



Consortium for the National Equal Justice Library  
Oral History Collection  
Interview with

**Lillian Johnson**

Conducted by Alan Houseman  
Nov. 11, 2018

Alan Houseman:

This is an oral history of Lillian Johnson, who's the executive director of Community Legal Services of Phoenix. The date is Friday, November 11, 2016. We are filming this in Indianapolis, Indiana. The interviewer is Alan Houseman for the National Equal Justice Library.

Alan Houseman:

Lillian, let's begin with just a brief overview of where you grew up, where you went to college and law school, and the jobs you've held. Then we're going to back and focus on your legal aid work.

Lillian Johnson:

Okay. Born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. That really helped me far more than I understood and appreciated at the time. Oklahoma provided educational opportunities to Blacks and Whites, separately but completely controlled, so that we had very high achievement expectations. I had the opportunity to go through a school system that was very good. What was most helpful to me, I later learned, was that in addition to history and other things, we had separate Black history classes. I learned and was exposed to at a very early age really what was actually going on in America as well as what needed to be changed and how that change was going to affect all of us, and each individual having some responsibility in that change.

Lillian Johnson:

You can appreciate that my choice for college was Howard University. They were there in Oklahoma recruiting, and of course it seemed like an extension of what we were doing there as well. Naturally, Howard was my choice. I had that opportunity. Just to put in perspective, that really was a very important decision that my family did not fully appreciate because the most that we traveled outside of Oklahoma, and we did that by vehicle, was really sometimes to Illinois or Missouri. But we had not experienced air flight and had very little knowledge of what Washington D.C., that whole area, was like. That's why I chose Howard.

Lillian Johnson:

It was a wonderful experience at Howard. The community was so dynamic, and in addition to being at a university with so many different populations represented and different languages spoken, it was just fantastic. It was wonderful. It was just exciting.

Lillian Johnson:

But, I also am reminded that prior to even going to college, I had made a decision about what I was going to do, that I was ultimately going to law school and become a lawyer. Because I had

an experience in about the fifth grade where we had career day when professionals coming in and speaking to our class and talking about the challenges of the profession, and really responding to questions. We had a lawyer come. I don't know if you will recall but during that time Beverly Hillbillies was a popular TV show. You may recall that they discovered oil on their property and ultimately it resulted in them becoming rich and blah blah blah. One of the questions that was posed to the lawyer was, "Why do they have derricks on some of the property, and yet they're not rich?" He began to explain to us about mineral rights and that essentially some of the families that had these derricks had sold, or didn't have, the mineral rights. Only thing they were getting paid was for the space that the derricks occupied, but that the oil companies were actually getting the oil. He explained it so well that it became apparent to me that that was a profession that I wanted to pursue. I went to college already anticipating that I would go on to law school. I chose Howard for the reasons that I mentioned, and I was not disappointed. It was absolutely fantastic.

Lillian Johnson:

I spent a lot of time in college not only getting a really, I think, good basic education, but I had the opportunity to go and be around the law students at Howard. They all dressed like lawyers and they all talked like lawyers. Talked like lawyers in that they were about identifying issues and resolving problems of the day. It was just inspiring to me that that was essentially exactly what they were doing. But, the best laid plans of mice and men, right ...

Lillian Johnson:

It just so happened that a guy, someone that I was very close to that really I thought he was the man that I was going to wed, and he too came from Oklahoma and was going to be on his way to being a lawyer. The difference was, he went to Dartmouth College. I would travel from Howard to visit. He had been in a position whereby he was participating in student programs where he was assisting in some kind of activities. From what I could gather, they were having summer programs for low-income residents of communities in Connecticut. They would travel to Hanover, New Hampshire for a summer. He was really excited about that project.

Lillian Johnson:

I was also excited about that community project. To make a long story short, on one of the visits, I met the dean and president of Middlebury College, and I was encouraged and invited to apply for an assistant dean position. I applied and I got it. I spent a year Middlebury College as dean of students. What was really exciting to me was that everything that I had learned and had been exposed to was something that was expected that I would use. They really wanted my perspective and opinion to be part of it. Among the things that I was excited about is that they had a legal program whereby they were on a 4-1-4 system. In that one month, you could have projects. They had a project whereby students were essentially given a case and they were supported by lawyers to actually move the case. That was pretty cool.

Lillian Johnson:

Students were very interested in the civil rights and all kinds of things. It gave me an opportunity to act on some of the things that I claimed that I believed in, and it produced a really good experience for me. I met a lot of good people that, even to this day, refer to me as Dean Johnson. Can you figure? I can't. It was very helpful because it was an entirely different environment. There were not people of color, and it was a time in our country where literally young kids would want to rub your skin to see if you were actually, truly that color. It was an interesting time. But, I of course will fill my commitment to go law school. Aside from that, my dad was getting pretty restless. What does this up in Vermont have to do with the practice of law? I then applied to the University of Chicago law school. My parents had moved from Oklahoma to Chicago at that time. That's why I went to law school at the University of Chicago law school. That was just exciting times.

Alan Houseman:

After law school, just briefly, and then we'll come back and talk about this, where did you work?

Lillian Johnson:

After law school. Let me first tell you what I did in law school. What I did at law school, which was exciting, again, was had the opportunity to really be exposed to some tremendous professors and speakers. As you can imagine, the law school had rules or policies or something. One of the ones that they had was a fantastic clinic. They had a system where you had to put your number in. It was a lottery. You had to have your number drawn before you could work in the clinic. I asked a number of questions, "Why?" They were saying, "It's a privilege." You don't get credit for it. It is extra work, and you are telling me that there's a lottery and that if your number is not called, you don't get there, you can't do it. They said, "Yeah. Isn't that great?" I thought to myself, "That does not make sense."

Lillian Johnson:

To make a long story short, I didn't go through the lottery. The clinic opened up, and Lillian just showed up. I became a part of the clinic earlier than most law students would have. It sealed my fate. I was smitten with the opportunity to actually, on a one-on-one basis, listen to a person having a problem that lawyers, only lawyers, can help them address or resolve. That was it. I was sealed. The interesting thing about it is that I went through all that summer and the entire second year and they had this election where they had someone, a law student, a clinic fellow, would be elected to be a spokesperson. I was nominated. They asked the question on the nomination form, "What is your number?" I had to tell them, "I don't have a number." They said, "How did you get here without a number?" I said, "I just showed up." They said, "We are not going to write that story." Why do you have a system if someone doesn't follow it? I said, "I'm good with that. I don't even have to be part of the leadership of the clinic. That's okay with

me. I'm just really pleased that I'm a part of it." As a result, my experience at law school was just fantastic.

Alan Houseman:

After law school, you ...

Lillian Johnson:

After law school I went directly to the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago for a position there as a staff attorney.

Alan Houseman:

Then you moved up?

Lillian Johnson:

Right.

Alan Houseman:

You also worked at the LSC regional office, was it?

Lillian Johnson:

Yes.

Alan Houseman:

We'll come back to that.

Lillian Johnson:

Okay.

Alan Houseman:

We'll come back to a lot. I'm trust trying to get the outline.

Lillian Johnson:

Yes. Staff attorney. I was subsequently appointed to managing attorney, and I left that position to join the Chicago Regional Office of the Legal Services Corporation. By then, I understood that it was a national movement. It wasn't just local and it wasn't just us in Chicago and University of Chicago law school doing this. It was a national movement, and I just wanted to be a part of it.

Alan Houseman:

After that, and then we'll come back.

Lillian Johnson:

Okay. After going to the regional office, as you can well imagine, I learned a lot because it was a national movement. I had the opportunity to meet, interact with some pretty exciting, brilliant people. Let's see. Among those people are Alan Houseman, Clint Lyons. I just was blown away, but something happened whereby the Legal Services Corporation itself was threatened. That was a presidential election whereby the president had vowed to eliminate the Legal Services Corporation. I was immediately interested in getting to the field, that is, going back and being a part of a program.

Lillian Johnson:

A position opened up in Phoenix, Arizona, for the director of Community Legal Services and, as you can well imagine, with no qualms I went out there and interviewed and got excited about the client reps as well as the others in the community who are dedicated to legal services. They offered me the position and I took it.

Alan Houseman:

Great. I think you actually answered this question, but I want to be just explicit about it. What factors led you to go to LAF after law school? I understand how you go to being a lawyer and what influenced you there, but what got you to LAF? Why did you go into civil legal aid?

Lillian Johnson:

That's what I really was exposed to. My short experience with regard to criminal defense actually scared me. It scared me because I was immediately exposed to what happens if someone doesn't have a lawyer. I had that. Because the University of Chicago is so large and had a social work program and had a number of different experiences, among those I was able to look and participate in the criminal defense component. The idea that someone could lose their liberty because they didn't have the resources was so absolutely terrifying to me that I began to go to see some of those trials and things. That's what was encouraged. I literally couldn't take it. I could not be in the criminal setting. It was just too much for me.

Lillian Johnson:

I was encouraged about the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago because it was in different neighborhoods throughout Chicago. That's exactly what legal aid is supposed to do. It's supposed to serve the community. That's what resulted in me seeing the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago as an option.

Alan Houseman:

You were there awhile in the neighborhood office. What would you say were the most important thing or things you did? The most important things that happened that affected you,

what you would say is, "I accomplished this," or, "This is something really important to me that happened during those years at LAF."

Lillian Johnson:

Well, I had the opportunity to work both on the south side of Chicago, which is a very different community, and on the west side of Chicago, which is obviously very different. What I learned from my experience at Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago is that it's about the community that you serve. We were encouraged and participated in the community depending upon what the communities needs were. For example, on the south side of Chicago housing was a really huge deal in terms of access to housing, or remaining in housing despite not complying with the rules as they were written. I think the community partners, those individuals who were there and part of the community that were not lawyers was probably what really struck me about community lawyering. The individuals that I learned the most from about that were non-lawyers, so the paralegals.

Lillian Johnson:

There were six paralegals in my legal career at Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago that really helped me to begin to more effectively communicate with individuals who are seeking legal assistance. I couldn't have gotten it anywhere else. We were taught to ask certain questions to get at the legal problem, and that's how the clinic was run in law school. The paralegals, they helped us to appreciate that you have to relate to the client. You have to know the client, and let the client tell you what brings them there. Not being, "Oh, you've got a housing problem, so let me see what we can do to help you there." That was very, very, very, very helpful and very important.

Lillian Johnson:

The other thing that was particularly exciting was the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago had a reputation of taking on powerful people on behalf of the community. Class actions were a thing that they were very effectively doing. They also did not have a limit as to what type of legal problem they would address. They would just say, "You tell us your problem, and then we'll see what we can do to assist you." That was very exciting, and of course they had some of the best lawyers in the city that were very effective, both in presenting the case, but also identifying the problem and ways to address the problem in addition to being of help to that individual client, but others similarly situated. That was particularly exciting.

Lillian Johnson:

On the south side was housing. Interestingly enough, that is where I met the man who I ultimately married. He was a community organizer on the south side of Chicago. The summer of my first year, I did a project for ... I can't recall the name of the group of lawyers, but it was really to help to recruit lawyers to accept cases for pretty much low-income residents who were

targeted by the police in terms of traffic tickets because they were really in the low-income communities. They needed lawyers to provide them with representation so that they didn't get caught up, either put in jail or have hefty fines. It's the ACLU. I was doing that. After that presentation, which I developed, I had to draft certain memos. The lawyers presented it, and I was really excited about that.

Lillian Johnson:

The lawyers there said, "You're doing good. What do you have in mind to do next?" I said, "You know what I really would like? I really would like to work in housing. I really think that that's an area that I'd be very interesting in doing more. You have any suggestions?" I thought they were going to refer me to a lawyer. They said, "Well, there is a community organizer, and he's fantastic. He really has made a real significant difference on the south side of Chicago. The only thing is, he doesn't care for lawyers. They have their place and they tend to take over things and not allow the client to make the difference, make the decision." I said, "Okay. Alright. I'm still, I'm game." They gave me his number. I called him, made an appointment to have lunch.

Lillian Johnson:

The way he talked about community, I was like, "This is great." Most fascinating thing about this, I'll move on, was that I began to go with him to some of his housing meetings. The tenants were talking about the issue and there were exciting things. Because I was a lawyer, they would ask me questions. I'd answer the questions. There was another meeting and he said, "I have to remind you, it's their decisions, it's their housing that's at stake here, so you should not give them the answer to the question that they were asking, 'What should I do?' You should not answer that. That is their decision. Let me talk." Oh yeah, I got it. I got it.

Lillian Johnson:

There was a meeting. I did the same thing. They're asking me a legal question. I answered it and answered it. He said, "Can y'all excuse us for a moment?" He politely walked me out of the meeting and he hailed a cab. "We won't be meeting you anymore because these are decisions that they have to make, not a lawyer make for them." He said, "You have a wonderful evening" and put me in the taxi. It really helped me to appreciate that that's right. It's not my decision. Lawyers have to understand and appreciate and not overstep our boundaries. It's about the client. It's their decisions, and we have to facilitate them making those decisions, not make those decisions for them.

Lillian Johnson:

Anyway, if you can imagine, we stayed in touch, but he was like, "No, can't have you participating in my meetings. I can certainly recommend someone else and you can do that."

Alan Houseman:

Interesting. Let's go to your time at Community Legal Services. I want to start with, just describe the program today. Number of offices, staff, kinds of things you do, how you're organized, funding sources, various things like that. I'm not trying to pin it down to any specific things, but describe Community Legal Services to us.

Lillian Johnson:

Okay. Community Legal Services is a not-for-profit law firm that covers Maricopa, Mojave, Yavapai, Yuma, and La Paz Counties in Arizona. It also provides legal assistance to the migrant farm worker community. We have a total of six offices. Our main office is in downtown Phoenix and that houses the majority of lawyers in our law firm. Maricopa is the most populous county in the state, and we serve Maricopa County primarily from that office. We have an East Valley office that's also in Maricopa County. Then we have offices in Mojave, Yavapai, Yuma, and a farm worker office also in Yuma, San Louise.

Lillian Johnson:

We have a total of 32 lawyers. Each office has a minimum of two lawyers, two paralegals, and a legal assistant that also may serve as the intake staff person. Then we obviously utilize volunteers throughout the program. Community Legal Services has a very effective pro bono program, volunteer lawyers program, where we recruit and utilize primarily lawyers, but all kinds of volunteers that assist us in addressing and resolving legal problems.

Lillian Johnson:

Our primary funding source is the Legal Services Corporation that represents still more than 50% of our funding. Then we have funding from the state. We made a commitment that we wanted to have a relationship with the five major cities in Maricopa County so they would always know what are the legal problems in their community. We receive funding from them as Maricopa.

Lillian Johnson:

We also have other federal funds that deal with domestic violence victims and individuals who are facing significant loss of their homes through foreclosure. We have a pretty active bar foundation, so we cooperate as part of the bar community to help identify legal resources on the state level that will help us address civil legal problems.

Lillian Johnson:

We have a very good commitment from an active board that includes clients as well as attorneys. Our other really tremendous resource is called the Arizona Equal Justice Foundation. It was a commitment that Community Legal Services made to help include the private bar directly in the development of resources and expenditure of resources directly for civil legal services. That is a very active, and it's entirely law firms. Their commitment is an amount that's

dealing with however many billable hours from each lawyer. They raise money and they provide that money directly to the three legal services program in the state.

Alan Houseman:

What would you say were one or two of your major accomplishments at CLS?

Lillian Johnson:

I think that perhaps the most significant accomplishment that I pride myself in is that I think when I came, CLS was focused on the staff and the staff being available, getting the support and training that they needed in order to provide legal services. One of the things that I wanted and encouraged the board and staff to consider is it's all about the clients. We need to find out from the people that we're really funded to serve what are the problems that need addressing in their community. First and foremost, we've got to get out of the office and into the community and be able to identify groups and individuals who are knowledgeable about their community. We need to ask them, and gather again the information from them, and let them control what our priority areas are and much of what we are set up to do.

Lillian Johnson:

I had good fortune. In my first experience being there, as part of the interviewing group or as a member of the board, there was a Catholic nun who was instrumental. Community Legal Services first was only responsible for Maricopa County, and then when the Legal Services Corporation came into existence, they wanted to make sure that other areas of the state were covered. Yavapai, Yuma, and La Paz, but the programs had to develop the structure and begin to serve. In Community Legal Services' case, while we had Yavapai County, we didn't have a staff office. We had an office that used private attorneys to assist clients.

Lillian Johnson:

This nun who had taken a vow of poverty was just fantastic, but she head Catholic social services for our area. She sold chocolate covered bananas on the steps of the court house. The sign was, "Bring legal services to Yavapai." She wanted an office open. I met this woman. I was so impressed. Anyway, we became really, really I think, good friends. She was indeed a mentor, but to say the least, we opened an office. We began to be committed to having staff offices in each of these counties. That's what I'm most proud of, that we actually began to deserve the name Community Legal Services.

Alan Houseman:

Do you have an office in Prescott?

Lillian Johnson:

Yes. That's exactly right.

Alan Houseman:

Let's move, unless you want to say anything more about the program, which you can, I want to move to your national work. Before, I just want to make sure, is there anything else you want to add about your program and your work there?

Lillian Johnson:

As a result of that, I think we deserved to call ourselves Community Legal Services. It's about the community. We take that very seriously. The same thing applies to our board composition. We have attorney representatives from each of the counties that we serve, and we have client representatives. The board actually feels responsible for our community. From time to time, we've had different projects depending upon the needs of the community. Those projects have been phased out. We were overwhelmed with the population increase and the lack of resources to actually provide direct individual services to clients. Again, what I'm most proud of, is it's all about the community so that we have adopted a strategic advocacy initiative which is designed to make sure that we are achieving results in strategic ways that impact our entire client community, irrespective as to which office.

Lillian Johnson:

An example is our strategic advocacy involves five areas of the law, and we have work planned, an initiative that's designed to impact our entire service area with the strategic advocacy initiatives in those initiatives in those areas. I guess I'm most proud of that we have now continued to be deserving to be named Community Legal Services.

Alan Houseman:

You've been very active at the national level. You've played a major role at the National Legal Aid and Defenders Association, this conference we were at. You played a major role in the Project Advisory Group, which in 1998 merged with NLADA. You played a major role in the African-American Project Directors Association. I want you to talk about those three. I don't care which order. I don't care how you want to frame it. You can merge them all together. Whatever. I don't care, but you've played a big role at the national level in this. I want you to just describe some of what you've done and why you've done it.

Lillian Johnson:

Okay. Again, I think I'm indicative of a legal services lawyer. One of the things that I have understanding and appreciation about legal services lawyers is we don't see boundaries. Again, we're pretty driven. In the regional office was an opportunity to go beyond the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago and see that in other communities in other states there were legal services organizations with the same objectives serving their community that we had at Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. They're doing it in a lot of different ways, but they had the same objectives. There were different ways that people were doing it, but we all had those

things in common. It was about our community and it was about providing access to legal services, to everybody. We were doing it in different ways, but we were all dedicated to that.

Lillian Johnson:

There were others that were doing it more efficiently and more effective than someone else, so I had the chance to see that. We would take that information and say, "You might need to get in contact with this person from this area." It was very, very helpful. As you can imagine, I'm doing that in the regional office. All of the regional staff met once a year nationally. I got the chance to meet other regional staff who definitely helped to develop my understanding and appreciation for what legal services can and should be. They continued to be my heroes, but having that experience and then going into legal services where I'm responsible for a program, it never dawned on me that I should be just responsible for my little area. I saw it all, finding out what other directors, what was going on, and that's when I encountered the organization Project Advisory Group.

Lillian Johnson:

One of the most interesting things about the Project Advisory Group, every aspect of the community was actually represented. It just wasn't directors. It was staff attorneys, it was paralegals, it was all aspects of the community were represented. It was huge. They would make decisions that would affect the entire community, the national legal services community, and of course it was all consistent with what I had learned at an early stage in my career. It's about the community, right? It's not just that individual program or individuals. The project advisory group is where I had the opportunity to meet a lot of legal services staff from all over the country. I thought it's way of operating, the officers were elected by the masses, and I bought into that. I found that very, very helpful and very important. I liked that we were not only concerned about our particular community and our particular program, but the national movement. That was very important.

Lillian Johnson:

As part of that, I think, that's what immediately I learned as things progressed in our community that on a national level, the Project Advisory Group needed to have its energies directed into access to justice for all movement. That's what the National Legal Aid and Defender Association represented.

Lillian Johnson:

I was part of the leadership of the Project Advisory Group that went into discussions that resulted in the merger of Project Advisory Group into the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. We laughed and said, "We're bringing democracy to the hundred year old entity, the National Legal Aid and Legal Association." It'll never be the same again. I think not only is it as good as it was, it's better than it was before the Project Advisory Group merged in. It really

was an important decision, and I'm proud that I was part of helping our community to make the decision. It was a no-brainer, actually.

Alan Houseman:

You were chair back at one point?

Lillian Johnson:

Yes, I was chair of the Project Advisory Group.

Alan Houseman:

Afterwards, you became chair of the board of NLADA. Is that correct? You played high leadership roles at both of these organizations.

Lillian Johnson:

Yes.

Alan Houseman:

Right. Okay. Sorry. You were about to say something else.

Lillian Johnson:

I was going to say, the other thing that was really important to me is that I think the Project Advisory Group helped the legal services community to be a community. That's what was very important to us, so that it was not just what we were doing in Phoenix. It was what was being done in Los Angeles and New York. We were part of a national movement. I learned that the Legal Services Corporation, during my tenure there, had among its leaders, some of the most prominent, most notable lawyers that this country will ever see.

Lillian Johnson:

That's all part of what was really, I think, helpful for me in terms of my career, was having that exposure. I could not have been in a better place at a better time. I started in Chicago, went to the regional office so I got exposed to the national leaders, and then I had the opportunity to be actually right there on the ground, actually implementing and serving the community and then representing the community. I'd like to believe that the communities values have been instilled in me, and that's what I do at the national level. I just represent the values.

Lillian Johnson:

One of those is the role of the client. It's not about lawyers. It's all about the client. It's really important to forever have that in our minds. Otherwise, you know how we are. We can solve a lot of problems, but we have to make sure we're solving the right problems. The client's involvement and participation helps us to stay on the right track.

Alan Houseman:

You also were very involved in founding, I'll let you characterize your role, the African-American Project Directors Association. What was your role in that and why was that created?

Lillian Johnson:

Well, again, because I had the opportunity to work on the national level, among the things that I noticed was that among the leaders in our community, there were a handful of people of color. There are different experiences that people of color in leadership roles bring to the table. It was very helpful to me to be introduced to some of them. I began to be a part of a small group that say, "What about getting together, and let's form an alliance so we can begin to address some of the issues that people in leadership in legal services, people of color, have that are different than those who otherwise don't have that additional situation to address.

Lillian Johnson:

The reason I share that I had that experience is because I kept looking for, within Arizona, "Where's the nonprofit community? Where do they get together?" Interestingly enough, as part of a group that helped to form the Organization for Nonprofit Execs in Arizona because we have like problems, right? We have all of those issues and those things that we have in common. We can work together to address, resolve, or whatever. Professional development was among them. Yes, and I was ultimately the chair of that board, the Organization for Nonprofit Execs. It was the same thing with regard to working on the national level. Again, the participation and importance of keeping the clients' interest, as I shared with you about my earliest experience, it's about the client. If we don't constantly have that reminder, when we go to resolve problems, we probably don't take the most effective way of doing that, of addressing it.

Lillian Johnson:

There, the issue was, "Why not?" People began to talk. Interestingly enough, we had a huge meeting ... Huge meeting for us. I think it was about ten nationwide. All of the individuals that were there, they were like, "Okay." They weren't going to do the work of organizing or whatever, so I agreed to do it. We have made some tremendous, I think, changes, within our community to keep that in the forefront. While we chose the name at that time because that was what was primarily the people of color, the group consists of Asians, Hispanics. It's just been an association that's very productive and effective in representing people of color in leadership positions in the legal services community.

Alan Houseman:

Before we end, I want to ask you your views on the future of civil legal aid. We're in the middle of a potential crisis because of the election of President Trump. But aside from that, assuming we get through that because I don't want to focus particularly on that, where would you like to

see the civil aid community go? I put it in this context. There's a broad access to justice movement going on around the country, partly driven by the fact that a lot of people are in courts without lawyers. There's obviously a huge component of our work with pro-bono and you and others at any large legal aid program working closely with pro bono. The broader access to justice movement includes all kinds of things going on. Where do you see civil legal aid, both in context of the broader movement, but more importantly, where would you like to see it go in the future?

Lillian Johnson:

I think where I'd like to see it go is to actually achieve access to justice for all. I think that's the ultimate vision that I have for legal services. I have learned that it's not that simple. I've learned we cannot do it, isolate it. We can't do it as a civil side. I think access to justice requires that we look at criminal as well. I think that there has to be, and luckily, NLADA represents that, there has to be that focus, the attention, on both.

Lillian Johnson:

The other thing that I think is really important and I come back to it is the community. It's not about lawyers. Lawyers have a concept of access to justice. We are always going to be lawyers in how we deal with it. We think it's the system, we think it's that. Clients will tell you, there should not be homeless people. In a nation like this, there should not be that. There are community groups who have decided that's right. They have chosen to address the issue of making sure there's no such thing as the homeless. I think we, the lawyers and legal community, have to be a part of that movement. It's about the clients. What direction do we go in? That's where I see it all. I think we have to be partners. What we bring to it is our knowledge and understanding and our advocacy.

Lillian Johnson:

They have a lot of things to offer to make this a reality. I see it, access to justice for all. We need to concentrate on the least of us. Those with the least resources. It makes sense that we are doing that. We should not be solely committed to, "I'm just doing it for people with the least resources." I'm excited about the possibilities now because we've learned a lot in our community. I would like, very much, for us to use that which we've learned. We have some of the most exciting millennials. The resources are there. If we could all come together and create, you know, a commitment to achieve access to justice for all and there are not limitations as to what we can and should do in order to get there, it's going to happen. It's going to happen in my lifetime. I'm convinced, Alan, it's even going to happen in your lifetime. All of us are going to be able to see it.

Alan Houseman:

Great. Before a final opportunity to say whatever you want, you received a number of awards. Your resume, only part of this. Which award or awards you've received do you value the most?

Lillian Johnson:

I know this is going to sound mushy, I value all of them. It's because of the individuals and the circumstances. An example is, I got an award from a sorority and a fraternity. I was like, "Really? I'm not active in a sorority or a fraternity. Really?" But when they came and told me what they were about and what they were wanting to accomplish and what the individuals had said that I do, I was just humbled. I was honored. That's the simple answer.

Lillian Johnson:

I think also that probably the one that humbled me the most, and I was a little taken aback because of the impact it had on my mom. My mom is now 90. Two thousand, I think, eleven, when President Obama's initiative in terms of Champions of Change, and I got the phone call, "Yeah. Right." Okay, thank you very much. Then I got another phone call and I said, "Who is this?" At this time, it was Jim Sandman. He said, "No, Lillian, this is real. This is real." I said, "Okay." When I learned that, I was telling my mom, and she said, "Let's go. Let's go." My husband said that, "You are going to take your mom. I'm going to let her go and let her be with you." I don't know about you but the steps ... I get teary-eyed ... my mom insisted on taking the steps up because she wanted to have the entire experience.

Alan Houseman:

Just so we're clear, you were awarded one of the White House Champions of Change?

Lillian Johnson:

Right.

Alan Houseman:

This Champions of Change award focused on Legal Aid?

Lillian Johnson:

Right.

Alan Houseman:

Very few people got that award.

Lillian Johnson:

Yes. Yes. It was because it was from President Obama, my mom's response was, "Oh, yeah." She was so excited. She was just so excited. It was just my proudest moment because she was so proud. She said, "This is my daughter. This is my daughter." I was just humbled.

Alan Houseman:

Great. As we close, is there anything else you want to put on the record here that we haven't covered? If there is, fine.

Lillian Johnson:

I would want to emphasize that I have had opportunities that I'm not sure others may have had. I think it's because, really, when the bottom line is, it's because that I have had the focus of my attention to be about the community and the clients. I think that's really an important message for all of us. It's really about the community, and it's about the clients. I think one of the things that legal services has done for the legal community is to help lawyers understand it's not about us. Yes, we have a particular skill and knowledge and the capacity that others do not have, but it's our obligation to use that for our community. Access to justice for all, in my opinion, should always be a commitment every individual lawyer makes once they take that oath.