

1 Deborah Leavy, interviewed by Karl Grossman at Planting Fields, Oyster Bay, New York on  
2 May 28, 2011.

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4 Karl Grossman: First if you can tell us how you got involved with Old Westbury, why you  
5 came and so forth?

6 Deborah Leavy: I was actually one of the high school planners. I was contacted because  
7 somebody who my parents knew and I knew —he knew me through my parents—knew  
8 Harris. And apparently the word came down that he knew this high school girl who was  
9 interested in political things and curious and interested in the world. They called me up  
10 and they asked me if I would come to Old Westbury after high school was over that day—I  
11 don't know what day of the week or however long it was—and come and advise them  
12 about opening this college. I said, "But I've never been to college." And they said, "Exactly!  
13 Your mind is clear, you have no preconceptions." So that's how open it seemed at the  
14 beginning.

15 Karl: What high school was that?

16 Deborah: Baldwin High School. On Long Island, South Shore, middle class, almost all white,  
17 actually we were integrated until I graduated.

18 Karl: And there was a family connection with Wofford you say?

19 Deborah: A family connection to—friends of my parents were friends with Harris Wofford.

20 Karl: And you became a planner essentially?

21 Deborah: A student planner, and I would come after school. My mother would pick me up  
22 and she would drop me off at the Clark estate. I sat around a table and people would  
23 discuss, "Should we do this? Should we have this?" And I was asked my opinion.

24 Karl: Did you think it was like a little nuts to have a high school student frame a college?

25 Deborah: I said my first reaction was, "I don't know anything about college." That seemed  
26 to be valuable because, as I said, there were no preconceptions. I didn't have any  
27 preconceptions. I didn't know what college was supposed to be like so it was really what I  
28 wanted coming into a college situation.

29 Karl: What were the kind of things, if you could remember, that you suggested?

30 Deborah: I don't. Hey, that was 1968. I really have no memory of what those discussions  
31 were about or what I suggested. I know that I was encouraged to speak my mind and I did.

32 Karl: Then you decided to enter the college that you planned?

33 Deborah: Yes, I applied to Old Westbury, and I was thrilled when I got in. I remember  
34 talking to whoever it was who called me to say I was admitted, and they said, "You thought  
35 there was any doubt?" I had like no idea of how these things worked.

36 Karl: What was it like?

37 Deborah: Coming to Old Westbury?

38 Karl: Yeah, what was Old Westbury like at that point for you?

39 Deborah: For me, it was personally, it was—it took a piece of me that had never been  
40 validated—it took a piece of me that had never been validated and let it grow. I was not  
41 popular in high school. I was not in a particular crowd. I was not in the political crowd. I  
42 didn't want to be in the smart crowd. I wanted to be in the popular crowd, but I wasn't in  
43 the popular crowd. There wasn't anybody like me, and here there were all these people  
44 like me, who understood me, who were looking for the same kinds of things that I was  
45 looking for.

46           They weren't all like me superficially. There were older students and black and  
47 Puerto Rican students. I remember one time being grilled by a group of the non-white  
48 students and asked if I believed in non-violence, and I said yes and they said, "Why?" and I  
49 said, "I don't think I would be very good at violence." I was valued for who I was and didn't  
50 have to pretend to be anybody else, so the "me" inside me really could grow.

51 Karl: What was the scene like? What was the culture like here, then?

52 Deborah: [5:05] There were a lot of meetings. There were a lot of discussions. There was  
53 nothing assumed. Everybody argued about everything. The co-ed bathrooms that have  
54 often been cited were a big issue. There were people who thought we should have co-ed  
55 bathrooms. It had never occurred to me one way or another. I'd always lived in a middle-  
56 class house. There was one student, an older student from Thailand, who gave an  
57 impassioned speech about how she would be very uncomfortable. And we did not have co-  
58 ed bathrooms based on her discomfort I think. We didn't want to impose that on anybody.

59           We separated into three factions pretty quickly within the first year. That was the  
60 "Groovin' in the Grass" faction, the White political faction, and the Non-White Caucus

61 Karl: The “Groovin’ in the Grass” would sort of be the sixties’ hippies?

62 Deborah: They were the people who took art or music or theater or they hung out  
63 together. They didn’t care about politics. I was in the political group. We, in the first  
64 semester, went into Ocean Hill-Brownsville, where there was a strike by the teachers union  
65 which was—how do I put this? My mother was a union person and could not believe I was  
66 crossing the picket line. I said at the age of seventeen, “But mom, it’s okay, the Black  
67 Panthers are protecting us.”

68 We went in because the teachers were striking for all the wrong reasons and we  
69 went in to teach the kids. I had just read *Summerhill* [A.S. Neill’s 1960 description of the  
70 experimental English boarding school that promoted self-regulation versus external  
71 discipline as an educational theory]. I thought we would all sit around in a circle. This is  
72 not what these kids wanted, they wanted structure. They said, “Teacher, where’s the  
73 weather? You got to put the weather on the board.” I just learned a tremendous amount  
74 from that practical experience comparing that book with what these kids were used to,  
75 what they wanted, what they thought they needed. It was tremendous to have those  
76 things—that dialogue between the academic and the real world that was going on pretty  
77 much constantly.

78 Karl: The political faction was very much from the left?

79 Deborah: There was nobody to the right of Hubert Humphrey

80 Karl: And you were comfortable with that?

81 Deborah: Absolutely, that’s the way it was.

82 Karl: Did your politics change here?

83 Deborah: They got more radical, my liberal orthodoxy was challenged. I remember  
84 phrases like, "By any means necessary," and I started scratching my head and wondering  
85 exactly what that would mean —"by any means necessary". What I might be called upon to  
86 do. The reality was not as threatening as the rhetoric. I think the challenge to my liberal  
87 orthodoxy was a good one and I retained my progressive politics throughout my life.

88 Karl: Which you really obtained here?

89 Deborah [8:20]: I grew up in a liberal household. I became more radicalized here. I  
90 remember one of my first jobs after I left here was working for the American Civil Liberties  
91 Union, which I thought was a pretty establishment organization. Eventually from there I  
92 went to law school which of course was even more establishment and I worked in the U.S.  
93 House and U.S. Senate. So I was working within the system. Then when I left there and  
94 went back to the ACLU it was, to me that was working on the outside all of a sudden and  
95 was not nearly as productive as working on the inside. There was a change in methods I  
96 guess for my politics, but not really that much for the way I saw the world.

97 Karl: Where do you live now?

98 Deborah: Outside of Philadelphia, on the Main Line.

99 Karl: You're still doing law now?

100 Deborah: No, I'm a painter.

101 Karl: Good for you.

102 Deborah: It is. It is very good for me. I got tired of it. I really wasn't a conventional lawyer.  
103 I mean I worked for the House, I worked for the Senate, I worked for the ACLU, and I didn't  
104 really go into court. I had a law degree that made me a lawyer. I was being paid to be  
105 angry at the ACLU and that wasn't a part of my personality that I really wanted to keep  
106 emphasizing.

107 Karl: You graduated from here?

108 Deborah: I did, there's a picture of me at graduation that somebody gave me today.  
109 Wearing my long Indian print halter dress.

110 Karl: Have you connected with the "new" Old Westbury at all?

111 Deborah: Not at all, I really liked what you had to say but my feeling was they said we  
112 failed well, that's it, forget it.

113 Karl: That's why it's sad. I didn't understand why you didn't understand.

114 Deborah: No, we knew, we were quoting, we didn't think we failed. We thought we  
115 succeeded so well that they closed us down. And that's what happened. When somebody  
116 —I guess Fran [Koster, former student] or Jay [Neugeboren, former faculty]—was saying  
117 that this idea was hatched after Berkeley, our thought was that they decided to take  
118 anybody who was in a state university and put them on one campus, give them whatever  
119 they wanted, keep the rest of it quiet and they wouldn't have a Berkeley. They couldn't  
120 even handle that. Eighty-seven students and they couldn't give us everything we wanted,  
121 big deal.

122 Grossman: I think what's more complicated, I think it had to do with the private colleges in  
123 Nassau County fearing a four-year liberal arts college—Adelphi, LIU, Hofstra. So that's why  
124 I think the Rockefeller administration did this experimental spin, non-traditional students  
125 and so forth. I think in hindsight when you look at it, why it happened the way it happened  
126 —upstate when those teacher colleges were flipped to become four-year liberal arts  
127 colleges that wasn't an issue, but here it was. I think that's why it became experimental.  
128 As a result of Old Westbury what did you end up doing?

129 Leavy: I ended up doing a whole lot of things but I think one of the things I got from Old  
130 Westbury was something that Harris said—we all called him Harris, Harris Wofford the  
131 first president—that Harris said that he wanted Old Westbury to accomplish. We learned  
132 to appreciate learning and to do it on a life-long basis. I did lots of different things in my  
133 life. I was a writer, I worked at the ACLU, I am a painter, and I worked at Capitol Hill. I had  
134 a lot of different career paths that I took here and there. I loved each one of them, and  
135 learned a lot from each one of them, and wasn't afraid to try new things.

136 Now people skip around a lot, but then that was a non-traditional path to have a  
137 number of different careers. That was the time when people would sign up with a  
138 corporation and stay there until they retired; that's no longer the case. It was different  
139 then and I credit Old Westbury with giving me the love of learning that let me explore a  
140 number of different paths and work situations and commit myself to different things in my  
141 life. It's all been very rewarding.

142 Grossman: I won't keep you here any longer.