AB: Down-up solution, of rebuilding at the very local level, and that's why we decided to focus all of our energies and monies on one community, a very small community.

LB: Focused resources, that's another very important, focused resources. Instead of taking government money and building a house here and here and here, or sweeping into a community and building twelve HUD houses, or twenty, or fifty, and I fixed your house and you ain't never going to see me again, and I'm gone and ain't you happy, you know. You build a house, and that's all you've done with that dollar. What about if you don't do it that way? What about if you enter into a partnership with the community that says we will bust our butts to focus resources into the community. We don't promise any resources. We'll just bust our butts to focus resources that you tell us you need and could use, because we do have some bridges to the outside world. Part of the contract is that we 're going to help you come across those bridges with us, and then we're going to have those people go across this bridge into your community. The other part of the contract is that you're going to bust your butt doing whatever it is that you can do that you define with whatever resources you have available to you, your family, your community. And the third part of the contract is you agree not only to help your neighbor but to help rebuild the next community, and you will help select which is the next community, and you will know that because they came to help you. It's almost like bidding for the Olympics that's going on right now.
In Four Corners and Sorrel, now, we've got about six communities that are attending the meetings.

RK: Is that right? They want to be the next?

LB: And they're saying, "Can you help us? How do we do this?" And then Aunt Jane stands up and she says, "Well, you're got to get organized. You got to get yourself together. You got to want to do it. It's not going to be easy." And they begin to tell their story and their history, and some fall out and some fall in. But they write themselves in or out with their readiness.

AB: At the local community level it's the putting of the dream, what can this community be ten years from now. Let's envision this community.

LB: If you had your druthers, what would it be?

AB: And they're the ones themselves who envision their own community. It doesn't come from us or anyone else.

LB: They closed their eyes and they did that. They had a long list of things that they, very visual. Sidewalks and sewerage or whatever it was. There was a long list. And then we just asked them what would be three things you'd like to do now and we think you could do that you feel most about. Not one, two, three, just which three things? And they were already working on housing, so housing wasn't one of them. Two of them we weren't surprised about, but the third one we were surprised about. One was we want to get the guys from hanging off the corners, and they defined that as we got to get drugs out of our community. And we need jobs. We need more money, economic
development. Those were two things that didn't surprise us. They now have reduced drugs in their community, by 50%, and we're beginning now to work with them on economic development. The third one was a surprise to us. They said we want different leadership. New leadership was the first thing they said. "What do you mean, new leadership?" They said, "You know, good leadership." I said, "Well, what does that mean, good leadership?" "Different leadership." I just wouldn't let them alone. I said, "Well, what does that mean, different leadership?" They said, "Wise leadership." I said, "What does that mean, wise leadership?" By this time they wanted to punch me in the face. [Laughter] Then they said, "Well, you know, leadership that's going to roll up their sleeves and work along side on us." Bingo. The style of leadership that they had been used to was, "You are my people. Don't worry. I will take care of it." Patronage, straight from the plantations, southern politics structure. Do you know, that they have a new parish council member they elected, a relatively young man, who gets out and works with them and attends their meetings. He's a young man that happened to, ten years ago, work with us, and they got him elected. The rural coop elections came up. In the old days when they first, this group of women who were devalued and weren't important and were put down by the politicians, suddenly three years later the politicians are calling them and asking if they can go to their committee to make a political speech, to run on the rural coop. So they're calling us and they say, "Don't we have to invite them all?" We said, "Yes, invite them all." So
they sent written invitations to the six candidates. Three showed up to the meeting. When they finished making their five minute allowed, it looked like the League of Women Voters. Then they were asked questions, and they were asked questions that they hadn't expected to be asked. Why are you spraying pesticides without asking us? Why are you mangling our beautiful trees? What is your policy on people like the mills that use a lot of electricity? Don't you give them a discount? What kind of discounts do you give the elderly? These guy weren't prepared for this? [Laughter] It began to dawn on some of the members that maybe next time some of them could run. But they had a voice in saying who got elected, and they had some dialogue going on there. So it's a very interesting thing, empowerment. This taking back our communities and political structures.

AB: That was part of their initial, at the very start of this group three years ago, commitment to one another. Not only were they going to rebuild each others' house, but they were going to rebuild a community where it would be a pleasant place to live.

LB: They had to deal with quite a bit of sexism also, not only in the larger community that exists in society, but also within their community where women had their place. So as long as women were doing all the physical work for about eighteen months, it was fine. Then when a few men joined, the men would stand up and say, "You ladies can't do that." And a couple of women would enable them. They were enablers, like an addict, they would stand up and say, "Yes, we need some men to help us do
that." Finally, a couple of other women said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Where were you for the last eighteen months when we were on the roof and tore down those seven houses. You know, we're not helpless." Then finally they began to define something very interesting, and that is you do what you can do. Whether you're old or young, a man or female, if you can get on the roof, you get on the roof. There's some men who can't paint, don't want to paint, can't get on the roof. That's fine. There's some women that can get on the roof. Whatever it is you do, you're not limited because of your gender or because of your race. That's a steady, ongoing kind of thing. And the ministers had the most trouble with that. Some ministers, I shouldn't say all, but there were some ministers.

AB: It was not the rejection of the men. It was we're happy you're here.

LB: But do not come to dominate us. It was very important that it started with women, and that's not a mystery. That's not a unique thing. Most organizing in the world at the grassroots level has happened with women organizers, whether it's around food, especially around shelter. Women in the world do most of the physical work, which is usually an astonishment to some people. I think even in this country you might that depending on how you define physical work.

AB: But the history has been that the women started but it's taken over by the men.

[Three people talking]

LB: And money especially. You look at your environmental
groups in the country. All the backyard grassroots groups, if you had to line them up, certainly here in Louisiana, I would say easily, easily 90 percent are started, and the bulk of the drudge work and the hard work over the years, is done by women, and some wonderful men. If you look at the environmental groups nationally, from Sierra Club on and on and on, look at the board of directors, look at who gets the pay jobs at the top, primarily. There's a problem there.

AB: The civil rights movement has been the same thing.

LB: We need more men at the grassroots. We need more women at the paid levels. We need that partnership.

NB: I do a lot of development work in Africa, southern Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and you always (       ).

LB: Women have less of a concept, though they're not totally devoid of it, and this is not to romanticize women, but they've had a different experience and a different perspective. They are more devoid of turf problems and of hierarchy problems.

RK: They're used to this partnership. I mean, I think you said that before, kind of working, of figuring how to put together things that make things happen as opposed to men -- they just have to run through and do them themselves or direct people.

LB: Now, you must be very careful as an organizer to provide them with exposure to opportunities to label that and to value that, because there is a tendency when they become a little bit formally organized to model the white male corporate model. So that, as an organizer, is one of the major things that we had to do.
NB: I'm curious. Maybe this is a different kind of question. Back to your earlier work where the first task in some ways was to make these invisible people more visible. I recall reading about the three of you, with Father O'Connell, up in Washington. You speaking, ( ) somewhat more angrily, you somewhat more quietly, but essentially letting people know that there was a lot of injustice going on with these people. I can't remember, was it St. Mary's plantation?

AB: St. Mary's and St. Martin's.

NB: Was it St. Martin's? I think it was one of your comments at the hearing where you said something to the effect that there was a plantation where the people don't get paid until ( )

AB: That's in St. Martin's parish.

LB: Was. It was St. John's plantation..

NB: At least my coming to know you and writing was sort of that time frame, but now you're talking about these sorts of activities. Could you just kind of outline a little bit in your own thinking and development and learning, how you got from there to here? How did you learn that? Where there important experiences along the way and discerning moments that helped guide this path that you've taken? Because you are talking somewhat differently now.

AB: Oh yes.

LB: The content, hopefully the passion is still there. I suppose it could be called anger [laughter]. I wonder if might not also be called passion. [Laughter]
NB: (        ) don't go hand in hand.

LB: But anger is fine if you want to use that. Defining moments, how we got from. . . .

AB: I think one of the defining moments was at the end of the Farmer's Home, helped us to do that, when they would not refund us in the late '70s.

LB: What was the defining moment?

AB: For a self-help housing project. And we knew very well it was a political thing because that particular proposal was well put together.

LB: Well, I happened to overhear a conversation. They didn't know who I was in another city. Looking at some apartments. And the Farmer's Home people, from the office that was making decisions, said, "It'll be a cold day in hell before we fund those people again. We don't want to fund farm worker housing in the first place. We want to make farmer loans." So I knew.

AB: And they would give us stumbling block after stumbling block. There was always a reason, and then it was six months later and we had to start all over again because the six months had elapsed and so forth.

LB: We had blue boxes full of documentation, and we were ready to go to court.

AB: Yes, we were ready to go to court. We had a case. We have gone to court before and we have been successful at doing so.

LB: Never lost.
AB: So we had to reflect over this. Is it worth it going to court over this at this point?

LB: Do we want to put our energy into making them do something so badly, or do we want to say, "What could we do with that enormous amount of resource and energy?" if we went around them this time.

AB: It's what we decided to do.

LB: And we made a different decision, and it's one we've never regretted.

RK: I was interested in the beginning how you, I think this sitting down and looking and studying and surveying, researching, and really thinking about what it is you're trying to grapple with and understanding the kind of gullible nature of the problem, and that you have to enter the contest here where you are, some place. Did you continue to do that? One thing that impressed me in all of the stuff that I've read, and even more so listening to you talk, is that even though some things are, there's a certain serendipity in the directions that you take with the bingo and other things. . . .

LB: [Laughter] That's a wonderful word, because you're right.

RK: But there's also it seems to me, as you work through things you're very thoughtful and very conscious of sitting down and kind of strategizing in a way that I think a lot of organizations and a lot of leaders don't do some times. I'm not sure why they don't do that. We think it's a pretty important thing. One of the things we're doing right now with this is
trying to say, before we start doing a lot of other things or people doing it. . . .

LB: That's team planning, isn't it?

RK: Yeah, let's sit down and figure out where we've been and what the structural problems are, what individual problems are, organizational problems are.

LB: That's what we do, and that's what we hope we do because we want to teach that process out in self-help communities, out in the rural communities. I think there's a couple of more things that are kind of key to making that happen.

One of them was that we each had very different perspectives. Anne's is a French, European experience. I'm a Cajun background person, native Louisianan. I'm sometimes kind of hard to explain, how is it a Cajun, white woman is doing this who is not a nun? Who's also not a nun, I'm a conundrum. She's a nun so . . .

RK: Pardon the pun on that one.

AB: Yeah.

LB: Sorry, I didn't get it myself [laughter]. Thank you, I'll have to remember that. I think another thing, aside from the team having different perspectives. . . .

AB: And Helen. . . .

LB: And Helen is from another part of the United States where she understood, and that was something she brought to us in the '80s, it was very, very crucial, and that was until you begin to see the problems in the context of a larger rural in a larger community, even the farm workers problem, you will not make that
progress. It is not a farm worker problem.

RK: Yes, yes.

LB: It is a total community problem, you know. It's not the farm workers' problem. That was a defining moment. That was a perspective that she brought to us that was crucial.

AB: I think we had that perspective before because we had seen the sugar ( ), but not with the clarity that she brought.

LB: She gave just wonderful midwestern clarity about agricultural issues and what healthy communities can be.

RK: Is where she's from?

LB: Yes, Nebraska. She's worked in Iowa, and she's worked on agriculture in the United States.

RK: My father's family is from northern Minnesota. He's Norwegian.

LB: Oh, what a civilized state [laughter].

RK: Right. He hasn't lived there in many years, but I'm thinking about some of the words you use and concepts of these communities that you're working with, and the vision that you have today. I have a very strong sense, I started picturing almost pioneer communities that my grandparents and great grandparents grew up in, and although there were lots of tensions...

LB: You didn't have a plantation experience.

RK: No. And I think that the kind of clarity and the crispness of the vision is coming through. She probably is, to some extent, responsible for that.
LB: What was important about Helen is that she was not someone who came for four years to do her good things and leave. When she came, it was really quite by accident she got hired, and it was in spite of the fact that she was a nun. Because we had some not so good experiences with nuns who sort of had the answer, wanted to come and deliver them and do good things for two years, and then they or the community could get called somewhere else. And we believe that there's several lifetimes of work, and that the continuity and that staying must be there. The communities must know and you must know you're not going to bail out. So there is a life commitment, I feel, in our experience, I can't say that for everyone else, here that needs to happen, and it did happen. I think another thing that happened was that each of us would leave the Louisiana experience and would have a regional and a national and, in some cases, an international connection. In my case, serving on the Southern Regional Council, for whatever I may have been able to bring to them, and I think only after ten years of work have I been able to bring something to them in the passage of a motion recently on gender equity. They have given me for ten years that sort of think-tank, analytical, regional analysis of things. That's been extremely helpful. Steve Suits is especially gifted in doing that. It's quite a remarkable organization in many ways because of his particular skills that he's brought there. I've learned from him. I've participated in the national women's movement, the National Women's Conference Committee, and I have learned from mentors, some of them male, some of them females, regional
and national. That is almost like a retreat. I take and extract if you will, or try to earn my keep by learning [laughter] and come back to Louisiana and then I relook because I have a different context in which to put it. Helen and Anne, especially, had an international [experience]. Helen is serving on the International Rural Advancement Foundation and is on that board. So she has a world experience in rural issues, hunger and poverty and leadership and structures. It's fascinating. I've only recently begun doing some international, other than traveling to Mexico, travel where I went to--two very striking experiences. One was going to Oslo, Norway to attend as an observer the Rural Advancement Foundation's international deliberations. Those deliberations were good, but being in the country sort of blew my mind. Gee, there's a mythology that has been going on here. True, the people are very similar there, but there may be different ways of doing things. As I traveled through that country, I didn't find the kind of poverty, I couldn't find poverty [laughter]. I couldn't find homelessness. I couldn't find the kinds of imbedded problems that we have in this country.

Then I went to Russia as part of a parallel NGO, 38 nation, women meeting together of the CSCE -- Cooperations Security in Europe Conference. This was a parallel conference. That was a mind blower. Seeing the desperation of women in Moscow and the surrounding areas, and seeing what our country is doing on an international level where we're bringing the men into this country to tour forty corporations, and then we bring them back
to Moscow, and we send our male executives over, and we teach them. I happened to be having supper with a group of women in a Moscow literary club, where there was food. The rest of the country was really desperate for it. The husband, he was like an astronaut, been displaced because of the problems of funding. She was an immunologist, a doctor, doing world class research. He had picked, of course, to come to our country and study business, and she had not. They were both unemployed. When he came back that very night and came to the club to greet his wife, he was absolutely exuberant. I had been asking all the women what model do you think your country will imitate. Will it be the Scandinavian model of democracy and capitalism, social democracy? Will it be the United States capitalistic model? Every woman I spoke it said, "Well, we will find our own way, but I think it will be more the Scandinavian model." So I took the opportunity to ask him that same question. He said, "Oh, absolutely not the Scandinavian model. They tax all these businesses. You know we must get larger and larger and gobble up the small businesses or we will not be able to survive." What we had done was bring him over, create a little Donald Trump, and bring him back and drop him in Europe. That's one of about a dozen experiences I had on that Russian trip. That's that global education. I must continue my education because I'm ignorant. And if I can make those connections, the key thing is making those connections, then I can begin to understand more and more things in Louisiana.

RK: You said you come from a European background. Why
don't you explain a little bit about what influence that had on both why you came here and, not only the way you approach issues, but why you have these kinds of concerns?

AB: Well, I think a number of things there. The war definitely. I was fifteen years old when the war started. So all my teenage years and young adult were spent in the Alps. At the time when we were occupied, both by the Italians and the Germans, and the underground was very high. It was a very difficult time, very difficult time. So living through those war years and then the Americans came, the Russians came. We were not occupied. They were victorious. [Laughter] Realizing that there was not very much difference between the two situations. Realizing that people at war, there is not very much difference between a French soldier, a Russian soldier, a German soldier, and an American soldier. There is a lot of destruction going, a lot of power, and that we inflict on each other at that point, whatever race or whatever nationality we are, we inflict disorder on that country. The French soldiers coming to this area of the country where I was had no respect for the people's property or people's lives than were the German's soldiers. Maybe not in exactly the same fashion. I could go on and on. But there was a lot that I learned from that as a youngster growing up. I also happened to have had a father who was very involved even before that time, during the '30s, and pretty dramatic times. Even though I married when my father was out, and my mother received word that we were going to be attacked in our apartment, the apartment we had at that time. We moved all the kids out and
ourselves and went to the hotel. So these were the '30s.

NB: He was involved in the underground?

AB: No, before the war. That was in the social upheaval of the '30s. He was a very strong.

LB: He was a mountaineer.

AB: He was a mountaineer and a preservationist. He was a forester. And also, he was very strongly conscious of social justice. That came clear through my very young years. He was actually fired from his job. He had a job as a civil servant in the forestry system, and he was fired because of his convictions. He had to make do for the following years, and he had a large family. So all of that stands certainly behind. Also, I think that during those years the fact of the universality of the global, the globality of the problems became very clear as people from Russia, from American, black, white were passing through the area where I was. Also, as a youngster, I was not born in France. I was born in Germany not very long after the first World War, and my father was in occupation there. Sent by the French government to occupy Germany. I don't remember anything of German because I was very young, but all my very young years I was called by names as French can't call the Germans at that time.

[Many people talking]

So all of that, I think, built up a consciousness. It was within not only my own consciousness but the consciousness of the youth at that time that was being filled with all of those things. That time had a great deal to do, I think, for me to see
problems in their global context, I mean their social justice context. Then when I came to this country, we were aware—I came in the mid-50s—of the racial problems in this country. That's one of the reasons why I came. Thinking that as an outsider, strange as it can be, as an outsider I might have something to enable communication, because I wasn't personally caught in one side or the other.

RK: So you had already joined the church at that point?

AB: Yes. I did join immediately after the war. Also the fact that the situation, the poverty situation, that France was put in by the war and after the war. It lasted many, many years after the war. I think that had something to do with it. And then being confronted locally here after that with the actuality of the racial situation, the injustice situation, that existed, and people where caught in a system which they could not get out of. There was something else I wanted to say, in some ways ( ). The mountain where I'm from, I can't survive in small mountains like Appalachia where your view is blocked every time you turn around. The Alps, where I'm from, there is nothing that stops your vision. It goes up and up, and it changes also constantly. I don't know if you've ever been there. The setting is a circle of mountains. The colors of the mountains change ( ). The light changes. Everything changes all the time, and at the same time there's infinite vision. I happened to go to school when I was a kid outside of the city. We were going on our bicycle, and I was facing that very hard chain of mountains, changing all the time. That forms your thinking, your
vision. Very definitely, it stays with you.

RK: You think in those kinds of.

AB: I have been reflecting over this many times. Here in Louisiana, where it's very flat, I thought I would never adjust in a very flat country, but it's the same thing. (        )

RK: You get out in the fields and you can. . . .

AB: On the other hand, I feel also one of the problems the farm workers have, and I think Virginia is defining it, in what she says in the movie. When you work in the cane field, you always see the sky, the birds, or the cane right around you. I have many, many times driving at the end of the summer or in the fall when the cane's tall, and the roads with that tall cane on both sides, that's blocking your vision. It's blocking your vision physically, but I think it's also blocking your vision of something else.

LB: And coming from the Alps you had a different experience.

AB: Yes, that's what I was just explaining. The Alps has infinite, you have nothing that stops your vision. It goes on and on and on up high, and so I think the physical setup in which we live has a great deal to do with our real vision. People have a hard time to see past that cane field. It's because (   )

LB: So it really is a cane (     ).

AB: Yes, it is a cane (               ).

LB: (            )

AB: Vastly different background, and working as a team.

LB: Boy, that's a commercial for diversity [laughter] which
we do believe in.

AB: Yes. There was another point, which I think was a moment ago. I'd like to involve Helen into that. No. [Laughter]

LB: She's camera shy.

AB: It's when the pesticide issues came in the early '80s.

LB: What does that mean when the pesticides issues came, because they're been here.

AB: What I mean is, there was a choice we made not to try to bridge out, and, of course, expose the situation of pesticides, but not in the same confrontive way we had before.

LB: We'd done a fair amount of confronting because you must label the problem. The labeling of the problem is, by its very nature, confronting. We began to articulate very strongly that it was not a veiled attempt to put farmers out of business, to end agriculture, which, of course, it should seem self-evident, but that is what they...

RK: They think of, right.

LB: Nor was it a personal attack. As a matter of fact, we began very consciously to have farmers understand their own connections that they weren't seeing. And that is that you have a corporate driven chemical industry that has made policy in our land-grant colleges. It has made agricultural policy that is, in fact, extracted dollars from your pocket, while we have supposedly fulfilled the mythology of feeding the world. Yet, we produce so much food we must then subsidize. We've gone with our large machinery to other parts of the world and made great,
wonderful diversity of crops into mono-agricultural, cash crops, which then a blight goes through and wipes them out, and they eat their seeds. Then there is starvation. So the picture is not all one way or the other, but it's not just a perfect shining star. And to begin to make those connections of who is driving agricultural policy, and the finally ask the question of the farmer. I remember the revelation was, you know, we believe, and he had never heard this, we believe that farmers ought to own the land. How much of the 3,000 acres that you farm do you own? Fifty acres. Who owns it? Prudential Life Insurance, a lot of it. A chemical company, he leases from some others. And I think it was like an explosion because he had an opportunity to make some connections that he had been systemically shielded and maybe economically, supposedly, induced from seeing.

AB: There was another point even before that when we realized that if -- what we want is not to be confrontation, what we want is not the confrontation just for the sake of confrontation. We never did, but it became even clearer. What we want is to achieve a change. We realized, and we said it earlier, that for the common community, the larger society, farm workers are disposable commodities. If we want to really be successful in terms of eliminating some of those pesticides, let's form a network of people, whether they are nurses, physicians, performers. That was a key point, not to be on the attack of the problem, just as it was. To be efficient was an important point.

LB: That reminds me of another defining moment, which was a
woman who was with the Noyes Foundation, she isn't now, her name is Rachel Poe. Rachel Poe came to our community to just listen and to find out, and has been very helpful to us. In fact, we have some money from the Noyes Foundation. What Rachel did, on the way out of the meeting, after hours of meeting, she asked a single question that blew our minds. She was concerned about systemic change in sustainable agriculture. Her question was, and she said, "I don't expect you to answer it now," how are you going to avoid what has been the inevitable situation of environmentalists and agricultural interests confronting and clashing with each other, and using up their resources in sort of a wasteful fight. How are you going to do something differently in Louisiana? And that was an explosive question because remember, we had filed suit. We had stopped subsidies in the state. We had been chased with guns and rifles. We had had our folks in prison. I mean, we are not the beloved of the agricultural producers. So how are we, as a non-profit, ever going to. . . . And yet, we're very identified with the environmentalists but many environmentalists have not dealt with race issues, have not understood sustainable rural communities. They have a very backyard issue. It was an enormous challenge. And I think that question, in and of itself, was a defining moment that we had grapple with. So foundations play a very key role, not in coming in. They're not too successful if they come in and sort of dictate to you, but on asking, upon observation and listening, very provocative questions. What an enormous help that was. We have a few people. Gloria Steimen is one of those
persons who's done that. Rachel Poe was one of them, where they listen and they learn, and then they just make a few comments and statements that sort of hold up a mirror to you and reflect back to you what it is that has been coming their way. And that's what we try to do in Four Corners. So that's our learning moment. That's what Rachel Poe did. That was a defining moment to us.

RK: Yeah, because that changes a lot of your strategies and thinking and makes you kind of deepen your understanding about different things.

LB: Conservation of resources, where are our common agendas. It called us to use the partnership that we said we believed in in this, what could normally be a very confrontational contest.

AB: That was an extremely successful things, that network that you and Helen, mostly, put together of nurses, fishers, because they were very directly affected by the pesticide issues, of people who were absolutely for it once before. And it was based on the farm worker ( )

LB: Where are the common interests?

RK: How did your experiences and background, aside from the fact that you're a native of the state and have probably a perception of people and a sensitivity to certain kinds of things that other people wouldn't, what do you think the particular understandings and awarenesses in your own background and history that were different and lend a different kind of....

LB: I think my first few years were in a very, very rural
My father was a grower, and my mother lived with her mother, my grandmother. They had a little rural country store. I watched their sense of business and their sense of kindness to neighbors. Opening up on a Sunday to give someone a loaf of bread because they forgot to do it, and the sense of justice, the sense of fun, the love of Louisiana and the people, and the sort of fair play, although there were clearly different communities. There was a sense of fair play, sense of kindness and justice. Then I got a fairly, for Louisiana standards, good education from the Sisters of St. Joseph in Baton Rouge, which is a much more urban community. By the time I got out of high school, from St. Joseph Academy, I went to LSU. And I was like 120 in the psychology introduction class, and I hated that. So I came eventually through some other experiences at the University of Wisconsin and having been a nun for a couple of years, I came eventually to USL. So it was a much smaller university, much more personalized, much more relating to the community, and I really liked it. So my educational experience certainly gave me, and my living, family experience, and I was clearly, in the '40s and '50s there were not a whole lot of models for women to do things other than be a teacher and a nurse. And you get married and have children. I certainly could have followed that model but I didn't particularly want to be a teacher or a nurse. So the people that I saw that appeared to be the most independent were nuns. They seemed to be able to go and come, but, of course, the reality, as you got into it, was quite different. [Laughter] There was a thing called the Roman pontiff
[laughter]. That's a whole other discovery and discussion. So independence has always been very, very crucial to me. Independence in choosing my own life. I have often said I don't make a very good victim. I get too damn angry too quick. I'll probably get killed. God help me, had I been born poor and black, I don't know. If I had also known the things I know, I'd probably . . .

RK: I feel the same way sometimes.

LB: I might have been dead. Black, male, and poor, I most surely would have been in prison. So different experiences, I was born of some privilege, if you will, by the fact that I was white and I had some education. My family probably started lower middle class, and I would say solid middle class by the time I came out of the family. I had to kind of work my way through college, and paid off a ten-year loan. Then I went to the University of Wisconsin after I got fired as a teacher. There was a defining moment I can remember as a child, and then there's another defining moment. When I was a child, you always said, "Yes, Ma'am," to people who were older, and you always said, "This is a lady." But our ironing woman, which I say nicely, was a much older woman than I, and when I would say, "Yes, Ma'am," I was corrected by my mother. "You don't say, yes Ma'am to Ella," and I would say, "Why not?" It didn't make any sense to me. When I would say, "When is the ironing lady coming?" My mother would say, "No, when is the ironing woman coming?" Things have changed. Woman is a nice word now. But in those days, woman was reserved for a class of women, and lady was the nicer thing you
called, especially white ladies of some class. So that was transmitted to me, or attempted to, and I must have been born with some barriers, or maybe I took things exactly as I thought they were taught to me, and it didn't make any sense. I drove my mother, I think, quite crazy with questions. [Laughter] And continued to do that, I think.

RK: That's a problem throughout the South, those kinds of questions upset a lot.

LB: Then in the Catholic schools you were taught, you see, and in the Junior Achievement, I had a wonderful Junior Achievement experience, the entrance into capitalism. And you learn that if you work hard, you will get somewhere. So then as I went through high school, but at the same time the sisters gave me the sense of poverty in missions around the world, not here but around the world. So I understood a concept of poverty over there. And then I understood that if you hard, as my parents did, you would surely get somewhere. So then I began to see, in my college experience, another defining moment, was a black man who worked as a person who was a caretaker of the Catholic Center on the campus. I liked him, and he liked me, and we were fast friends. We would spend time in the library. We could have coffee there. One time I was out on the campus, and he was passing in the back of a truck with some chairs, moving them on campus, and I waved to him. He wouldn't wave back, and later on he told me that we would get in trouble. That he felt uncomfortable doing that, and I was too stupid to have understood that at the time, but I quickly learned. That was a defining
moment. That the friendship could be contained here but not out here and that made me angry. Not only that he felt so constrained, but I felt quite put upon and quite denied. So I've always approached this from my own sense of freedom being restricted.

Once, after I was fired—once I seem to have a record of being fired [laughter]—on the War of Poverty for organizing blacks and whites, which is another whole story. That was certainly a defining moment. I remember going to a local, the only place open at 10:30 or 11:00 at night was a local lounge on the bayou. It was a place called the Pub, and it was kind of a nice place. You could go and have a Coke or a drink. There were maybe six of us that were going after we left the courthouse meeting, and I guess maybe half the group was black. So I said, "Oh, let's go over there," quite stupidly. We went in and as soon as the black folks came in behind us, they wouldn't sit us. So I became very angry that I was denied to go into that pub, to associate with whom I chose to associate. So I've approached it largely, not only a sense of philosophical justice, but from a personal experience. That it ain't right. Then as you look, some folks, every one isn't born equal. Some folks are born with a little more advantage. If you're a white male, you're probably most advantaged. If you're a white female, you might be next, and on down the color and ethnic levels or economic levels. So I just began to reevaluate, and I discovered some mythologies. So those were certainly....

RK: You said this organization of black and white that was
a defining movement?

NB: That was the Headstart.

LB: I guess I was going to talk about also the firing at the school where I taught. I was a seventh and eighth grade teacher. [ ) the War on Poverty, and that's kind of how our paths crossed. Anne was stirring up all this trouble and organizing the War on Poverty and taking Lyndon Johnson quite seriously. [Laughter] And organizing the ( ) and so on.

AB: I was not allowed as a woman to be on the board.

LB: To be seated on the board through. Women were not allowed to ( ). So finally though she did, in fact, get elected to this board as a nun. Quite an interesting scene.

AB: The guy at one place, I remember, told me one day, "You don't have a chance. You're a foreigner, you're a woman and you're a nun." [Laughter]

RK: Three strikes against you.

LB: There's an excellent example of what appears to be teamwork that, in fact, is a farce, and that is, the structure of the War of Poverty, while it had a lot of things that came out of it that are enormously important and wonderful and good. The formula was one third poor elected to the board, one third service agencies like welfare deliverers, and one third public officials. What that really meant was it was two to one [laughter]. So it wasn't a peer team at all. It was a formula for disaster, where you had to have police guarding the meetings because they were such ( ), literally. Well, I was a civics
teacher. I happened to have the first year a wonderful principal. What they call the ( ) in the Catholic school, a sister from Canada. She liked the way I taught, and I believed that, like spirituality or religion, it didn't just belong in a church, that you needed to make connections between things. In the Catholic tradition you were taught justice and social justice. It meant throughout. So when I taught civics I made these bridges and connections. So the most interesting thing to me to learn in government was not to go through the pages of civics because in my own experience in civics, I got a "B" because I carried the teacher's books and she ended up ( ). [Laughter] So what I wanted to do in civics was take these seventeen young people in the seventh grade out of the classroom and put them in this hot and heavy room, guarded by police, with protesters, where you had a black civil rights attorney calling for audits of the military because the politicians had called for the audit of the local non-profit agency which was organized and run by local black folks. So you have all of the dynamics and explosions, and it was a sort of safe place, but it was certainly an interesting place to learn civics.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B