

**Oral History Interview of
Jon Sitton**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
December 10, 2013
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Jon Sitton, who discusses his blindness, attendance in mainstream public schools in Idalou, Texas, higher education leading to a degree at Texas Tech University, and his career with the Social Security Administration.

Length of Interview: 02:05:10

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is December 10th, 2013, and this is David Marshall interviewing John Sitton at the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech, Lubbock, Texas. And his daughter Emily is also here. And if you want to chime in and ask any questions, feel free to do so.

Emily Sitton (ES):

Thank you.

DM:

So let's start with a little bit of background. Let me get your date of birth and place of birth.

Jon Sitton (JS):

August 1st, 1954. I was born in Olton, Texas.

DM:

At the Olton Hospital?

JS:

Yes.

DM:

Okay. And you were not born alone.

JS:

Correct. I am one of three—one of triplets.

DM:

Okay. And your triplets are?

JS:

Don and Lon.

DM:

And the oldest is Don?

JS:

Don.

DM:

And then?

JS:

Lon.

DM:

You're the youngest?

JS:

Yes.

DM:

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

JS:

My parents were Frank—his name was John Frank, Jr. John Frank Sitton Jr., but he went by Frank. My mother's name was Earnestine. There was an A. It was E-A-R-N-E-S-T-I-N-E, because she was named after an uncle Earnest. So her name had an A in it. They grew up—my dad grew up in Floydada. My mother grew up in Carey, which I understand is close to Childress. I'm not sure exactly how they both ended up in Petersburg, but that's where they graduated from high school. And both of them went to Tech for a short time. My dad—I'm not sure how long exactly, I know after the first or second semester, my dad came down with some kind of fever. Rheumatic fever or something, I think that's what they—and so I think he had to quit at that point. I think my mother went for a year. But they never finished.

DM:

Did they go to A&M?

JS:

They went to Texas Tech.

DM:

Okay. Well, I was wondering because I got—I came across some information that suggested they were married in Bryan.

JS:

They were married in Bryan because my dad was in the service. So he was stationed at the military base in Bryan.

DM:

Okay, that makes sense. This was 1943, does that sound right?

JS:

Yes. Yes. So they got married over the Thanksgiving weekend. I don't know all the details. I'm assuming they had to get married then because he had to go back to work or whatever. I'm not sure exactly all—and then he was sent overseas. He went to Okinawa, in Japan, for I'm not sure how long, maybe a year. I'm not sure exactly. I don't know a lot about what he did. I think he worked on airplanes and he was also a cook. And then they came back, or he came back. I guess at that point, as far as I know, he was—his tour of duty was done and they'd moved back to West Texas. I'm not sure. And then at some point, and I'm not sure when it was, they moved to Hart, Texas. And then I have two older sisters: Alice, who is seven years older than I am, and Joyce, who was five years older than we were.

DM:

One lives in Lubbock, the other in Boise?

JS:

Yes. Boise, Idaho.

DM:

And which is which?

JS:

Alice lives in Lubbock, Joyce lives in Boise.

DM:

I see. Your parents farmed, is that correct?

JS:

Yes. My dad is a cotton farmer, and he also grew maize, you know, feed. But his primary was cotton. When we were very small, I remember him having some cows and pigs and chickens, but he had allergies to the cow feed and after a while, he just couldn't handle that anymore. So he quit that and just raised cotton. And of course my parents also had a big garden ever year. They grew black-eyed peas and green beans and squash and corn and tomatoes and peppers and I don't know what all.

DM:

Did your mother can [food]?

JS:

Yes. My mother did can. So we had a lot of fresh food in the summer. I spent a lot of summers shelling peas and snapping beans and when I would rather have been doing something else, my

mother would get up early in the morning and come back and wake us up and says, "I've just been to the pea patch and I've got so many bushels of peas. Get up and start shelling." And we would say, you know, "Mother, can we take a break?" "Well, your pan's not full yet. You need to finish getting that pan full. We got canning to do!" So—

DM:

I can relate to that so well. Well tell me a little bit about the circumstances of your birth and the situation at the hospital, the incubator, the story of how you became blind.

JS:

We were not blind at birth, as I understand it. And we were not premature, really. The fact that there were three of us made us, I guess what they would call premature weighed. I don't know exactly how they judge it. But anyway, for reasons—because we were so small, they put us in the incubator. And we all were placed in the same incubator, crossways so that I was—Don, Lon and Jon in order of our birth is the way we were placed in the incubator. And we were there for twenty-six days. They knew that there was a possibility of blinding us in the incubator, but you know, at the time, they didn't feel like there were a whole lot of choices. I mean, you know, we had to breathe, we had to—I don't know if our lungs were not developed. I don't know all the statistics—all the particulars about that. But anyway, we were there for twenty-six days. And at the time that we were—came home, they didn't have any idea that we were blind. They didn't really know for a while. They didn't really discover it—we were born in August, and in December, my parents always put up a Christmas tree, but they noticed that we didn't care to look at the Christmas lights. They were like, "See the pretty lights;" we didn't care. And they suspected at that point. And I think in February of that next year, they went and took us to the doctor and they confirmed that were all blind. The vision that I have is out of my left eye. The vision that my brother Don has is out of his right eye. Lon, who was in the middle, has no vision. So we think that the placement in the incubator had something to do with that. I've never heard any doctors say that, but it just makes sense to me.

DM:

Has anybody said anything about the duration of time in the incubator being a factor?

JS:

No. My mother just tells me that we were there for twenty-six days. And I don't know what the reason or the rationale or anything for that was.

DM:

Have you heard anything about the—what exactly it was, that caused this? Was it the oxygen, was it the effect of the oxygen on the optic nerve?

JS:

That's what I've always been told, that the oxygen damaged the optic nerve. And because it was the optic nerve, there's no transplant or no cure. They can't—at least at that point, and I'm assuming still today, they can't transplant nerves. I had a doctor a few years ago say that there will be a cure, or a solution, but not in my lifetime. And as far—I have been told that during the fifties—I was born in '54—that during those years, early to late fifties, there were many, many children that were blinded in the same way. I've been told that that's the reason Stevie Wonder is blind. I don't know that for sure, but I've heard that.

DM:

Did your mother ever talk about when she found out that her boys were blind?

JS:

From the time we were born, my mother and daddy always had hopes of us, you know, playing football. My family has always loved football and sports. And they always hoped that they would come see us play on the football field. That was—and of course, growing up born to a farmer, we were—we would be expected to drive the tractor or whatever that entailed, growing up on a farm. Of course, when they found out we were blind, they decided that was not—those things were not going to happen. But they—my parents have a lot of faith. They were both Christians, they worshipped God, they took us to church. My mother told us that we were born on Sunday, and that was the only reason she missed church that day, is because she was in the hospital having us. But we went to church all the time. And my parents, when they found out we were blind, of course, their faith sustained them. They had family, they had friends, and the doctors said the best thing you can do is—yes, they're blind, they won't drive a car, they won't play football, but other than that, there's not much they can't do. You make sure that they know they can do just about anything they want to. And I grew up with that kind of mentality and I praise God for it.

DM:

What was the story on the names?

JS:

The names? When my mother was pregnant, she was told she was going to have twins, and they went to the doctor one day for a checkup and the doctor took an X-ray and said, "I think I see a third." And my dad said, "Let's get out of here before there's a fourth." So yes, there would be a third, so they went home and made a list. Okay, if it's three girls, it's going to be this, this and this. If it's three boys, if it's two girls and a boy, if it's two boys and a girl. So they had it all written down, so they'd know. Well, when we were born, my dad had taken my mother to the hospital and forgot the list. So when we were born, they put bracelets on us that said number one,

number two, number three. Because they didn't know what our names were. So my dad had to go home and get the list.

DM:

What were the girls' names? Did you ever find out?

JS:

I don't remember. It seems like there were—I know they all rhymed. Seemed like it was Fay and May and I don't know what the third—I'm glad, I'm glad my name's not Fay. Fay's a good name, but not for me.

DM:

I wondered if that was the case, because I love the Lon, Jon and Don.

JS:

Yes. No, all the names rhymed. I don't know what the combination names were, but they all rhymed, I know that.

DM:

I've got to ask this: when they called you, did they say, "LonDonJon"?

JS:

Yes. Many times. Yes.

DM:

Well, that's okay because I was the third in my family and one of the older was a sister and they called me through the list of names before they got to my name. It happens under any circumstances. Well, what were some of the responsibilities, the chores that you all had on the farm. You've already mentioned the shelling of peas.

JS:

Yes. That was a big one in the summer. Of course, my mother was a very meticulous housekeeper. So we were expected to put our clothes in the dirty clothes hamper, make up our beds. On Saturday—my mother worked during the week also, so Saturday was housecleaning day. And we'd get up and we'd vacuum and we'd oil, mop the dining—the wooden floors and we'd make sure that the linens were—everybody's linens got changed once a week and we made sure that that was done. Saturday was housecleaning day. That was what Saturday was for. Sunday was going to church. That was pretty much the way it was.

DM:

Did you not have any more livestock at this time?

JS:

My father got rid—I remember milking a cow. It wasn't a chore, it's something that we had to do, but my dad would take us out to the barn and we would get to help milk the cows. I'm not sure how much help we were because we were small. I would say—and I don't know for sure. Maybe I was like six or something when my dad got rid of the livestock, because growing up, pretty much we didn't have that. He—

DM:

Did he want to kind of introduce you to things around you? Was that what his intention was? If he didn't really need you to milk the cows—

JS:

I think so. And you know, it's always—it's like, Daddy, can I go out with you out to the barn? And when it came time to water the cotton, we would go out to the field and we would help him—my dad used aluminum pipe pretty much to water. At that time, there weren't a lot of underground pipes and all that. He had a big old pipe trailer and we'd put all the pipes and we'd help him string the pipe, take pipe off the pipe trailer. I guess they were like thirty-foot joints or something and we'd help line them up and get them in there. And we'd help string the pipe to the ditch and carry the tubes that were going to water from the ditches to the rows and help him do that. My dad also did a lot of woodwork. He wasn't really a builder, but he would build cotton trailers. A lot of times they would have to be—you know, after so long a time, the wood rots and you'd have to repair it. So I remember sitting on the board while he sawed and all that, and helping him carry the wood and all that kind of thing. I have vivid memories of that.

DM:

Did you have any close neighbors?

JS:

Yes, we did. We had a neighbor that was probably about a quarter mile down the road. It wasn't like you walked back and forth to their house much. Of course, everybody was farmers so we all lived on the farm. And their kids were about the same age as us, so we would have some interaction with them. Our main interaction was of course school and church. It was a small town, so the—everybody you went to church with, you went to school with or vice versa. As long as they were—you know, the Baptists, I grew up Baptist. If you were Baptist we saw you at church and school.

DM:

That's another thing that you just mentioned. There are so many metaphors in the English language that have to do with vision. We'll see you, looking forward to it—did that ever catch you funny, or—

JS:

No, not at all. Not at all. And I have people that say, "What do you mean, you watch TV? You can't watch TV." And I'm like, what are you going to say? I listen to TV? That sounds weird. I mean, and that's the way I grew up. Yes, you watch TV. Maybe you can't see what's going on, but you watch TV. You know, I saw—

DM:

It has a more general meaning than just the vision aspect. That's interesting. How old were you when you realized that things were a little different for you than for other children--that there was a different dimension in their lives than in yours?

JS:

The only thing that—of course, going to grade school was different because I was in a different class. We had a teacher that taught us braille. But before that, I'm sure going to church there were obviously sighted children in the church classes and stuff, but I don't really have any recollection of anything being much different. I remember going to Vacation Bible School and making little projects and stuff like that. But as far as—they didn't put the blind people off at a separate table or anything like that. We were right there beside the other kids. And of course, the teachers would help us glue our little Bible verses to the paper or the plate or whatever it happened to be and all that. But of course, when we started elementary school, we had—we went to school in Lubbock. When I was two, my parents moved from Hart to Idalou because the doctors told my parents they need to go to a school that's large enough to have resources. They said, "You should either move to Amarillo or Lubbock." And my dad being a cotton farmer, from what I understand, a lot of people living in Amarillo, they grow cotton there too, but there's a lot of wheat grown in the Amarillo area. My dad wasn't—he didn't care to grow wheat. So he wanted to go to Lubbock because that was where he could do his best farming. So we moved to a little farm outside of Idalou.

DM:

Where is it from Idalou?

JS:

Idalou—where was the farm?

DM:

Do you know which direction?

JS:

It was south—wait. Yeah, southwest. About two and half miles southwest of Idalou.

DM:

It's pretty good cotton country out there, even now.

JS:

Yeah. And as a matter of fact, my neighbor, when my dad sold the farm, my neighbor bought it from him. And his son, as far as I know, still runs the farm along with his own and others.

DM:

Do you know their names?

JS:

The son's name is Jay Winter. J-A-Y Winter. And from what I understand, he has been very successful and has quite an operation. He raises pigs and I understand he has a very large operation out there and has done very well.

DM:

I ask because we live south of Lorenzo, so it's not too much farther down the road in big cotton country. How about your first days at Idalou school? Did you say you went to Lubbock?

JS:

We went to Lubbock for the first six years for elementary because there was nobody in Idalou that could teach us Braille. So we went to Lubbock and I was in a class of about maybe eight or nine blind students. The teacher—you know, when you're in first grade, you don't think your teacher's cool. But looking back, evidently she was a very smart lady. She taught us braille. The vision—of course, back at that time, there was no computers, there was no close-circuit TV. I probably could've read print if it had been a little bit bigger, but there was no—the large print was too small for me, so I learned braille—

DM:

By the way, Jon, is your vision now in your left eye about the same as it was then?

JS:

No, it's worse. It's getting worse. Even in the last—I can tell you in the last two or three years. And of course, I'm fifty-nine, so I'm saying that it's just age. I don't know if it really is or not.

The last time I went to an eye doctor, he kind of looked at me and said, "What are you doing here, there's nothing I can do for you." I said, well, I've been told it's time to have a checkup. And he said, "Okay, see you in five years." And that was kind of—but I know it's not as good as it was.

DM:

Is there any way of describing—how would you describe—can you think of a way to describe what you can see?

JS:

I can see—I'm very near-sighted. I can see close-up much better than I can see distances. I see colors. I see—I can tell that you're sitting across the table from me. I can't see your facial expressions, but I can tell that you're there. I see colors, I see—close up, I can even read, like headline-size print if it's that or a little bit bigger. And I used to be able to read a little bit smaller than that, but I can't now.

DM:

Have they ever tried to assign a value to that, like twenty-two hundred?

JS:

Yes, but I don't know—the last time I remember asking it was like twenty over two thousand or something like that. And at one time, I wore glasses for a little while when I was in college and even after that. And they didn't help me see better, they just kind of clarified things. When I took the glasses off, I could see things were a little bit more blurry, so I guess I should say they made things stand out. And then I had a cataract in my left eye when I was in my thirties. After the cataract was removed, I could see better because of the cataract, but I don't know if the glasses they prescribed for me weren't correct or what, but they didn't do any good, so I just quit wearing them. I could probably—it might be—I might be, have a little bit better clarification if I got more glasses, but at this point, I'm just kind of like, okay. I'll just deal with it what it is.

DM:

I noticed—I looked at the *La Ventanas* [Texas Tech University annuals] and I noticed that you wore glasses then.

JS:

Yes I did.

DM:

But your brothers did not, I don't believe.

JS:

Right. They were never—well, Lon has no vision at all. As a matter of fact, when he was six years old, they removed one of his eyes and the other one just kind of shriveled up as far as I was told. So now he wears artificial eyes. And Don—Don's vision is not as good as mine, I don't think.

DM:

So no reason to try to wear glasses.

JS:

Right.

DM:

Okay, well anyway, we digressed a little bit. Can you tell me about the school, the education that you got in Lubbock, and exactly how she was—she taught you how to read braille, you said?

JS:

She taught us how to read braille—

DM:

How do you teach that?

JS:

The first part is of course—the teacher was fully-sighted so she read braille with her eyes. She could look at the page and see what we were writing. But the first step for our training was to get our fingers sensitive. You read with your index fingers. So we were given books of things. They had maybe a fingernail file; a strip of sandpaper. The next page might have a piece of foil. And we were the—the assignment was, what's on this page? And by feeling of it, you had to be able to describe to the teacher what it was.

DM:

I see.

JS:

So that was the first step.

DM:

All about developing sensitivity.

JS:

Right. And then after we—what do you say—graduated from that book or accomplished—then the next book had felt shapes. Is this a square? Is this a rectangle? Is this a triangle? What is this? And so we had to be able to identify the felt on the page and tell what it looked like. And then after that, then we went to braille. I learned grade one braille. Grade one is everything written out, letter by letter. Jon is capital J-O-N, just like any—that's how I spelled my first name; all the words written out. In the second grade, we learned grade two braille. Grade two braille is contractions, because braille takes up so much space, combinations of dots make up different combinations of, like, one symbol is ER. One is EN. One is AND. And there're all kinds of contractions to shorten the length of—so we learned grade two in the second grade. And then we also learned the math symbols, the different math symbols. And so we learned that.

DM:

How does this compare to the rate of learning to read for a sighted person?

JS:

I really don't know. What I tell people when they say, "Gosh, how did you learn to read braille?" I say, "Well, I went to first grade, just like you did and learned to read in first grade." But I don't know because in first grade, most of our work was done—we read—the teacher that we had that taught us braille, you know—we learned after the shape book and after we—I remember something about flashcards. We were given flashcards to learn the letters. And then we went on to books. We read the books. And then we would also have a period of time during the day when we would do math. And then we would do spelling. And I remember having to take the spelling words home and learn them and all that.

DM:

You were learning to read braille. Did you have to learn to write—I guess you type—

JS:

Yes, we learned to use the classic Perkins Braille. Which is still around and despite—I don't know when the Perkins Braille was invented, but long before I was even born, but it is still the—I mean, everybody that ever read braille or wrote braille has used the Perkins Braille.

DM:

And it imprints the page? Excuse my ignorance, by the way.

JS:

Sure. Well, I don't know if you know—the whole braille system is made up of six dots. And different combinations of the dots make up all the letters and numbers and symbols and everything. So the braille is kind of like a typewriter. The keyboard consists of three dots on the

left, three keys on the left for dots one, two and three, and then a spacebar in the middle and then three dots on the right for dots four, five and six. And then there's a backspace key and a new line key. And that's basically all there is to the Perkins Braille. But I have mine at home that I got when we were in the second grade. My parents bought three brailers. Mine is still working. I've had it—I mean, it's a manual braille. I understand they make electric ones, I'd like to see what one looks like sometime. But I mean, they're very durable. I had mine—I sent it off to someplace in Massachusetts, I guess where the Perkins school is, once and had it overhauled and all the things greased and oiled and whatever they do. I mean, they're—it's a tank. You can't—

DM:

Back when they used to make things out of metal.

JS:

Right, right. Exactly.

DM:

Well, that's very interesting. It's just something that so many of us don't really think about. But I've never really seen a brailer in action. So you were already using it in the second grade.

JS:

Yes. Yes. I think we started using it in the first grade. But of course, we didn't use contractions at that point. But yeah. I remember in the first grade writing braille. I don't know what kind of papers or assignments we had. I vaguely remember at the end of my assignment I would write, "Love, Jon." Because my mother would get letters from my grandmother and read them to us and at the end of the letter it always said, "Love, Grandmother." So I thought that's how you ended your paper. Love, Jon.

DM:

I think that's very nice.

JS:

And my teacher said, "No, you don't have to say love, Jon." And I said, "Okay."

DM:

That's a great story. So you were in the Lubbock schools—oh, what was the teacher's name?

JS:

Her name was Mrs. Fewell. It was spelled F-E-W-E-L-L. Her first name was Mildred. And of course at that time I thought she was older than dirt, but I'm sure she was not. She was—she was a good teacher. She didn't put up with anything. We had to make sure we didn't talk when we

weren't supposed to talk and I got in big trouble one day for talking during a tornado drill. And that was a big no-no. She didn't mess around.

DM:

And you spent how many years at the Lubbock school?

JS:

Six years.

DM:

All six of your elementary years. And then you went to Idalou.

JS:

And the understanding was that we would go to Idalou after the sixth grade. That was kind of the long-term goal. So when we were in first grade, for one class a day, we would actually go to another classroom and that's where we—and she was a teacher that did not read braille and had regular-sighted students. So we would go to her class for a period during the day. And we would spend that class period, and then we would go back to our original class. In the second grade I don't remember exactly, but I think maybe we spent a couple of periods a day in the second-grade classroom. And of course, we would take our braille book to that classroom if we were studying social studies or whatever. We would read out of our braille books while they read out of their print books. Then in the third grade, I learned to type on a typewriter because my other teachers didn't read braille, so if we had a spelling test, we had to type our answers on the typewriters so that they could read them and grade them.

DM:

Well you learned to type five, six, seven years before most kids, I guess.

JS:

Yeah. And of course, it was a manual typewriter. And we had typewriters in my braille class. So one of the classes, one of the periods of class was spent doing typing. And of course it was all—if you could see at all, she would put tape on the keys to cover up the letters, so you had to learn it by touch.

DM:

It was all by touch and you had no braille indicator, no indicators at all except maybe the J and—

JS:

No, nothing.

DM:

Nothing?

JS:

Nothing.

DM:

You just felt—

JS:

You had to learn where the home keys were and I remember practicing ASDFG and all that, so we learned to type that way. And when we got to—when it was time to go to the next class if we went to another class where we were taking a spelling test or something, we would take our typewriter with us and go to that class.

DM:

I have a nice little quote from one of your classmates. This came out in a newspaper article—actually about Lon—that was written, I don't know, seven years ago. It said something about you guys carrying your typewriters and I think your typing tables from class to class.

JS:

Yes. When we went to Idalou for junior high—of course, in elementary, you didn't do a lot of going from class to class. But in junior high, of course we did. So they decided. Someone, I don't know, I guess the principal or my parents, I'm not sure, decided that the best way for us to get from one class to another was to have a metal typing table on wheels. So we had a brailer for taking notes, we had the typewriter and we had our stack of books. So when it came time to go to the next class, put the typewriter—if we had the typewriter on our desk while we were taking a test or typing something, then we'd put it on the typing table, put the books on the typing table and we'd pull the typing table to the next class. And then when we got there, we would take off whatever books we needed and put them on our desk or whatever—whether we were going to take notes or whatever and at the end of that class, do the same thing.

DM:

Did you—did the three of you stay pretty much at the same pace through school?

JS:

Yes. We always had exactly the same teachers, the same classes. Everything was the same. And I don't remember that much about grades, but I think we all made pretty much the same grades.

DM:

Did you help each other with studying and this kind of thing?

JS:

Yes, we would. Of course my mother, you know, in elementary, all our books were in braille. And then when we got to junior high and high school, some of the main books were in braille, but there were some that were not. And our mother—we would come home from school and she would start reading to us from whatever book needed to be read. When it came time to do math work, we all got our brailers and went in [to] the kitchen table and my mother would help us do our math. That's how we did our homework.

DM:

Did your mother or your sisters or your dad pick up on any of this, any of the braille, for example?

JS:

My mother had a book that told her how to read braille. But she tells me—I don't remember—but she tells me that we told her, "If I can't read your writing, then I don't want you reading mine." And so she didn't learn braille. That was her story. I don't remember saying that, but that's what she said. So she put the book away and never learned it.

DM:

How about your sisters? Did they help in any way with homework?

JS:

They would help. Of course, they were a little bit older, so they had their own—and my sisters were involved in basketball and all this, so they were kind of—they had their own stuff to do but yeah. They would read to us sometimes.

DM:

As far as activities were concerned at school, did the three of you hold close together? Did you attend things together or did you go your separate ways?

JS:

No. We were always together.

DM:

That's interesting because you're really in different directions now.

JS:

We are.

DM:

Different occupations, different locations.

JS:

Yes. Well, growing up, my grandmother hoped that we would always all stay together. If my grandmother, rest her soul, had had her way, we would have roomed in the same room at Tech, we would have married triplet wives and all lived in the same house, you know. Because she just could not see us ever being apart. And growing up, at least until high school, we always wore the same clothes, always alike. I remember as a kid when it was time for Easter, we had to go shopping on Saturday for an Easter suit and we would walk in the store and my mother would say, "I need three suits just alike," and they would say, "I'm sorry ma'am, we only have two." "Well boys, let's go somewhere else." And we would spend all day long going from store to store to find three suits just alike, three pairs of shoes, just alike. It was a—it was a process. If they didn't have three alike, well that was just too bad. Well, let's go somewhere else. And sometimes my mother would have to order out of the catalog. But pretty much we went shopping and finally when we got in high school we were like, Mother, please, could we not dress alike anymore?

DM:

I guess the only way you knew is that she was saying—

JS:

Right. Right. But she kept everything straight. I never wore Don's shirt or anything. I don't know how she did it. I had my own drawer and my own place, and my stuff was my stuff and we didn't borrow each other's clothes. What need was there? Your stuff's just like mine. I don't need to borrow yours.

DM:

Tell me a little bit more about your interests in junior high and high school. If there were specific subject interests, if there were teachers that you—that are especially memorable, for good or bad.

JS:

Well, of course, we were always into music. We grew up—I remember listening to the radio. I can tell you songs that came out on the radio when I was six years old. And I remember listening to those songs on my sister's radio. We were always into music. We loved rock and roll. We were big Beatles fans and we loved music. And still do. That's a passion, is music I guess you'd

say. And I have, you know, we all loved to listen to music. We share CDs, talk about music. That's just the way we grew up.

DM:

You were also in the church choirs?

JS:

I was in choir, I grew up in choir, I was—I remember doing children's programs at church. As an adult, I was in the adult choir. My church now, I'm in the choir now. And I love it. And it's wonderful. And we always sang in church. As we were growing up, my brothers and I would sing specials, as they call them at church. The music director would call my mom and say, "Can the boys sing Sunday?" We were the Sitton boys. So, "Can the boys sing on Sunday?" So we'd go find a record and learn a new song, because we learned our music. I have seen braille music, but I don't know it. I think my brother Lon knows it somewhat, although he doesn't really use it. So all of our learning songs were strictly by ear.

DM:

He says in his article he's still that way because you have to use one hand to read it and another hand to play it if you're playing an instrument. So that's a challenge. So listen to it and learn it.

JS:

Yeah. So of course our favorite classes were always choir and music classes. I remember having music class in elementary school. I don't think during school I consciously said that math was my favorite subject, but I liked math. Math, to me—there's a right answer. Two plus two, yes, it is four, as opposed to English, where it's so subjective. My wife is a word person. She loves words. I hated diagramming sentences. I never could understand the point in that. I never did like that part of English. I liked reading stories and I would write stories occasionally and all, but I guess math was—and social studies—history, yeah, that's fine. It never was really a real interesting class for me, although I think I learned it okay. But I guess math was something that I enjoyed and still do. I enjoy—I remember in elementary school learning the multiplication tables. To this day, nine times nine is eighty-one. Eight times seven is fifty-six. I just—

DM:

Isn't that cool, how that falls together?

JS:

Yeah, I just know it. And to me, Mrs. Fewell, I remember going through that. You start with your one's table and then you go to the two's table. And then you learn all the way up to nine and ten. I'm glad that I know that because I think there're some people now that don't know. And of course now we have calculators and all that, but I still do stuff in my head if I can.

DM:

Well, did this direct you toward a business interest?

JS:

No. I don't—perhaps. I'm not really sure why I chose business. I think it interested me just the fact that there was stuff out there that I didn't know and that I wanted to—of course Don went into radio and has always been interested in radio and will be always. And I was interested in that also, but not enough to make it my life's ambition. I still like to go to his radio station and tinker and mess around and that kind of thing. I've always loved singing, but I never—I'm not really a soloist, although I have occasionally. So I didn't consider music really an option, although I could have, I guess. Business just seemed interesting to me, because it was something different. It was something that I wanted to do for me. I didn't want to follow in Don's footsteps or Lon's—Lon was a music major. I didn't want them to say, "Oh, there's Lon and his brother." So I wanted business because it was different and because I didn't have to take a foreign language. And to me, that was a cool thing. Oh, you don't have to take a foreign language, yeah, I'll major in business.

DM:

They ought to let braille count as something, you know?

JS:

Well, you know, I think these days they do say braille is a language, but back then, no.

DM:

Well you know, you kind of have to guess at this streak of independence, since you went in different directions, different locations and this kind of thing. So there's your streak of independence. Now, did you all live in Murdough [dormitory at Texas Tech]?

JS:

We all did. We didn't live in the same room, contrary to my grandmother's unhappiness. We did not live in the same room. We lived in Murdough. I'm not sure why Murdough was chosen for us, because I don't remember having any say about where we were going to live. But of course, the dorm—it was not a question that we would not live in the dorm because living at home was not an option because we had different schedules and all that. My mother couldn't run back and forth all the time. And besides that, living in the dorm was fun. I mean, that way you could go and come as you needed to. I remember the first day of class somebody that I just met in the dorms said, "Time to register! Let's go." And he was I guess a junior. I don't remember his name. He was a cool guy, but I don't even remember what his name was. We went and he helped sign me up for class.

DM:

Oh, and this was back when it was in the coliseum, probably.

JS:

Oh yes. In the coliseum, and everybody went to class and stood in line and waited for your card and got your card punched or whatever needed to be done. Oh my gosh, this class if full, I can't get into that one, I guess I'll have to—but this guy was great. He helped me figure out a schedule and then after that he showed me where the buildings were. I had classes in all different buildings. So I learned how to get to the ag [agriculture] building. My English class was in the basement of the ag building. So I would go to the ag building for English and the architect building for history. Then later on, when I got to be an upperclassman, of course, I had more business classes. And at that time, the business building was across the street from Murdough, so I just walked across the street and went to class a lot. But I learned a lot of different places on campus by having classes in different buildings. I had classes in the administration building. I had classes in the ag building, the architecture building, just several different buildings. And then in West Hall at the time, there was a resource center. At the time it was on the third floor of West Hall where we would—well, it relocated there. When I first went there, our resource center was in a barracks building, an army barracks building. They used to have a bunch of army barracks buildings around campus. And it was right behind the library. And it was an old army barracks building with wooden floors. And they had set it up with little, sort of like cubicles but they had doors. And in each cubicle was a tape recorder. I had a locker and I would put my tapes and my books in the locker and then we posted jobs, student jobs on the financial aid board. If you want to read to the blind, come to this barracks at a certain time. And people would come and read. They had a book that people would read—I remember it was like one of Ernest Hemingway's books. And people would read on a tape and they'd read a couple of paragraphs and they'd say, "Okay, my name is Nancy, if you're interested in having me be a reader, here's my phone number." So then it would be, oh gosh, I've got to get somebody to read this chapter in history. Let me go listen to the tape. Oh yeah, she sounds good. So I'd call Nancy. "Nancy, I need some chapters read for history. Can you come read it?" So she'd come over and we'd meet and talk and all that. And then she would say, "Okay"—I would say, "Here's my locker, here's the tape." We used reel-to-reel tapes. Here's my tape for English. Go to the place on the tape where the chapter, last chapter ended and read the next chapter. So when she had time in between her class or whatever, she would go read on my tape. And then when I got out of my class, I'd go get the tape and either take it to my room or wherever I—if I needed to be there, take it back to my room and listen to what she'd read. So very few times did I ever actually sit there and listen to her read live. Most of the time, it was between my schedule and their schedule. And I didn't have the same reader all the time. I might have—I had a math tutor, this one lady that was great. She was a student. She tutored me in math. Because math you just about had to have a tutor. Of course, in college there was nobody to read braille, so there were no braille books. There was no—so everything was done by reading off the tape. I would go to the bookstore and buy my book just

like everybody else. Read off the tape and listen to the tape. Glad that class is over, now I can erase that tape. And then I had a math tutor because they had, you know, math was something that you had—it involved more than just reading. So I had to have somebody that would help me, actually help me look at the graphs and look at the charts and do the calculations and all that. Later on I had tutors for statistics. I don't remember what all math courses I had, business math and some other classes. That was always a tutor. They had a program they called special service and I'm sure it still exists in some form. I don't know what they call it now. But they had a program called special services and they had students there that were—I think they were paid even by the university or by the state for tutoring. And so we would call, "I need a math tutor. I'm taking business math 101." "Okay, here's your tutor. You get together and meet." And I remember going over to the business building at eight o'clock at night to meet with my tutor because I had an assignment. I think most of the student tutors were graduate students, so they had their work too, so they'd call me and say, "Okay, come over at eight o'clock and I'll help you do your assignment." Or whatever, you know.

DM:

Squeeze you in where they could.

JS:

Right.

DM:

So this was attached—not attached to the library, but a barracks?

JS:

This was a barracks building—I don't know; there were several of them. There wasn't just one. There were several of them at the time.

DM:

Was it associated with the library or was it a separate—

JS:

It was a separate building. It was a standalone building.

DM:

I wonder what department ran that. I don't guess you ever—

JS:

I don't know. The commission for the blind had an office on campus. They actually had a counselor that had an office on campus. At that time, she was in West Hall. So I don't know

really if the commission for the blind—I think they probably are the ones that provided the tape recorders and the tapes and all that. As far as I know.

DM:

Jon, how would you make your way around campus?

JS:

I used a cane. I used my vision, of course, but I learned to use a cane and I would kind of make my way around with my cane and you know, I'd just have people help me. We didn't have mobility instructors as such. I'd say, gosh, I don't know where that building is, so I'd have someone walk it with me several times until I got comfortable with how to get there.

DM:

You know, we all still have that problem (Laughter); even more so now with all the buildings. Okay. Was it difficult to find your route and remember your route or did you pick up on that pretty quickly and were soon able to do it yourself?

JS:

Yeah. I would pick up pretty quickly. If it was a building that I didn't have to go to very often—I remember getting lost trying to find the English building. That building never appealed to me. There was always something about that building that I never did care for.

DM:

The English—the one that was kind of serrated, it jogged this way and that—

JS:

Yes, exactly. Yes it did.

DM:

They finally tore that down, you'll be happy to know.

JS:

Thank goodness.

DM:

Not many people liked that.

JS:

I never liked the English building, but luckily I only had a summer class or two in that building.

DM:

Okay. I'm going to pause this.

(pause in recording)

DM:

So I've got it back on now. And so you were able to find your way around campus fairly well. What's the difference in then and now? Are there any differences for you getting around campus? Obviously the layout is different.

JS:

Obviously. My daughter is a student currently. When we came to tour the campus before she started back four or five years ago, I said, "Oh, Emily, this is Tech, I'll show you around." Well, that lasted about five minutes. "What, that building's not there anymore? Oh." At the time, the SUB [Student Union Building] was a one-story building with no Barnes and Noble. The bookstore was a separate building on 14th Street. And so yeah, things have changed very, very much.

DM:

But as far as getting across the street and things like that, is it any more difficult or less difficult now? I know that when you cross University, there are audible crossings and things like that. You've probably not encountered those yet.

JS:

No. When I was in junior high, we went to the school for the blind for three summers. They had a program at first for students of public schools. It was not for the students who went to the blind school. And they taught us mobility, how to use a cane. We had different classes. We had a shop class. We had some other classes. And it was fun, too. It was a fun time. [We] met blind people from all over Texas.

DM:

And you took a shop class.

JS:

You took a shop class, learned how to—

DM:

How did you do that?

JS:

[They] taught us how to use a miter saw. We didn't use a table saw—

DM:

Not power tools.

JS:

Not power tools, but we used a drill press. We used a plane. We used—just woodwork we used. And the teachers taught us, this is what—they had a little house, a miniature house in the middle of the shop and you could take the floor out. These are floor joists; these are what hold the floor up.

DM:

Pretty cool.

JS:

This is how the windows go in. It was really cool. I built a box, a little—I don't know how to describe it, but it was kind of like a jewelry box. It wasn't fancy or anything. But hey, I built a box and put hinges on it and the lid opened and closed.

DM:

That is neat.

JS:

So that was fun. We had other classes. They had a cooking class there. We had a class called daily living skills. We learned how to make the bed. We learned how to pack a suitcase. We learned how to tie a tie. We learned how to iron a shirt. Things like that.

DM:

I'm so glad you took the cooking school because Judy later on—

JS:

Yes, yes, she did. Before I got married, Judy said, "You got to cook me a meal. I want to see this." She said, "Can you cook?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Show me." So I had to cook her a meal.

DM:

What about back at Idalou schools? Was it difficult to get around or easy enough to get around the school campus or the school buildings?

JS:

No. Of course, Idalou is small, so there was one high school. We'd go across the street for lunch at the little store there. We called it the high school store or the junior high store. And they sold hamburgers and things like that. We'd go across the street for lunch. My mother would give us fifty cents a day, because at that time, you could buy a hamburger and a coke and French fries for fifty cents. But hey, I didn't want to spend all my money on lunch because if I had money left over, I could save it to buy records with. So I'd get a glass of water, which was free, and a bag of chips, which was a dime, and that was my lunch. Because I knew when I got home from school, my mother would feed me and I wouldn't have to worry that I was starving. So I saved forty cents that day, and I could save three or four days or a week or two and have enough to buy a record.

DM:

The LPs.

JS:

Yeah, the LPs.

DM:

Pretty good. Well you know even if it's not difficult to get around the campus or a building, you still have masses of people going this way and that. Is that an especial challenge?

JS:

The bicycles were always a challenge. I'd be walking a class and a whoosh. Well, that was a bicycle. And I'm just thankful that they didn't run over me. Because, it's like, aren't the sidewalks for pedestrians? But they didn't—I understand that's still a problem.

DM:

It is a problem.

JS:

But yeah. And of course I learned to not be shy. If I got someplace where I didn't know where I was, "Hey, where am I? How far am I away from wherever?" I just stopped somebody and would say, "I'm lost. I don't know where I am." And they'd try to tell me how to go, you know.

DM:

Right. Okay. I want to read you this quote from a newspaper article and get your comment on it. This is about when you were in Idalou, so we're kind of bouncing around here, but let's go back to Idalou a minute. This is a quote from one of your—I think an older classmate, Joyce Snodgrass. I don't know if you'll remember her or not, but she says about your mother, "Their

mother never treated them as if they were blind. It was in the days before computers and they used to carry their typewriter tables down the hall from class to class. They just fit in and always had a sense of humor.” But I think that’s especially interesting where she says your mother never treated you so much like there was a—like there was a big difference or something.

JS:

We were told from day one that there wasn’t too many things we couldn’t do. Maybe we couldn’t drive a car, maybe we couldn’t drive a tractor or play football, but other than that we could do pretty much whatever we wanted. I know my parents I’m sure had some sleepless nights worrying about this or that, but they never showed it. We were always—from when we got to Idalou and were there with no braille teacher and no—we had to do everything to compete with our sighted counterparts, if you want to put it that way. I mean, we were—that was cool. That was great.

DM:

Oh, good.

JS:

That was marvelous. You don’t have to go to the braille class anymore. You don’t have to—you go to math, you go to any class that they go to. We didn’t—I wanted to take band, we never took band. I don’t know if money was an issue. My parents were not rich. I don’t remember—I never missed a meal, of course. But there was never any—I guess they didn’t want to buy instruments or didn’t want the noise, who knows. We were never encouraged to be in the band, so we were in choir.

DM:

It was enough to listen to your Beatles.

JS:

Exactly. So we were in choir. And I loved choir. And you know, so yeah. When we were in seventh grade, we took P.E. [Physical Education] and that was not fun because teachers didn’t know what to do with us, basically. And we didn’t care. We didn’t necessarily want to run track or, obviously we didn’t play volleyball, so after about the eighth grade, the principal said, “You know what? Why don’t you all just take a study hall or we’ll figure out something. You all don’t have to do that.” And that was fine with me. I didn’t care to miss P.E.

DM:

Was there any kind of physical exercise or anything like that though that they had you do in school?

JS:

No, not after seventh or eighth grade.

DM:

Can you tell me about going to Austin in the summertime?

JS:

Austin was fun.

DM:

Now, this was in high school years.

JS:

This was in junior—yeah, this was between eighth and ninth grade. And we went for three summers. The first summer, it was for what they call public school kids only. So everybody that went there was from some school in Texas where they had been mainstreamed like we had been. The second summer and third summer they opened it up to students of the blind school. So there were students, there were students like we were that were from other schools and then there were some students that were full-time students at the school during the winter and the fall. To me, there was a noticeable difference. I made lots of friends there from people that were full-time students at the Texas School for the Blind. But you could tell which ones were and which ones were not because at the blind school, the coke machines had braille on them. Well, that was cool because you knew if you were getting a Coke or a Dr. Pepper or whatever. But you know, that's not the real world. And it was fun having stuff labeled; having everything geared toward being blind. But it wasn't reality for me. To me, these people kind of expected it. And that was kind of—that was the way it always was.

DM:

Let me ask you this way: do you feel that you were better-prepared for the work world by being mainstreamed?

JS:

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

DM:

So this was a three-summer program?

JS:

Yeah, this was for three summers and they taught us what they call mobility classes. We would learn how to use a cane, we learned how to get around the campus at the Texas School for the

Blind. After we learned how to get around the campus, the mobility teacher would take us in a car. And we went to what used to be called "The Drag". I don't know if it's still called that or not in Austin; someplace where we learned how to cross the street. You listen for the cars that are going parallel to you. And when the cars parallel to you are going, you know that's your green light and you can go. When the cars in front of you start going, then you know there's a stoplight and you should not go. And then after we mastered that area of town, then we went downtown and learned how to navigate downtown, crossing bigger streets; going into buildings. One of my assignments was to go into a department store and find out where the such-and-such department was. And of course, I had no idea, so I had to ask. And when they told me, I'd say, "Okay, now tell me where that is. Tell me how I get there." The clerk or the person in the store would say, okay, you go up the escalator—well, where's the escalator? Well, you have to go down and turn a left or whatever. That was my assignment for that day, was to find a certain department. So we learned how to do that. That was mobility class. And then like I said, we had the daily living skills. We learned how to do household things and we had the cooking classes and we had recreation. We learned—we'd have dances on Saturday night. And we would meet the kids that way and have fun and have dances and then they had a little snack bar. During the break between classes you could go to the snack bar and maybe you were a student and you worked at the snack bar. You learned how to make fountain drinks or you learned how to—it wasn't a burger place. It was just vending machines and fountain drinks and snacks and stuff. So you could go there and get you a glass of tea or whatever. Always on the weekend they would plan things for us to do. And it was fun. I met some great people there. Of course, after my wife and I got married, the story was—I'd say, "Well, I knew so and so. They went to the blind school when I was there. They're from El Paso. Don't you know them? They're blind. Don't you know all the blind people? Well, no." That was kind of the standing joke. "Oh, they're blind, you must know them."

DM:

Let's get back to Texas Tech for a little bit. I want to ask you about just kind of your general classroom experience, the faculty that you remember. Tell me a little bit more about dorm life if you don't mind.

JS:

Dorm life was good. I had different roommates; several different roommates. Well, I had one my freshman year. He—his best friend was there and so they hung around a lot. Then one day he said, "You know, I really want to room with this guy. We've been friends. So I really want to room with him." I said, "Okay." He said, "There's a guy down the hall that's living by himself right now. Why don't you go room with him?" I said, "I don't know him." "Oh, he seems real nice." So I went and knocked on his door and said, "I'm looking for a room, can I move in with you." And he said, "Sure." We got to be great friends. For three years we roomed together. And he was very soft-spoken, very quiet, very studious person. We got along great.

DM:

Were you in Murdough the whole time, four years?

JS:

No, for three years. The fourth year I had two friends that I had gotten to know and we moved out and got our own apartment. And it was within walking distance of the campus, so I could still walk to class.

DM:

Okay. And what streets did you have to cross?

JS:

I had to cross—it seems like it was on Avenue U or something, so I had to cross University and maybe like Broadway, some of those streets there. I can still tell you a lot of the—when my daughter came up here as a student, I was—what, there's no College Inn anymore? There's no Broadway Drug? There's no this and that, the places we always used to go to.

DM:

What are some of the classes and some of the faculty that stick in your mind?

JS:

I had a very cool management—introduction to business management professor. It was a huge class. It was in the—I don't remember what they called it, but it was at the room—at the time, there was a big room in the business administration building that was like, three hundred students. And it would have the overhead. And this professor one day—I remember specifically he said, "Okay, I'm going to describe everything on the overhead today because we have a student that can't see it." And I was so impressed that out of three hundred people in that class, he took the time to explain the overheads to me. He was the exception. I mean, all my professors were great for the most part. There was a few that I just didn't care for their teaching style, but that had nothing to do with that fact that I was blind. But most of the time—of course, on the first day of class, after class, I have to say, "Hey, my name's Jon Sitton, I don't see. Can we figure out a little—" and we'd decide how we're going to take tests or how we're going to do this or that. A lot of the professors, I would go to their office and they would give me an oral test. If it was something like math or something like that, they would give me the test and my tutor would help me take it. They didn't care that I wasn't sitting in class. It just depended on what the course was and how it was structured. I remember a lot of my tests were oral just by professors giving it to me. Sometimes—I don't even remember writing that much stuff in tests. Of course, I had assignments, I had to do essays and things like that. And all those were on the typewriter. But there was—I took a computer class. Of course, it was the time when computer meant going to the computer lab and using—

DM:

Fortran.

JS:

Yes, punch cards and Fortran and the teacher flat did not know what to do with me and I didn't know what to do. I think I dropped the class and took it another time with another teacher and just kind of talked about things. I don't remember how that all came about exactly.

DM:

Who was the business teacher you were talking about?

JS:

His name was Dr. Justis. Bob Justis. He was great.

DM:

What would you do otherwise if someone was showing slides?

JS:

A lot of times I would just take notes. And I would just have to rely on whatever they said. I took notes in class. Of course, you couldn't take your brailier to class because number one, it made noise and number two, you didn't want to carry it all over campus. So I used the slate and stylus. The slate is a little metal object that has little indentations for the dots and the stylus. You actually poke the letters through the paper.

DM:

It seems slow.

JS:

It is very slow. So that was my preferred method. The only other option was to record the class, and if I did that, which I didn't want to do, because then it was like going to class twice. Then after class, you had to go back and listen to it again and take your notes. So I didn't like that, because that was very time-consuming. If I did record the class, of course I had to get the professor's permission. This is what I want to do because it goes too fast for me to take notes. This is what I need is a recording. Do I have your permission to record the class. And of course, most—I think they all said yes, but I wasn't going to do it without getting their permission. So that was—I took notes. Most of my classes I would just take notes. Unfortunately, I remember one time falling asleep and it was one of those classes where the back of the room was higher. They had the step. The higher your step was, the more you were to the back of the room.

DM:

An amphitheater—

JS:

Yes. So I dropped my stylus and it rolled down to the front of the classroom and the professor picked it up and handed it to me and I was very embarrassed.

DM:

I bet we all did that once or twice. (Laughter)

JS:

Yes.

DM:

What about activities on campus beyond all of the study and the tutoring? You were in some organizations.

JS:

I was in the business—what is it called? Business Council?

DM:

Business Administration Student Council is what I wrote down here.

JS:

I think that was it.

DM:

Okay.

JS:

We would have meetings about once or twice a month or something, I'm not sure exactly. Maybe once a week. And then we had a room where—that had to be manned all day by—if you had a class or period where you didn't have a class, you'd go be in the BA council room and somebody would come in, what is this? I want to know what y'all do. Then you tell them about the BA council or whatever. And so I manned that room. It was just—it was just an organization to help students learn about business. We had a program where we would actually interview prospective professors. And that was fun. I enjoyed doing that. Got to interview a few people to see, okay, if you come to Tech, what is your—what do you want to bring to this school? What's your style of teaching? And that was fun. I got to sit on several interviews like that.

DM:

What was Sigma Iota Epsilon?

JS:

That was a management fraternity that I thought would be—well, I'm a management major. I should join this fraternity. I went to a meeting. They stood around and talked and had the keg in the middle of the room as the center of attention. And I said, "Okay, I've gone to a meeting. I'll put that on my resume." And that was the only meeting I ever attended. I'm sure they do worthwhile projects. I actually have no idea what they do besides that. Because that was the only meeting I attended. I'm sure it was a social function, but I said, "I got better things to do than stand around the keg." So I never went back and they probably didn't know who I was. That was just—that was a one-time deal and I said, "I don't need to go back." So I didn't.

DM:

I noticed that you and your brothers were in the Lion's Club. Tech Lion's Club.

JS:

Tech formed a Lion's Club to—I guess to try to get students interested and then, you know, as they would go on—and I was, I guess you'd call, a charter member of the Texas Tech Lion's Club. To my knowledge, it didn't last too long.

DM:

I don't know about it, but there are a lot of things on campus I don't know about.

JS:

I think after most of us graduated, that was pretty much it. I don't know why, or if it just didn't do what they thought it was going to do. When I got out of college, I said, "Gosh, I'm a member of the Lion's Club! I could go join a Lion's Club somewhere and tell them I'm a member!" But I never did it.

DM:

Okay. And then the Texas Student Association for the Handicapped.

JS:

That was—

DM:

A Tech Student Association, I'm sorry.

JS:

Yes. I was actually president of that one semester or one year.

DM:

Well, you were vice-president of the Lion's Club, I have down here. Does that sound right?

JS:

Your memory's better than mine.

DM:

Got that out of the La Ventana.

JS:

Okay. I don't remember that. The Tech—what did you call it?

DM:

Texas Tech Student Association for the Handicapped.

JS:

That was an organization that was there just to assist the blind students and to let them know what campus life was all about, kind of introduce you to the reading program and the different services that were available. We would have meetings and we would talk about things that were going on, any problems that we were having. It was just—and it was also a social thing. We didn't have any like big fundraisers, it wasn't that kind of thing. We didn't walk for breast cancer or anything like that. It was just a time for us to get together and discuss issues and things that we thought would be nice to change and things like that.

DM:

On campus.

JS:

Yeah.

DM:

But now, this was for the handicapped, they called it. This was for those who were blind, those who were deaf, presumably—

JS:

No. It was just—well, it was just for the blind, whether—those are the only people that ever came as far as I knew. It was just for blind people.

DM:

And so you graduated in 1976.

JS:

I did. I graduated in four years.

DM:

Bachelor of Business Administration?

JS:

Bachelor of Business Administration. I didn't take a lot of hours. I only had to—I think I ended up with a hundred and twenty-two hours, which was just about the least you could have and graduate. And I went most of the summer sessions just because I didn't usually take more than twelve or thirteen hours at a time. And I wanted to graduate in four years. So I would go to the summer sessions also and I managed to do it. I managed to graduate in four years, which was my goal.

DM:

Your degree is Bachelor of Business Administration, but what specifically was your focus?

JS:

Business management.

DM:

Management, okay.

JS:

They didn't really have a personnel management focus, it was business management. I was more interested in personnel management, so that was kind of what I thought I would do, or what my interest was. Yeah, it was business management, but my interest was personnel management. I actually had a job on campus my last semester and I worked at the—I don't know what they call it, but it's the office where you go to find a job?

DM:

Placement, maybe.

JS:

Placement. The man was real—his name was Mr. Hudson. And there was another lady that worked there. Different departments would call up and say, "I need a secretary, this is what the requirements are, this is what I need, this is how many hours a week they'll work." And this

wasn't just for students. This was for all positions on campus. And he would fill out a card whenever they would call. And then he let me braille on the card the job requirements and the job description. People would come in for an interview and I would actually get to interview them. And that was fun. I liked that.

DM:

How about placement for you? Because you were approaching graduation, was there any effort to help find you a job or were you—did you have a direction to follow in procuring a job?

JS:

I had an advisor in the business administration department. Frankly, either I didn't know what to ask or they didn't know what questions I needed answered, so I got very little assistance from them. I'm not saying it was their fault. Maybe I just didn't know what I wanted to do. But I didn't get much assistance from them. The commission for the blind had an office on campus and there was a counselor, and her job was to help students find jobs. I mean, that was pretty much what she did. While we were students, her job was to help us get what we needed. They actually paid—we would get a—we had to fill out a form at the end of the month that said how many readers we had, how many hours did they read for us, and then they would send us a check and we would pay our readers. So that was one of the things they did. But then at the end of graduation, or upon graduation, then she assisted me in finding a job. And that was done by the commission for the blind. That's basically what they do. After you are successfully employed, then they close your case. Several years ago, I needed—I thought I wanted a new computer for my home use, and I needed software which is expensive. So I called the commission for the blind and I said, "I need a new computer and I need some software, can you help me?" and they said, "Are you employed?" And I said, "Yes." And they said, "No, sorry, we can't help you. We're in the business of helping people get what they need to be employed. If you're already employed, buy your own computer," you know, basically. They were very nice but they made it very clear that that was not their job. Their job was to assist blind people in getting employment or getting training to be employed or whatever they needed to get employed.

DM:

Do you remember the name of the lady at Tech?

JS:

Shirley? Oh dear. Oh. If you hadn't asked me, I probably could have told you.

DM:

That's okay.

JS:

I do not—she was an unusual name.

DM:

It might come to you later.

JS:

It might. She was very good. But I do not remember.

DM:

If you think of it, let me know, whether today or some other time.

JS:

I can ask my brothers. They'll know. Sharon or Shirley or Sherry or something like that. But I cannot remember her last name. I remember she was from someplace up north. Everything was "youse guys."

DM:

Youse guys.

JS:

Youse guys. And I'll probably think of her name later. But she was good.

DM:

So what happened after graduation?

JS:

Well, I graduated in May. My parents decided that I needed to stay in Lubbock because certainly there were no jobs in Idalou or on the farm. So I needed to stay in Lubbock and look for a job, so I got my own apartment and basically spent the summer trying to find a job. I went to several interviews and nothing worked out. Finally, the commission—we just called it the commission for short, the commission for the blind. So the commission helped me get a job at a personnel agency. And my job was to help—it was like an employment agency, people would come in looking for jobs, send them out on interviews, hopefully they'll get a job so you can get paid. That was straight commission. But she gave me fifty dollars a week against a draw, so that when I did place somebody, whatever money I made would go toward the draw. I think I ended up there kind of breaking even. So it was never—that only lasted for like three months or four months. I think I got the job in September and then I quit in December because I got my permanent job at that point. But they helped me also get my permanent job, my job after that,

which was working for the Social Security Administration, which is what I've done for thirty-six years.

DM:

That's great.

JS:

The lady at the commission for the blind knew that I was not making enough to live on at the personnel agency and certainly was not going to be—that was not my—whatever you call it. Cup of tea, I guess. So she called me one day at work and said, "Social Security is hiring blind employees. They have a program. Are you interested?" And I said, "Yes," and she said, "Oh, there's only one thing. If you take the job, you have to move to Houston because that's where the office is that you'd be working." I said, "Fine, I'll go. I have an aunt that lives in Houston." I had no idea that she lived a half hour or forty miles away. I didn't know how big Houston was. My parents were comfortable. "Oh, you have your Aunt Lois! She lives there, you can go stay with her." Okay, she lives across town. But they didn't know that.

DM:

Never any trepidation, just like, "Yeah, good."

JS:

Right, right, yeah. So I said, "Hey." So the rest is history.

DM:

Wow. And how did you work into the job? Did you pick it up quickly?

JS:

I went to training. At that time, this was in '77, they were hiring lots of blind people. The SSI program, Supplemental Security Income program was very new. And that was a program to assist the blind, basically. To get SSI, you have to be sixty-five or blind or disabled and have limited income. Social Security was trying to get blind people off of SSI and get them employed. So they hired a whole bunch of blind people during those years. And they had a central training program in Los Angeles, California. So I went to Los Angeles for eight or nine weeks. And went to class every day and learned everything that they taught about Social Security. All the people in my class, there were twelve people in the class, when we got out of the class, we all went to various parts of the country working in different offices. I went to Houston. There were some people that stayed in Los Angeles. Some people—there was a guy that went to Dallas and he's still there. All over the country. And so once we completed our training we went to the various offices.

DM:

Can you explain pretty much what you started out doing and is it the same thing you do now?

JS:

I started out in what is called the teleservice center. There are about thirty teleservice centers throughout the country. Now the teleservice centers answer the 1-800 number. There's a national 800 number that you call Social Security and it's going to be answered by someone in one of these teleservice centers. Whoever—wherever there's a call waiting to be answered, someone will pick it up. It's all controlled by computers and calls go to wherever they're needed. Back in the day when I started there, it was all local. We only answered calls for the Houston area. We were the only number that was listed in the phone book. So if you wanted to call Social Security, you called our office, because that was the only number that was listed. You thought you were calling the local office, and people still do. So they think they're calling the local office and they want to speak with the lady in the back with the red hair that sits by the window. "No ma'am, I'm sorry, I'm not in that office." "Well, where are you?" "Well, I'm in Houston." "Houston?" So they think—but then you—I take questions, and since now we're national and we take calls from all over the country, I never know where my next call is coming from. I very rarely ever get calls from Houston now. Back then, all my calls were from Houston when it was local. But when we went national, I get calls from all over the country. And it's everything from how do I get a Social Security card to—my husband just died, how do I sign up for benefits. The whole gambit of Social Security.

DM:

I see. So you have to know it all.

JS:

Yeah. And you don't. You don't know it all.

DM:

But you know—

JS:

You know how to find out. Right, right. And if you can't help them—some things, they do need to speak with a local office about. If they're actually filing a claim for benefits, then they do have to speak with someone in the local office. So you either give them the number for the local office or you find out how they can best be served and help them get in touch with the local office or make an appointment if need be for them to go or speak with someone by phone. So that's—there's a lot of referral. But things we can do, we can do change of address, we do direct deposit, we do, you know, I can send you this form. Of course, now everything is, you can go on our

website and I'll tell you how to do that. You can look up this, you know. Back then it wasn't that way but now it is.

DM:

Well, it must be a job that you like pretty well. You've been with it a long time.

JS:

I do. It's challenging. Dealing with the public is a challenge because people don't call Social Security because they're happy. I mean, you don't say, "Gosh, I think I'll call Social Security today and see what's going on." Either you have a problem with your card, you need something right away, your husband has just died, you know. People don't call—you got this letter saying that somebody made a mistake and your overpaid thousands of dollars and you don't have the money to pay that money back.

DM:

Sometimes you get irate people, I guess.

JS:

Yes, yes you do.

DM:

So you have to know how to unruffle feathers.

JS:

Yes. And if they say, "I want to talk to a supervisor." Then you have to say, "Yes ma'am, I'll let you talk to a supervisor." And you pass them on to the supervisor, because if that's what they want, that's what they get. Even if you can help them. If they ask to speak to a supervisor, they have a right to do that.

DM:

Right, okay. Have you given a thought to retirement?

JS:

Yes, I think about. Of course, the thing is I talk to people every day that are retiring. Oh, that sounds good, maybe I'll do that someday. But yeah, I think about it.

DM:

What would you do in retirement?

JS:

I have no idea. I have a daughter and of course right now, she's in college. She's going to Tech. So we're doing the student loan thing right now. So I think I'm going to be working for a while to pay off student loans.

DM:

Nice time to have a job.

JS:

Exactly. Exactly. And once she's out of school and locates to wherever she's going to be, then if that involves someday being close to the grandkids, then I'll retire and go play with the grandkids. Who knows? I don't know. God knows. He's in control. I don't know. Me and my wife have said, "Gosh, I guess we'll move to wherever Emily moves to." I don't know. So we'll see.

DM:

Okay. Tell me about Judy.

JS:

Judy is amazing.

DM:

What's her maiden name, by the way?

JS:

Her maiden name was Vasek. V-A-S-E-K, but it's Czech. So it's not "va-sek." A lot of people pronounce it "va-sek." And there is a V-A-C-E-K, but her name is V-A-S-E-K and they're Czech, so they pronounce it "va-shek." She is one of seven sisters. One of them passed away, so there's six left. She is—I met her playing beep baseball.

DM:

You need to tell me all about this on recording.

JS:

Beep baseball, when I first came to Houston and I was getting to know people and all that, somebody introduced me, said, "Oh, you ought to come out and play beep baseball." "What's that?" "Well, the Lighthouse [Lighthouse for the Blind] runs it. And it's a sport and you go out there and everybody is blindfolded." Contrary to popular belief, most people are not totally blind. Most people have some degree of vision, but on the beep baseball field everybody needs to be even.

DM:

Level the playing field.

JS:

So if you can see at all, they blindfold you. So all the blind people are out—when it's your turn up at bat, your team's at bat, then you have a ball that's bigger—it's a softball, but it's bigger than a softball. It's not huge, but it is bigger than a regulation softball. But it has a beeper in it and a speaker and a little battery. And when you pull out the pin, it beeps. It goes very fast. "Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep." And it beeps and when you are up at bat, the catcher—I mean, I'm sorry, the pitcher is on your team.

DM:

And he's sighted.

JS:

He's sighted. He wants to pitch to you. The goal is for him to make sure that you can hit the ball. That's what he wants, is for you to hit the ball because he wants a run for his team. So he says, "Ready? Ball." And when he says ball, the ball is leaving his hand. You have to figure out how long it's going to take for the ball to get to you so that you can swing and hit the ball. And it's just a matter of practice, it's just a matter of timing, it's just a matter of you getting the bat level. I don't know how many times, no, your bat wasn't level, you dropped the bat. You need to level out your swing. Because you know, he wants to pitch to you.

DM:

Does the sound of the beep help at all?

JS:

Not really. Not in batting. It's all a matter of timing. You have to know that from the time he says ball, there's just a second or so before you have to hit. Because by the time you hear the ball beeping, it's too late. You've already missed it by then. So beeping doesn't really help if you're batting. Beeping is for the defense. So after you hit the ball, it's either a foul ball, meaning it only went so many feet or it didn't go far enough. If it's not a foul ball, then the umpire will make the base, one of the bases, buzz. There are two bases. First and third. That's all there are. When one of the bases buzz, and you don't know which one it's going to be, the umpire decides—if the ball's going one direction, he's probably going to make the base beep in the other direction, or the base buzz. Like if the ball goes out to center field, he's probably going to make first base beep, because it's not going where the ball is and he doesn't want you to go where the ball is. Because you might run into somebody that's out in the field looking for the ball. So he's going to make one of the bases buzz. And you listen for which base is buzzing and as soon as you figure out which base is buzzing—the bases look like foam cylinders. They're probably

maybe a foot around and they're maybe five feet tall. And they stand up and they have a buzzer on them. Your job as the batter after you hit the ball is to run to the base and get there as fast as you can. And if you get to the base before the opposing team that's in the field, their job is once the ball is hit, they are out in the field, spread out throughout the field and they have to find the ball that's beeping. And that's where they have to listen for the ball to find it. And so they're—"No, I missed it, it went by me, can you get it?" Well, somebody that's behind them, they'll, "Okay, I hear it, I'm going for it." And they'll try to find it. If I get to the base and you're on the opposing team, and if I get to base and touch the base with any part of my body—I would run with my arms stretched out so that if I didn't hit it with my body, my arm would hit it. It doesn't matter as long as any part of my body touches the base, that's a run. I don't have to go back home. All I have to do is whatever base I'm going to touch the base. Then that's a run. I'm done. I get a point. If I touch the base before the opposing team finds the ball—and if you're on the opposing team, you're down on the ground and you're searching for the ball and you're running to find it. And if you find it, you have to hold it up in the air above your head and say, "I've got it!" And if you find it before I get to the base, then I'm out. If I get to the base before you find the ball, that's a run.

DM:

That's pretty good. How many head-on collisions do you have? People are chasing the ball and—does that happen?

JS:

You do. There are spotters that are also on your team. They're out in the field. They are sighted. When the ball is hit, they can say one word. Usually they would say the name of the person, because we're all—we used to spread out in like a W formation. Maybe two people up front, then three people behind them so that wherever the ball was hit, we had a chance of finding it. So when the ball is hit, they can say one word and they would usually say a name. Like I was kind of the centerfield in the back. And if the ball was hit real hard, and it was going to go way far down to the center of the field, they'd say, "Jon!" And I'd say, "Okay, I'm listening for it." And we could talk, the blind people in the field, we can talk to each other. "Did you hear it?" "No, I can't hear it." "Where are you? Did you hear it?" "Yeah, I hear it." "I've almost got it." "Here it is. I've got it." And so if—"It went by me, you have to go get it." And we can talk, but all the spotters can do is say one word. And that's all they can say. The only other thing they can do if someone is about to run over somebody and they can see that it's going to be a disaster, they can say, "Stop!" And at that point, everybody stops, because you don't know whether you're the person who's going to get run over or you're the person that's about to run over somebody. So if they say stop, everybody stops. And that's their job.

DM:

It's a safeguard.

JS:

Right. Right.

DM:

So this brings us to Judy.

JS:

Yes. So Judy volunteered for the Lighthouse. She was a volunteer and she got introduced to beep baseball. So she was the catcher on our team. Catcher would stand behind the batter and first of all kind of position them in the batter box. "Okay, here's the bat, you need to stand facing this way because the ball's going to come at you from this direction and you need to kind of—oh, you're a strong hitter, so maybe you need to stand back a little bit." Or whatever. And so they would kind of—of course, after the ball is hit, then they—if you don't hit the ball, of course they have to catch it and go get it and bring it back and then you go, what is it, strike two or whatever. Because you get, you know—I think there was—you get five pitches. If it's a foul ball then that doesn't count. And so they would kind of help the batter get in place or go catch the ball if he didn't hit it or if she didn't hit it. It was a co—there were guys and girls. And so she—I tell people that Judy was the catcher of the team and she caught me. So that's where we met.

DM:

Where is she from, by the way?

JS:

She's from Rosenberg, Texas, which is close to Richmond, which is just outside of Houston. She grew up in the Houston area and that's where she's always lived.

DM:

Well, tell me about your dating and getting married.

JS:

We—she tells people, and I'll admit, I was not a good dater. I didn't know—I hadn't had many girlfriends. I didn't really know how to court, as they say. I didn't really know very much about it. I was not a good dater. I didn't always send flowers at the right time. But hey, somebody told Judy once, "Hey, it doesn't matter if he's a good dater, after you marry, you don't want a good dater anymore. It doesn't matter." So I'll admit, I was a little bit slow on the uptake. She says that she had to kind of help me along. I remember on our first date—of course I didn't drive, so she said—there was a movie called *Can You Hear What I See*, or *Can You See What I Hear*. It was about a blind guy. So Judy decided that we should go to the movies. So it was really her kind of asking me out and she has stories that I wouldn't bite the bullet or take the bait. At any rate, we went to the movies together and then after that we started seeing each other a little bit

more. It was fun. We decided—we found out that we had a lot of interests, the same interests. She was of the same faith, denomination that I was, which made it nice. We went to church together and that was fun, and did other things together. We started really dating I guess I should say around Memorial Day. We got married in November of that same year.

DM:

What year was that?

JS:

This was '82. We actually got engaged in August. I remember going home. She wanted to meet my mother and we decided that we would not get—we by then knew that we would get married, but we didn't know exactly when. And I took Judy to see my mom and she met my mother and everything. Mother says, "Well, it seems like Judy really loves you and you love her." I said, "Yeah, I think we're going to get married." And she said, "Oh? When are you thinking about getting married?" And this was in August. I said, "Oh, I'm not sure. Maybe April?" Because I didn't want to say, "We're going to get married next month!" "Well maybe April, we're not sure." She said, "Why wait so long?" It's like what? So we got married in November. I remember going to work one day and somebody said, "Well, how is it going with you and Judy?" I said, "You know what? In six months, we're either going to be married or broke up." It was really, to me, it was fast just because I didn't have a lot of experience, but it was—I remember nights when she would come to my apartment because of course she's the one with the car and then she'd have to go home alone. It was just—it was hard. We've been together for thirty—well, we got married in '82 so this would be thirty-one years. Love her more than ever.

DM:

Now tell me about Emily.

JS:

Emily—we were married for ten years before Emily was born. We didn't—we had pretty much decided we weren't going to have kids. Not that we didn't want kids, but that it wasn't probably going to happen. And then she came up pregnant. And it's like, "Wow."

DM:

I guess we're going to have kids.

JS:

Yeah, I guess we're going to have kids. I didn't know anything about raising kids, even babies much. I didn't have a baby sister or baby brother. So I didn't know too much about it. I'd been around babies a little bit, but not much. So Emily was born and the doctor kept us in the hospital longer than, she later admitted, longer than we really needed to be. But she wasn't sure we knew

what we were doing. She kept saying, “Are you all going to go--what are you all going to do when you leave the hospital?” Well, Judy’s sister has two kids. We’re going to go stay with her for a week or so. Okay. So then she later admitted that she wasn’t sure we could handle a baby.

DM:

Was there some concern because you were blind?

JS:

I think so. And just because—yeah, I think that was a lot of it. But we took Emily back for her checkup. “Oh, well, she looks like she’s doing good. She’s putting on weight. She’s eating well. Okay, you all are doing okay.” But I remember the first time Judy went to the grocery store or some place. I didn’t have any problem babysitting. I could sit with the baby and watch her sleep or whatever. But when it came time to change a diaper, oh my gosh, I didn’t know what to do. So I called a neighbor and she came over and changed the diaper. I said, “We can’t do this. This is crazy. I’ve got to learn how to change a diaper. But what if she falls off the table? That’ll be horrible.” Judy said, “Change her on the floor. She can’t fall off the floor.” I said, “Great idea.”

DM:

And quit looking for excuses to not change her diaper.

JS:

Yeah, exactly. So we had this little changing pad, and so I put her on the changing pad on the floor and changed her on the floor. Never had a problem. She couldn’t fall off the floor. So that worked out just fine. Emily and I—and I’m sorry, I get really emotional talking about Emily because she and Judy are the love of my life.

(Phone rings)

DM:

Let me pause this just a second.

(Pause in recording)

DM:

And so Emily grew up—you all were living in Sugarland at that time, is that right?

JS:

Yes. We bought a house in Sugarland in 1983. So we’ve lived there ever since then. Just got it paid for, praise the Lord! So Emily, that’s the only house she ever knew growing up. We’re very close. A lot of times when she was a kid, Judy had to go to the grocery store or Judy had to go

buy school supplies or whatever it was and it was just easier for me to stay home with Emily. So we made up our own games. Obviously I wasn't going to go help her learn to play basketball. So we made up our own games. And we made up cool games.

DM:

Okay, give me an example.

JS:

Oh, we had fun games. We would—Emily is an actress. She's always been an actress, ever since she was born. She's studying acting right now. She is an actress. We just want her to be a paid actress at some point.

ES:

That's the goal.

JS:

So when she was little, we would watch movies. And as soon as the movie was over, "Hey, let's play the movie." So we would act out the movie. One of her favorite movies was *Balto*. *Balto* is the story about a sled dog. So I was Balto and I was on the floor being the dog and she was the person that rode the sled and rode the dog. And I was all the voices. (raspy voice) Balto had a voice like—no, Steele was his name. Steele had a real deep voice. And some other dog had a different kind of voice, so I was the voices for all the dogs. We had great times doing movies and playing movies, acting out movies. If it wasn't that, it was going out in the yard and watching her learn to do cartwheels. Watching her ride her tricycle or whatever it was. We made up all kinds of games. In the morning, when it was time for her to go to school or go to daycare—because of course Judy and I both had full-time jobs. Judy is a records manager. She's a very successful consultant. She's employed, but she's full-time and always has been. Before daycare, of course Emily had to eat breakfast. So I would say, "Emily, time for your cereal." So she'd come in there and would pour her cereal. And I'd say, "Okay", and I'd get the carton of milk. "Okay, the cow's going to come now. Be nice to the cow. Pat the cow so she'll give you milk." So then we would pet the milk carton. "Okay cow, give me milk." And we just—silly games. We still play silly games these days. We're very close. And we have a great time together. So now that she's in college up here at Tech, we have our road trips, we call them. When it's time for fall semester to end and she's going to go home for Christmas, I fly up and we drive home together. And we have a great time in the car singing to our iPods and having a good time. So we are extremely close and I thank God for it.

DM:

What did you think about her coming all the way up to Lubbock?

JS:

Oh, I wanted her to go to Tech. Absolutely.

DM:

It's kind of become a family tradition.

JS:

Yeah. She's third generation. She didn't necessarily want to go to Tech at first. But the other schools that she wanted to go to just didn't pan out. So I said, "Okay Emily, just go up to go to orientation." I mean, she filled out—we filled out the application and she got accepted and she says, "I don't want to go to Tech, I want to go somewhere else." And I'm like, "Okay, just go to orientation. If you don't like it after the first semester, you don't have to go back." And they did their job at orientation. They got her hooked. She was a Red Raider.

DM:

(laughs) You have to watch out for that, Emily.

ES:

You just—I mean, they make you start bleeding red and black. You can't do anything else after that.

JS:

And I was thrilled, and am still thrilled to this day. My daughter is a Red Raider and I could not be happier.

DM:

John, I've pretty well exhausted my questions here. What else did you have on your list? I think we covered a lot, but there were some others, I believe.

JS:

We covered just about everything.

DM:

Funny how that happens.

ES:

Talk about your ankle.

JS:

Yes. Ten years ago, I took Emily—we have a neighborhood pool, and Judy had been socializing with some friends that day and so she got home and I said, “Why don’t me and Emily just go to the pool for a while? We’ll just go—I’ll go watch her swim.” She was ten, eleven, twelve? Eleven at the time. So Emily and I went to the pool and I was sitting by the side of the pool and she was swimming and then it got to be late and I said, “Emily, it’s time to get out of the pool, we have to go home.” And at that point, I fell in the pool because I was closer to the edge than I thought. And I said, “Oh, fell in the pool. Guess I’ll get out of the pool now. I could swim. I didn’t have a problem with that.” But I discovered I couldn’t get out because my ankle was hurt. And I had to pull myself out with my arms and then I couldn’t stand up. So I said, “Emily, call Mom, she’s going to have to come pick us up, I can’t walk.” So they helped me get—the lifeguard helped me get in the car and I got back home. I was in severe pain, so the next day, we went to the emergency room and they X-rayed my ankle and they said it was broken. And so I’m like, “Okay, gosh, this hurts, this is bad. I got to—” So they said, “You’re going to have surgery, go to an orthopedist.” So I went to the orthopedist the next day and he X-rayed and said, “Yeah, we’ve got to do surgery.” I said, “Just put it in a cast.” “No. This is a severe break. You have torn tendons. This requires surgery.”

ES:

They described it like a pretzel break. You can’t just break a pretzel in one spot; you break it in several spots.

JS:

It was shattered, yeah. So they did surgery. But before the surgery, I had to go for the general blood work up and all that. And they called me and said, “We can’t do surgery on you. You’re severely anemic. Your hemoglobin level is supposed to be twelve, thirteen. You’re a six. We can’t do surgery on you until we get you a blood transfusion. You got to have blood. You’re severely anemic.” So I went to the hospital, had my transfusion. They did surgery, they repaired my ankle. I was on a cast where I could not bear weight on it for six weeks, so I had to use a walker to get around because I could not bear any weight on it. Then after I got out of the hospital for that, they said, “We got to figure out why you’re losing blood. You’re very anemic. So you’re losing blood.” So I had to go to the—have a colonoscopy, they discovered a tumor in my colon, said, “You have colon cancer.” So I went through surgery for my colon cancer and had that taken care of and then had twenty-four chemo treatments. But I tell people that an angel pushed me into the pool because I had no idea. They said, “You had no symptoms?” I said, “Not really.” They said, “Weren’t you tired?” I said, “Yeah, I’m always tired. I get up at five o’clock every morning. I’m tired all the time.” I tell people that an angel pushed me into the pool because otherwise I wouldn’t have known that I had colon cancer. So the Lord—I don’t believe in coincidences. God is in the miracle business. And he has done so many things in my life that I cannot even begin to tell you how he has helped me and how he has blessed me. And that was

one of the big ones. So I went through chemo, I was out of work for about six weeks during the ankle and during the colon cancer. I had enough sick time where I'd never missed a paycheck and now I've earned it all back. I was able to get my chemo on an outpatient basis and get back to work. And now as long as I have my colonoscopies on a regular basis, I'm fine.

DM:

Everything is free and clear?

JS:

Everything is free and clear.

DM:

Isn't that incredible?

JS:

So God is good. Whatever you say, I say, "God is good."

DM:

Tell me about being a deacon.

JS:

The church that we—we've been members of several Baptist churches. The one we have now is Sugarland Baptist. We've been really blessed to be in that church. After—the first thing I did when we joined is I got in the choir because gosh, I said "this choir sounds great. I want to be in the choir." So the first week we joined I said, "I want to be in choir." And they said, "Come on." So I'm in the choir and I met lots of friends in the choir. Throughout the church we have a great Sunday school class. They were taking nominations for deacons—we'd been in the church two or three years. They said, "It's time for deacon nominations. If you want to nominate a deacon, fill this form out. Ask the person if they're willing to serve and if they are, fill the form out." And Judy said, "I think you should be a deacon." So I prayed about it and I said, "Okay." So she nominated me and they came and interviewed me, and said I met the qualifications. So I was ordained. My mother was able to come to the ordination ceremony. I've been a deacon since about, I don't know, five or six years maybe. I've been on the prayer team where we have prayer with people that come for prayer after the service. We also went to people's homes and had prayer with them. Prayer's a marvelous thing. God can do all things through—we can do all things through God who strengthens us. James tells us to pray for one another and that's what God expects us to do. I believe in my heart, with all my heart, that God listens. And I can pray about anything. I've lost—"God, I don't know where I put the whatever. Help me find it." Some people might think that's not a good thing to pray for, but I tell you, it works, and many, many things. My first inclination, anytime I have something I don't know what to do with, "Well, let

me go pray about it.” And the Lord is good and he has helped me many, many times through a crisis. And he will—in my colon cancer, I had such a peace that I was never alone. God was with me. And he gave me such a peace that if I was going to make it, he was going to help me through. If I wasn’t going to make it, then that was my time. And I had no fear. I have no doubt that I’m saved by grace and when I die, I will be in heaven with Jesus, and that is as clear to me as anything. I have no doubt of my final destination. And I thank God that when the time comes, my wife and my daughter, my parents, my brothers and sisters and their families will all be there. Praise God.

ES:

All three of you are ordained.

JS:

Yeah. My brothers—my one brother is a minister of music. He’s an ordained minister.

DM:

Is he the one at Lamesa?

JS:

No, he’s the one in Big Spring. My other brother is an ordained deacon also.

DM:

I was going to ask you, I think I know the answer to this, but I was going to ask you if you ever felt in your life that you were disadvantaged or that life was unfair, especially because of blindness.

JS:

No.

DM:

Did you ever go through a time in your life, at any age, where you thought—

JS:

Not really. I’m still waiting for them to make a car that I can drive, and I think that’ll happen with all the sensors and things that are on cars now that tell you when you’re going too fast or whatever. They’ll get a car that I can drive, so I’ll get me a car someday. But you know, I wish some things were different as far as—I wish people knew more how to relate to blind people in some cases.

DM:

Do you find people shy and standoffish?

JS:

Occasionally. People that I know of course are not. But other people, sometimes they just don't know what to do. And it's not that they're rude or anything, they don't know how to help you. And if somebody doesn't know what to do, I'd just as soon they ask, because I'll tell them if I don't need help or whatever. What can I say, God is good. I'm blessed. I'm very blessed. I don't feel—I think I'm a little bit slow at some things and some things I don't do maybe the way you do it. But I've got what I need to do my job, Social Security provides me with a computer that talks and has the magnification I need. I've got the same setup at home where I can read my own e-mail and use my computer and do that. I pay my bills through a software program.

DM:

The technology is a help.

JS:

Technology is wonderful. Technology is the blind person's best friend. There are so many things out there. Everything talks now. I've got a talking thermostat at home that if I want to change the temperature, I can change it—programmable. It's programmed. It takes me through the program steps and it talks to me. When Emily decides that the temperature needs to be changed, she goes and pushes the button and I can hear it.

ES:

It tells on me.

JS:

“Emily, are you in there changing the temperature again?” And there are so many things out there. Of course, technology is also expensive in some cases. But it's worth it. I use JAWS [Job Access With Speech], anybody that knows what JAWS is, it's the freedom scientific program for talking computers. JAWS is a wonderful program. It's not cheap, but it is worth it. And I use JAWS and Magic for magnification. It's great.

DM:

Can you use the enlargements on a computer screen to see anything at all? Can you see print?

JS:

Yes, but not with the enlargements just built-in. I have to use Magic—it's a special software. I can make my print anywhere from two to thirty times bigger. I can put one letter up on the screen and almost make the whole letter fill up the screen if I want to. I don't need it to be that big, but

Magic is a wonderful program. It works in conjunction with JAWS. So it's great—there are other programs out there that I've used, but to me, those are the best. But yes, it's a great—they're great tools. Whoever invented JAWS and Magic is a very intelligent person and I'm glad that they did it because I use them all the time.

DM:

What else did you have on your list, Jon?

JS:

I think that's about it.

DM:

Did you ever—we talked about this on the phone. Did you ever get an idea of when these articles might have come out in the *Avalanche-Journal*?

JS:

I know when we were about twelve there was a couple of reporters that came out to the house, and they were going to do some kind of big feature story. And I actually don't know if it ever actually came out or not. But they took many, many pictures. They went to our school, they observed us at school, they did interviews with our teachers. They took us to someplace called Rimrock City that was some kind of park or something.

DM:

Right here on the edge of town?

JS:

Yeah.

DM:

I think I know where that is.

JS:

But I don't ever remember hearing whether or not there was actually a story that came out about it.

DM:

I'll see what I can find out. Do you think that any of your brothers or sisters might have some snippet of information?

JS:

Possibly. My mother passed away two years ago. She had tons of stuff. But before she passed away, she had to move into assisted living and a lot of the artifacts got tossed and thrown aside for whatever reason. My sisters may have a few things, but I would love to be able—I know the *Avalanche-Journal* has a lot of stuff. If I just knew how to get to it.

DM:

Okay. Well, I'll see what I can find out. I might go ahead and talk to your brothers first just to see if they have—if they can narrow it down a little bit. But then we'll start looking through A-Js. We have the entire run of A-Js here.

JS:

Great. Well, I know there are stories from time to time. I know when I turned fifty, they did a story about me and my brothers turning fifty. And that was in August of 19—I mean, 2004.

DM:

Two thousand four.

JS:

So I know there's a story there somewhere. "The Sitton Brothers Turn Fifty". And of course there are stories—I know Don has had stories featuring him as he's worked in radio throughout the years.

DM:

And we have an article about Lon.

JS:

Yeah.

DM:

And that was in 2006.

JS:

There is an article—and I'm not sure how you would get it, but the Social Security internal publication, it's called *The Oasis*, it's an internal Social Security magazine. They published an article in 1989 that I was featured in because I was one of the first blind people that went to computer training in the nation. Me and like seven or eight other people went to Baltimore for computer—

End of interview.