administration], and there was NOAA. So, it had worn a few different hats.

JB: We still, I think, have a problem with the National Weather Service seeming like it's its own thing when there's no "NOAA" attached to the National Weather Service when you read about the hurricanes and everything else that is happening. It's hard to put all the pieces under one label unless you're part of the organization and you know that all of these things are part of NOAA. So, I agree. There's a little bit of a challenge there with the marketing and the comprehension of what NOAA entails.

MG: Before we move on to the NOAA Corps, was there anything else you wanted to say about your work with the Commissioned Personnel Center?

JB: I would just say that I really appreciated how much the people that worked in that office were helpful to me and invested in me in a sense to mentor me and educate me on the whole uniformed service and what all that means. The ranks, the personnel system – I mean, that was all new to me. I had no idea. I didn't know anything about uniformed services, which are similar to the military but a little bit different. I think everybody there was just very supportive of me, knowing that I wasn't going to stay there as a secretary and that I had other things that I wanted to do with my career, but they helped me understand what it was about and what their mission was. One other highlight of that time was when I got to meet C. Everett Koop who was the Surgeon General for the US during the AIDS/HIV epidemic.

MG: What was your impression of him?

JB: There are some good stories about him, but you can probably read about those online. I was just impressed that he would come out and speak up about things. He was very candid and said things that were bold at the time.

MG: Was he the Surgeon General during the AIDS epidemic?

JB: Yes.

MG: I just wanted to ask, when COVID happened, were you making parallels to the AIDS epidemic? Did it feel familiar?

JB: No, I didn't. I didn't associate it with that. I had lots of other stuff going on that took over my life. But I didn't feel a parallel with that.

MG: I just noticed it's noon now. We still have more to cover. Would you like to keep going, or would you like to find another time to get together?

JB: I'm okay going for a little bit longer if that's okay with you.

MG: Yes. The other thing I'm struck by is that I mostly interview people of an older generation when the position of secretary was what women could aspire to, and so I love that you were supported to do more with your career. Where were you finding that support?

JB: Everywhere. I mean, people ask me, "What does it feel like to be a woman in this field?" I never felt like being a woman made me pigeonholed into one thing. My parents both were so supportive of me being whatever I wanted to be – doctor, politician, whatever. I mean, if I had said I wanted to be a racecar driver, I'm sure my mom would have cried, but she would have supported me. That's just how it was. There was no, "You can't do that because you're a girl." I felt that from my parents from early on. There was nothing that they told me I couldn't do. I had the support of my teachers all through high school. College was a little bit different. I feel like they were turning out people left and right. I don't know that I had a college professor that I really felt was advocating for me to do one thing or another, but it was a great learning experience. The people that I worked with at the Public Health Service Personnel Office were all extremely supportive of me, again, learning about what a potential career was in NOAA, or even in the Department of Health and Human Services, if I wanted to stay on that path. I felt like I had a huge support system, no matter where, and it's because of all of them that I am where I am today. There are so many little things that connected along the way that makes this possible.

MG: Yes. What year are we in that you went to officer training?

JB: '90. So, I graduated from college in 1988. Went cross country. Started my federal career in August of 1988. Then, in January of 1990, I headed off to Newport News for NOAA officer training. The Officer Training Center at that time was at Fort Eustis. I remember I packed up my pickup truck and headed down there and didn't really look back. It was just like this is just meant to be.

MG: Tell me about your training class. How many other women were there, and what was the training like?

JB: I hope I get this right. I think there were four women total in the class, and I think we had twenty-two in our class. But I haven't brushed up on that in a while. There were people there that had started in other military groups. We had a couple of people from the Army and the Navy. We had somebody from the Air Force. So, there were some folks who had had experience in what it was like to be in an officer position. They were kind of our mentors for

everybody else who was just new to the whole thing. Plus, we had the staff at the Officer Training Center whose job it was to make sure that we had our basic training, not only in what it meant to be an officer, but training on ship handling and nautical rules of the road, and learning about the NOAA organization and everything that goes with becoming a newly minted NOAA Corps officer. So, that was about a six-month program with field trips to NOAA headquarters and different labs and things, and time onboard ships and boats to do small boat handling and ship handling. Just a great experience, a great hands-on experience. We would take one of the ships out, NOAA ship *Pierce*, the training ship, and went up to New York. We were standing watches and going through all the different jobs I had been learning about for so long and had some real great experience hands-on. It was demanding, but it was also just so much fun to be able to actually put it all together and, after six months, be able to do so much hands-on. Not necessarily doing science or math at that time, but just boat handling, ship handling, putting together how to do your navigational skills, and a whole different understanding of what it means to be out on the ship and what it takes to actually get from point A to point B, which is something if you've never been out and responsible for that, you have no idea what all goes into that. That was just a huge change in my understanding of the world those six months of training that was part of my introduction to NOAA.

MG: It sounds like training enhanced your desire to work for NOAA and to join the Commissioned Corps.

JB: Absolutely. Yeah, it was fantastic. Then, of course, right after officer training, everybody goes out on a ship assignment, a two-year ship assignment. I had the good fortune of being assigned to NOAA ship *Ferrel*, which was based out of Norfolk. It did a lot of near-coastal scientific work, primarily monitoring and measuring pollutants in harbors and bays all along the East Coast and Gulf Coast. So, a great experience [inaudible] ship handling and learning about the science. I also had the opportunity to go to dive school and learn how to be a NOAA SCUBA and working diver. That was something that I did for the seven years that I was a NOAA Corps officer.

MG: Where was the dive school at the time?

JB: I went to the program in Seattle.

MG: Was that with Dick Rutkowski?

JB: Cliff Newell was in charge of the diving program then. I still keep in touch with Cliff. I had never imagined being a diver until I heard about NOAA. I just never even thought about that. So, again, one of these opportunities, like, wow, how lucky. How fortunate am I to be in this place and to have this opportunity to learn what it's like?

MG: I want to hear more about your dive experiences, but just quickly – doesn't Cliff Newell live in Maine?

JB: Yes.

MG: That's where I am, by the way.

JB: He's in Phippsburg. Yeah, we keep in touch. He's good friends with my husband John Blackwell. They had a lot of dives together back in the day. So, we'll talk about that later.

MG: Good. Tell me about your dive experience over the years. How did diving play a role in your work?

JB: Primarily, it was either cutting off the lines that had gotten wrapped around the propellers or looking for something that got dropped on the bottom of the ocean somewhere. Some recreational diving just to keep current and making sure I knew how to do everything appropriately. I would say diving was something that I enjoyed doing, but it's not something that I do anymore. I think that it was great to do it when I did it, but it's not something that I have a huge passion to do at this point in my life. Maybe that's fear – I don't know – of not being able to physically handle all that it takes, or all that I remember that it took as far as the work that we did when we were diving.

MG: You spent two years on the *Ferrel*.

JB: Yes.

MG: Then you went to dive school, or was something else next? I think I have in my notes that you were on the *Whiting* for a bit.

JB: I went to dive school, I think, before I went on the *Ferrel*. I was able to be a diver while I was on my first ship. Again, if there were things that had to be done like hull inspections, or if something had gotten wrapped around the propeller, the divers went in. I did several dives. Because the *Ferrel* went, honestly, from Maine all the way down to South Texas throughout the year, and stopped in different places to do different projects and sampling and things like that, I had opportunities to dive in Maine. I had opportunities to dive down in Key West. I had opportunities to dive a number of places, some wreck diving, some just work diving. Always something new to be seen.

MG: Can you talk to me a little bit about your life and accommodations on board the ship and maybe what the dynamic was between the men and the women?

JB: The *Ferrel* was pretty small as far as ships go. It was a flat-bottomed converted oil rig supply vessel. So, it wasn't a big ship. I shared a room with another woman officer, and I had a couple of different shipmates that I shared a room with because the officers would rotate just like I rotated on and off. I had a great experience with both female officers. As part of the officer crew, I had terrific captains and executive officers and ops officers that I worked for. I learned a lot. I had lots of collateral duties, some of them not so fun, but all things that had to be done – ship store and radio officer and performing safety inspections and checking the fire extinguishers as safety officer, all the jobs that get pushed down to the most junior officer. So, in addition to learning how to operate the ship and drive the small boats and support the scientific complement that was coming on for the different projects, I was learning about the different things that go

into making sure that the ship and the personnel on the ship are safe, and that we are were in compliance with everything. It was a great experience. The officer crew was pretty small. I want to say there were five of us, and then the rest of the crew who were just absolutely terrific. A lot of characters. A lot of people that aren't just on a ship for just two years but are on there for their entire career -- from the engineering department, stewards, to the deck personnel – just amazing characters and amazing support from them for the mission as well as for myself and the other officers on board. So, it was great. The first two years – the first ship assignment was just absolutely phenomenal. The places I got to see. The places in the US that I got to see because we would pull into port not quite every night, but often. Being able to see the coast from a ship looking at the coast – it was just an experience that I'm so thankful for.

MG: Did you have a land assignment after the *Ferrel*?

JB: I did. So, I went to my captain at the time, the commanding officer of the ship. I was talking to him about my next assignments that I was interested in. The one that caught my eye was Coast and Geodetic Survey survey crew. I forget exactly what the title was. I said to him, “Do you know anything about this? It’s about surveying and blah, blah, blah.” He goes, “I got a good friend who's working up there in that office now. When you're up in Rockville, go and talk to him. His name is Dave Minkel.” I said, “Okay.” So, when I went up to Rockville – or Silver Spring, perhaps, at the time – I looked up Dave, and I went, and I talked to him about the Coast and Geodetic Survey or the National Geodetic Survey [NGS] as it is known today. There were a bunch of name changes going on at that time. He gave me the rundown about what geodesy was about, surveying, and the office. He handed me a magazine. He handed me *GPS World Magazine*. It was because of that interaction with Dave and this new technology of GPS – because we had GPS on *Ferrel* -- I just didn't really know a whole lot about it. We weren't supposed to be using it for navigation on the *Ferrel* because it was still not fully operational. It was a black box kind of thing. But then I got this magazine, and I started reading about it. I’m like, “This is so cool.” This is revolutionizing positioning, right? It's got surveying, it's got math – everybody wants to know where they are. It was one of the next little steps in this career thing that just was like, “This is what I want to do.” After learning about the Geodetic Survey, I went back and filled out my “dream sheet,” the list of assignments that I wanted to do. I applied for the position that was basically a field assignment to go, again, probably to my mother's dismay, traveling across the country, wherever they wanted to send me to collect survey data and learn about the different geodetic techniques for surveying. GPS was one of them; leveling, taking gravity measurements, and doing other kinds of line of sight measurements were all part of my hands-on experience that I had for eighteen months as my second assignment as a NOAA Corps officer. So, we lived in hotels and traveled with a group of other people in the survey crew because we were all working in the same local areas conducting the survey, and we just kept going from location to location, state to state, collecting the data that was identified for the projects we were working on. So again, mainly Maine down to Florida, still on the East Coast and definitely east of the Mississippi. I didn't get to go to any cool places out West. But there was plenty to see on the East Coast, too, from the land, not from the ship, but from the land side of things. That's where I learned a lot more about surveying and geodesy.

MG: Was this effort to calibrate your surveying tools or to do new surveying?



JB: To do new surveying. This is when GPS was being used as a tool for accurate surveying, which replaced a lot of the line-of-sight surveying that was done with the historical instruments that we know and love and what built the framework for positioning back over two hundred years ago, the Survey of the Coast and the Coast and Geodetic Survey. With GPS, it was a new technique to use. With the new equipment, the processing of the data, the setting up of things, and the fact that the GPS constellation wasn't fully complete yet – there were a lot of challenges with when the best times were to go out and survey. Sometimes, it was in the middle of the night, and you had to survey for at least five and a half hours on a point in order to get enough data. So, there are times you wake up in the middle of the night to go out and set up on a point to collect the data because that's when the satellites were in the right alignment to get the best data possible. So, it was fun. It's not like that anymore with the full constellation. Technology has certainly advanced since the early 1990s. It was great to be there in not quite the very beginning, but early on phases of GPS and using satellites to do accurate positioning for geodetic purposes. So, we were surveying old points, resurveying them, as well as adding new marks in the ground to help densify places that hadn't been easily surveyed previously because GPS made it easier to collect data in places that would have been much more difficult with traditional methods of geodetic surveying in the past. A lot more economical, too.

MG: What areas are difficult to measure? What were the challenging areas?

JB: For GPS?

MG: Yeah.

JB: Anything in trees because you don't want anything above your GPS antenna. You want to have clear visibility of the sky. So, there is nothing that's creating any kind of interference or creating problems with the signals. It's very difficult to survey in canyons. So, whether it's an urban canyon or a natural canyon, it was pretty challenging to do that. I remember trying to survey a point. I think it was the Hassler disk outside of the NOAA headquarters there in Silver Spring. Of course, there are two tall buildings right there, kind of blocking a big part of the sky. It was very difficult to get an accurate measurement on point there. These days, the more satellites you have, either through GPS or other global navigation satellite systems from other countries, if you can combine all those different satellite data together in your software system, then you can get a better position faster nowadays than you ever could back when I first started GPS surveying back in, again, the early 1990s.

MG: I interviewed John Bossler, and he talked about what this looked like even earlier. It's just interesting to hear about the trends. Was he the director of the Coast Survey at the time?

JB: He was not. I did not work with him directly – I came in after John Bossler. I have met him and talked to him. He's amazing. He's quite the character also. I'm trying to think back. Who was the director at the time? Some of the directors I worked for were Lew Lapine. I think also Charlie Challstrom was probably the director I remember the most. I think it was Lew and then Charlie and then, of course, Dave Zilkoski.

MG: Anything else you want to say about this time surveying? It sounds like it was a really exciting job.

JB: GPS surveying may sound exciting, but once you're set up on a mark, you just sit there and make sure that things are working. The weather always made it exciting if you had storms or just trying to get from point A to point B. There would be places where you'd have to actually carry a lot of equipment. You couldn't drive to something if it was up on a mountain; you had to actually haul it up there. So, thankfully, these days, the receivers and antenna are a little bit lighter weight and not as bulky as they used to be. But there used to be some hard work involved in trying to get to some of the more remote locations. I also did some leveling work in Ohio, which was just taking height measurements along a highway basically with a leveling crew. Very important work. Very exacting work. I would just say that what I learned from all the different crews that I surveyed with as part of my experience in that eighteen months was how dedicated those folks were to making sure they did it by the book and as best as they could as safely as they could. I think everybody else on the crews that I worked with were men. So, almost, I would say, a hundred percent of the time, I was the only woman that was out there. They taught me the ropes and made sure I was safe and wasn't in harm's way. They also just gave me a great appreciation for what they do as their profession. Again, not rotating in and out every couple of years to do something different. That was the job that they had, some of them, for years and years of making sure that they were the best at what they did. It was just a great way to learn about the Geodetic Survey, again, as an officer, that set the stage for me then coming back as a civilian shortly thereafter in my career.

MG: How shortly after? Because I know you also had an assignment on the *Whiting*.

JB: Right. So, in 1996, I believe it was, the NOAA Corps was basically at a crossroads. There was a lot of concern that it might be eliminated. I think there was the Executive Office under Clinton – proposals that maybe NOAA would get eliminated. There was a freeze in promotions and bringing new officers on board. It left people a little bit shaky, especially those of us who were recently in and looking at still several years to make it a full career. At the same time, I was planning on getting married. I made the decision to get out of the Corps. I was going back to sea, which was fine, except I was going back to sea on my third assignment as the same junior officer level that I was on my first assignment. There was no upward mobility at the time. Because there were no new ensigns coming in, I was going back out, I think, as a Lieutenant JG [junior grade], doing the same thing I did before but on a different ship with a different mission. So, it wasn't like I wasn't learning something, but it didn't feel as good. It didn't feel as good from a career perspective, and not knowing if the Corps was going to continue and how long it would take to get a promotion, and the fact that I fell in love with the National Geodetic Survey – it just seemed like the right time to make a change. That's when I applied for and got a civilian position with the National Geodetic Survey as a field operations liaison person. So, it was doing office work supporting the field crews that I had previously been working with. It was kind of a natural progression for me, and it enabled me to stay put for a while and not be traveling all around as I started on a new path of life and got married.

MG: What year were you married?

JB: 1996.

MG: Okay, so that was a big year. A lot happened.

JB: A lot happened. I spent six months on the NOAA ship *Whiting* because, at that point, they did not want to just let people resign. They wanted to make sure that they could staff the ships as much as possible. So, there was a six-month waiting period before I could officially resign. So, I did go out for six months. It was in November of 1996 when John and I got married. Then, about the same time, I started a position with NGS as the field operations liaison.

MG: Was John also a member of the Corps?

JB: Yes. John was a NOAA Corps officer. I met him early on in my NOAA career. He was at the training center at the time when I was down at Fort Eustis as one of the training center personnel. He's also from Rockville, and we grew up more than three miles apart, but not that far apart. But we never knew each other – we went to different high schools, and were different ages. His parents were in Rockville. It's just a neat circumstance where we ended up back in Rockville at the same time after I got off my field assignment, and we started seeing each other. He retired from the NOAA Corps. He's definitely more of an avid diver than me, has thousands of dives under his belt, worked at the NOAA Dive Office, and was more on the hydrographic surveying track within the National Ocean Service part of NOAA. He definitely gets the whole NOAA mission and, in fact, taught me a lot about the NOAA mission back in the training center days. He's definitely a huge supporter of me and all the different jobs that I've had throughout my career with NOAA and a proponent for NOAA in general.

MG: Well, that's great. I'm glad you two found each other and can relate to one another.

JB: Me too.

MG: I wonder, Juliana, if this is a good place to stop for today. Next time, we can focus on your big next step and the rest of your career.

JB: Absolutely. That would be fine with me.

MG: Okay, great. Well, let me turn off this recording.

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Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 7/16/2024

Reviewed by Juliana Blackwell 8/5/2024

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 8/30/2024