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Interview with

Marilyn Swears

Conducted by Mary Thomas

October 31, 1991

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MARY THOMAS: -- interview of Marilyn Swears, director of the Alabama Legal Serv -- Coalition of Legal Services --

MARILYN SWEARS: Consortium.

THOMAS: -- Consortium. Legal Services programs. It is taken on October 31, Halloween afternoon, at the NLADA conference in Portland, Oregon. My name is Mary Thomas, and I will be the interviewer. The topic of the interview will be some thoughts about the beginning of state support in Alabama and in the South, and also some questions about the beginning of the Southeast Training Center. Right?

SWEARS: Right.

THOMAS: Okay, Marilyn. Tell us a little bit about your background before you came to Legal Services.

SWEARS: Okay. I'm a native Arkansan, first of all, always native Arkansan. And I really have two careers. My first career was that I was -- after I graduated from the University of Arkansas, I went to graduate school at Florida State and got my master's degree, and it was in student personnel. And I became a dean of students eventually at a private college in Missouri. And I did that for 12 years and after 12 years, said, "Do I want to do this the rest of my life? No. I don't want to

do this the rest of my life." And was concerned about continuing education issues. Became very much concerned about people thinking that their education was completed or ended at a certain point, and I don't believe that. And eventually found my way back to Florida State University through -- through a professor there. And got a doctorate in adult education and program planning, program development. And then started looking for a job, not in the institutionalized educational setting that I had already been in. I didn't want to do that anymore. But I didn't know what I wanted to do. And at one point, I thought perhaps I would starve to death because I wasn't sure I could find anything other than going to work for the government or going back to what I was doing. My major professor learned about this job in Alabama and said, "Maybe you'll be interested in this." I was already completed my degree. I was doing all kinds of -- helping people write dissertations and consulting and doing anything to make ends meet, living on macaroni and cheese. And he said, "I know about this job through a former student who did a needs assessment survey in Alabama. And maybe you'd be interested. They're creating a program. They're looking for a

director of training." And I said, "What's legal services?" I didn't know what legal services was. I had no idea what legal services was. Well, to make a long story short, I got in touch with the program in Montgomery where I am now, Legal Services Corporation of Alabama. Marvin Campbell was the director then and was the chair of the -- the three directors in -- in Alabama at that point, the Birmingham program and the Huntsville program. Those aren't their names. But those three directors, Marvin and the other two, were interviewing. And I went up for an interview. Drove up from Tallahassee. Interviewed. Took writing samples and -- and the three directors were so interesting. And I was convinced that they would hire a lawyer, that they were looking for a lawyer. I was not sure, perhaps I was a token educational person or something. And Marvin read all of my stuff because I had a lot of stuff I had written. I had worked on lots of projects in rural Florida and lots of stuff that was appropriate. The director from Birmingham just kind of sat there, as I recall -- he's no longer there; this is not my friend Ken Cain, who's there now. And Norman Bradley, who was in Huntsville at that point, was the person who talked to me. And I left the -- they asked

me a lot of things. And I left the interview totally convinced that I would never ever hear from them again. And I went back to Tallahassee thinking okay. I've got to find that government job now because I'm going to know how to do that. But I was absolutely fascinated with the prospect. The charge -- what they were doing was creating the Alabama Consortium of Legal Services Programs. There was nothing in place at that point. They were looking for a director of training. And that would be the first -- the first piece of state support in Alabama. And that's where they wanted to start. There was nothing in place. The charge to this person, this director of training, was quite simply to develop and implement a comprehensive statewide training program. Well, I thought that's -- gosh. That sounds like fun, doesn't it? So anyway, I went back. I overheard another candidate who -- coming out of his interview while I was waiting for mine, ask a secretary, "Where do I send my expenses?" And no one said anything to me about expenses. And I thought, "Well, that takes care of that." But I got back to Tallahassee, and in just a couple of days, Marvin called and began to talk in terms of, "Now, if you were to take this job, could you do so-and-so? If we were

to ask you to do this, could you do so-and-so?" I learned that that's the way Marvin approached things. Rather than saying, "We want to hire you," it was "If you can do this, would you do so-and-so," and all of this kind of thing. At any rate, they hired me. One of the ifs was -- this was back in the days of local training grants. And one of the ifs was, "If you can come for this job" -- and that was in January that I interviewed -- "can you come and write a grant proposal?" Well, this is how I had lived, working for the center for professional development at Florida State, putting myself through school partially. And I said, "Yeah. I can write -- yes. Easily." "Well, you only have 10 days, and you would need to come right away and do that. And then you'll have to go back and move," and do all this sort of stuff. And I came and I discovered that I had to write eight local training grant proposals in 10 days. It was trial by fire because remember, I didn't know anything about legal services. But I went. And -- and it was -- the reason I was so fascinated with it was that I thought this is what I'm interested in. Continuing education, continuing professional education. That is a big piece of -- of what I do. I was very much interested in

legal services when I learned what it did and became convinced that this would be a meaningful place to be. Not that higher education and institutionalized education is not, but it met a lot of needs. I felt it was in the real world. 12 years later, today, I can tell you it's in the real world. I live in the real world. That's kind of how I got there. It was real interesting.

THOMAS: I'm interested in the eight training grants that you had to write in those --

SWEARS: Yes.

THOMAS: -- 10 days. Were those for -- who was that for?

SWEARS: This was for the Office of Program Support in Washington at the Legal Services Corporation, okay.

THOMAS: I see.

SWEARS: This is how -- the little state support grant in Alabama was like -- I want to say sixty -- my recollection is it was sixty-eight thousand dol -- it was some small amount of money. And by the way, I learned after I was hired -- I thought that there would be a secretary and that there would be all these things. I learned after I hired -- after I was hired, "Oh, yes. You can have a secretary, if you can find the money in the budget." (laughter) So for the first

three months of my job, I was secretaryless. And then I did hire a secretary half-time, who is currently our executive secretary and predominantly my secretary, Joyce Manikin(?), who came then and worked. We shared her between LSCA and the then consortium. The Office of Program Support -- Legal Services Corporation in Washington in those days, as I recall -- and I was very new, so I may not have this right, but I think was a very strong presence in the field in terms of training. There was -- there was -- as a matter of fact, I think there were different units. There was like a management unit. There was a legal training unit. There was a paralegal training unit. And I don't remember all the names, but I remember some of them. Catherine Day Germany was one of the names. And anyway, you had this period of time in which to submit proposals for local training grants. If your program -- if your proposal was funded, then you got money from the Corporation by check, you know, to do this. I think you got half of it or maybe three quarters of it, and then you got the rest of it after you did all the paperwork and stuff. And so that was in place to do and was obviously very important. I didn't -- I don't think I even recognized how important

those eight proposals were when I was doing them. And I was, like, up night and day, trying to learn who the players were in Alabama, what was going on. What are you talking about, substantive law? What does that mean? I didn't even know the jargon. I learned the jargon real fast. Now, before I went, let me tell you, the reason they hired me, the reason they even had the grant to hire me, is that this was in 1979, okay. I believe Marvin Campbell, who was then the Legal Services Corporation of Alabama director, had spearheaded the effort in Alabama to get some state support money, and there was money available. And he had headed up the effort to do state support planning. And I inherited the work that had been done. Jim King was a consultant who went in and did a statewide needs assessment for training purposes. And I lived off the results of that needs assessment for -- for a couple of years, you know. I mean, it was real important. And he had gone around to all the offices. Remember, there had been no training. There had been maybe an event here and there, but it was not a statewide training that was part of a plan. It was -- they'd done a little trial skills and this kind of thing. So -- so there was the planning grant. There was a planning

grant, as I recall, to -- to bring together a whole body of people in Alabama, to talk about state support, and they hired a different consultant to do that. So there were lots of pieces that had been done. The state support plan called for putting different segments of the state support unit -- and there was nothing there, and the first thing, the first piece to be put in, was the training piece. And so they hired a director of training. As I recall, that was the first piece, and there were no concrete plans to move anywhere else at that moment. It was this is the first thing we will do. And then -- and then, you know, as money becomes available, we'll put in other pieces, you know. So it was -- that's how -- that's how that was done.

THOMAS: Were you aware at all of state support people in other states?

SWEARS: No. No. I didn't even know what "state support" meant. I didn't know. You know, I -- I didn't know anything about any of this. Go back to Marvin again. Marvin -- Marvin was there only a couple of years while I was there, and then he left and went into private practice. But Marvin was a real important person in my beginning because one of the things he said before I --

well, after I wrote the training grant proposals and survived that and found a place to live in Montgomery and moved. And he said, "One of the first things I want you to do is I want you to visit Georgia because Georgia has had a very strong training program. I want you to go over there and talk to Jackie Ross," was then the training coordinator. "And I want you to go up to Boston and talk with" -- oh, my. Rowan. Jim Rowan. Woo. I don't know where that came from. Because there was such a strong training program in place. Mass. Law Reform. That's where he was. And he sent me both those places. I went to both those places and talked and learned a great deal about legal services training and some things that were going on. I don't think I really thought in terms of state support immediately. I did not consider myself director of state support. I was the only person. I mean, I don't know what I would be directing. Myself? I was director of training. I knew this was the first piece of a state support center, but I didn't know what that meant. Very early on, I called Bea Moulton, who was a name -- who was director of the Office of Program Support at the Legal Services Corporation. LPS. I had a great deal -- I developed a great deal of regard for her. I liked her,

and I respected her. And I thought she was very bright, very concerned about what went on. But I called her and said to her, "Well, are there ever -- do you ever get people together who do training? I don't -- how -- how does one learn about all of this?" And the answer was "No, we don't. But we're thinking about that. That's a real good idea." And of course, 12 years later, I mean, I sit where I am now, and there are so many vehicles for -- for learning from other people who do what you do or who do things that you might do, you know. That it's pretty incredible. But there were -- there were not those things right then, not in 1979.

THOMAS: I seem to remember that the state support organizations in the southeast were a fairly cohesive group when -- in the early '80s. Can you talk a little bit about how that started to come about and how --

SWEARS: Yes.

THOMAS: -- you became aware of those folks?

SWEARS: Yes. I probably don't remember all the pieces of this, but I do know that I learned who the other training people were and who the state support people were. And very often -- my recollection is that very often then, those were the same people. I may be

wrong. I would like to see some -- I guess I'd kind of like to see some lists about that, but for instance, some of the really important people to me, one of the most important people to me was Leanna Gibson, who was in Tennessee, who had a great concern for -- for sharing with and helping new people and helping people who were in other states. We did some -- we did some -- eventually did some joint applications for -- for moneys to do some multistate events. I'm not really sure how we first began to get together in a formal way. I guess the committee on regional training must have been it. It was very shortly after I went -- came into Legal Services and went to Alabama. There was -- of course there was the Atlanta regional office. The Atlanta regional office did some things in bringing people together. And Victor Geminiani was the director of the Atlanta regional office. Jackie Mitchell was there. Guy Lesko was there. There were a lot of people there who were very much interested in -- in the -- in the development of state support in the southeast region. Of course Clint Lyons was one of the people who had been in the southeast region. Michael Terry. There were a whole lot of people who wanted to see it grow and flourish. But I was not in on the

ground floor of -- of doing that kind of creating, but I benefited from it. We had a meeting of state support people, Rona -- Rona Roberts, Rona Hobson, Rona Roberts Hobson -- I don't remember; her name changed about that time -- did some consultant work. And I remember having a -- a state support conference that was just a real wonderful eye-opener for me. Those were -- were convening -- convening groups of state support people. The -- the CORT, Committee on Regional Training, which I think most people would agree was pretty much of a disaster eventually, but we had regional training coordinators in the regional offices. We had an RTC, who was Eldridge Scott. And then we had this committee on regional training, which was made up of all these training people from all the states. And we developed training plans for the region. And that's training people. Then there were the Southeast Project Director Association meetings. I did not go to those early on, not regularly. Now those meetings include -- now -- they shortly thereafter began to include all -- state support people and other people. And we just -- we just talked with each other. We knew each other. We shared information. The Atlanta regional office was a moving force in bringing us together. I don't -- I

don't remember specific kinds of things, but I do know that those are the pieces and those are the pins that -- that helped all this and supported all this. Does that --

THOMAS: Yeah. Talk a little bit, if you would, about the differences that you see between state support today and the way it was when you started, and also the state support network in the southeast, the changes you've seen in that over time.

SWEARS: Okay. Let me talk a little bit first about the fledgling state support centers. We were one in Alabama. I think Arkansas may have been one. I don't know where they were. I do know Tennessee was established. Florida, as I recall, was established. Goodness. Kentucky was established. And my friends from back then will forgive me if there were others who were well-established. But there were a bunch of us who were brand-new. I was brand-new. One person, eventually a half-time secretary. Some new state support money became available, and the -- this is, you know, again back to the same players, Clint Lyons in Washington, the Washington people. Victor and his staff in Atlanta were very interested in seeing that we got money to expand and to be -- to become real state

support centers. So we went through a process of picking up on the study that had been done in Alabama and creating a plan. And we asked for more money. And we expanded at that point and brought on -- and our staff expanded to -- we got two secretaries. And we had myself, and I became director. And this was, you know, the field project directors were our advisory group in Alabama, our management group. And they wanted me to be the director and the training responsible person, and that's still true today. And then we wanted to hire -- we sent in a wonderful big plan for what we wanted and didn't get that much money, so we had to go back to work and re -- sort of rethink it. But we got an attorney on the staff, an attorney position, who would be the task force coordinator and the litigation support person and that kind of thing. We hired a resource development coordinator way back then. That did not -- that did not work out well for us. And I can tell you why that didn't work out well for us. We hired a communications coordinator, who is still there, Penny Weaver. We hired her half-time. We shared her actually with LSCA. So we had quite a little staff. I mean, it was great fun. We even had a staff retreat. You know, I mean, it was -- it was a

lot of fun. We did -- we did a lot of planning about what we were going to do. But we were a fledgling program. This -- at this same time, other state support centers were getting -- getting an injection of money to build up. And so we became -- we did a lot of talking with each other. The Atlanta region brought us together. And -- and we talked a lot, informally, and developed this wonderful network. And state support directors got together and talked. It was -- it was -- it was a real wonderful time. As you know, shortly thereafter, about the same time, you know, we got just absolutely slammed. And the money we were going to get got taken away. And we all went into this period of survival, which brought us together. I mean, it had -- it had a flip side in -- if we weren't close then, before then, we certainly became close in a different kind of way in helping each other to learn how to deal with this, how to survive this, how to make do. How not -- not just how to make do, but how to make do with quality. I look around now, and we went through a period -- and the cuts had a lot to do with this, I think. We went through a short period at least when we just all sort of had to go our own way, and if there was not some organization bringing us together such as

if you're a training responsible person, then through what is now the Southeast Training Center, bringing us together. Or if you weren't on that advisory board, or if you didn't go to the Southeast Project Directors Association meeting, state support directors were, I think, very much preoccupied with just getting their work done. And we didn't have this kind of cohesiveness. We lost -- from my perspective, we lost a little bit of that for a while. I think some of that is coming back for us. We just -- we just this past spring, for instance, had a state support issue group meeting, which was created for the purpose by -- and sponsored by the Southeast Training Center to bring us together to talk about state support issues, to talk about where we've been, where we are, where we're going. And it was a wonderful thing, and we all agreed that we want to follow up on it. Now, we've had -- we've scheduled meetings at -- project directors association meetings. Field program project director association meetings. The difficulty is that state support was so hard hit by the cuts, that no one of us felt we had enough money to send ourselves to both those meetings. Isn't that interesting? And so what we would find is that some of us would go -- I guess

went to spring meeting, to the spring meeting, which is -- which would be in Nashville or in Raleigh or in Memphis or somewhere. Or to the summer meeting, which has become the end-all/be-all meeting down at St. Pete. But generally not both. And it was, I think, in large part due to cuts in money and cuts in staff and very pressing kinds of problems, so that, you know, you just couldn't go off to these meetings. And I -- that's still true, to some extent. So we've lost that. But it is still, I believe, a very close-knit community in the southeast region. State support is. You know who these people are. And you are with these people at some point during the year. And if you're not with these people physically, although for the most part, you are some -- through some -- through some meeting, then you are on the phone, you know, 'cause we do -- we do still talk with each other. We do still ask each other things. I think that's a very important thing about the southeast region. And of course, other regions are sick and tired of hearing us talk about the southeast region, but it was a very fortuitous thing for me to wind up -- I could have gone anywhere because I'm single and I don't have children and I don't have ties in a certain place. And it just so happened that

I moved from Tallahassee where I was and had finished that particular part of my education, and I went up to Montgomery, Alabama, which was in the southeast region. I could have gone, I suppose, anywhere. I'm real glad that's where I went.

THOMAS: Your -- your talking about regional issues gives us a perfect opportunity to switch gears, if that's all right with you --

SWEARS: Okay. Hats.

THOMAS: -- and talk a little bit about --

SWEARS: I have another hat.

THOMAS: Put on your Southeast Training Center hat. You have been not only around, but central to the regional training center since its inception --

SWEARS: Yeah.

THOMAS: -- and are now and always have been its official archivist.

SWEARS: Yes.

THOMAS: So talk to us a little bit about the formation of the training center, how that actually came about.

SWEARS: Okay. And of course the older I get, the more I lose of this, so this is probably a very good thing to do. The -- it's been 10 years. That must be hard for anybody to really think about, but it's been 10 years.

In October of 1981 -- September of 1981 -- it's been a little over 10 years -- I was very dutifully doing my local training grant stuff and getting it in to Washington, and one of the things -- I went back and reviewed this because I wanted to get it -- I wanted to get it real clear in my mind. One of the pieces we had sent in from Alabama to do was an orientation package, and we wanted a videotape done professionally that would serve all three programs. We eventually did that. It was very fine, but very soon out of date. That was certainly -- that was a brilliant idea. (laughter) The tapes are somewhere, and they're wonderful. But anyway, I had a question about that that I needed to ask Bea Moulton about that particular training grant. And I called her, and she said, "Oh, I'm glad you called because I was going to call you" -- the light just went out -- is this okay? "I had a question that I wanted to ask you." And I said, "Okay." She said, "You know we sent out a" -- I guess it was a request for proposals. I don't know. I remember it only vaguely, and you will not believe, but I don't have a copy of this. The Corporation sent out a request for proposals to be the -- to receive the grant for the -- what I believe they were calling

multi-regional -- multi-regional training resource centers. Something like that. Now, this was in '81, and you know, these very, very serious changes were taking place in Washington and across the country and in the regional office, eventually in the regional offices and just everywhere. I mean, it was coming. And we knew this. The cuts were going to be severe. And we didn't know what it was going to do to the whole legal services community. They were concerned about this in Washington obviously and in other places. So they wanted to create these multi-regional training resource centers, things, okay. So I had seen this. I think, again, Marvin Campbell, who was the director of my recipient program, LSCA, and I had talked about it, looked at it. I had a trial skills training. I remember now because I refreshed my memory about it. I looked at it. It called for sending in all kinds of materials and history about what you had done and all this kind of stuff. I was going away to about a four-day trial advocacy skills training. I did not have time. The turnaround time was too short. I spoke with him, and I said, "Marvin, I don't -- we aren't interested in this, right?" "Right." And so I ignored it. I came back from that. I had the question for

Bea. I called her up, and she said, "We were going to call you." And I said, "Okay." And she said, "We have decided and we have talked with the Atlanta regional office, Victor agrees, Victor and Jackie and Guy and -- and we up here" -- this is Bea Moulton, then Jody Smith who is now Jawara Lumumba. He was working there. And I don't know who else. Floyd Price was working there. All these people had decided that the place this should be was in Alabama and that I should be the director. This is -- you know, "And so would you be interested?" And I was totally -- it came out of the blue. It really came out of the blue because I had not thought about it. And I said, "I don't know. I need to think about this, and I'll get back to you." That was in the morning on that day. And she said -- I said, "When do you need to know?" And she said, "Yesterday." And I said, "I have to -- I have to think about it. I have to talk with some people because I came here to do state support work. This is what I want to do. I am just starting. We have just gotten some money to expand the staff. We are just now becoming a real state support center, in my opinion, although what we've done is fine. We had done some pretty good training in a couple of years. I don't know. I just

don't know about this at all. That's not why I came here. That's not what I'm all about." "Well, call me back." So I talked with the directors of the other two field programs in Alabama. You know, all kinds of things happened. And she called me back that afternoon. And I was supposed to call her the next morning, but she called me back that afternoon and said, "Have you thought about this?" And I said, "Well, yeah. We've thought about it and talked about it. We think it is an important thing. And here's -- here's what we'll do. We will be happy to have the training center here. I will be glad to devote some percentage of my time to it. But I do not want to be the director of the training -- of the regional training center. I want to be the director of the Alabama Consortium of Legal Services Programs. That's what I want to do. Now, if we can work that out, then fine." There was a little piece before this. Some people had sent things in, and as a matter of fact, my friends, Leanna Gibson in Tennessee and Trina Gentry, who was in North Carolina, had called me and said, "Hey, why don't we submit a joint proposal for this, okay? I mean, who -- who wants this responsibility, and why don't we do that? I believe that the three of

us" -- and we had figured out a way how the three of us could handle this. We all had particular strengths to give to it and -- and whatever. And I wrote a letter of support about that. And Bea Moulton told me on the phone that that was unacceptable. So (laughter) -- so we said okeydokey. I became convinced that okay. Maybe we should do this. And so she said, "All right. Since you didn't send anything in, then will you please send me a letter outlining your experience, what you've done in the couple of years you've been there," and all this kind of stuff. And so I did. And we started in then to create this. It took a lot of working out, a lot of understanding and working out for me finally to convince everybody that indeed I do not want to be the director of the regional training center. I want to be the director of state support in Alabama. That's my first love. That's what I want to do. And I haven't even begun to develop that, see. And that's what I want to do. And also I didn't know where this was going. And they weren't -- there were no assurances about the regional training centers at this point. This was a \$150,000 grant with the promise of maybe another \$150,000. As it turned out, and I went back and looked this up, the one in the southeast got the

original \$150,000 grant. We were supposed to have Virginia and West Virginia with us, by the way, multi-regional. That eventually got lopped off and they went somewhere else. And so our second grant was 130,000, and we got a supplemental grant. Okay. And we went through a lot of things. And I don't want to digress too much, but I -- but I -- when I was looking back through this, your friend and mine, Judy Rausch(?), called me one day -- because that's when I first knew Judy Rausch because for a while, I acted as the director. And I went to the fledgling NTCC, which was a hoot. Oh, that was fun. The National Training Coordinating Council. That was quite an experience because these were all new creatures, these regional training centers, okay. And struggling to find our way was funny, frustrating, you know, exciting -- I can't -- it ran the gamut of all the things you're trying to do. But when Judy Rausch learned that the Southeast Training Center was going to get this supplemental grant -- and I don't even remember what that was for. It was for something, you know, but it was like 60,000 -- eighty thou -- I don't know. It was a supplemental grant. She said -- she called me on the phone and said, "What do I do if my advisory board

finds out about that and asks why?" (laughter) And I said, "I don't -- I don't know what -- I don't know. Let us hope they don't find out because I don't -- I don't know what to tell you about this." But that was the kind of -- that was the kind of thing that went on then. No one knew. We didn't know -- we had to create work plans, okay. And we pulled together this group of people in Montgomery. Let me see who was there. In October, I will never forget it, and everybody was saying, "Come to Montgomery?" But they came. Leanna Gibson -- this is not now the advisory board. This is people to come and just talk about the creation of this center and what it should be and how to draft the work plan. Leanna Gibson was that, was part of that group, a real important part of that group. Kyle Owens from Kentucky. Kyle Owens was a real important person back in those days, in the beginning of the regional training center, and drafted, was -- headed up the group that drafted the initial proposal for the regional task forces. So Kyle's name should be put somewhere, you know, to be -- to be always recognized and respected. Trina Gentry, I believe was part of that -- Trina Gentry was. Jackie Ross from Georgia. I believe those were the field people and myself. We

were the -- like the field level people. Then we had lots of folks representing Washington and the Atlanta regional office. We had Bea Moulton. I don't remember if Jody Jawara came to that meeting. Yes, he did. I believe he did. Floyd Price and Walker Thompson from Washington. Walker Thompson was something like the state support coordinator. Now, remember, this was the early '80s, and all this was going out, and no one could understand why we had a state support coordinator in Washington. At least I couldn't understand that. Maybe other people did. From the Atlanta regional office, we invited Victor to come. And Victor responded to me on the phone one day, "Yes, we'll be there." That meant that Victor and Jackie Mitchell and Guy Lesko were all coming. Now, picture this group to try to develop a work plan. As it turned out -- and I was very sorry -- Victor could not come. I don't remember whether he had a conflict. I just can't pull that up. But Jackie and Guy came. And we sat down and developed a work plan, and it worked out very well. We put some things in place early on that still are an important part of the Southeast Training Center. And I think at that point we called it the Southern Regional Training Resource Center, some bizarre title, but you

know -- that doesn't lend itself like the Southeast Training Center to calling STC. I don't know what we would have called the other thing. No telling. But we developed a work plan so that we could submit it so that -- and this all -- this all worked out. We set up an advisory board. And the first advisory board was the state support directors. An interesting thing. And maybe -- maybe I am not totally wrong because a little while ago, I said, as I recall, many of the state support directors were also involved in training. Maybe that's not -- maybe that's not true, but at any rate, the first advisory board to the South -- to the now Southeast Training Center was made up of state support people. It was state support directors. We eventually -- Stephanie Davis was one of those people. Gosh. Who were -- I can't remember who they were, you know. Some -- many of them are now -- Leanna, of course, in Tennessee. Linda. Linda someone in Arkansas. I can't -- I just can't pull up all the names. But that's who it was. We said from the very beginning of the creation of the Southeast Training Center that it was not to -- it was not to promote training or to do training as an end. It was not training as an end in itself. That its purpose, its

underlying purpose, was to support the work of the field. It was to -- it was to address the priorities of the field in serving clients. And that if it did not do that, then -- then, you know, there really was not much point in its existence. The Atlanta regional office at -- at this point had developed some core technology about what ought to go on. And part of it was training. Part of it was task forces. Part of it was policy advocacy, that kind of thing. The regional training center looked very much at that and -- and adopted that sense or at least that approach about what it ought to be about. So it never set itself up as just a training deliverer. And it was along about that time, as I recall, that someone said -- I mean, early, early, early on, said, "We need to develop a very strong alliance and relationship with the project directors in the southeast region." That became very important. And -- and before long, the state support directors were no longer the advisory board. And we created the advisory board to reflect the legal services community in the southeast region. And that is that the advisory board could have and should have some state support people, but it also would have some project directors. And it also would have some client

representatives, you know. So -- so that has been a real strength. The advisory board never has been just training people. And so the integrity of the Southeast Training Center has been maintained, I think, from the very beginning. I remember when I -- when I went to the first NTCC meeting -- now, you understand, I was trying desperately to get rid of this whole responsibility. I should stop here and say we were engaged in a director search for quite a long time. Because I was being very -- I was becoming more and more adamant. I do not want to be the director of the regional training center. Guy Lesko and Jackie Mitchell made a last-ditch effort to get me to flip-flop the percentages and say devote 10 percent of your time to the consortium, which is state support in Alabama, and 90 percent to the regional training center. And I finally had to say, "No, no, no, no, no. We must find a director." We suspected, and we were absolutely right, that we could not find the director we wanted to come to Montgomery, Alabama. Now I mean -- maybe if we had looked longer, harder, if we could have offered more. I mean, I don't -- I won't say it was a total impossibility, but it did not work out. But we went on the sort of endless director

searches. We had lots of, you know, search committees and all kinds of -- and did all of that. We finally found a director who was in Arkansas. And you know, sometimes we're a little -- a little slow to come around to thinking things, and we were thinking, "Well, you know, what are we going to do?" And then it -- it dawned on us, brilliant thinkers that we were, that look. You know, if we can't get Lonnie Powers in Arkansas to come here, let's move the training center to where he is. And we did. And that's why it's in -- that's why it's in Arkansas. Because that is where the first director, who was a qualified director, who was the kind of director we were looking for. And Lonnie Powers had been a -- a project director. And so now you see, we were not looking for a training person to be the director. We had come to the conclusion that we wanted a director of this center who was a lot of things, who had visibility in the region, who could exert the kind of leadership in making this center a viable entity and an important entity, who had the connection with the project directors. If this had been a training person, great, you know. But that -- that's what we were looking for. Someone who could have a vision for this. And I think Lonnie was a very

important first director of the center. Lonnie left Arkansas and went to where he is now, you know. He left us and went to Boston. He is in Boston, isn't he? He's in -- okay. To do -- to do some -- some -- some similar but -- but not training center work. But that was a very important beginning. Lonnie was very important in getting the composition of the center created and balanced and lots of other things. And of course from our perspective, Lonnie was very important to us because he hired Mary Thomas to come and work for the center. And Mary Thomas is -- is the director. Mary Thomas was acting director for a long time after -- after Lonnie left. And one day, it dawned on the advisory board, "Why are we doing this? Why don't we make her a real director? She's doing the real director work." That's all worked out so well for us. It's just incredible, you know, how things do come together and work out. I think it's a very strong center, and I -- I have -- at this -- at this conference, because I'm on the TAG steering committee and we've dealt with some funding issues, and we've dealt with state support and this kind of thing, the regional training centers have not been promoted in terms of funding and suffered greatly. And I -- every

chance I have, because I have been on the advisory board for as long as it's been. I was chair at one point, and now I'm secretary for life, which is an -- which is, you know, I mean, you don't go anywhere from there. That's sort of a dead-end position, I think. But anyway I stay there. But it's -- the training centers have -- have not received increased funding. They have -- they have been cut. And yet they do good work. I know firsthand what the Southeast Training Center has done and some of the wonderful initiatives that -- that the Southeast Training Center has taken on. I think it has a very good and strong advisory board. I think it has a very good and strong recipient program where it is, in Legal Services of Arkansas. There are lots of things that -- that work. Not to mention its staff. I mean, I think it has a wonderful director. There are just many, many reasons. I think it has a very wonderful relationship with the project directors in the region. That's another thing. That's another reason why it is -- it is strong. I see -- unless some horrible thing occurs, I see no reason why the Southeast Training Center will not continue to be a very important presence in the region. And why it will not flourish. Heaven knows what we could do if we had

an influx of money. We could move out and -- and do some other kinds of things. We have task forces, which we now call TAGs. They're called training advisory groups. Have had them ever since the beginning of this center, which sort of puts the Southeast Training Center on the cutting edge because there are other places in the country now saying, "Oh, why don't we have some regional task forces?" The new uniting support project says, "We need to have some regional, you know, task forces. We need to have some national ones." I look back at the early thinking 10 years ago and think, my gosh, how much of this still applies, how much of it has been followed. And we've been -- we've been -- we've been very, very true to the course in many, many regards in the Southeast Training Center.

THOMAS: What -- we've certainly been through some ups and downs at the training center.

SWEARS: (laughter) Yes.

THOMAS: We've -- we've gone through some hurdles. Would you talk a little bit about those maybe, but mostly the two or three best pieces of advice you would have or your memories about that.

SWEARS: Okay. Let -- let me think a little bit about the ups and downs in the training center. Well, let's see.

We have had -- there's a whole -- let me put -- there's a whole basket of things having to do with questioned costs, monitoring visits, investigations, et cetera. Perhaps the whole -- I'll put that in the little basket called being under the magnifying glass or whatever. I have often said to Mary Thomas, who is the director, we could write -- she could write a book on how to survive investigations, monitoring visits and all of that kind of stuff. There have been some -- I mean, those were real agonizing things. And I went for one as chair of the -- of the advisory committee. This was early on when we had some -- when we had had some questioned costs because back at the very beginning, we didn't really know how these things were supposed to operate. You know. And so we got into some trouble over consultant contracts. I don't know. Whatever it was. But we survived it. We survived it, but then the -- the -- I just a moment ago said I think we -- you know, we're very fortunate to have a very strong and supportive recipient program. Well, that very strong and supportive recipient program, Legal Services of Arkansas, board at one point said, "Whoa. We don't want this thing anymore." So that's another basket of difficulty I'll -- I'll talk about. We went through a

whole -- a whole time period of saying, "Okay. If Arkansas doesn't want us anymore, Legal Services of Arkansas" -- they had been through a lot with us -- us, the regional training center. I can understand they're saying, "What's this going to cost us eventually? You know, are these guys going to come after us or what?" So they said, "Maybe it would be better if this were somewhere else." So we looked around and tried to figure out how to move the training center and went through a whole process of trying to get that done. We had other programs. This comes from, I believe, our early on involvement with the field project directors and projects. And we had some champions on white horses, you know, who came galloping up and saying, "Hey, you know, I know you probably don't want to move it to my program. It's way out here somewhere, you know, away from everything. But if you can't find anyplace else to go, you know, we'll be happy to have you." It was really kind of -- it was funny and wonderful and all of that. But we decided that actually the place to move it, for a number of reasons, because the Atlanta regional office was no -- well, I shouldn't say it's no longer there. I think it is. I think the office is still there, but the whole

magnificent presence of the Atlanta regional office, the helping, supporting, driving, encouraging -- well, I mean, if you know Victor, then you know what I'm talking about, you know, the stimulating kind of presence was gone. And so we thought what we should do is put this there, you know. And maybe at some point -- and way back, we had thought that perhaps the regional training center might fulfill some of those functions, looking into the crystal ball and saying the Atlanta regional office as we have known it will not be there. But we decided that when the Legal Services of Arkansas board said, "I don't think we can deal with this anymore, we don't think we can," what we should do is move this to Atlanta. And we seriously -- I mean, we were ready to move it, the advisory board, the board in Arkansas and the whole thing. And we petitioned or whatever we did. The Corporation went through all these processes and whatever. And of course they said, "No." You know, of course they said no. "No. You can't move it." We got a lot of mixed messages, as I recall. I may be wrong about that, but it seems to me we got sort of encouraging things, "Yes, do this, and do that, and whatever, and then we'll talk." And then whatever and -- "No. Not at all." So we went through

that. I think that helped us in many ways to recognize -- and then -- and then the Legal Services of Arkansas board said, "Okay. You know, this -- we'll -- we'll deal with this." There was also a change in directors then, and the -- the then new and, gosh, I don't guess she's new anymore. I mean, I don't think she's new. But Jean Carter came in as the executive director and had a different outlook and perhaps a fresh energy about dealing with all of this, you know. Mary Thomas, our director, I think made a real effort, and it was a successful effort, to establish some relationship with that board so that they knew what was going on. I mean, it was a whole matter of educating, and so it has worked out better certainly than back then, when they were going to put us somewhere on the street or over in the -- in the river. I'm not sure where they were going to put us. (laughter) That was a real tough time. I can remember project directors signing petitions of support and writing letters of support. And there were all kinds of things that went on. And perhaps we're real lucky in the southeast region -- again I keep bringing this up, but it's a close-knit community. And it seems to me that there is always -- there always has been a real -- it's almost

like 911, you know. If -- if some part of this community is having problems, then the rest of the community will -- will rush to your support, whether they all do this physically, but they will be there. This is a real wonderful thing. This has happened in this region. It's happened with state support, I think. It has certainly happened with the regional training center, with the Southeast Training Center. So I guess if you -- way back -- I've gotten way off, I think. But you ask about advice. The tough times certainly do test your mettle. They also, I think, test out your loyalties and your commitment. And I think they also -- in particular regard to the Southeast Training Center, the tough times really have strengthened the support for that center. Strengthened and perhaps highlighted it. We might never have known it was there. And that's -- that's an important thing to know. I think some advice to any newly created entity, approach, thrust, group, whatever, in the legal services community, would be make sure that you have your -- your finger on the pulse of your community. It -- it says to me, for instance, you need to know what's going on in the field. You need to know what's going on with -- with the projects, with the project

directors, with the state support centers, with the training, with the staff and for heaven's sake, with the clients, you know. Where -- where are they? What are they doing? What do they have to say to you? All of these entities, because then when you get into trouble, you know, they know who you are and they know what your trouble is. They don't know otherwise. That's -- I guess that's certainly one of the things we learned in the whole saga of the Southeast Training Center. And it is kind of a saga, the way it developed.

THOMAS: It is. And you know, it's -- I'm loving doing this because it's always fascinating to me to listen to you talk about this whole development --

SWEARS: The olden days. (laughter)

THOMAS: The olden days. Right, right.

SWEARS: Yes, the olden days.

THOMAS: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about in relation to what has been important to you in Legal Services, either through state support, the training center or just Legal Services involvement in general?

SWEARS: Let me think about that just a little bit. You know, I just sort of -- I feel as if I have rushed

through 12 years of whatever, you know, and -- and there's so many -- there are so many people. There are so many individuals. There are so many little snapshots of things that have happened that are so wonderful. I just -- it's real -- it's real hard to -- to think of whether there is something that has not been said. I think probably that I've covered the things that I probably need to cover in terms of getting this down for -- for posterity or for whatever, at least in this region. I guess it is important to remember who those important players were all along the way. And I've named some of those. I have certainly given them short shrift, and I didn't mean to. But just simply by naming the names, I think it's always important to keep those names somewhere in our consciousness, the people who had so much to do with creating state support, you know. I mean, there's -- there's -- way back, there's Clint Lyons and Bucky Askew. You know, there's Victor Geminiani in the Atlanta regional office and other people. And then -- and then there are the people who were in state support like Leanna Gibson, Kyle Owens and others. Real important people in the southeast and for the whole -- I think, you know, in lots of ways then for the whole

country. I think this is a real important project for that reason, to keep in mind who these people have been in our history and -- and what their contributions have been all along the way.

THOMAS: I think as a -- as a final question, I'll just ask you if there are any lessons you think we've learned in developing state support and training center. I know you talked about advice. Is there any -- any real lessons or any final thoughts that you may have?

SWEARS: It -- it has -- it has occurred to me, and I can't -- I'm not sure that I know how to express this really. But it has occurred to me that one of the things I've heard ever since I came to work for Legal Services 12 years ago, some -- some real buzzwords, and I hate to do that because I don't want to trivialize it. It is not a trivial thing. The whole concept of developing local capacity is something I've heard ever since I first came to Legal Services. I've heard it in the training context. I've heard it in the state support context in terms of what a state support center, you know, needs -- needs to think about and do as part of its mission. I've heard it in terms of training center. It keeps cropping up. It occurs -- there's something there to be learned, I think.

There's something there that I think I've learned and that I think is a good lesson for us all because coupled with that recollection that I've heard that over and over through the years is this 10 years of real struggle for survival, real serious struggle in the field, in state support, in the training centers, wherever. In the client community, in the client organizations, in the whole -- in all of legal services. We have had a real struggle. We hope we're beginning to see some light, but one of the things that has happened in that struggle, I believe, is that we really have developed local capacity, local capacity for -- for not just surviving, but local capacity for doing, for deciding, for moving, for self-encouraging, for the whole thing. I think that is important. I think that's been an important lesson. And I think maybe that's a very important piece of advice, continuing advice, and that is in developing local capacity. Continuing to do that. If the training center helps to do that, great. If -- if we come together as a state support community in the southeast or across the country and we help to develop local capacity, great. If the southeast region pro -- if the Southeast Project Directors Association comes together

and helps to develop local capacity, great. I think it's a real important lesson we have learned and that maybe it's more than a lesson. Maybe it's a principle.

Okay?

THOMAS: That's it. Marilyn, I have -- I have thoroughly enjoyed that. Thank you very much.

SWEARS: Thank you.

(Conclusion of interview)

