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## **Suzanne Brown Memoir**

### **Brown, Suzanne**

Interview and memoir  
digital audio files, 39 min., 15 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Brown discusses the impact attending Sangamon State University made on her life. She started SSU and obtained her master's degree in Legal Studies. Brown continued into law school eventually becoming an immigration lawyer. She recalls classes with SSU professors Bob Sipe and Ron Sakolsy, and remembers writing for "The Radical Therapist" journals.

Interview by Mary Caroline Mitchell, 2010

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Narrator: Suzanne Brown  
Date: March 12, 2010  
Place: Springfield, Illinois  
Interviewer: Mary Caroline Mitchell

Q. Ok, this is March 11, 2010, and this is Mary Caroline Mitchell, and I am interviewing Suzanne Brown. So Suzanne, when did you... what degree did you get and do you remember the date when you were awarded your degree?

A. I got a master's degree in Legal Studies and I'm not totally positive of the year, but I think it was 1985 or 1986.

Q. I can look that up. What prompted you to start your degree?

A. Well, I was teaching Lamaze classes. I was a certified Lamaze instructor, and I lived in Taylorville. I had just moved to Taylorville from Massachusetts, and one of the courses that I ended up teaching was at Family Services in Springfield. I taught a group of unwed mothers. And the person who directed that program, we used to talk before class and one day she actually threw a Sangamon catalog at me and said, "You better get back in school and do something with your life before you burn out totally."

And so I just thumbed through the catalog and picked Legal Studies. I was interested in the theoretical part of Legal Studies, not being a lawyer or anything although that's what I ended up being, but it was just a pure theory interest that took me to that part of the catalog that she really pushed on me.

Q. What schooling had you had in the past before you came to Taylorville?

A. I had a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from the University of Massachusetts.

Q. And were you a traditional-aged student that lived on campus and had that kind of campus experience?

A. For my undergraduate?

Q. Uh-huh.

A. Well, sort of. I was the right age but I wasn't a traditional student ever, and I moved off campus like after my first semester. I didn't enjoy the campus kind of experience so I wanted something a little bit more independent but age appropriate, yes. And it was in the middle of the Vietnam War so there was a lot of stuff going on on campuses that made them--I guess I would say--not so traditional for many people.

Q. So when you enrolled at Sangamon State, do you remember about what year that was?

A. I stayed for three years, so I think counting back I think it was maybe 1981 or 1982. I stayed for three years because I had finished my degree requirements but I was actually enjoying myself and had an opportunity for... I was a graduate assistant for the Legal Studies for one year and I had an opportunity to go to be a graduate assistant for another program, which I wanted to do, so I stayed.

Q. All right, did you notice when you first enrolled at Sangamon State, what was your first class and what was your impression of the instructor or the instruction versus what you had experienced in your undergraduate classes? Was there a difference?

A. I don't think there was a huge difference initially. The difference for me for Sangamon came when we did our Public Affairs Colloquium, which I don't think it was my first semester but it may have been my first year. And also the intersession, those were the two things that had an enormous impact on me. The first semester seemed pretty much ok. School, I loved school; I always did like school when I was growing up, and I liked college. I liked that first semester, but everything opened up for me after those two other events.

Q. So you said your impressions changed after you got into your studies?

A. Yes.

Q. In what way?

A. Well, I'd met... like I said, I have sort of a nontraditional approach to life and I started meeting other people that also did. And maybe for the first time in my life because I grew up in a pretty traditional family with pretty traditional expectations and pretty much always felt like I was the black sheep... not necessarily the black sheep but the... there was something always that wasn't ok with how I looked at the world.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. So I never really got that kind of validation from my parents. I got validation for other things, being a good student and being well-behaved or whatever. In terms of how I looked at the world, I never had that in my family and started to find that at Sangamon.

Q. Through your connections with other, with faculty and with other students?

A. Yes.

Q. How many classes did you take at a time?

A. I was a full time student.

Q. You were full time?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. Were you working as well?

A. I was a graduate assistant.

Q. Ok.

A. Yeah.

Q. You were admitted and then immediately became a graduate assistant?

A. Yes.

Q. Ok.

A. I mean, I think that was a part of my admission.

Q. Ok, and in the Legal Studies department?

A. Yes.

Q. Ok, and who did you work with there?

A. I worked for everybody in the program but principally... I don't even remember his name. He may have been the director of the program that year or the director of the Legal Studies Center; I think it was the Legal Studies Center. It was whoever it was before Nancy Ford. And then Nancy Ford and I worked for Pat Langley.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. Specifically, I mean I took a lot of instruction from her but I think that I was really assigned to the entire program.

Q. So describe some of the faculty that you had either in your program or outside of your program. And who were the most memorable ones that come to mind?

A. Well, there's Bob Sipe, would be one, changed my life. Ron Sakolsky is another, and I still communicate with Ron although I haven't for awhile because he lives in Canada now. I have gone to visit with him and his partner. And Ralph Stone, I think were the three. Thinking about that question, I think those were the... had the biggest impact on me although there were

others as well that sort of wowed me. And probably the synergism of all of them together was even more of a culmination for me, really made an impact on my life.

Q. Would you feel comfortable sharing what was different that made you feel accepted or more at peace, what you had described before that were the... had a different approach what was is about these faculty that had impact on you or affirmed you?

A. Well, I can. I have a question to ask though.

End of Interview File 1

Begin Interview File 2

A. I would say I took a class called Issues in Radical Therapy that probably changed my life irreversibly and it was taught by Bob Sipe. And we started looking at everything from sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia issues that, social issues that create big problems in the United States and where their foundations were and then looking at ways to try to combat those forms of oppression.

And through that class, I started working in a collective that published the magazine called Issues in Radical Therapy, which... of which all of the members of the collective were either faculty, current students, or very recently graduated students from Sangamon State. And I went to and then the next year became the planner for a couple of years to a Radical Therapy Conference that was held in Iowa with a collective in Iowa and then in Wisconsin. I met people from all over the country who were actually looking at radical ways to change how we live our lives.

And that all coincided with an intersession that was on nonviolent conflict resolution. And I think, maybe I don't remember her name, her first name... I know she's a Marcuse, Herbert Marcuse's widow I think is who it was, who came and was one of the speakers. But they had wonderful presentations, speakers, experiential workshops that worked on teaching new... to me, new models of communication – nonviolent communication and how we could use that to combat racism and sexism and homophobia and every other “ism” that we would be confronted with in our lives.

So those things happened in very close connection to each other and changed many aspects of my life. I ended up going to live in a collective that had three houses on it. Bob and his wife and another person lived in one house. I lived in another house with my children and my husband and another woman. And then there was another... there was a trailer where... I don't know, three or four other people lived. There was some fluidity but basically that was it.

So we would make decisions about food production in the garden and babysitting and child care and just how we were going to use the space collectively. And so we were using that kind of problem solving, nonviolent communication model to try to change how we lived our lives.

Sort of looking at it from a very anti-capitalist perspective that scarcity models create competition and conflict and that if we looked at different non-scarcity models for living our lives we could, we thought, change the world (laughter).

We changed our little corner of the world I think a little and there's ebb and flow to all of that and I guess my corner has also ebbed and flowed but still I look at where I am today in terms of how I look at the world and my role and my possibilities. My potential for changing the world is so much more powerful than it was before I went there.

Q. Uh-huh. So these were really not class projects or it was an outgrowth of, well part of it was.

A. Part of a class, not a class project that was assigned but the class... the class was experiential I suppose in that sense. You couldn't get anything out of the class unless you... well I don't want to say what someone could or couldn't get out of a class. I don't think for me it would have just been an intellectual enterprise. It's like, "Ok, that makes sense. Let's try that."

Q. Yeah.

A. And so we did. We experimented a lot.

Q. So you were then taking other classes but living in an environment that had been spawned out of one of the classes.

A. Yes.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. And then I, Ron Sakolsky... I don't know if I ever took a class from Ron, but we also just became friends. And he has this incredible music collection and just opened up a whole other way of looking at music and how we communicate and music from around the world and introduced me to those wonders and marvels that I've never even thought about. It was just another crack that opened up there and then there was Ralph, who I took several classes from.

Q. And what did he teach?

A. Well he taught history classes, and I had him for a couple of history classes, which I don't remember specifically. But I also took two semesters from him of a course that was on Utopian society where I think the first semester we did, we read Utopian authors. And then the second semester, our task was to build a Utopian society and then design a strategy of how to get from here now or then and to that Utopian society, which was such a fantastic exercise.

And I guess for me and the people, we had small groups and I became really close with the people in that, in my small group because really I guess when you're designing your Utopia, you

have to get a little personal about what does that mean to you. And actually Ralph encouraged us to do that and insisted that we do that in some ways. He'd come around and he'd say, "Ok, where are you at?" And we'd say. And he'd say, "No, it's your Utopia." And we'd say, "Well, we liked it and we think it should be like this, but it really won't work." And he'd say, "No, in a Utopia, it works because it's Utopia. So how do you want it to be?" And it was such a great exercise to actually think about like how, , how the world could be.

Q. Were there any products that you produced like papers or journals or whatever that you've kept?

A. I have not kept that. I mean, I actually kept a journal for all of that time but I kept a loose leaf journal. And as I... as an issue would be resolved for me and I usually wrote in it when I had some kind of issue I wasn't sure how to deal with and... but as I did a series of mediations or had some other kind of epiphany of sorts where, , I felt ok this is done, I would have some little ritual of tearing the... taking the page and burning it or destroying it or shredding it. I probably have two or three pages left now.

Q. I didn't know if with the Utopian...

A. Oh, did we keep a journal as a...

Q. Did you as the group?

A. Well, we had a project, I mean we had a presentation to do, but I don't remember if we had kept a journal or not, maybe. I didn't keep that. I kept one paper that I wrote in... for class, for Legal Studies, my thesis, which was on the legal problems of communes. Now that's where, I mean that's definitely where I was heading, looking at, you like trying to take whatever is there academically and apply it, , to life.

Q. What do you remember about grading? How were you evaluated with some of the classes that you took?

A. Well, some of them were grade grades. I did well in school, so... and some of them were like a narrative evaluation, which I also thought were useful.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. The Legal Studies program I think was pretty much a graded kind of program.

Q. So you had certain classes that you had to take to get your masters and then there were optional classes?

A. Electives.

Q. Electives. And these ones you're describing were electives?

A. They were.

Q. Ok, so that probably... so in your Legal Studies classes those don't stick with you as well in terms of remembering?

A. Well, no but what I did get from Legal Studies is I got excellent foundation for doing legal research and writing. I took the courses, I did that work for my assistantship, and when I did go to law school, I was miles ahead. Even after my classmates in law school had completed legal research and writing, they still didn't have the foundation that I had gotten from Sangamon. So that was very excellent, very excellent.

Q. What... what professor do you remember in Legal Studies?

A. Pat, I think, Pat Langley and Larry Golden.

Q. Oh, ok.

A. And probably Larry though because he also taught at that nonviolent conflict resolution course, our intersession course in which made me more interested in taking classes, Legal Studies classes from him.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. And I took a couple from Larry; I think he taught a course on unequal justice, which was important for me. The courses that we've all drawn from were like some critical theory or critical thinking, critical legal theory were memorable. I don't think when I went in to that program, I actually knew what direction it was going to be. Really I was just thumbing through the catalog and it seemed to catch me more than anything else.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. But those kinds of courses, substantive law classes I wasn't that interested in but the theory of law because I'm interested in how societies work.

Q. Uh-huh. Were your fellow students working full time? How many... because you seem to have been able to focus on your studies full time plus your children. How... do you remember?

A. There was a really broad mix. There were not too many people who were going to school full time but there were some. And as you mentioned I had two little kids and sort of funny, I was married at the time and my husband decided to go back to school at the same time. Basically just said one day, "Ok, I can't do this anymore." And he went back to school and he was admitted and got an assistantship with the Labor Studies Program. And our last names are

different and the first day when we were going into our new offices, we were assigned an office together so we were office mates.

And the really wonderful thing about all of this was, it just... everything came together at the same time because we were really working on trying to figure out how to have an egalitarian relationship and when one of us was working and the other one wasn't or vice versa. It was really, really hard to value child care as opposed to earning income and, washing dishes as opposed to cutting the grass and this... having the same job expectations, same number of hours, same salary, exactly the same salary, actually even sharing an office, having the same child care obligations, everything was... all those external things were like the same for the first time ever and it was a real exercise for us.

We actually aren't married anymore, but I think we both learned a lot about marriage in a good way through that... through that experience of being there together as students. Doesn't have to do with the university so much but was just... that was the environment where it all happened.

Q. Uh-huh. What kind of other... you mentioned intersessions. Those... were there any other kind of outside of class, I mean official... that was for credit, intersessions?

A. It was for credit, uh-huh.

Q. Ok.

A. It was like during the spring break or whatever.

Q. Uh-huh, you got...

A. It was very intensive.

Q. Uh-huh. And how many of those did you participate in do you think?

A. Maybe two.

Q. Did you have to do... because you were a grad assistant, did you have to do any kind of work study or experiential learning?

A. No, just the requirements.

Q. The requirements.

A. Required then, I don't know if it is now.

Q. Right.

A. It was not. I mean, there were a lot of activities at the university that, , I took advantage of.

Q. What were those kinds of things?

A. Well, they had lecture series that I was... there were a lot of lectures that I was interested in and went to.

Q. Can you remember somebody famous that you heard?

A. Oh, that I heard?

Q. Or that impacted you. Maybe they didn't have to be famous.

A. Well, there... yes, famous? Well, I met... well that was actually at an intersession, I met Shirley Chisholm. I was the person who was actually asked to go pick her up at the airport the day when she came in so that was a delight. I've always been grateful for that opportunity.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. I mean, lectures, I just remember plays. There were, there were a lot of plays that were at the... the campus was really very... there were probably three, or two buildings or three buildings maybe. I don't know if there were even three buildings, maybe two buildings when I was there. And there was a lot of construction going on, but...

Q. What buildings did you have classes in?

A. I had classes in... Brookens is where the library is, right?

Q. Uh-huh.

A. In that building and then a couple in whatever the other one is, I don't remember the name.

Q. The Public Affairs Center.

A. Yes, uh-huh.

Q. Where the auditorium is?

A. Yes.

Q. That was built when you went there?

A. It was already built. It was pretty new. And in fact I think some people were just moving in, transitioning offices into that building.

Q. Were you involved with student government at all?

A. No.

Q. Uh-huh, more just any kind of social type of campus activities that were focused on the campus?

A. I think not so much social activities unless ... except for those, , the plays, the lectures. I knew people who were in some of the theater groups, so I used to do that and an occasional concert there on campus.

Q. Uh-huh. Beside the faculty, are there students that you have kept up with that you met during your time at Sangamon State?

A. There was something about that. I don't have... there's one student that I actually still connect with, but there are people who are actually very... my two best friends probably are people I met through Sangamon State, but they were never students there.

Q. Ok.

A. But I met them through that connection. So there is one student, Candy Hudsall, who lives in Minneapolis now and we exchange emails couple times a year and birthday greetings. But if something comes up or we see something in the news that reminds us of the other, we call and talk.

Q. That's great.

A. We see each other on the occasions when we're in those cities, so we do connect there. And then I, like I said, my two best friends on each coast and both of them I met through Sangamon. And one of them was the roommate of one of women who was in my Utopia group. I actually met her through my daughter because that woman in the group, Kay stayed with my kids for a weekend when... I don't even remember when it was. I had to go to a meeting and she stayed with the kids and her roommate stayed also. And when I got back, my kids are like, "You need to meet Bonnie."

And then I did and she was my partner for the Shadow Project when we were doing the preparation for the Shadow Project, which was our Hiroshima remembrance. We whitewashed the sidewalks with what looked like shadows, which was what happened at Hiroshima and that was when I actually first met... actually met her and we were... and that was mostly with Sangamon students also but a couple of... on the fringe kind of people.

Q. That just reminded me, Suzanne. What kind of political action took place on the campus or demonstrations or... that you remember or participated in?

A. Ok, on that... I don't really remember too much happening on the campus. I... there were things that were happening, the groups that were organized by a lot of people who were associated with the campus.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. But they would not be on the campus because there wasn't very much visibility on the campus. The campus was so removed from everywhere that if you wanted to do a demonstration, you wanted to be where there is people who could see the demonstration. So you'd go to the post office or National Guard, , or someplace else where there were actually people around.

Q. Right, right. So you were on the campus in the daytime?

A. Yes, mostly

Q. Which... did you have any evening classes?

A. Yes.

Q. Ok.

A. Took some evening classes on campus and some at the downtown campus building.

Q. Where was that located?

A. I've been away from Springfield for so long, but it was... maybe...

Q. Was it the Leland Hotel?

A. The Leland Building, yes, thank you.

Q. Uh-huh. When you reflect on your... well, just tell us now... After you got your legal degree, did you... let me just talk about graduation. Did you actually graduate, walking across the stage?

A. No.

Q. No, ok.

A. I wasn't interested in doing it all

Q. Right. So when you graduated, did you look for a job or what did you do with your...

A. I got a job with a lawyer right away and then I ended up working for the Continuing Legal Education...

Q. Uh-huh. Illinois Continuing... IICLE.

A. IICLE [Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education] or whatever, don't remember totally what all those initials are for now. Then I took a break from there and I traveled a little and then I came back and worked for the Illinois Conference of Churches.

Q. And what did you do at the Illinois Conference of Churches?

A. I helped start a program unit in the southern part of Illinois or the downstate part of Illinois to help undocumented immigrants get documentation during the legalization program that began in 1986. The program was... the law was passed in 1986.

Q. And so after that how did you become an attorney?

A. Well through that process, it turned out that the... Well first of all, I met lots of wonderful people in that process, including you, Olgha Sandman who I communicate with still. And I met a lawyer... he calls me his mentor and I call him my mentor. We have that kind of relationship; Craig Mousin at DePaul University now, who helped our program become an accredited agency for the Department of Justice to actually represent people in immigration proceedings in front of the Immigration Service without being an attorney to get accredited representative status.

And I got that and started representing people and liked it and continued to do that until I actually moved to St. Louis and even after I moved to St. Louis. Eventually the programs had several splits. The part of what was the Refugee Resettlement Program split away from the Conference of Churches became the Interchurch Refugee and Immigration Ministries. And then there was another sort of political split that happened between the Chicago area and the downstate area that were really different communities, different immigration needs.

And after the management, I guess, of the IRIM office in Chicago decided to close downstate programs or when that became clear that was going to happen, a new agency formed that I directed. I was still an accredited rep, it seemed like all I was doing at that time was fundraising. And it had taken me so far away from helping people that I wanted to do, I felt really detached from it and was trying to struggle with a way to not be consumed with fundraising.

And one of the ways that I contemplated and the Board thought would be a good idea was instead of being a recognized agency by the Board of Immigration Appeals—we could only collect what they considered to be minimal fees and they were very, very minimal, could never

cover the cost of providing services--that if we had an attorney on staff, we could actually provide services to people who had money. And they could help subsidize the work for people who didn't have money.

And so that was sort of the plan, to go get a law degree so that instead of being accredited representatives, we would be paralegals working under the supervision of an attorney so that we could take cases as a part of private bar, earn money that would support the work that we all really wanted to do, and that sent me to law school.

Q. And where did you get admitted?

A. I... well I got admitted to several different places, but I went to Washington University in St. Louis because I'm from St. Louis. My family was in St. Louis.

Q. And how old were you when you did that?

A. Well, how old was I when I did that? 45 or so, I was... in my class was my nephew who is my godson, so we were in law school together. And he wasn't even going directly from college either; he had already gone out and been working after college.

Q. So right now, tell us what you're doing career wise.

A. I have a small immigration law firm in St. Louis. We are eight people, multicultural, our staff are from all over the world. We have English, Spanish, French, Russian and Arabic language representation in the firm. We represent people of all financial brackets. We do a lot of pro bono work. We also represent corporations.

We are I think the only private law firm that's a clinic site for one of the law school clinics at Washington University because they recognize the public interest work that we do. So we are a clinic site for their Civil Rights and Community Justice Clinic, so we get two great students every semester to help us in that project and keep life, , coming into the firm.

I have been involved with the governance of the American Immigration Lawyers Association for many years. I'm taking a break this year. I've been chair of the Missouri Kansas chapter on two different occasions and served on the National Board of Governors for the organization, which is... it's very demanding because it's... they... there's quarterly meetings and it's just a lot of time out away from the office to do that and so for the past year and half I have tried to focus a little bit more on the firm here. And that takes a lot of time.

I come to work by 7 or 7:30 every day and I probably leave at 5:30 or 6:00 if I'm lucky and still only have enough money to buy blue jeans (laughter). We actually try to have a great, incredible staff who when we actually do have extra money and the question is, ok we can look at it a number of ways. And we're not a collective; I'm the boss, I know that, but we really try to... I try to make decisions that take everybody's needs into account. So most of our decisions

are made collectively and we can get bonuses at the end of year, we can get raises, or we can hire another staff person. And they always choose to hire another staff person because they know that we can make that much more happen with another person, so I'm so blessed in that respect.

Q. Well I really appreciate your taking the time for the interview and I wondered if there was any other thing you would like to record that I haven't asked you about or that we haven't touched on?

A. You've done a great job.

Q. Thanks.

A. And I would say that... first of all, thank you. It's been, the exercise for me has been really fun and also stimulating, reminding me about a lot of things that are easy to, they're certainly down there but they... to make them come back up again.

One of the things that did remind me about and we talked a lot about is how important Sangamon was, partly the period of time in history, partly the time in my own life, and just the exposure that I got to just different ways of thinking about the world, just have the most enormous, in fact the most transformative thing that's happened in my life, more than having kids.

Q. Wow.

A. Yeah.

Q. Ok. Well, thank you very much.

39 minutes 18 seconds

End of Interview