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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Linda Satter
28 July 2007
Little Rock, Arkansas

Interviewer: Garry Hoffmann

Garry Hoffman: This is Garry Hoffmann, and I'm interviewing Linda Satter on July 27, 2007—actually it's July 28, 2007—in her home in Little Rock. This is for the oral history of the *Arkansas Democrat*—now *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. And before we start, Linda, I need you to say that you agree to this interview and to the use of the transcript.

Linda Satter: It's okay by me.

GH: All right, we'll—we'll move on. Let's start out with a little bit about your upbringing if that's okay. Tell me where you were born and raised and what you liked to do as a kid.

LS: Well, I was born in Wichita, Kansas, and I have one brother, who's nine months and twenty-seven days [laughs] younger than me, and we're twins for two months out of the year, we like to say. But—we lived in Wichita until I was nine, and then my parents got divorced. And we moved to—my mom moved—moved us to

Nebraska, where she was from. So then—my dad remained in Wichita. So we went to school in Lincoln, Nebraska, and I graduated from high school there, and then after—after I graduated from high school in 1977, I went to work for a company called Square D—made circuit breakers.

GH: Square D—is that square with the letter D?

LS: Yes. Yeah, with the D—D in the middle of the square. They make—they make circuit breakers, so I can tell you all about the insides [laughs] of a circuit breaker. I did that for a couple of years and—and was kind of resistant to—actually to going to college. And—had just thought that I would like to write, and I had thought that someday I will just wake up and be inspired and write a best-selling novel, and that will take care of me. [Laughs] I finally came to realize that's not how it works. So then my dad kept asking me to come back to Wichita, and he said, "I'll put you through college," so I went back to Wichita and—and went to Wichita State University. And I graduated there—from there in 1985. I—Loudon . . .

GH: [Words unclear]

LS: I graduated in 1985 with a degree in journalism and philosophy, and then came to Arkansas because I was looking for a—I had not had—I was the news editor at the college paper.

GH: What was the name of that?

LS: It was the *Sunflower*—the WSU *Sunflower*. And I had been real busy and was pursuing two majors and had not had time to look for a job. And—so the journalism department chairman told me, "I know of a job in Fort Smith,

Arkansas," which I had never even heard of. I didn't know that—I had never heard of Fort Smith. But that's how I ended up getting the job.

GH: Wichita's not that far from Fort Smith.

LS: Well, I know [laughs], but I mean, I'd heard of Arkansas and Little Rock, but not Fort Smith. And so I just didn't want to go to one of those little papers that—in Kansas, you know, there were a lot of little—little, tiny towns and, you know, you typically will start with a—you know, a little newspaper that's got, like, a 1,500 circulation or something. And—and I really didn't like—didn't like that. So he found out about the job in Fort Smith and told me about it, and I just applied there and got a job there at the *Southwest Times-Record*.

GH: And what year is this?

LS: This was in 1985. I graduated in 1985.

GH: So right out of college you got a job pretty quick.

LS: Yes, right, at the *Southwest Times*. I worked there for two years and . . .

GH: Who was your boss there?

LS: Oh, Debbye Hughes was my editor—city editor.

GH: That's D-E-B-B-Y?

LS: D-E—yeah, D-E-B-B-Y-E.

GH: Y-E. Okay.

LS: She has—she had since died of breast cancer, and she was a nun—a former nun. She was a really nice person. She was a—she was a good editor. I know that the first time that—it was my second day on the job there actually. And I was sitting at my desk, and all these important-looking men in dark suits came into the

newsroom and kind of got everybody's attention, and—and I didn't know who they were. I thought they—they looked, you know, very important and very impressive, and one of them came up to my desk and said, "Hello, how are you?" and shook my hand. And then—he had all this charisma, and I was so impressed, and he walked away from me. And I said to Debbye Hughes—I said, "Who was that?" She said, "That's our governor, Bill Clinton." [Laughter] So that was my introduction to Arkansas. And anyway, like I said, I worked there for two years.

GH: Did you cover general assignment, the courts, police?

LS: I covered—I covered education first. I covered the city of Greenwood [Arkansas] and education—the Fort Smith School Board and then the city of Greenwood. And I—Fort Smith was—it was fun—it was fun for two years, but I got really—it was too small of a town for me, and I just felt like I needed to get out of there. And I had—had a friend who was working at a TV station in Fort Smith, and her husband worked at the *Democrat* in Little Rock.

GH: Do you know—remember who that was?

LS: Hal Brown.

GH: Okay.

LS: He worked in business.

GH: Right.

LS: And I worked with Leslie—Leslie—she had a different last name. But anyway, she was a—she worked at the TV station, and she told me, "Well, the *Democrat* has eight openings right now." So I sent a letter to [managing editor of the *Democrat*, 1978-1992] John Robert Starr. I didn't even know how to—how write

a query letter. And that was the most nerve-racking thing of all was trying to figure out how do you write these letters asking for a job? And so I actually borrowed a letter that he had written to get the job and wrote . . .

GH: That Hal Brown had written?

LS: That Hal Brown had written that got him the job and modeled it on that. And then, like, two days later [laughs] I got a call from Ray Hobbs, who was then city editor, and he said, "John Robert Starr wants you to come in here for an interview." So I went to Little Rock and had the interview, and I remember this was when everybody was on the second floor, and the place was just a—a horrible mess. I couldn't believe when I came into the newsroom that it was a working newsroom. It was just so chaotic and, you know, cords running every which way. Everything was just a mess, and it was just all—well, it just wasn't organized by any stretch of the imagination. And I remember thinking, "I am not going to work here. First of all, I am going to do this interview and get out of here." And then Bob Lutgen, [who] was then the [assistant] managing editor [1987-1992], and Ray Hobbs was the city editor, and they were going to take me out to lunch in the basement of Dillard's [department store], which was right down there—downtown.

GH: Right, the Corral.

LS: Oh [laughs], is that what it was?

GH: Mh-hmm.

LS: They were going to take me to lunch there, and they said—they started asking each other, "Well, do you have—where's the petty change? Do you have the

petty change?" And they brought some sort of a—Ray brought some sort of a little saucer out of his top desk drawer, and it just had change in it, and they looked all befuddled and concerned about "How are we gonna? Well, I don't know if we're going to be able to take her to lunch." I thought, "I am never coming back to this place—ever." [Laughs] And so—and then I went to the—I went and had the interview with 'em, and I remember that Ray Hobs was really serious. He was asking me all these really serious questions that I hadn't even thought of, you know. And I—but he was intimidating to me, but then Bob Lutgen—he was like—it was like good cop, bad cop. Bob Lutgen would laugh at everything. He was just a jolly guy, and he made me feel real comfortable. And so somehow or another, I . . .

GH: Now, did you meet Starr as well?

LS: I don't think I met him then.

GH: Okay.

LS: I don't think I met him then, but I [laughs]—but they called me later and offered me the job. It seems like—I guess if I remember correctly, I went back to Fort Smith, and then they called me and offered me the job—unless they offered it to me that day. I don't remember. But anyway, I said, "Okay." And I don't know why because I had said, "I'm not going to—I'm not going there." I guess I just [laughs]—something just compelled me to say, "Okay." And [laughs]—but it was just to get out of Fort Smith, but I also liked Little Rock a lot. Little Rock was—when I—I had been to Little Rock to visit and I had—and when I drove in, when I was—well, yeah, when I drove in for the interview, and I had been there—

been to Little Rock once or twice before that, I just really felt comfortable in Little Rock. It was so much—so much more inviting than Fort Smith, and it was a lot like Lincoln, Nebraska, really—the town that I grew up in. And I guess that's why I liked it. It seemed like it was a—a whole different—in a whole different era than Fort Smith, you know? It was—it was a modern city. [Laughs] And so I really—I felt like I was getting back into the correct century.

GH: The specific job you were interviewing for—was it a beat or was it general assignment?

LS: Oh, it was a—it was just a reporting job. And at that time I think they were talking about having me cover—they were going to have a new beat covering southwest Little Rock, and I said, "Well, I really would like to do police reporting," because in Fort Smith I had done a little bit of it, and I said, "I want to cover courts," because those are two things I didn't know much about. I had done—I liked the police reporting, and I wanted to cover courts. I wanted to know more about it, and I just never had the opportunity in Fort Smith. That beat was always filled, and so I liked the idea. I had read columns, you know, by Russell Baker, who use to work at—I guess it was *The New York Times* or . . .

GH: Or the [*Washington*] *Post*. I can't remember which.

LS: *Baltimore Sun*. Well, he had been—he wrote that book, *Growing Up*, and—which was a Pulitzer Prize-winning book. And he had—I think he had worked at the *Baltimore Sun*. I don't know. I don't remember the specifics now, but I just remember that he was the police reporter, and he would work at night, and all this wild stuff was happening, and he would call in his reports, and they'd have

rewrite men that would write it up. And to me that just sounded so exciting to cover the police beat. So . . .

GH: Do you remember their—Ray and—and Bob's reactions to that? Were they surprised that you'd want to be a police reporter?

LS: No, they just seemed like they were trying to figure out—they were saying, "We might have—" They were just saying, "Well, we really want to put you on this southwest Little Rock beat." And so I—you know, it didn't really matter. I just had mentioned that to them. But when they offered me the job, they said, "We're going to have you do police beat." And that was fine with me. I was excited about that, so . . .

GH: Was that night police?

LS: Yes, the 3:00 to midnight shift.

GH: Monday-Tuesday through Saturday or something like that?

LS: Tuesday through Saturday, 3:00 to midnight. Yeah.

GH: Did you have any kind of—as a woman police reporter, was that a problem for you, establishing some type of rapport?

LS: It really wasn't. And I think it helped, actually. You know, the *Gazette* had two police reporters, Rob Moritz and Wayne Jordan, and they were my—supposedly my enemies, you know, because [laughs] we were told during the newspaper war to regard our counterparts at the *Gazette* as—as our enemy, as if we were in a war. Well, we all liked each other—Wayne and Rob and I—and we'd all come to the police dep—well, it was either Rob or Wayne. I mean, they weren't there at the same—you know, they—one of them did it. I think Wayne did it two nights a

week, and Rob did it five nights a week or they'd mix it up a little. But anyway, we'd—we would arrive—the police reporters would arrive at the police department at the same time every day, and we'd arrive about—I think we'd get there first around 3:30, and then we'd go into the public information office, which Bert Jenkins was the PIO [public information officer] at that time. And the police had this down. I mean, they knew that—they knew about the intense competition between the two newspapers, and they had a policy that—to be very fair with both papers, and not to give one paper anything that they didn't give the other. And that had been drilled into 'em. I mean, if one of us had a scoop, they would—you know, if it was something out of the ordinary. But for giving us the daily reports and telling us what was going on, they were to be very fair with both of us. So we had this little system, and we'd—we'd both go into Bert Jenkins's office, and we'd sit there and . . .

GH: And Bert is B-E-R-T.

LS: B-E-R-T. And he would let us have the—he'd show us police reports from that day—the incident reports of the day. I know we'd sit there and look through those, and then he'd tell us—we could ask him questions or he'd tell us about other things that had happened, I guess. "Right now they're working a robbery," or "they're working this and that." But he told us at the same time so there's no way one of us could say that the other one was told more. And then we'd go kind of as a unit down to the detective division. Oh, wait. No, we didn't do that in the afternoon. We did that later. We got that basic stuff before he left at five o'clock, and then we'd go do our rounds, and—like, I would go to North Little Rock and

the sheriff's office. And between the Little Rock Police Department, North Little Rock and the Pulaski County sheriff's office—do all that, come back to the newsroom, write it up in the initial police brief. And then usually we'd go eat and then come back—you know, we'd make calls around the state to—checking certain police departments around the state. Oh, I think it was the [Arkansas] State Police bureaus, checking and seeing what was going on elsewhere in the state. And then we would start it over again later. It seems like it was about—well, it was in evening—we'd always—I think we made, really, like, one trip to the sheriff's office during the day. They pretty much closed up, and they really weren't very helpful. They didn't give us much information anyway, but we—and there wasn't much that happened out there. But we would go to the Little Rock Police Department, I think, two more times at night, and North Little Rock at least once—maybe twice. But we'd go in on the later rounds, and we'd go back into the detective offices. And now you can't do that. They have—you have to be buzzed back and ask for a specific person. But they were all laid back, you know, at night. And they always had one lieutenant in charge, and so we'd go together and sit and talk and—I mean, the *Gazette* reporter, and I—we'd go and sit and talk to the lieutenant, and he'd—we'd ask him questions about reports or things we'd heard on the police radio or if there had been something going on—there had been a shooting or whatever. And—and he'd give us all the details together. In fact, sometimes he'd say if there was just one of us there, "I'm not going to start talking till—I'm not going to start talking till Wayne gets here." Or, you know, "Wait until Rob gets here because I don't want to repeat this twice."

[Laughs] And—and so we would do that. And then, you know, of course, throughout the night things would happen. We'd hear things on our police radios, and we'd be running all over town to different things—and—and sometimes I'd go to something that Rob wouldn't or vice versa. And we were always trying to figure out what the other one was doing.

GH: Right.

LS: We were obsessed with what the other reporter was doing, and you'd even get to where you'd ask the police—you know, "Has Rob been in here yet? What's he working on?" You know, and they have a [laughs]—the police were very well trained, I guess, as to not divulge any scoops that the other side was working on. But sometimes you could trip 'em up and get 'em to tell you some details. And so it was very exciting, and it was fun, you know, running around at night. I've always been a night owl, and I—I thoroughly enjoyed it. And then at midnight when we got off work, sometimes we'd have a—sometimes the *Gazette* police reporters and the *Democrat* police reporters—meaning me and Noel Oman, who was my predecessor on the police beat full-time. Noel had started—I think Noel and Rob had started this—that they'd go and meet at Joubert's bar down on 12th Street, and—where there was a pool table and—and of course I didn't play pool, but some of them did. We were—it was like a secret meeting place because we were not allowed to talk to the—to be—to be friends with the people on the other side. You know, we were to stay away from these *Gazette* people and treat 'em as our enemies. And I think they were pretty much supposed to do that with us, so we'd gather here, and we'd have drinks and we'd talk about, you know—we—

you know, talk about our victories. And Rob Moritz one time confessed to me that he had woken up on a—I don't know what day of the week it was, but he had woken up in the morning and looked at the paper, and he saw this big story on the front page that I'd written about this big fire, and he had just written a brief on it—that there was a fire, and it caused *X* amount of damage. And I had gone to talk to the guy that was burned—burned—he was—he jumped out of a window, and he said as the flames licked his butt or something—kissed his butt, and it was a real dramatic story. And Rob said that he was—he was just driven to a drinking binge. [Laughs] I don't think he even hardly drank. He said, "That just drove me over the edge." And so we were—we could confess [laughs] these things to each other—these little late-night Joubert's gatherings. We didn't do this every night, but anyway . . .

GH: Joubert's, by the way, I believe, is a French name. I think the spelling was J-O-U-B-E-R-T-'S . . .

LS: Yeah, yeah.

GH: . . . for transcription purposes.

LS: Yeah. And so—and that was the fun of this job, you know. You'd get a . . .

GH: So you had these secret meetings with the competition afterwards—off hours?

LS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And we were still very competitive. We wouldn't tell—you know, we were careful what we said. We didn't want to reveal anything. If we were working on something, you know, that we wanted to be a scoop, we wouldn't tell 'em. But—and we didn't try to get it out of each other either, because we—we knew that—you know, we both knew that we weren't going to

be telling any secrets like that. But if it's something that already happened, Rob was, like, "Oh, that just sickened me. I woke up, and I saw that all over the front page, and I thought, 'I'm going to be in such big trouble.'" Then Wayne Jordan would tell me—he'd try to counsel me sometimes and say, "All these briefs you write up about all these robberies—these armed robberies—you've got to realize these are not really that important. You've got to stop writing 'em all up." And I said, "But Wayne, you know, this is interesting, and—you know, we need to let people know that there's been businesses robbed near their house or whatever." And he'd say, "No, no, a lot of these are just little warrant cases, and they're going to—these are going to turn out to be cases that aren't even prosecuted." And he said, "But the bottom line is you're getting me in a lot of trouble. Every time you write these briefs, then my editors say, 'Why did she have a brief, and you didn't have it?'" And so [laughs]—I'd say, "Well, sorry." But anyway, so that's just kind of how we—I know one time he sent me to the Waffle House, and we went past the Waffle House in North Little Rock on the way to that police department every day. And he said, "Well, let's stop here and have a cup of coffee." And he tried to talk some sense into me and get me to stop writing all these briefs. It was driving him nuts. So . . .

GH: Who was your—who was your immediate supervising editor at that time?

LS: I think that was Randy Fears. He was a—he was an assistant city editor that worked at night, and—and I think he eventually moved down to Florida. Anyway, he was pretty easy-going, and—and I know when I wrote that story about the fire—I hadn't been there very long, and he said, "I think you're going to

work out okay." [Laughs] So—I know there was one time—there was a shooting in the *Democrat* printing building—the printing press building, and—and I—we both—you know, Rob Moritz came to that shooting, and I arrived there, and we were standing outside and—and the police were out there and didn't want us to go in. But somehow I got to go in because I worked there and—even though I didn't work in that building, I guess they felt like—I got to go somewhere. I don't know. I mean, they didn't let me walk up to the body or anything, but it was—it's like I got some access that Rob didn't, and I remember saying, "Don't let him in here because he works for the other paper." And then he just had this look on his face like—I don't know, I felt sorry for him then. But [laughs] anyway, it wasn't really that big of a scoop [word unclear]. I remember thinking—"Poor Rob. I should've let him in." But I was trying to do my job and be—consider him the enemy. You know, the ultimate enemy. He just had this crestfallen look on his face, like—"I'm just going to have to stand outside in the cold."

GH: Now was this—when you first came to the *Democrat*, had—the *Gazette* was—had Gannett already acquired the *Gazette* or . . .

LS: No. No, it was—this was in 1987. It was—October 4, 1987, was my very first day at the *Democrat*, and so—so that was, you know, several years of—of the newspaper war going on. And anyway, that was the fun time with all that—you'd get up in the morning, and the first thing you did was go get the paper and see what your competition had done, and if they'd beaten you in any way—if they had details that you didn't have, it was just really [laughs] tough to deal with.

GH: Now were you—when you came into work, were you consistently reminded of

the—that "Why didn't you have this particular story?" Or "Why didn't you have this detail?" Or did you—did you judge yourself more than you were judged by your superiors?

LS: Well, pretty much anything they—it was all noticed. I know that they had a reporter one time that—there was some police stand-off in southwest Little Rock where a guy—a guy was holed up in his house with a gun, and then he came out of the house and the police shot him. And the *Gazette* reporter—it wasn't Rob at that—it was somebody—his predecessor after that had gotten—I think it was the—John Hoogesteger was his name, and he had—he . . .

GH: I don't—I don't remember how to spell Hoogesteger's name, so . . .

LS: H-O-O-G-E-S-T-E-G-E-R.

GH: Okay.

LS: And he had reported how many bullets were fired—how many rounds were fired—and, you know, like, whatever—thirty-three shots and how many hit the guy or whatever. He had all these specifics in there that I didn't. And I got talked to about that. And there was some other story one day that I came into the newsroom, and the *Gazette* had—had written a story that was better than mine, and Ray Hobbs left me a note. I went and checked my mailbox when I first got in every day before I went to my desk, and there was a note from Ray, and it said, "Linda, we got beat like a dog on this story." [Laughs] "Come see me. Ray." And I just saw that note, and then I just instantly—I mean, just tears sprang to my eyes, and I—I had to go in the bathroom and swallow a bunch of times before I could confront Ray. And he was just very angry at me—"How could you let this

happen?"—"I don't know. I don't know how they got that story." I don't even remember what it was. But he was like, "We need to do a follow-up on this." I was just like—"Okay." You know? And I did do a follow-up, but it's just really—I was very shaken by that. [Laughs] And then I know that John Robert Starr—sometimes he would put in the critiques—in the daily critiques he would put things like—well, [laughs] I remember when somebody was—somebody—I think it was a presidential candidate—was speaking down in the Metro Center Mall and there were different crowd estimates—like, our story wa—had like 500 people, and the *Gazette* said 5,000 were there. It was some enormous difference in [laughs] crowd control. Anyway I don't know which was correct, and I don't even think—I covered some aspect of the story but not the main one. But I remember that he wrote in the critique that day, "Heads are going to roll over this." And I—[laughs] oh, my God, there was a lot of intensity—a lot of fear that if you missed one detail you were in deep trouble.

GH: What was the—the technology like in the newsroom when you . . .

LS: The technology? Oh . . .

GH: Did you have a—was this at the time when they had the bank of computers that . . .

LS: They had, like . . .

GH: . . . you jockeyed for position to get one?

LS: Yes, they had, like, eight computers, I believe, in the middle of the newsroom, and, you know, there were more than that—many more reporters. And all these computers—well, there were these big outlets sticking up out of the floor that

stick up about four or five inches out of the floor and cords going all across the floor so you were, like, always tripping on your way to get to the [laughs] terminal. And then you'd get to a terminal, and you'd get your story—you know, if you could jump in there and get that—that computer—and doing police beat, a lot of times when I'd come back from my rounds, I guess most of the reporters were off of those computers, but you just never knew. I mean, it was always a struggle to get a computer. And then the business reporters were on the same computers, you know. Everybody was trying to get those computers, and we were all ferociously working on deadline. I mean, one of us would get a call—or somebody would get a call—a call-back on a story, and, you know, you had to debate—"Should I take that call-back or stay on my computer?" Because you've got to take the call, and somebody would get your computer, and then there'd be a fight, you know. "That was my computer." "Well, you got up." "I'm on deadline. Get out of it. I had my story started." There'd be a big [laughs]—big to-do, and [laughs] so—it was just chaotic, and a lot of those phones—the phones we had in there were tied—there were often two phone lines—two phones connected to the same line. So you could be interviewing somebody, and somebody else would pick it up and start—bloop, bloop, bloop—dialing a call or, you know. [Laughs]

GH: Right.

LS: It was just a very—it was amazing that the work got done.

GH: You'd have to yell into the phone, "I'm using this phone."

LS: Right.

GH: The person you were interviewing would hear the same thing and . . .

LS: You would. And then there was this big air conditioner unit—this loud air-conditioner unit up there, and people would always say—while you were interviewing them they would say, "Are you in a warehouse?" And it would be making this [laughs]—you'd be yelling, and then all of a sudden the air conditioner would go off, you know, and you'd just be—and then you'd really be yelling. [Laughs] It was so—and then it was cold, you know, because a lot of times when that thing was on it was too cold. But . . .

GH: Now, were you the—were you working police during the entire time of the newspaper war, or did you change over to different beats?

LS: Oh, let's see, I did—I did switch to municipal courts. The "day police"—they called it the "day cops beat," where I did municipal court—Little Rock Municipal Court and the day co—and stuff that happened during the day on police beat. So I did that for a little while. I think—I think that's what I was doing when the newspaper war ended. I believe so.

GH: Were you . . .

LS: It wasn't as exciting really because it wasn't at night. But you did get to write more in-depth stories, but then you had to write it so fast and just throw a bunch of facts in the story and get it in the paper. You had to—you got to take a little more time, although still, compared to now, it was very quick, you know. You couldn't take more than one day on a story ever. And we, you know, we tried to get the more details, like the number of shots [laughs] fired in this incident, you know—the little details that the *Gazette* might not even think about putting in

their story—follow-up from the night-before events—stuff like that or following these people through court when they have their arraignment. And Little Rock Municipal Court had a lot of dull moments, but it occasionally had some really interesting stuff. You could be sitting there waiting for one person—like someone that was charged with murder, waiting for them to come up for their arraignment, and you'd have to sit through all this other misdemeanor stuff first. But sometimes a good story would come out of that. There was—there was one time where I was sitting in Judge Marion Humphrey's courtroom, when he was a municipal judge, and a guy—I wasn't really paying that much attention, and then I heard Judge Humphrey saying—it was a theft case, you know, and the guy was being sentenced, I guess, and Judge Humphrey said, "Well, I'm going to sentence him to a year in jail, but I'm sure he'll be out by noon." This was about nine o'clock in the morning [laughs], and I was, like, "Whoa!" So I wrote that down and started paying attention, and it turned out that the guy—he'd been sentenced to this apparently several times, and he did—kept—kept getting out by noon or at least, you know, after two or three days. And they called him the meat man. He would go into stores and steal sides of beef, you know, and put them in his pants and put them in his jacket, and then he would—and this had been go—going on with him for years. And he'd get sentenced, but he always—you know, because of jail overcrowding, which still goes on. [Laughs]

GH: Right.

LS: Always to this day. He would get out before noon. And so I wrote a story that was really funny. I—I had a lot of fun with it. It was just one of my favorite

stories [laughs] over that—over that little case. And I remember that—at that time Pat Lynch on the radio—on KARN—he was talking about that story on the air the next morning, and it was just so funny the way he was discussing it, and that was just a little fun element of my—of my job. It was not only the drama, but there were a lot of fun stories, too. Part of that was just the drive to get things because you were in competition.

GH: So what happened when the—when the competition somewhat abruptly came to a halt? I guess in the weeks leading up to the demise of the *Gazette*, there had been rumors going around that something big was happening, or what was . . .

LS: Yeah.

GH: What was the scuttlebutt in the newsroom at that time?

LS: Well, there were a lot of rumors going around, and I don't remember exactly what—if we really felt like we knew anything, but I guess I just kind of tried to ignore it because I just thought—I was just into the job that I had at the time and just wanted it to stay like that forever and just didn't want to hear any of this other stuff. And I thought maybe it wouldn't happen or if it was just a rumor. You know, I was in denial, I guess. [Laughs]

GH: So you were sad that the . . .

LS: I was very sad. That very day—that was a terrible day, October 18, 1991. [The Gannett Corp. newspaper chain purchased the *Gazette* in 1986. It shut down the newspaper on Oct. 18, 1991, and sold its assets to Little Rock Newspapers Inc., now Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Inc.] And I was—that day I'd had a headache. I'd had this headache for about three weeks that wouldn't go away, and—and,

you know, so I had this headache anyway. And then they, you know, they announced that the *Gazette* was closed, and it was just like all of a sudden—and I remember of all the days, I had on this horrible outfit, and it was just, like, [laughs] all this bad stuff was coming at the same time. The *Gazette* was closing, and I had a headache, and I just wanted to go back and—home and just crawl under the covers or something and wake up and have it be a new day. But, you know, then all of a sudden there was all this attention, and there were all these, like, TV reporters outside the newspaper, and—and, you know, you just had this sense of "What are you going to do? Why are we going to do these stories now?" I mean, this was, like, our purpose in life was to compete with the *Gazette*. I mean that gave us all our momentum. That was a big thrill, and it drove us forward. And all of a sudden it was, like, "We're just going to be out there on our own"—you know—"We're just not going to have the motivation." And it was really sad.

GH: Was that a common feeling among reporters?

LS: Yeah, I think it was. I think the *Democrat* reporters—I don't think—there wasn't this sense of elation among the reporters about—you know. There was a—[Democrat Publisher] Walter Hussman [Jr] had a big announcement and everybody gathered around and cheered and everything, but—but overall I think that, you know, after that moment everybody was, like, "Wow." You know, this is just—this is not good. It's sad, and then what about these people at the *Gazette*? They're going to be out of jobs, and, you know, it was just—it just seemed devastating—to *me* it did, and I think it did to a lot of other reporters.

And just felt lost all of a sudden, and, "What are we going to live for? What are we going to—what's going to drive us to try to get all these details?" And . . .

GH: Was there any staff meeting or anything in the immediate aftermath of that? "Okay, here's our approach now." Or, "You're to keep covering the news the same way as if you don't have the competition." Was there any—did you get any type of marching orders in the wake of the *Gazette*?

LS: Well, I'm sure we did. I just don't really remember specifically what they were. I do remember . . .

GH: Did you approach the job differently?

LS: Yeah, it just seemed like it was—you know, it was just kind of like a—I guess like the death of somebody. All of a sudden it's—things are more solemn, and—and a certain amount of enthusiasm fell off immediately. It kind of got revived later, but it was just—it just wasn't the same. And we did get some sort of instructions—some sort of meeting about—that we could take our time on stories and develop them a little more now that we didn't have to just immediately put things in the paper. We could—we could double-check facts, and—and hold a story for a day if we needed to. It was like an unheard-of thing to hold a story for a day to try to get more details, and that was hard—that was a hard concept to grasp because we were used to just immediately—anything you knew just immediately went in the story. I mean, if you—you know, unless you just [laughs] heard a rumor or something. But it was just a different way of doing business, and it—and it all worked out, but it just—it just took a lot of the edge off, and—and the edge was the fun thing—you know, the driving force for that.

And it got to be where it was nice to have more time to work on stories and calmer, and it really made more sense. It seemed much more rational, and you could spend your time and get more—more feature details in a story and you could—and I've always liked feature stories anyway. Those have been my favorites, and so that was good that you could take your time and you could talk to people and you could maybe work on your writing a little bit more and . . .

GH: And how long were you a police reporter after that?

LS: Oh—hmm—not long, I don't—I don't think. I can't really rem—because I was moving away from the cop beat already. I was—I was on day cops and doing municipal courts. I became a general assignment reporter, is what happened for, like, three—three years under Roger Hedges.

GH: Okay.

LS: And I'm pretty sure that—I'm pretty sure that I was a general assignment reporter after the war ended, but I may have started doing that before—before the war ended. And so that was—that was even *more* relaxed, you know, than having a beat. And it just wasn't as motivating, you know. You didn't have—you didn't have a beat that you had to check every day, and you didn't have—you didn't have competition that you—you know, someone you were competing with all the time. But it did give me an opportunity to do a lot of different—a lot of different stories—just a wide variety of—of topics. I do feel like I got given a lot of stories that were, I guess, sweet little stories [laughs], and that came to annoy me because I thought . . .

GH: Soft—soft features?

LS: Soft, yes. Little—you know, even little groundbreaking ceremonies, and it—so I became dissatisfied with that, and I know that I complained to Ray Hobbs, and I said, "You give me all these stories about children and stuff, and, you know, that's good, but I'm—I want more than that. I want something exciting." And so, he said, "Okay, okay, fine." So then I came into work one day and—well, one day he said—he left me a note in my mailbox—"Linda, today at 11:00 a.m. you are going to get drunk. See me for details." [Laughs] And so I went to him, and he said, "You wanted something more exciting." And these highway patrolmen and maybe different officers were doing a test. They had subjects—they needed to test the—to—to train officers how to do those stops when they test somebody for drunken driving.

GH: Sobriety tests.

LS: Yes, sobriety tests. And so they had—so I had to—Ray had volunteered me for that, and so—and it was 11:00 in the morning, so I remember I had screwdrivers because it was orange juice—you know, orange juice and vodka. And there was a cop in there doing a test and then another person—I can't remember. But anyway, that was a wild day just because they'd have us drink certain amounts. They'd measure how much we drank, and then they'd take our blood test to see how much was in our blood or some—something like this. Then they would have us do all these tests, and, of course, we failed 'em all, but we thought we were passing 'em all. And that was pretty wild, and I remember coming back to the newsroom at the end of the day, and I was wanting to write my story then, and—and Ray Hobbs said, "You are drunk, and you are going home." [Laughs] And—

and [fellow reporter] Danny Shameer drove me home. But anyway, it was just—that was an unusual story. Another time I came in, and—and he said, "You're going to turn in a bank robber today." And I said, "Okay." And there was a guy that had come into the newsroom from another town, and he said that he was wanted on a bank robbery warrant, and he was innocent. And he wanted a reporter to take him in and turn him in to the [U.S.] Marshal's office so he'd get a fair shake. Well, you know, I didn't really know—I mean, I didn't know anything about the marshal's office and how they worked. I didn't really know what to do with the guy, but I interviewed him, and he just proclaimed his innocence, you know. "They've gotten caught up in this. I have not done it. I've got my suitcase here full of clothes for when they take me to jail"—he was—he was all prepared— "But I want the newspaper to be aware of this because I—" I guess he thought somehow we'd keep him from getting locked up forever, you know. And so when I—I know Ray had Barry Arthur, the photographer, go with me in my car, and I drove this guy and Barry Arthur to the police department—or to the marshal's—to the federal courthouse to the marshal's office and I brought him upstairs but then I had never even—I don't think I'd ever even been in the federal courthouse, but I had to bring him up there to the marshal's office after I found the marshal's office and say, "Here he is. I'm bringing in a bank robbery suspect." [Laughs] I didn't really know what I was doing. It was just crazy. And then [laughs]—you know, and, you know, there were pictures Barry had taken outside the courthouse of me with this guy trailing behind me, like I'm bringing him in. And so anyway, the guy turned himself in, and I—and I was

surprised at the marshals. I was, like, "Okay, this guy is here to surrender on a warrant." And they're, like, "Oh, okay." They were real casual about it. They had to go back in the back and look up the warrant. It wasn't like they just grabbed him—"Oh, we've been looking for you, buddy." [GH laughs] And anyway, so then they took the guy away, and then the next day I went to federal court to cover his arraignment, I guess is what it was. And I didn't know the first thing about courts at that time. I had not covered—except for municipal court, and I was just sitting in there listening to these proceedings, and the prosecutor called me to the stand. [GH laughs] He said, "And now we call Linda Satter to the stand." And I looked around and I was, like—I said, *"You mean me?"* He says, "Yeah, you." And so I was, like—I didn't even think that I could protest or anything, and so I just went right up on the witness stand. [Laughs] They asked me, "Why did you—what did he mean when he said he wanted a fair shake?" And I said, "I don't know what he meant. I only know what he said." And they just basically confirmed that the stuff I had in the story that he had told me. But anyway, that was—that was another crazy episode. And then one time Ray—when I was a GA [general assignment reporter], he had me go up in a helicopter where they were looking for marijuana fields, and I think Barry again was the photographer, and it was a—it was the Army National Guard, maybe, or the Air National Guard, whatever. And they had—they had these helicopters. And, you know, I'm afraid of heights, and so I'm generally okay when I'm enclosed like that, I mean. And in this case they had the doors open, and the doors went all the way—when they opened up, they were even open a little underneath you. And I

was scared to death, and I remember I got—my face was blue and—according to Barry. Barry was sitting over there laughing, and his feet were dangling through the open space, and it was just terrifying. The helicopter guys would do these little lurchy things, like they thought that was— that that was funny to scare me. And I was so relieved to get off—to get back on the ground. That was a—and then I told Ray that I'd had enough excitement—did not need any more exciting stories. "A normal story will do from now on." [Laughs]

[00:45:13.25] GH: Now was—during this time, was—was John Robert Starr still the managing editor?

LS: Yes, yes.

GH: Okay.

LS: He was. Yeah.

GH: Was he still doing the daily critiques?

LS: Yes, I think so. Yes, he—he was—pretty sure.

GH: So you were a general assignment reporter for how long then?

LS: Three years.

GH: And then?

LS: And then it was in 1993, because my dad had just died in Kansas, and I got the—I was put onto the courts—the Pulaski County Courthouse beat. Now, I don't remember who was—who was my editor right at very first—if it was Roger or if it was—at some point—it might have been David Bailey. David Bailey was my—was, like, the assistant city editor. I don't know if he was initially when I took over that beat, but he might have been. And I remember I—I had resisted

that beat at first because, even though I had always wanted to do courts, I was just so stressed out by my father's death, and I just felt like I can't do it right, you know? But they just said, "You need to do this. We need you. You've got to do it." So it was a very busy, busy beat, and it was back to that frenzied pace, kind of like during the newspaper war.

GH: Were you the only courthouse reporter?

LS: The only court—yes. And then there were thirteen courts, and they were very busy courts. And this was the year of—where the gang eruption—all the gang stuff had started to come out in Little Rock.

GH: Mh-hmm.

LS: They had that HBO [Home Box Office cable TV network] documentary about gang-banging in Little Rock. [*Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock*,1994] All these cases were coming to trial—all these gang cases were coming to trial, and there might be three murder trials going on at the same time in the same courthouse some days. I mean, it was just very exciting and I liked that, but there was a lot going on. It was also *very* stressful because I wanted to be thorough on each one, and I had to hop around to different courts. And—and I also had a whole bunch of chancery—you know, civil cases. There would be, like, lawsuits filed—filed over constitutional issues and just all kinds of stuff going on at the same time. And that was—I was so stressed out for a long, long time on that beat. And I remember David Bailey telling me, you know, "This is not the '*Courthouse Gazette*.' You do not need to write all these stories." And I thought, "Well, I *do*." [Laughs] Because—I mean, I guess I was used to that during the newspaper war

with the police beat that you had to cover *everything*—you know, every little thing. I mean, if you covered one person's armed robbery, you had to cover another person's, because why would you cover some and not the others, you know? You had to—we had, like, a list of crimes—we had, like, a list of crimes that we focused on that we—that we gave attention to. You know, like murder, aggravated robbery, kidnapping, rape, and then the other crimes—you know, arson and the other ones kind of got lesser—lesser attention. There—there were so many of those big crimes [words unclear] felony cases going on, and the jury trial stuff I found fascinating. I really enjoyed it. I was really into it, and I just couldn't keep up with it all. I did do that for five years—the circuit court—circuit court beat. Of course, I got more relaxed about it because I got more familiar with it. And it did calm down a little eventually although the place never calmed down totally. And it was—there were—the courthouse was just so—the Pulaski County Courthouse and its beautiful buildings—it had been renovated. When I first started covering it, it was temporarily in the top of the KARK Channel 4 [television station] building. It was in this unused—it was a makeshift courthouse while they were renovating the real courthouse. And so everything—all the courtrooms were real little, the hall rooms were real tight. It was just really a scrunched—you know, and there were some very emotional trials where there were people that basically wanted to kill each other, having to passing each other in these narrow hallways, and it was—it was very intense. And I know that's where I—I met Omar [Greene] before covering the courts. I had—had actually gone to the real courthouse. [*Democrat* reporter] Liz Caldwell covered the

Pulaski County Courthouse before I did, and one day I went over to the—I guess this was before they started the renovation or at least before they closed the building, but . . .

GH: Mh-hmm. I remember this. [Words unclear]

LS: Yeah. I don't know. It was just somewhere down in the—I think it was somewhere down on the first floor, but Liz Caldwell was introducing me to people because I was going to fill in for her for a week or something on the courthouse beat, and so she introduced me to Omar. She said, "I want you to meet Omar Greene." And I said, "Well, I've heard about this guy." He's—you know, he just sounded like a real popular guy, and—and, you know, everybody knew him, and I was just kind of intimidated. I thought, "Oh, I don't want to meet him. He'll scare me." But [laughs] then I met him, and I thought, "Oh, he is a nice guy." [Laughs] Little did I know that many years, later I'd be married to him. But anyway, that was a—he had just—he was in private practice [as a lawyer] at that time—so—and I would run into him—so back over at the KARK I'd run into him occasionally in the hallways and . . .

GH: You couldn't avoid him there. [Words unclear]

LS: You couldn't, yeah. He was—and like I said, my dad had died right when I took over that beat, and I was very close to my dad in—in Kansas, and I was—like, for a year I was—I was a total mess about it. Well, I was also very busy. The beat actually helped me, being so busy. It helped me deal with my grief, but I was just, like, in a constant state of grief while I was doing that beat for the first year. And I'd run into Omar, and his father had died a year before mine, and so he was

always very comforting to me. And he would ask me how I was doing, and, you know, because he knew—he knew about my dad dying, and that was—that actually made a big difference. It helped me a lot. So—but anyway, so then back to the—and then the courts moved back to the regular courthouse building, and it was a beautiful building—it is a beautiful building, and there was just so much activity there all the time that I really liked that about it. It had a little press room, and from what I understand, the press room before had been in this little hole in the wall under the stairs. But the one that was there when I moved into that building was like a penthouse suite. [Laughs] That's what some people came to call it. It had windows, and it was—I mean, it was still like a—sort of like a big closet, but it was a pretty spacious, big closet, and it had these beautiful windows that looked out and you could get light in, and—and so I felt kind of pampered . . .

GH: The technology had—newspaper technology had been upgraded at this point.

LS: Yeah, and at this point you had—I had a computer over there. I had a laptop, I guess—I guess is what I had. Of course, the desk—the desk—you still had the thing—always at the *Democrat*, the furniture was always falling apart, and I know it was always scraping your clothes. I know one time in the *Democrat* newsroom on the second floor when it was so chaotic that, you know, you'd—you'd sit at those computers that we were always fighting over in the middle of the room, and they had these—they were on this wooden table and it had little splinters, and more than once it snagged my pantyhose. And I remember one time I'd just had had enough, and I just got really, really [laughs] mad and starting screaming and talking to—complaining to one of the editors. "That's it. I've had it with those

pantyhose being ripped—every single one of them. I don't get paid enough to have to go through all these different pairs of pantyhose. I'm going to start charging the *Democrat* for my hose." [Laughs] Anyway, so here we were in the courthouse, and I had a desk—a desk that eventually did just fall to the ground and they had to replace it, but [laughs]—bring in another one. It just got real wobbly, and then all of a sudden, boom, it fell. But I had a—luckily, it didn't fall on me because it was heavy. It was metal. But I had a little laptop over there, and it didn't have a fax [facsimile] mach—well, it may have had a fax machine. Things were just kind of moving into the technological age. [Laughs]

GH: Now had [*Democrat-Gazette* Editor] Griffin Smith come in at this point?

LS: Yes. Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Yeah. And I do remember the day—I remember not the day, but I mean I remember one moment when Griffin Smith took over, I had a—I guess at that point when he first took over, I was still a general assignment reporter, and I was covering—during the [Bill] Clinton presidential campaign [1992]—I was covering the media that had descended on Little Rock. That was kind of my mini-beat. And so one of the thin[gs]—and—and I'm a cat-lover—so one of the things that people—oh, the *Washington Post*—well, let me think—let me think about this. There was—were all these reporters and photographers that would wait outside the [Arkansas] governor's mansion, like, for Clinton to come and go and things to happen. And his cat, Socks, started coming out, you know, from under the wrought-iron fence. The cat would come out and was getting a lot of attention. Then one day Clinton put out a notice—I guess some—I think it was a CNN [Cable News Network] guy had picked up Socks and photographed him,

but—and it made Chelsea [Clinton] mad when she saw that her cat was being picked up like that. And so a directive came down from Clinton: "Do not touch the cat." And so I said to Ray Hobbs, "We need to a story on Socks." You know, this is going to be a presidential cat. And he was—and I guess this was at the point where he was—had already been elected or else it was just sure that he was gonna—gonna get it. Anyway, and Ray was, like, "Well, I don't know if we want to do a whole story on a cat." And the next day [laughs] the *Washington Post* came out with a story about Socks. And I was, like, "See?" And they said, "Do that story on Socks. Get it done today." And so [laughs]—so I went out there and I could not—Socks was not out there that day, but I went to the—the governor's mansion, and they had a little guard shack where Buddy Young was the head guard or whatever, and he let me in there. And they were lax when they knew I was doing a story about the cat and not about, you know, the presidential stuff.

GH: Right.

LS: So they just—they just, like, let me in—"Oh, come on in." And they said—and Buddy said, "Yeah, that's my cat. I raised him. I raised him up from a kitten." And then they just made it real entertaining, and they started telling me about what he did throughout the day, and—"He goes into the woods, and he catches squirrels, and this right here, we"—the [state] troopers had hung up a little mouse on a tree for him to play with, and they just told me all these details about Socks. It was really funny. And then Griffin says, "I think—" I was telling Griffin about the story . . .

GH: This is Griffin Smith, the editor.

LS: Griffin Smith. He said, "Well, I think we need to get a little dossier on Socks." And [laughs]—and I was thrilled that he—that he saw the humor in this, you know, and that he was really wanting to play it up. And so I actually went to Hillcrest Animal Hospital, which is my vet [veterinarian] anyway, and they gave me—they told me Socks's records, you know. I said, "If this is not too personal—if this is not confidential, I'd like to know. You know, I mean, this is a cat, but—" They said, "Well, he was born—" You know, they told me where he was born and all this stuff—I mean, as far as they knew. They told me his history and the date that he'd been neutered and how old he was, and so we put that all in a little box in the paper, and it was a cute little design that looked like a little resume sort of thing on him. "Neutered on such-and-such date." And—and Chelsea and Hillary [Rodham Clinton] had found him in the neighborhood when he was—he was a kitten, and they had found him outside the home of Chelsea's piano teacher. And he and his sister were out there, and they were crying out for milk and stuff. So that's how they got him. And I wrote up that story, and—and Alyson Hoge edited it. And I remember because she added a little flourish at the end about that—how he'll—how it'll be when he's walking down the hallowed halls [of the White House]. I remember she added that. And it ended up being just a fun story and—and took up a lot of space. It was on the Arkansas page. But that is what led to Starr—John Robert Starr wrote a column about it, and he was just incensed that that much space would be taken up by a story about a cat and—with a photo—with photos and a graphic and everything else, and he was

appalled, and basically was criticizing Griffin Smith, and, you know, this new way that the paper was turning. And then Griffin put out a memo saying, "This is the difference between the old guard and the new guard. We won't have our columnists directly criticizing the stories in the paper," or some—"or the policies of the paper or whatever." And I remember that memo somehow ended up in the *Arkansas Times*. They wrote about it. I think it was just a little—one of those little blurbs but . . .

GH: But at this time Starr was a contributing columnist. He had . . .

LS: Starr—yes.

GH: He was no longer the man—he had resigned as managing editor.

LS: Right, he wasn't managing editor.

GH: Or retired.

LS: He had just recently—it was a very recent thing. He had just become a columnist from being the managing editor, and it was like he was trying to preserve his power as managing editor by blasting this—the devotion of space for something ridiculous like this. He was, like, blasting the news judgment of the new managing [laughs] editor, basically—of the news editor. So, and—I remember Griffin saying, "This is the difference between the old guard and the new guard." And I really liked that because I always think that a newspaper needs fun in it, too. It needs to have a lot of entertainment as well as news, and it just can't be straight facts, you know. It's got to be interesting. So anyway, I don't know how I got off with that—on that from the courts, but that was—that was a story that happened right after—right after Griffin took over. And at this point I think we

were—this is when we were up on the third floor and it was a lot calmer. You know, they had remodeled the third floor and the skylights.

GH: There was carpeting on the floor.

LS: There was carpeting all of a sudden. There was . . .

GH: It was a lot quieter.

LS: It was—it was almost too quiet. It was strange—kind of eerie at first. But the—those big . . .

GH: Outlets.

LS: . . . electrical boxes—outlets—were not there to trip over.

GH: And the wires weren't there.

LS: The wires were gone. All the desks all matched because they were the *Gazette* desks. They were, like, the orange desks that the *Gazette*—they'd had in the *Gazette*, and it actually looked nice. I mean, you had sun coming in because the windows before were all—from what I understood somebody—on the second floor the windows were kind of opaque—kind of a frosted sort of . . .

GH: You couldn't see out of them.

LS: You couldn't see out of them. They were yellowish, and—and I don't know if this is true, but one time somebody had tried to clean them all. They put a solution on it, and that's what caused it to be that way. [Laughter] I don't know if that's true or not. [Laughs] But anyway, we used to go up to the third floor to get files, and the library was up there. And those skylights—and everyone knew they were there because they were blacked out. They just had—you couldn't see 'em, and it was always dark and spooky up there on the third floor. But now we

were on the third floor, and it was real light and bright and positive, and the computers were—you know, there were a lot more computers. Everybody had a computer on their desk. And it was quiet, it was orderly, and people just seemed more civil. It was just like a whole different world—a whole different place.

GH: There was a sea change in the working environment then.

LS: Yes, yes. It was quite a bit different. But it was nice to have some calmness and civility all of a sudden, and that's when I started covering the Pulaski County Courthouse in 1993.

GH: And you said how many years at the—five years?

LS: Five years.

GH: And then to the federal courts?

LS: And then I started covering the federal courthouse in 1999. So yeah, very early 1999. That was a—there was a big white supremacy trial going on that I started covering—covering then That was my first trial in the federal courthouse. My first trial in the Pulaski County Courthouse was Scharmel Burnett—Scharmel Burnett murder trial.

GH: She had been accused of killing her husband. Is that right?

LS: Yeah.

GH: He was the pool—pool man.

LS: Actually that . . .

Omar Greene: Yeah.

GH: Johnny Burnett Pools.

LS: He was a—he was a wealthy man. He owned—I think it was Burnett Pools and

Spas.

GH: Pools and Spas. Right.

LS: And it was a big "whodunit?" mystery, and Scharmel had been a spokesman for the [North Little Rock] [S]chool [D]istrict, and she was pretty well known.

GH: The North Little Rock School District—is that right?

LS: Oh, I don't know. I can't remember now if it was Little Rock or North Little Rock. But that was a big trial, and it was so interesting. And I just really enjoyed that—the court beat. And also I think right before that, actually, the very first trial I covered was the Christmas lights trial—Jennings Osborne . . .

GH: Mmm.

LS: You know, when his neighbors sued him for being a nuisance. And, ultimately, Judge Brantley found that he *was* a nuisance.

GH: Ellen Brantley.

LS: Ellen Brantley, mh-hmm, who was then a chancellor although they don't have—now they're not called chancellors. That . . .

GH: They're just called circuit judges now.

LS: Yes, they're all called circuit judges. That trial—the day it ended is the day that the Scharmel—Scharmel Burnett trial began.

GH: Hmm.

LS: It's like things just started off on a whirlwind with that beat. And pretty much they stayed that way through that whole beat because, like I said, it was—it was during the time when all these gang cases were coming to light. There had been, like, the most murders at any time in the history of Little Rock, and more murders

per capita in Little Rock than in Washington, D.C., or anywhere in the United States, per capita. And so it was a violent time, and also there were violent outbreaks in the courthouse. You kind of had to watch your back. This just made it fun and exciting, though, because you never knew when somebody was going to jump up in a courtroom and do something bizarre. You know, people would escape. They would—they would bolt all of a sudden and run down the stairs, and all the sheriff's officers and bailiffs would have to run out after 'em and—[laughter] and then there was a—a—oh, and there was one trial that I was covering where I had been hit by a car on my way home on—there was a trial I was covering—a civil trial—a chancery trial—about a—a motel that was being shut down because it had drug—it had a lot of drugs and prostitution there. And I was leaving that one day, walking across the street—walking across Broadway going to my parking space, and I got hit by a car. And I felt something in my back, and I was—I turned—I was going across the crosswalk and it was a Walk sign. And the next thing you knew, I was on—on top of a—I was on top of a car. I said, "There's a car underneath me!" [Laughs] I was flopping around, and—and anyway it ended up that I had cracked a vertebrae—my last vertebrae in my back. But at the time I didn't want to admit it because I was on a mission. I was trying to get my story written, and I didn't want—you know, again, it was a matter of denial, I guess. The car hit me, I fell off the hood, and then I got up. I mean, it was in the middle of five o'clock traffic on a Friday afternoon—downtown Little Rock. And I was embarrassed about having been flopping around on a car hood. I stood up, and it did hurt, but I said, "I'm okay." And

somebody had called an ambulance, and I wobbled over to the prosecutor's office, and the ambulance guys came and looked at me and were seeing if I could feel my toes and stuff. And I just said, "Look, I don't want to get in an ambulance. I'm okay. I've got to go write my story." [Laughs] And so I went back, but I couldn't walk up the street to get to my car because it was an uphill climb and it hurt. But I thought, "Well, this will go away. It just hurts right now because I just got hit, but it'll go away in a few hours." I had Melody LaRue, one of the prosecutors—I said, "Melody, could you give me a ride up the street?" 'Cause she was leaving. She gave . . .

OG: Melody Piazza.

LS: Yeah.

GH: That's Melody L-A-R-U-E?

LS: L-A- and then it was a capital R-U-E.

GH: R-U-E. She's now—she would be Piazza.

LS: Yeah, married to [Pulaski County Circuit] Judge Chris Piazza. But—so she gave me a ride up the street to my car, and then I drove back to the newsroom, and I started writing my story. And I took the elevator up there, I guess, 'cause I couldn't walk up the stairs. And I—and then I started realizing as I was writing my story [laughs], "This might be serious. Maybe I should go back and tell somebody." I went to the—up to the desk, and I told Glen—I think Glen Chase was my editor at that point. And David Bailey was standing around, and Ray Hobbs, and I said, "I just want you to know I've been hit by a car, but I'm okay. I just want you to know it might take just a little bit longer to write my story." And

then I went to sit back down, and—and they came—Ray came over to my desk and he was, like, "*What*?" You know, "What's this all about?" And they got all excited. And they said, "You need to go to the doctor and you need to fill out worker's comp [compensation] forms and all this stuff." And I was, like, "No, no, no. It's just no big deal, really. I got up and walked away." But then as I continued to write the story, and my back really hurt, and I e-mailed Danny Shameer across the room—who was then a reporter, and now he's an editor. And I said, "Danny, when I'm done with this story can you take me to the hospital? I've been hit by a car." And he thought I was joking, and he rolled his eyes at me from across the room. And then he looked at me, like, "Uh-oh, she's not kidding." He came over and said, "Are you serious?" And he did take me to the doc—to the hospital that night, and it didn't show any cracks then, but a couple days later I got this big bump in my back and had a bone scan, and it showed that a vertebrae was broken. But anyway, that did heal and everything. And so then later I was back sitting in the Pulaski—in Judge Langston's courtroom—Judge John Langston's courtroom in the Pulaski County Courthouse—and I was—I was taking some pain medication for my back, which was—the bone was supposed to re-grow itself, you know. And I was taking notes. There was a preacher who was about to go on trial for rape, and he had gotten many continuances, and he did not want to go to trial that day. And he said—he was complaining about the attorney to the judge, and the judge said, "Look, this is just a ploy to continue the trial yet again, and I'm not going to put up with this. You've had this attorney appointed to you for months, and you're going to go to trial today." And so he said,

"Bailiffs, bring the jury in"—or something—you know, "Bring the potential jurors in." And the guy just went ballistic. The guy was in the courtroom, and he just stood up and started—and he—the bailiffs came toward him like they were going to—I think they were going to actually handcuff him—I think he said—I think the judge said, "Take him back to the back for a while." You know, and then they were going to start picking a jury. They came toward him to put the cuffs on him, and he just rose up—he just flung his arms into the air, and he flung one bailiff across the room and the other bailiff the other way. And the—the podium—the lectern got knocked over. And all of a sudden [laughs] everybody started running around in the courtroom and ducking up against the wall and ducking under benches. And the judge and his court reporter started quietly moving along into the chambers, and I—I was sitting out there taking notes and everything. And the defendant hit the counsel table and knocked all these papers off of it, and hit the microphone and broke it in half, and part of it came flying over toward me. I think it was heading right to my neck, but there was a victim witness person sitting to me. And I was just writing down all these reactions. And she pulled me down. She said, "Linda, duck!" And so when I—when she pulled me down it hit me in the shoulder, which is a lot better than hitting me [laughs] in the neck. So then—and I was already on pain medication from the—the back injury, so—which was probably a good thing. But anyway, then the guards—some—some sheriff's deputies that were downstairs on the third floor and heard the commotion—they came running upstairs, and this great big sheriff's deputy came in there, and everybody else was plastered against the walls and

hiding, and he came in there, and he just stomped up to the guy, and he said, "*I'll* get him." And—and, finally—and the defendant just sat down and put his hands out to be cuffed, and that ended it all. But it was a very scary situation. And there was actually a lot of stuff like that that happened in the Pulaski County Courthouse. So—oh, and then I had to go file another worker's comp claim, even though I really wasn't [laughs]—that was a very minor injury.

GH: So they moved you to federal court because Pulaski County was too dangerous? [Laughs]

LS: They were—they were teasing me that I was—that I should get combat pay, being in the federal court—or being in the state courthouse. Then I go to the federal courthouse, and it is just totally calm and orderly. It was just an unbelievable difference but . . .

GH: Like going from the old *Democrat* newsroom to the new *Democrat* newsroom?

LS: Yeah, yeah. At this point—I was actually kind of glad, though, at this point. I was kind of glad to leave the chaos behind. [Laughs]

GH: And so this year—what is it, 1999?

LS: Yeah, yeah.

GH: Okay. And at the federal courthouse, although it's, I guess—I don't know if it's a higher class of criminal, but you had—you had some pretty interesting cases over there as well.

LS: Yeah. In fact, that very first case—I mean, I say it was calmer at the federal courthouse but the very first case that I covered was the case of Chevie Kehoe and Danny Lee, who were being tried for a racketeering murder case where a family

was killed in Tilly, Arkansas . . .

GH: That Chevie is spelled just like the car?

LS: Chevie is C-H-E-V-I-E.

GH: I-E. Okay.

LS: And then K-E-H-O-E.

GH: Okay.

LS: And Danny Lee, just spelled the normal way. And Chevie was from Seattle [Washington]—the Seattle area. And Danny Lee was from Oklahoma. Basically, they were charged with—as part of a conspiracy to set up a whites-only nation in the Pacific Northwest, they had gone on this cross-country crime spree that included the killing of three people in Arkansas—a man who was a gun dealer, his wife, and her eight-year-old daughter. Their bodies had been found floating in the Illinois [River] bayou by Russellville [Arkansas], like, five months after they were missing. What happened is someone had put plastic—had placed plastic bags over their heads and suffocated them and thrown them into the water and then weighted them down with concrete bricks. And so then these—you know, and that had happened in 1996.

GH: They had gone missing from where?

LS: From Tilly, which is right on the line between two counties, and I can't think of the counties.

GH: Is that T-I-L-L-Y?

LS: T-I-L-L-Y. It's a little, bitty town. It's got the—I'm almost thinking of it here—what county. Well, anyway . . .

OG: One of them's not Pope County?

LS: Near Russellville. Well, Pope—yeah, Pope County was—but that's—it may have been Pope County. It was either in Pope County or right next to Pope County. [Editor's Note: Tilly is in northeastern Pope County] Anyway, so they had—this was a death penalty case, and there was also—you know, there had been the bombing of the Murrah [federal] building in Oklahoma City [Oklahoma] in [19]95, and there were some rumors that these people were—might be connected with [Oklahoma City bomber] Tim McVeigh—might've been connected with him. And so there was intense security, and they had marshals that they had—they had borrowed some marshals from other jurisdictions. And they had these marshals with machine guns on the roof of the courthouse and posted here and there, and you would get locked into the courtroom. When you went in, you had to be in by a certain time. You couldn't just come and go. And then they would lock you in there, and they had, like, armed marshals inside and outside the courtroom, right outside each door. You could only go out at a break, and they had separate metal detectors set up outside the court—courtroom in addition to the one that was downstairs. So it was very intense security. And that trial lasted for about—I think it lasted for, like, eleven weeks if I remember right.

GH: And they were convicted?

LS: They were. One [Chevie Kehoe] was convicted and—and got life, and the other one [Danny Lee, who had a history of violent crimes] got death, which he's still appealing. But that was a wild start—kind of a wild start to the federal beat, too.

GH: Now, while you were at the federal courthouse—and maybe I'm jumping ahead a

little bit too much—but you were at one point diverted onto a special project—investigative project—involving treatment of juveniles.

LS: Oh, yeah—yeah, right—which really didn't—wasn't connected with federal courts, but Mary Hargrove was working on that. She was working on a series . . .

GH: And who was Mary Hargrove?

LS: Mary Hargrove was our projects editor, and she was an investigative reporter that had come here from Tulsa [Oklahoma] and had been at the *Miami Herald* [Florida newspaper], and she was doing a project on juvenile justice. And so she—she had done a lot of it herself, but it was very, very time-consuming. It had gone on for months, and she needed to start calling in some help, so she had me do some of it because I had experience doing legal stuff, and Patrick Henry, who, I think, was then a GA. She had us do aspects of it. So I focused on one aspect of that, and he focused on one aspect, and we went out and did a bunch of interviews. So I—I left—you know, I wasn't covering the federal courts for maybe—I don't even remember how long that—that was—maybe two or three weeks—to help Mary with her project. And that story ended up winning a Robert F. Kennedy [Journalism] Award. It's an award for [coverage of] the disadvantaged. It was a grand prize winner. I forget the [laughs] exact name of the award, but it was primarily Mary's award. I mean, Patrick and I got—got the attention, too, but it was really Mary's project, and we were—we got to help her with it. So . . .

GH: Was this an example of having more time, also, to work on a story?

LS: Yeah, yeah.

GH: Kind of a new way of doing things at the newspaper.

LS: It was.

GH: The fact that you had a projects editor, for one thing.

LS: Yeah, that—that—and I had always—I still—I've always wanted to do projects, and so I was very glad to have an opportunity to work with Mary on that even though, like I said, I only got to spend maybe three weeks—two or three weeks on my part of it. But I liked that because I—I like concentrating on one topic and really getting in-depth with one topic, and throughout my whole career—especially [laughs] doing police beat during the newspaper war—you were skipping around. You know, you had a million subjects coming at you at all times. And so that was—that was a good thing to do, and it was a good demonstration of how the newspaper philosophy was changing. And we were focusing more on—the newspaper was coming to focus more on front-page stories and—and in-depth and—and more feature elements to stories, rather than all the—covering the daily meetings or writing all the briefs. It got to be less—less briefs written about—say, like on police beats, you know—every armed robbery or every such-and-such. And it just became more of a focus on different—on stories that were more stories, I guess, instead of . . .

GH: What do you think about that development—as a—as a reader of the newspaper, for instance?

LS: Well, it's good and bad. It has good and bad. I like—as a reader, it is more interesting to read a feature-type story, unless you just want the information—you want to know what happened. Certain stories, like—like things that happen around town that are—that would be police beat stories, you basically—you—you

just want to know—I mean, if it d—if it's just—unless it has some really compelling emotional or human angle, you just want to know basically where it happened and when because you want to know what's happening around your neighborhood. So you don't want things exaggerated, you know, and made into too big of a deal just to make a story out of something. That, you know, you can go too far that way, and there's been occasions where that's been done. But overall, I was real happy that—that we were going towards getting to actually do some "story stories." You know, to write some stories and tell a story and—and take some time with it, and go and interview people—people in the backgrounds of stories. I think that's overall a lot better for the paper.

GH: You've been ab—in addition to the juvenile justice story, you've been able to do some other enterprise stories of that type.

LS: Yeah, I remember a story about—there was a trial about—it was called the "arsenic and old lace" trial. There was a woman—a grandmother—she was actually young for a grandmother, but she was—she had poisoned her sister—her older sister—with arsenic gradually over time. And—and I—I covered her trial, and it was a very interesting trial. Then after the trial, I did a more in-depth thing with it where I went and talked to the family members that were affected by this, and went out to their homes and saw all these places and got to do a long—like a news feature on it. And I really enjoyed that. That was—it was interesting. I mean, you can still—there's a lot of details that don't come out in the trial, and so you can—the trial sometimes gives you the idea for a bigger story where things that might not be important legally are still very interesting to the public. And so

you can . . .

GH: So the motivation—the motivation used to be the—you knew you were in open competition every day.

LS: Mh-hmm.

GH: And you s—you mentioned being somewhat deflated when the newspaper war ended.

LS: Yeah.

GH: But [?what it is?] you've since inflated again. And where do you draw your motivation now?

LS: Well, I guess it's just—maybe it's more of a—there's more of a—a motivation that—the mo—motivation is more now that you can—you're looking for—when you go on a story you're looking for these things that you can draw out later, you know, in a bigger story. You know, the "story behind the story." And that's fun. I like that. I mean, when it—when it deserves to be. You know, there's some stories that if you're talking [laughs]—if you're told to try to make a story out of it and it's just not there—it's just not that interesting, that's a different situation. But there are—it's good to have the—to know that you are—that it's okay now. [Laughs] That you're allowed to do that, and that it's—if it's—you can go out and you can—you can hear something in a—in a trial or whatever and develop it and it could become—you know, you could hear things that nobody else has heard before because it's not coming out at a trial. I mean, it's stuff that you're actually digging up on your own. And those are really—can be the most insightful things. And it does take—if you have a little more time, you can

actually do—you can find out so much more stuff. Sometimes people are reluctant to tell you things at first, and then they will gradually get used to you, or they'll see that you've written a couple stories about something and they'll trust you—or just—it takes them a while to think about things and to—to finally agree to be talked to. And then when they do—once you gain their trust, you can get a lot of really good information—the stuff that's really more important to people that has the more human element in it as to why people commit these crimes or what drives them. You know, the human element can really come out then, and that's really what makes a story. And so now I try to look for that in my—in my—court—court stories. Not only covering a trial or writing about a lawsuit that's been filed, but also seeing if there's maybe something else behind that, that—that I can find out about a case.

OG: Linda, I'm sorry to interject, but at the Nick Wilson trial—did you get to—were they [words unclear]?

LS: Oh, I'm—well, I can think of another case that I—that I really got into, which involved child porn—Internet pornography was starting to be, you know, a big deal, along with federal laws affecting pornography. There was a case that came, that was filed against a lawyer in town. He was charged with possession, possession of child pornography. And it was just a—basically a small charge, but he was a lawyer and he lived in kind of a ritzy neighborhood, and—and, you know, I think his wife was a counselor at a school and all this . . .

OG: A psychologist.

LS: A psychologist, yeah. And so it was, like, wow, you know. We just wrote a brief,

as we did on most of these when people get indicted, "So-and-so is charged with"—it's kind of like, wow, this is wild, you know—an attorney being charged. But then one day the government filed a motion to dismiss the indictment, and I just thought, "How can they just do that?" I mean, he's already been—you know, what happened? Because it wasn't like he was pleading or anything. They weren't dismissing it because he was pleading to a lesser charge. They just said something about maybe the [?ends of?] justice or there's not enough evidence or whatever—there—you know, for reasons of justice they're dismissing the charge. So I thought, "We've got to look into this because we've already said his name and he's already been tarnished, and now"—and it turns out that they—you know, it wasn't him actually. His—his son and I think his son's friends had been over to his house using his computer, and something had—had gotten downloaded on the computer, and then his computer broke down, and he took it in to be fixed at Best Buy [electronics store]. And they found the stuff on the hard drive that he or somebody had deleted. And they called the police and he was indicted and it just—so a story grew out of that that was all about how they prosecute computer—Internet crimes and how it can ruin somebody's reputation who is totally innocent— [laughs] you know, and how—how you prove that one person has something if it's not—you know, how you prove it on a computer because so many people have access to a computer and just this whole new realm of questions that was opening up and—and, actually, I talked to the attorney for that story and he later moved out of town, and he has since come back to town, but that was a story that I really enjoyed doing. And it won a Katie Award for

specialty reporting. [Editor's Note: The Katie Awards are presented by the Press Club of Dallas, Texas.]

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]