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Interview with

***Forrest A. Plant***

Conducted by Victor Geminiani

September 24, 1991

Transcribed by: Carilyn Cipolla, NCRF

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**Victor Geminiani:**

Interviewer is Victor Geminiani. The subject of the interview is Mr. Plant's memories as board member and president of the Legal Aid Society of Sacramento County. Good afternoon.

**Forrest Plant:**

Good afternoon.

**Victor Geminiani:**

I very much appreciate you spending a few minutes with us today, talk about your memories as the board member and board president of the Legal Aid Society in Sacramento County. We want to thank you very much. Could you tell me a little bit about your background prior to becoming involved with the Legal Aid Society?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, I don't know how much of that would be of interest. I was born in Sacramento. And, but spent the early part of my life growing up in Davis. My family was in Davis from very early. I believe I was the fourth or fifth generation in my family to have lived in Davis. Plant family. My mother's family were long-time Sacramento folks. So we have a long -- the family had a long history and ties

to this area. I went to the Davis public schools. I went down to Berkeley to do my undergraduate work at University of California. And went through there on an expedited program, because it was during the war. I was getting my commission at the same time I was getting my undergraduate degree. So I graduated from Berkeley with an undergraduate degree, A.B. in 1944. I then served over in the war in the Pacific on a heavy cruiser, the United States Boston. And came back after the war and was in the class that began in 1946, which was the first post-war class at Boalt Hall at the University of California. And I graduated from there in 1949. And came immediately to work here in Sacramento. My firm was then known as Devlin, Devlin and Diepenbrock. And I have been with the same firm ever since. So I've been practicing now, I guess, almost 42 years all with the same firm. I became a partner in the firm in 1955 -- January the first of 1955. And the firm -- my name went into the firm name some short time thereafter. So that's my general background. I have been active in the -- in community affairs ever since I came to Sacramento and active in the affairs of the county bar and the state bar and also very active in the affairs of the University of California alumni.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Could you tell me how you first became involved with the Legal Aid Society here in Sacramento?

**Forrest Plant:**

I -- I really can't -- have no distinct recollection of that. But I'm quite sure that it came about because of requests from some of the people who were involved. And

this would have been back in the late 50's -- '57, '58 -- 1958, along in there.

Probably Bruce Allen, because Bruce and I had been in the same class at Boalt Hall and we remain friends from there until now. And I am sure -- and he was active in local bar affairs as I was. And also Jack Downey was a good friend. I'm sure that probably one of those fellows called me. And -- and, of course, I was aware of what was going on, and asked me if I'd be interested in participating, and I said yes.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Do you remember in the late 50's, when you first became associated with the program, what the program looked like -- how large was its budget, what the staffing pattern was, the relationship of the private bar -- things of that nature?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, a little bit of it, yes. In the first place I can say that it was a very modest operation. And personnel-wise, of course, Mrs. Dorothy Littlefield was the -- was the -- was the administrator of the program -- executive director or whatever her title was, I do not recall, but she was the person that operated on a day-to-day basis. And my recollection is that she had been with a -- the forerunner of the United Crusade, that she had been involved with that. And right now I forget the name of that in Sacramento, but it was a forerunner of the United Crusade. And I think she had had some position with that organization. And then, she then -- and under what circumstances she came with the Legal Aid Society, I don't know. But, from the earliest time that I was involved, she was running it on a day-to-day basis. I

think she had maybe one secretarial person helping her. Whether that was part-time or full-time, I don't recall. At some point along the line, John Carson became the legal staff. And I believe that was a part-time position. And he served in that capacity for several years. The budget -- of course, the big thing was that we had very, very little money. Almost all of our money came from the United Crusade. We got a little bit from legal lawyers referral service. And a very small bit of contributions -- registration fees or whatever -- from the users of our services. My recollection is that the -- that the total budget was in the area of somewhere between \$17,500 and \$25,000. And gradually increasing in that range over the period of time that I was involved. And that was the total revenue from all sources. And then we tried to fit everything we were trying to do within that. Now, of course, we had a lot of help from volunteer lawyers. And that we had a fairly large number, but one of the things we were always trying to do was to recruit more volunteers to help. I -- I do recall having done volunteer legal work for the organization as well as serving on the board then as its president. I don't recall specific cases, but I do recall that on several occasions I did actually provide legal services pro bono as part of that operation.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Do you recall what motivated you or brought you into the pro bono panel initially?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, I just felt that it was a general part of a lawyer's responsibility to -- to provide legal services to those who couldn't afford it and that this was the

mechanism that the profession was providing in Sacramento; that this was the way to do it.

**Victor Geminiani:**

In an interview I did with Mr. Allen, he suggested that he thought about 150 or 200 members of the bar comprised that panel, which was a very sizable number.

Do you have a similar recollection, or is your recollection different in terms of the size of the pro bono panel that worked with the Legal Aid Society?

**Forrest Plant:**

I -- my recollection is it wouldn't be quite that large. It was -- it was, I think, large in proportion to the size of the private bar in Sacramento at that time. But whether it was that much or more -- now, I have some minutes here. And I think there is a reference in these minutes to the numbers of those lawyers. My recollection from reading those is that it wasn't quite that big, but it was substantial in terms of the number of private practitioners in Sacramento at the time.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Do you remember anything about the types of cases that the program engaged in back in the late 50's, early 60's?

**Forrest Plant:**

I remember landlord-tenant type things. I remember minor -- very minor criminal matters. I remember -- I remember neighborhood disputes over the typical types of thing that you know goes on in neighborhoods -- "Is the fence in the right place?" "Is the tree in the right place?" That kind of thing. I remember not

handling actual court actions involving dissolution and so on, but I do remember marital disputes that the lawyers would counsel about without actually -- as I recall, we did not actually take on what was called 'divorce cases' in those days. But I could be wrong in that, but I don't think we did. But I think we did counsel people -- give legal counsel to people that were having these marital disputes.

**Victor Geminiani:**

You became the board president for the Legal Aid Society right after Mr. Allen's term ended in 1961. You served, I think, from April 1961 until April of 1962. Can you remember how that came about -- how you became --

**Forrest Plant:**

I have no distinct recollection of it, but I think that the way that happened, those things did happen, was that I had been -- I had served on the board. I was an active board member. I think I was devoted in my attendance at the meeting. I had, I guess, delivered up to the nominating committee qualities that they were looking for in the president. I have no doubt the chairman of the nominating committee called, asked, said they were meeting and asked if I would be agreeable to serve if I were nominated, and I told them "yes."

**Victor Geminiani:**

You served on a number of -- as a chair of a number of subcommittees at that time. They were extremely active.

**Forrest Plant:**

I could remember serving on the personnel committee. And I forget, but I would have been active on the board.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Nominations and budgets are two other committees that I think you chaired while you were serving.

**Forrest Plant:**

Yeah. I don't have a distinct recollection of it, but we have -- in those days, as I recall, there were lawyers on the board. There were non-lawyers on the board. And I remember that there were some problems with a few that were not good about attendance and participation, but most of them were very active and very -- very energetic about participating with the -- with the board.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Do you remember any major issues that you had to grapple with, either as board member or president of the organization?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, of course, "major" is a relative term. The things that seemed major to us would no doubt be very minor today. Of course, the big thing was getting enough money to do what we wanted to do -- to pay the salaries, to pay the rent, to pay for the telephones, and to get the volunteers, lawyers, to do the counseling. And I can remember that, you know, just getting a new telephone line -- well, do we have enough money? and all. We were -- I have reviewed the minutes, and I remember

that we -- we were very tight on space. We -- the number of people that were coming to us for help was increasing. There wasn't enough room for them to sit in the reception room. And I think that finally, during my term or at the end of my term or shortly thereafter, we did get some adjacent space so that we could have enough room for people for our -- our operations. But, as I say, basically the problems fell into two areas -- one was finances, and two was keeping a panel that was large enough. There were -- as I recall -- a state bar and a county bar were struggling with the lawyers referral service situation and what was ethical and proper and what wasn't. And basically -- and I don't recall the entire evolution of it, but we -- I think the Legal Aid Society was operating the lawyer referral service that existed in the county at that time out of our operation. In other words, as I recall it -- at least during part of the time I was involved -- that was not being done to the county bar office, but was being done through the Legal Aid Society. So that Mrs. Littlefield and her helpers had the responsibility of dealing with the fact phase of provision of legal services in the community as well as the legal aid -- strict legal aid stuff.

**Victor Geminiani:**

The minutes reflect that in 1960 you were assigned responsibility by the board to discuss with Dean Schaber, I think George School of Law, the use of students for the first time in the program.

**Forrest Plant:**

Right. Yeah.

**Victor Geminiani:**

May have been one of the early users of students in the country. Can you remember any events around that?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, I don't remember. I do remember that Gordon Schaber came to me to discuss -- and, when I say "came to me," I don't mean so in the physical -- necessarily in the physical way, but approached me and contact me about the possibility of incorporating advance students at McGeorge into the legal services program here. And I was very open to that. At that time, there was a serious question, though, about how much law students could be involved in the providing of legal services. And it was sometime subsequent to that that there was a formal program for -- under which non-lawyer students could participate in providing legal services. And that was all done in a formal way by the state bar. And that was occurring when I was on the board of governors as state bar, maybe even when I was president. I don't recall these dates that well. But so what I'm saying is -- here is we were -- well, Dean Schaber and our society were well ahead of others, I think, in thinking that law students -- those who had progressed far enough in their studies -- could properly participate in this kind of thing. And we discussed this. And, as I recall, the way it came down was that, after several discussion and all, our board approved a limited participation by students from McGeorge in -- participating in sitting by and auditing interviews, making notes, and then -- in fact, being assistant to the lawyer that was involved in doing any necessary legal

research and so on. So that was, I think, the forerunner of a very large participation by McGeorge in legal services programs here in the community. But that started on a very, very modest basis, but it was sort of opening the door.

**Victor Geminiani:**

As you think back in those years, do any particularly strong memories come back -  
- the personalities that were involved in the program?

**Forrest Plant:**

Yeah. Yes. Mrs. Littlefield, of course, because she was -- she provided the continuity. And I remember, you know, people that I worked with -- board members -- very well. We met monthly upstairs at Robert's Fish Grotto, which was on K Street. And attendance was generally very good. And I remember, in addition to Mrs. Littlefield, of course, John Carson, who was the -- became the staff attorney on a limited basis. I remember Don Nance, who served on the board very well, and I continue to know Don over the years. He was a very active man in the community. Bruce Allen and Jack Downey, of course, and Malcolm Weintraub, all of whom were lawyer friends of mine who were very active. Marquita DeCristoforo was an active member of the board. She acted as secretary of the board for a considerable period of time. She was the wife of Joe DeCristoforo, who was a classmate of mine, also a classmate of mine at Boalt. And she later became a superior court judge. Judge Joe Babich was on the board. I remember at some point during the -- during my service on the board, maybe while I was president, Frank Richardson was then president of the Sacramento

County Bar. And he had become active. And, of course, he later became a judge at every level in the state court system here. And is a very revered member of our community. I remember also Mrs. Grover Bedeau. She was the wife of superior court judge. And he later became the district court of appeals judge. And I may be wrong in that -- saying he became a district court of appeals judge. He certainly was a superior court judge. And she was a wonderful member of the board and was a president at one time. I connected her with the district court of appeals, because she worked over there for many years as a secretary. And she's still alive, and I see her once in a great while at functions. She was a very fine member of the board. There were some very, very dedicated people, strong personalities and strong convictions that served on the board at that time.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Can you remember any motivating factor that was common to all of them in terms of their activities in the Legal Aid Society? Why did they take part? And why did they spend their time so freely and willingly to further legal aid?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, I just think that these people, as I say, many of whom were lawyers or had connections with the legal community, and some who had -- like Brett Bartick was a certified public accountant. There were some people that really were not lawyers and weren't involved with lawyers in any particular way. But I -- my feeling is that they were all very much convinced that we should do all that we could to provide legal services to those who could not afford it. And, of course,

this was before the time that it became a national project in terms of federal funding. And so that it was being done as a charitable type of operation through the United Crusade in the area. And these were people that -- that had -- wanted to be involved in volunteer activities in the community and chose this way of doing it.

**Victor Geminiani:**

As you reflect back on your contributions and your involvement with the Legal Aid Society, are there any particular words of wisdom or advice you have for those that are providing legal aid today in this community or communities across the country?

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, no -- I don't have any particular advice except that those involved should continue to be aware of the importance of it and can render the best service with the feeling in mind that they are doing something that is really important. In other words, I'm trying to say there -- some people who work in this field have to be getting psychic satisfaction out of it. In other words, it's something that you -- I think in order to do the most effective job, you have to really be convinced that this is something that's very important and a service to society and that -- that you are fulfilling important function. And that -- whether you're actually serving as an attorney or serving as staff someplace or serving as a member of the governing board, I think that having that attitude toward the operation is the key to the success of the enterprise.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Well, Mr. Plant, on behalf of the board and the staff, and most importantly the clients of Legal Services of Northern California, we want to thank you very much for the opportunity to reflect on your memories. But more importantly, for your critical contributions that you made at the earliest point of our program's beginning.

**Forrest Plant:**

Well, thank you very much, Victor. I really don't feel that I made any special contributions or that there was any kind of breakthroughs while I was involved. As I say, we used to -- we used to agonize over buying a new dictating machine or putting in a new telephone line. So it kind of pales in significance. But I think that the -- that the foundation was laid for what has followed during those years. And it would have been easy to -- for it to just not succeed. But I think that's the main thing we did -- was that we kept something going in a creditable manner. And, if we hadn't done that, it would have been more difficult for you folks to do what you're doing today.

**Victor Geminiani:**

Thank you, sir.

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