

James C. Blaine

Interviewed by Ben L. Cohen

November, 1992

COHEN. This is an opportunity to talk with you, Jim Blaine, about your career.

Jim, let me ask you if have you had this kind of interview before?

BLAINE. Not in depth. I've had a talk with Frances Feldman and Bruce Jannsen on campus, but not in any depth.

COHEN. How did you get into the field of social work?

BLAINE. I was working my way through Chapman College, which at that time was on North Vermont. I had a baseball scholarship and I needed a part-time job to make ends meet. I heard about a part-time position in East Los Angeles on North St. Louis Street, at a branch of All Nations Foundation. I applied for the job and I lucked out and worked on a part-time basis. That was in October 1938.

COHEN. How about giving me a brief run down on the positions that you held in the field since 1938?

BLAINE. Okay, Ben. I was a part-timer for about six months, at which time the administrator left the Hollenbeck Social Center and I was offered the position on a provisional basis by Dr. Robert Kibben; he was the executive of the All Nations Foundation. He was satisfied with me and I enjoyed the work. Seemingly, there was an opportunity to help the young men and women as well as older persons in the community, and I stayed there until I went to military service in 1942.

COHEN. You were late in getting in! I got in in 1941.

BLAINE. We both have been around the track. I returned in 1945 and was offered a position with the agency which, at that time, was the All Nations Foundation on East Sixth St., 824 East Sixth St., in Los Angeles. I stayed with them as Director of the Boys Club and Camp and, later on, after about six years in that capacity, I was promoted to Assistant Agency Director. I stayed in that capacity through July of 1964 at which time, following a change of administration, I left all Nations. For the following two years I was a program consultant for the E.Y.O.A, working with indigenous leadership in East Los Angeles.

COHEN. Spell out E.Y.O.A.?

BLAINE. Economic Youth Opportunity Agency in Los Angeles. It was funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity. Originally it was called Y.O.B., Youth Opportunity Board. I was the community organizer who contacted the indigenous leadership in given areas, hopefully to gather enough data to prepare a proposal for funding through the anti-poverty program. I had the good luck to have a couple of proposals funded. I was there two years and I found it to be extremely frustrating. Primarily that was due to the bureaucracy and the bottom line of getting funds from the federal government down to the grass-root level where these needs could be met. The EYOA, in Los Angeles, was a part of the anti-poverty program headed by Sergeant Shriver in Washington, D.C.

My next position came about through a series of coincidences. I saw an ad in the paper that the Masonic Fraternity was looking for an administrator for their children's home in Covina, California. I applied for that position because I was looking a change at the time. I had prepared a resume. I was selected as

administrator in May 1966. I stayed in that position through July 1981, when I retired. So I had experience in three different positions: 26 years with one (All Nations); 15 years with another (Masonic Home); and two years with EYOA. COHEN. Well, that's pretty unusual in our field. I have similar kinds of stories. But it is quite unusual when you have to move into another community to get a job.

BLAINE. Well, Ben, I found working with the people extremely interesting, extremely valuable, and quite satisfying. From a personal point of view, helping people put their lives together. In many instances it seems that people develop a sense of self-esteem to a degree so that they can look forward to the future. Being in a position to have a hand in helping them to get training so that they can be functioning members of a rather dysfunctional society, has been most wonderful. No regrets.

COHEN. Which did you find most gratifying personally and professionally? What aspect did you find most satisfying?

BLAINE. I believe that my most satisfying experience was the last one. I think the dream of any social worker, especially one working with children, is about having a budget adequate to really meet the needs of the people with whom we were working. The children were supported by the Masonic Fraternity of California, which had a very understanding board of trustees, with sufficient funds available in reserve for us to use in the programs.

The second thing I think any social worker might like to do is to be a part of the building program. Two years after I went to the Masonic, the Board took

official action on the basis of studies in which I was involved, to replace the fifty-five year old dormitory type program with a "family cottage system." I was involved with that for three years and had the opportunity to see this type of work, which was not new to our chosen field or profession. Instead of separating brothers and sisters, we had a family-type plan. These have a maximum of eight children in each cottage where brothers and sisters could stay together and maintain their "family." That was developed primarily from having had the opportunity to ask many alumni what the home could have done, but didn't for whatever reasons. Somebody said, "Well, we grew away from brothers and sisters so we couldn't get thinking about family!"

COHEN. What kind of obstacles did you encounter that prevented you from doing things that you felt you'd like to do?

BLAINE. Well, that goes back to my experience with All Nations, East Los Angeles, and the Skid Row District, which changed virtually over the years. From the Fifties to the Sixties, the agency was aware of it and there were many studies being made and the possibilities were considered of transferring or moving to a different location to establishing similar type of programs. There was a great deal of work involved and studies involved. Whatever the reason and some of these reasons I am aware of, but direct recommendations were not followed-up; there was no fruition and the agency not necessarily dye, but gradually went down hill

I think the frustrations have been not so much from a lack of funds, but possibly the lack of leadership, the lack of security and knowing that for a major

undertaking, maybe the Board was not totally prepared. However, I was not with the agency at the time that what I described took place, but I hated to see it happen, because we had our main research: "Suddenly tomorrow"!

COHEN. What strategies did you use to accomplish goals that you were trying to achieve?

BLAINE. Well, I harken back to the time when the Masonic Home buildings were old. At one time there was a discussion about moving the Masonic Home for Children to another area than Covina. One of the first assignments that I received from the Board of Trustees was to prepare a paper on what were some of the needs for a qualitative child care program. That was my first assignment. To work with a committee and gather necessary data about what was needed—we needed good schools, available health resources, and cultural opportunities. After about a year and a half, we found that Covina, or that general area in the Valley, had these things available to us, that it was not necessary to make a major move. At the same time, this study was keeping extremely close tabs on maintenance costs because the buildings were old. Those were frustrating times because the board was not swift. There were differences of opinion. We had this space in Covina where we could inaugurate and put together the cottage type of group living. We could maintain the old building while the new one came into being, which we did! That was pretty frustrating at times, trying to carry on a program with 65 children in the middle of a great big building program, with all the equipment and so forth.

COHEN. What social movements or activities were you involved with that

seemed important to you at the time, but didn't lead to the goals that you wanted to obtain?

BLAINE. Ben, I think it goes back again to my experience with EYOA; that was terribly frustrating. The frustration came from the bureaucratic red tape that we had to go through and we were just part of an agency scattered around the United States, along with many, many other agencies, all hustling for that dollar out of Washington. It was terrible frustration: frustrating especially from a stand point of people who had given so much of their time in the community and unaware of that we could not fully explain to them all the process that we go through to come to the state and the federal government for funding. That was probably the biggest frustration that I had.

COHEN. What is your view of measures that social workers can undertake to affect programs and policies, or that can be more or less effectively pursued by volunteers, legislative or other leaders, and so on. Can you talk about that, Jim?

BLAINE. I personally think that our organization is really doing a remarkable job by keeping us informed about what goes on nationally. Our own publication here in Southern California was pretty well aware of some of the cutting edges in the field of social work. Fortunately we have many extremely skilled experienced practitioners who are in a position to not necessarily lobby, but to interpret to some of the elected officials what this means at the grass root levels. One particular incident that was interesting to me and in a very minor way I was involved in, was Title 22; it was written by our State Legislature, rules and regulation for children's homes. Fortunately we had a group of social workers

that were in the field and we had an opportunity to have a couple of social workers sit in with the planning committee, to go to legislature up there in Sacramento. It was a very difficult job for them. That was one of the frustrations, but a classic example of legislatures and politicians going to the people who had the expertise through the experience of grass roots level and listening to them and asking questions of them. It has Title 22 that we lived by. And it was nice that many of the old regulations were incorporated in this Title 22; it had some input from the practical standpoint of the practitioners. That was good and we could do more of that.

COHEN. What do you think has been the impact of the activities that you were involved in. Do you think that your work has had an impact on the scene?

BLAINE. Well, that's a great overview. I'll have to say from a personal standpoint as a retired professional, it was nice to be in a position to help in very minor way the passage of Title 22. There was a thrill in seeing the children or the people who are in great need, yet thanks to an agency and agency programs, not only the monetary resources, but also the services can be available to meet those needs. It is a thrill to know the people pulled out of the ghetto or Skid Row. I had gone into the profession to help or to be in position to help meet some of those needs, or to have access to ways of opening doors so that people needing encouragement and help can find a way to become happier themselves. It is a pretty hard question to answer, but it is a feeling one gets from remembering children in the '30s by keeping in touch with those children: to be invited to weddings, christenings, to homecomings and house warnings, to family

reunions—having a relationship for nearly 60 years. You feel very, very comfortable to invite eight of them to your fiftieth wedding anniversary. This is highly personal, I know.

COHEN. What significant changes have you observed in social work practice when you entered the field, and to date?

BLAINE. Oh, Ben, that is a real tough one, just a personal one. When we got out of the army and we went back to USC School of Social Work, we were all interested, regardless of who we were, in becoming social workers. We had a multi-racial student body at the time, and we were interested in becoming professional social workers. We had all nationalities and colors. We thought it was wonderful. Now I'm sure this is a personal opinion. Social work has grown a lot since the 'forties and is a much larger organization at the present time. Over a period of many years' experience, I'm sure the needs have been seen and are currently being met by the African-American social workers, Asian social workers, and the Latin social workers—those with the Spanish surnames. I don't believe that more or less separation has weakened the field by any means. My age is showing, but we struggled so hard at the end of World War II at the University of Southern California to let blacks swim in the swimming pool on campus. Then I harken back to pre-war, when we had a great dedicated faculty. They weren't necessarily democratic, but this is what we have to do and this is what takes. We had a bunch of guys overseas where their lifestyle was one of survival and I think some of our faculty members learned from these people. It's hard to explain, but they seemed to listen with a little more compassion than

understanding. Whether we are going to have to take Casework 1 or Group work 1, we had been interested in trying to keep alive for years, and it was quite a riot. This was a very poor example but that's how I felt at the time.

COHEN. I think that the post-war years' students were quite mature, those who were returning from the war.

BLAINE. Some of us did a lot of growing up in the service.

COHEN. Do you have any personal papers, pamphlets, and any items that can be made available for research? I'm going to withdraw that question because I know that you do and that you are working on them now. Let me ask this question about the role of the lay leader; how you learned over the years you work effectively with volunteer leaders. Do you have any items that you want to register now?

BLAINE. I feel I have to use a couple of examples, if I may. When I was at the Masonic Home we had children come to us as a result of parents being terminally ill. This was before a hospice program became what we know it to be at the present time. We had institutes, meetings, and seminars, which I was fortunate to attend. I was interested in reviewing with the people why a child was placed there, as well as concerned with the feelings of the family--impending loss, death--and the kids have feelings of losing a dad or mother. That is one of the things that prompted me to work with hospice after I retired. Having had part of that experience and sharing part of that experience, I have had the pleasure of helping with volunteer training for hospice volunteers. From practical experience, I think that we have been able to interpret to some of the volunteers what is

reasonably expected and what they could possibly expect some of the behavior, action, etc. I think that that same principle applies to training volunteers working with children: be it an educational program or be a volunteer working in a camp. You have to interpret to them what the basic needs are and never lose sight of that. We must see that the volunteer has a feeling of accomplishment because kids have to have that feeling of accomplishment as a result of the efforts of this individual. I think one of the things that might come out with the volunteers is how much you care. Some of the causes, the factors of why that child is acting out--this is where I take professional training with me, plus the practical experience that we have. Ben, I think there is a great need for volunteers; I have been amazed at the numbers of volunteers 18 years of age--that we call intergenerational relationship--today. Kids ought be equals. It is a valuable experience for children to have some kind of role model and a father figure. Many of them don't have and never had. It's good to see younger children accepted into the homes for the elderly because so many old timers kept on saying: Hey, we want the nice noise and the enthusiastic yelling of little kids. We need that; we miss that. It is also a learning experience for the children to be aware of having to repeat or talk quietly or slowly to people who are hard of hearing.

COHEN: It's kind of hard at times for children...

BLAINE. As I recall, children forming happy relationships with elderly people, it's kind of hard at times for the elderly people to feel comfortable when younger folk come in and give them a hug and kiss goodbye. That can be a two-way street,

however, but there is great sense that sometimes we overlook and that is the sense of feel. That is why I think, among other things today a hug doesn't cost anything; it goes a long with a good smile and a good solid honest hug. If you start talking about children and intergenerational relationships, they probably wouldn't know what you want to--or are even trying--to talk about. But in my experience, ever so many children have not had a chance to know a grandfather figure or grandmother figure and have not had too much of an experience to realize this aging process takes place. That brings to mind one time when we took some children from the Masonic Home up to the Masonic Home for the Elderly. When we came back some of the kids came around and said, "Well gee, old people up there were real old," and one little guy with all the sweet innocence of an eight year old kid asked: "Are you going to be old some day like that, Mr. Blaine?" And you have an opportunity to interpret the aging process. "Oh, and then you mean I am going to get old like that some day, too." So the moment or whatever the life experience might be: I believe that these are some of the things that we sometime overlook.

COHEN. Now, looking back at your life and at your career, you feel that the choice that you made to go into this field was a good choice. Any regrets about entering into the field? Any thoughts that you might have done better in a different field? Can you speak on that a bit?

BLAINE. Ben: no regrets. In my years of experience working with children and adults: no regrets. There have been many times that were frustrating. I have mentioned many times in talks to other workers. I think the type of work that we

have been in, you have to have a few tears to really appreciate all the joys, and I think you have to have a few of the frustrations and look through them and learn by them to again fully appreciate the “success,” if you will.

I have been blessed and I don't mean it to be facetious. I have had the opportunity to contact people who have touched my life in a very meaningful way and with most I have had the opportunity to tell them at the times how much their influence has meant to me. Some of them I didn't, or forgot, or couldn't for whatever the reason. It's a thrill in retirement to go out and touch base with these people and tell them what they have meant to you. Things you have to wait years to fully appreciate until that little moment. My wife and I just returned from a trip to Denmark and Europe and England and back to Germany, Hungary and Austria. We were houseguests of a gentlemen and his wife who I remember on Christmas Eve 1943 singing Christmas carols to us in Ascot, England. We exchanged snapshots and addresses and I procrastinated. I kept rationalizing about being a busy social worker for 37 years until mutual friends went back to England. When they got back there, they called and called our Ascot newspaper, and told them that one of these days Jim Blaine was going to quit procrastinating and write a letter to the local Ascot newspaper and say thanks for the courtesies for Christmas Eve and also Christmas Day. This lady went back and called the newspaper and they printed it the following day. She had a telephone call and confirmed the fifteen-year old Boy Scout. After they sang Christmas carols to us--he and his brother, a much older kid--we took them to Red Cross and we had donuts and cocoa and out of that I had an opportunity

and was invited to have Christmas dinner with them in 1943. He remembered me and we remembered him and we have been meeting, as a result since 1981. We have seen one another every two years and relived a lot. Now I have no regrets, of course. Facetiously, that's one good thing that came out of World War II. No, there are many things but it's been a most wonderful work experience. I feel very privileged and very proud, modestly proud, with no regrets. It has been a wonderful life. And a couple of other things that are highly personal again: when we start talking about having an influence and not knowing just exactly what the influence was, it's nice to go to a 50 year reunion and find people who possibly you had an influence on or that they remembered you as a social worker.

COHEN. Any other things you'd like to add, Jim?

BLAINE. I hope that I will have an opportunity to bring the Board of California Social Welfare Archives in Los Angeles some of the data that has been amassed at All Nations. In the School of Social Work and Arlien Johnson Library, people will have access to these files for research etc. Seventy-five years of some of these archives are available in a couple or three more boxes. I had contact with you by phone and also by mail, and when I meet you today, I remember you from the time you spent with the Jewish big Brothers Association and many mutual friends. This has been a lot of reminiscing, and I want to thank you for your patience and time in sharing the day with you.

COHEN. Oh, I thank you for taking the time to come out. You have a very busy calendar and I appreciate the fact that you came a long distance to meet with

me. On behalf of the California Social Welfare Archives, I want to tell you how much we appreciate this and this will be very useful to us.

BLAINE. Nice to be here, and see you Thursday a little before noon on campus.

Nice to see you.

COHEN. Thank you very much.