

Ann Shaw, MSW
Interviewed By June Brown
On May, 26th 1993

ABSTRACT

In this interview, Ms. Shaw describes the early years of her community-based work, primarily with the church, the YWCA and the United Way. She gives an account of her later work as a professional social worker, from 1968 to the present, an agency-based direct server, a social work educator, and as a volunteer.

BROWN: Ann, what circumstances led you into social work as a profession?

SHAW: I think that it can really go back to the family, to the time I was born. My grandfather was an AME minister from Columbus, Ohio. His father before him was an escaped slave who had come to Ohio through the Underground Railroad. He was on his way to Canada and freedom. The issue of race and equality has certainly been a part of not only my life but also my grandfather's and my great grandfather's life.

My father was a mortician in Columbus at a time when it was difficult for black businesses to be established. I grew up with the realization of the importance of black business, the importance of economic growth for our people, and the importance of being able to enrich life for others by being involved in the process. I was asking the new church if most blacks were involved at the time, because it was the "social work agency" of the generation. My grandfather was also aware of the necessities of being involved in politics. He felt that he was doing the Lord's work by not only talking about what Jesus says and what Jesus is, but talking about the problems that faced the generation at the time, and trying to really interpret what Jesus would have done today in the circumstances. How would he have worked to change things for people at the time?

It was a time when we were called “colored” then rather than “blacks.” In fact, I’ve been through changes, a number of changes: from colored, to Negro, to black, to Afro-American. But I’m sure the concept was the same. We were colored at the time, as I recall. My grandfather realized that landowners in Ohio were leasing their land because they had no lines of credit with banks, and they were leasing land without proper compensation. So he was a political activist as well as a minister.

On the other hand, my mother’s family was Episcopalian, and they had come to Ohio long before the Civil War. In fact, I have two grandfathers who fought in Black Ridge, and I have the papers of one. But my mother and my grandmother were both involved in the work of the Episcopal Church, and they were both involved in women’s groups. When I was a child, they were, along with another group of women, influential in starting a dance class at the YWCA, and it was called the Blue Triangle. It was the Negro branch of the YWCA. I guess by that time, we had gone from coloreds to Negroes.

My brother and I were involved in the activities of the Y and the Church, and we grew up with the understanding, that not only do these institutions help your life, but they made progress for all of our people.

I married a man whose father was also active in the community. Leslie Shaw was a policeman and, for a long period of time, headed the Juvenile Prevention Bureau. He talked a lot about Jane Addams. At the time, I really found he was a very noble man.

He had not only worked at his profession in law enforcement, but he chose to have leadership roles in the work of the community. He was president of the Los Angeles Urban League, and President of the NAACP for over a ten-year period. In fact, I remember that it was difficult to ease him out of the leadership role, because he mentored

for such a long time, and there were other younger men and women – no, there weren't any women. I don't think this role had ever been held by a woman, though they needed an opportunity to express their needs and work for change for the people.

I grew up with the understanding that I was responsible, as was my brother, for not opening doors but for holding them, putting my foot in the door, holding them wide open for others to pass through.

I think the first really racial experience I had was in grammar school. My mother was very determined to be a member of the PTA, and she would come to the meetings of the PTA at the time. And the white women would introduce themselves and when they got to her, the President would simply skip over her as if she did not exist. I must say this though: it did not discourage my mother. She was an even more determined fighter than they could envision, because she attended those meetings, found out what was going on, and she was very vocal and straight away made opportunities for the Negro youngsters who were a part of that elementary school.

Now that we have the background, I have worked as a volunteer in the YWCA. I think I held almost every position in that organization. I was a Y wife. I was first a teenager, involved in the teenage programs at the time. At the university, I was a part of the University YWCA. When I got a job, I was a University teacher, and I was the University advisor for a campus YWCA. When I married, I became a Y wife. And later, I held a position on a branch board, and I moved from branch board to metropolitan board and eventually held the position of President. I was the first black President of the YWCA of Los Angeles.

In that organization, I think I had my best education in community problems and my best education in leadership, in developing skills needed to guide a large group, and my best experience in general information regarding the times.

The position with the YWCA was extremely interesting because it was a time when government programs were being sponsored or were asked to be sponsored by private organizations. I think the highlight of my whole volunteer career was the fact that the YWCA of Los Angeles was one of the first institutions to accept government money and to start a job core program; a job core program for girls.

It was extremely difficult to get this concept through to the board because there was a great deal of fear that by accepting any government money, regardless of the value and the rewards, we would be losing our independence and would be under government control. At the time, we had a board of fifty, and to get fifty women to agree on anything is difficult, but to get them to agree to accept government money for a program that would change the lives of young women from 16 to 21 was even more extraordinary. I do think, at the time, my race helped me. There were a number of women who were mostly reluctant to accept the government money. They were the very same women who were reluctant and hesitant about going against me because they felt they could have been accused of racism. As a result, the job corps program went through, and I might say that's about the only time that racism ever worked to my advantage.

The program is now twenty-five years old, and we had numbers of women go through that. It is rated one of the best in the country. I left the Presidency as a volunteer, and two years later, I accepted a staff position with a job force center. I worked there till my entrance into the graduate school social work. In fact, it was really responsible for my

asking to and wanting to go back to school. I already had a master's degree, a Master of Arts Degree. I felt that I was reasonably intelligent; that my decisions were wise ones or I wouldn't have made them. But there were often times when I was voted down, because people seem to think that social work professionals had greater intelligence and skills than just a person who had an aging master of life degree. I wanted to find out what information they had. I wanted to have that status in order to hold weight, influence, and making my opinions more valid.

BROWN: Well, Ann, after your very rich experience with the job core led you to decide to come into social work, will you give me a brief run down on the positions in social work that you have held with regard to health, welfare, civil rights, policy, or whatever.

SHAW: I served on the national board of the YWCA for three years, and then as a member of the World Service Council. In the meantime, my husband had accepted a political appointment. John Kennedy appointed him as the first black postmaster of a major city in the nation, Los Angeles. My life at the time changed drastically. I had four children, and our income, in order for my husband to accept this position, dropped drastically. We lost one-third of our income. It was a challenge, and he felt it was an opportunity to prove to the country what an African-American could do.

He ran a Post Office with over fifteen thousand employees, and I was proud of the way he ran it. He had experienced such prejudice in the University. He attended Ohio State University, and he would never have had an opportunity to run a large business at that time. At the time, he ran it respectfully and well.

I found that entering the School of Social Work at USC was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I had an assignment, a fieldwork assignment, with the

Salvation Army, because I was interested in community organization and in health problems. I must say, it was one of the most unique and different experiences that I have ever had in my life. I was assigned to work with the Manhattan Project, which was a drug abuse program – a halfway house really - for recovering youngsters who had been addicted to drugs. I recall one evening when my husband was coming in from an important trip and asking how things are going and how was your day? And I said, “Well, I spent it on skid row, trying to get a youngster back into the house. “

I found that this was really a very important day in my life without realizing it. I was asked to look for a youngster whom I had become friendly with and who lived at that house for a three-month period and who had sometime “split” the house and gone back to skid row. He was 18, and the Salvation Army wondered whether or not my social work abilities and my education really were giving me the understanding and perceptibility and the most important concepts in social work practice. So I went to this flea bitten hotel, knocked on the door and asked if this youngster were there. I wanted to get him back to the house, because I knew how important it was. He was a main-line heroin user. He was 6’ 2” and I’m five feet tall, but as the door opened and I identified myself, this youngster came through and threw his arms around me and he said, “Oh Ann, I just fucked up.” I recall my anxiety of getting back to the house. I said, “Well, you’re just fucking up more here.” I did get him into the car, and I did get him back to the house, and I found that my life was filled with salvation and praise for my success and achievement.

I was working at UCLA in 1968, designing programs and especially designing programs for women. The department was called Daytime Programs and Special Projects: an extension of UCLA. Daytime Programs really meant women because very

few men had time to take such classes. So I found myself working again and being involved with the feminist movement and realizing the problems that women faced at the time.

I felt that one of the great problems was city health care. I lived in South Central Los Angeles, and I realized that the facilities for health care were so inadequate. A pregnant woman would have to go all the way to County General Hospital to deliver her baby. Transportation was almost impossible for a number of people and it seemed to me that the problems I had been working to solve were not really the place to start. Without good health, all life seems really and truly very difficult.

(In 1966) I was asked to serve on the board of the newly built, newly formed, new Medical School. At that time it was called the Post Graduate Medical School. It is now the Martin Luther King/Drew University, and a part of the Martin Luther King Complex. I was happy with this job because I had worked as a volunteer for eight years with the South Central Welfare Planning Council.

My husband was the vice president of Watts Savings and Loan. So many of our social activities, and many of our community meetings, were held in that community. I knew the agencies that were working there, trying to make a difference. I felt that my contacts would help Drew University become more accepted by community.

One of the most difficult tasks that I ever faced was in realizing that we did not have money coming from our own community, the kind of big money that could support the growth of this institution, and eventually would lead to Drew University becoming apart of East LA.

I think, at the time, I had anger for the first time coming at me from community residents, who felt that I was selling my people out. They wanted a black University, and they wanted it really to be a black University on the models of Howard University and Meharry University and Morehouse University. But because of the politics of the times, we had no black money. I felt that the best way for the University to survive and best way for those services to keep coming and to build to the extent that they did, was to merge with UCLA, using their money, their establishment, their background, and their influence, to continue the services for all of our people. So I was called Uncle Tom, booed at several meetings. But I continued to serve, and it is amazing how life works out because Dean Melincoff, the Dean of the Medical School at UCLA, as well as Dean Mathias - he was the Dean of the Medical School at USC - served on that board with me at every meeting.

When my six years were up and my term of office was over, Dr. Melincoff invited me to be the first black woman, and still the only black woman, on the UCLA Medical Board. In a sense, this enlarged the influence I had in the medical schools in making sure that minorities and all my youngsters had at least someone sitting on that board who was concerned about their welfare and who worked to make sure that the benefits others received, they also received.

I think that after working with Drew University and making major contributions in the field, next came my being invited to serve on the Board of Trustees of the University of Redlands. This was my school; the University that I had graduated from initially, and I felt it was an honor to be invited to serve on that board. For years it had

been a board that was controlled simply by old and white men, and this was an opportunity for women to achieve.

I found that this was a unique experience for my whole family. I remember that the first year, there was to be a retreat for our trustee retreat. I approached my husband and asked him if he would go with me for this weekend at University of Redlands. I remember his response; he said, “Ann, I tried to back you up in every thing you have tried to do, but you really can’t expect me to spend the weekend walking around that campus with thirty-two white ladies.” I reminded him that I had gone to a number of things without a great deal of desire in order to be a spouse for him. He thought it over, and he did go with me.

I remember that retreat because one morning the President’s wife approached him and said, “We missed you so much this morning Mr. Shaw.” He said, “Well, I was lucky????, I took the morning off to have my hair done.” He did find it unusual spending hours visiting the dormitories and having tea with the ladies. So I will always be indebted to him for that kind of different support.

This exposure also led to a political appointment for me. The Governor of California called and asked if I would serve on the California Commission on Judicial Performance. He said that it was a rare opportunity because this commission had never had a woman, and never had a black, and he was willing to appoint me if I was willing to accept, and I was. But I began to think about it and I lost my nerve. It was a watchdog commission that judges the judges in California. Judges are human beings too, and this is a deal where I found that had it not been for the experience and the degree I had from

USC School of Social Work, I would have been completely inadequate. It really was casework, in a sense, and I had learned those techniques, gratefully and thankfully.

I found that the gentlemen - it was a nine member commission - two were colored judges, two were superior court judges, one was a municipal court judge, and there were two other individual who represented the state bar. One was from Northern California, one from Southern California, and there were two lay members. And, of course, the Governor had appointed me as a lay member. It was extremely difficult because I had only been on the commission for two months when the decision was made to remove a Supreme Court Justice, McComb. This was the first decision.

The Governor who appointed me was Governor Jerry Brown, and I really did not want to embarrass him. I did not want to embarrass myself. I did not want to ruin the opportunity for others. So I asked him if he would reconsider the appointment and he said, "No, I don't care whether you know a great deal about law or not, that's why you are there, because you're giving the different perspective."

The gentlemen on that committee were more solicitous. I will never forget that every time they used any profanities, even if they said "damn," they would interrupt their conversation to say, "Excuse me, Mrs. Shaw." It shows that you can build a bridge as you learn to know each other and work together because it is the end of my service. The Governor did re-appoint me to this commission. We would say anything we felt and used any words we felt. It wasn't that I felt like one of the boys, but at least they felt comfortable with women.

The commission also had a new experience because we were asked to investigate the Chief Justice who, at the time, was Rose Bird. It was the first time we, in California,

had ever had a woman Chief Justice. And that led eventually to an investigation of the whole California Supreme Court. I was exhausted when that ended, and I asked the Governor to let me resign and please appoint another woman in my place. I had exhausted my resources and I was drained of time and emotional energy.

It was one of the most fascinating experiences, though, and it all boils down to the fact that people are people. We all live. We are all just human beings, and we all have different circumstances that we live by, live in and certain concepts we live by.

BROWN: Those have been really wonderful accounts of your career as it evolved. From what you said so far, one of your major goals was to integrate major boards of a presence and a perspective of women and of African-Americans. Would you comment on what from this integration that you were able to achieve so successfully, you consider most successful, and will you comment on the obstacles?

SHAW: I found that the goal of finding women and Afro-Americans to serve on boards extremely important. Obviously, it's where policies are set, goals are made, and decisions are made. This is extremely important because it is important to be a part of making decisions. Not only abiding by them and not only that, but having a representative on this board influence what others do and say and think. It really, in a sense, is a policy of informing and educating others on that board.

I served for a time and I am still serving on my law school board. I recall the chairman of the committee. The board of visitors of the law school had a party in his home one evening. He stood up and asked a room full of trustees, who were there with their wives, "Just really what is affirmative action?" I could not believe that this actually occurred. I turned to the Dean and I said, "May I answer this question?" and the Dean

said, "Mrs. Shaw, be my guest." But it is appalling at times the ignorance and the myths that still exist.

I felt that targeting major boards included not only those that were predominately majority, but also, unfortunately, there were some of our very own who were insensitive and unaware.

I served for six years on the board of the Los Angeles Urban League. I recall this as an organization that is a part of our life. My father in-law served professionally. He held that the presidency and supporting the League was just like supporting the Church. You did that as well as buy groceries; it was a part your life. I went to the meeting to hear a report of the nominating committee, and low and behold, every person nominated to a position of importance in Los Angeles Urban League, was a man. I recall telling our current president, a man I think highly of, and, of course, John Mackelvie, my neighbor and my friend, whom I also think highly of, that I wanted them also to be aware that black women were not going to continue to support agencies and organization where we had no representation. I feel that I'm glad I had the courage to say it because, as time went by, that did change, and I think four years ago, we had our first woman who served well as chairperson of the Los Angeles Urban League.

I think it's also extremely important to be aware of the fact that there are tremendous obstacles to being a member of, or being on a board of an agency/organization. One is that minority women are often assigned to insignificant committees. Invariably, the finance committees are dominated by men.

Another obstacle that I would certainly like to express is that it is extremely difficult to get women and Afro-American individuals to participate on those boards

because of the financial perceptions that are held by leadership. It is assumed that you are a big giver and you are going to either give money, raise money, or have contacts that will raise that money for you. A major event, a fundraising event takes place without realizing the sacrifices of time you are making. You are also asked to sell a table and tickets at three hundred dollars per seat: it's impossible. Lots of individuals who are willing to initially try, give up the effort after one year because the financial request and the financial commitments that you are assumed to have made are simply impossible to satisfy. They do not match the resources of the individual. When you pick up the paper and read about the discrepancies between blacks and whites in income, it's unfortunate that this never enters into the requirements that are made on individuals.

I think its been seven years that I have served as a member of the Board of Councilors of the School of Social Work at USC, and I have enjoyed it. It is a good board. But we do not have the power make-up that other graduate schools and universities have. If you contrast the School of Medicine with the School of Social Work, it's just really unfair. Social work is not a profession that makes millionaires, and yet, the work that is being done in social work is far more important than is ever realized or recognized. I feel that's a problem we are going to have to work on, especially in these critical times when the health of the community depends so much on social work. Few individuals realize the importance, the value and the stability that social work brings to the whole community.

Perhaps, the rebellion - some refer to it as the riot - took place in the spring of '92. USC is in the midst of the city, and I found that a number of organizations were extremely disliked by minority groups who lived in the area or in the cities. I could

understand this because few students who are in schools in this area will ever have the opportunity of attending this University. The cost alone is prohibitive.

Neighborhoods had been torn down for new buildings at USC to go up. I remember one woman who headed a neighborhood association in South Central, who stood in a meeting and said that USC paid Hispanic youngsters to put graffiti all over the neighborhood so that it would decrease their property values and make the neighborhood more available to purchase by USC. The School of Social Work is like a bastion, standing between the anger that we know is in the community and the staff of the University.

The School of Social Work is one of the few graduate schools that is trying to give the University a different image. And I wish more people were on the board of this institution.

BROWN: Well, Ann, this has been a rich and very informative look at the aspects of your career. You have told us so far what your primary activities have been, what you have seen as achievements and where you have seen the obstacles. Now I would like to ask you if you would give us your view of what the impact of social welfare – broadly, but particularly your professional activities - what the impact of those things have been on California as a whole.

SHAW: I think that one example has been an experience of recent years. Just three years ago, Senator Diane Watson appointed me to a state Task Force on the Family. The twenty-six member task force that really had a responsibility to submit those recommendation to our state legislature, regarding laws that we would like to see come into existence and be effective. It was a very diverse committee, with twenty-six

members, and I feel that as a result of the study and the conclusions and the recommendations that came from this task force that they were great influences on the state and eventually, on the nation. One example is the recently passed California Family Leave Act, which not only affects California, but eventually will probably be adopted by other states and have an impact on the whole nation.

I think, too, in terms of another very strong member of that committee; a member of the gay community who certainly brought out new understanding, new attention to the homosexuals in our community and their rights and desires, and their participation in community life.

So there have been examples of how social work, in many ways, has influenced and certainly, hopefully, will influence the future.

BROWN: Thank you Ann, for the account of the significance that California has had for its own legislation and the nation. The final thing that we would like to address is to first of all thank you on behalf of the California Social Welfare Archives, for your special contribution to their oral history collection. But we are conducting this interview for a second purpose, in addition to the work of the Archives. In general, there is a subcommittee that is looking for documentation and oral history and particularly looks at the African-American experience in California social welfare. We've decided that we will organize our collection to look at what the efforts, the success, and the obstacles have been that are particular to African-Americans, following the Civil War, the enactment of the Civil War Amendments, and as African-Americans began the long and tedious task of searching for themselves and their place in American society. And as I listen to you account for what John Hope Franklin referred to as the ethic of philanthropy

and charity among African-Americans from the end of the Civil War on. Your family's tradition really mirrors that, so I thought we might end on an account of your history as a twentieth-century person by really looking at the sweep of your family's participation in philanthropy and charity, particularly in the interest of the African-American population.

SHAW: I think in terms of my great grandfather, the escaped slave, worked in a small Ohio community to establish his presence and his family's acceptance in Ohio. I think in terms of my grandfather, the AME minister (African Methodist Episcopal minister), who worked for an education at Wilberforce University, the first of the free land grant colleges established after the Civil War. He worked to enrich the community in which he was assigned, working as a small itinerant preacher and later, at the Mount Verne Avenue AME Church in Columbus Ohio at that time, the largest of those churches and the philanthropy of the social life of the whole work of the congregation and progress of the community was vested in the black church. I think of how those family values have come down through the generations.

I think of my own life and that of my husband and our involvement, and two of my children, some of them, who have carried on those family values and those interests. My eldest daughter, Valerie, just last week spoke at a House of Representative Education Committee regarding the economic development of the Crenshaw district. It's the result of the aftermath of the rebellion of last year. Another younger daughter, Rebecca, is now working as an intake worker at a drug abuse center. She specializes in working with mothers who have been addicted to crack cocaine and who work to improve their lives so they may regain custody of their children.

Truly the African-American tradition has been an unusual one. Because of the discrimination suffered, we have had to work together. We had to work together in some sense as a family, helping others and taking responsibility for the children of relatives. When I think in terms of the care that has been given, one for the other, it makes me feel that human beings are truly, in a sense, all related. We, after all, do belong to one of the most important families on earth: the human family.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my experiences with you. I am extremely proud of the work that the School of Social Work at USC is doing and most importantly, I am proud of being who I am.