

OH 18 OMA Oral History Collection
Alcena Boozer

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Interviewee: Alcena Boozer

Interviewer: Chris Petersen

CP: Chris Petersen

AB: Alcena Boozer

[00:00:00]

CP: If you would just go ahead and state your name and spell it for me?

AB: Ok, my first name is Alcena, A-L-C-E-N-A. My middle name is Elaine, the traditional spelling. My maiden name is Caldwell C-A-L-D-W-E-L-L. My last name is Boozer, B-O-O-Z-E-R.

CP: O.K. Thank you. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

AB: I was born in Portland March 19th, 1938.

CP: Have you lived in Portland your whole life?

AB: Except when I was in seminary, yes.

CP: And where did you attend seminary?

AB: At Church Divinity School of the Pacific which is part of the graduate theological union in Berkeley.

CP: O.K. Great. How did you find Berkeley?

AB: Well, I thought I was a liberal and then I found out that I was really quite conservative.

CP: When were you there?

AB: Down in the — '83 and '84.

CP: O.K. Were your parents from Portland?

AB: No, my mother was from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My father was from Mason City, Iowa and they met in California.

CP: What were their occupations?

AB: My father was a chef-cook and my mother was a housewife.

CP: So how did they meet in California?

AB: Well, my mother and her sister – my mother went to California to live with her older sister because my mother moved out and married at a young age in Baton Rouge to somebody my grandmother couldn't stand. So my mother – my grandmother sent my mother out to California to live with her sister, her sister ran a boarding house because they didn't have hotels for people of color in those days. The railroad men used to come and stay there on their layovers and that's where she met my father.

CP: So your father worked for the railroad?

AB: Yes, he worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad and that's how they got to Oregon – he was transferred up here.

CP: So what part of Portland did you grow up in?

AB: Northeast Portland in the area now that is near where – between the Rose Quarter and Lloyd Center.

CP: And you lived there for most of your upbringing?

AB: I lived there for all of my upbringing and I lived there the year I got married. My folks moved out of the house I was raised in because it was going to sell the next year to make room for some of that development down there. So we got to live there rent free for a year.

CP: Uh-huh.

AB: Then, after that, we – my husband and I – moved to Northeast Portland in the Walnut Park neighborhood.

CP: And you stayed there or –

AB: No, we moved from there down to Irvington and we left Irvington when I went to Seminary because in those days they weren't about to help any woman go to seminary.

The only reason the Bishop let me go was because I believed the Bishop at the time because he didn't think we had the financial resources to go. We sold everything we owned so that I could go to seminary.

CP: Wow. So your husband was committed too, huh?

AB: Oh, he was super committed. The first thing he did was go out to sell his Porsche, now that's commitment [laughs].

CP: Wow. So did you have any siblings?

AB: Yes, I am the fifth of six. There were three girls and three boys and I'm the youngest girl.

CP: Uh-huh. What sort of career paths did your siblings follow?

AB: My oldest brother followed our father. He was a chef. Then, my oldest sister was a beautician. My oldest brother is the one who is a pharmacist down at Oregon State. My next sister was a – she worked mostly for the federal government in clerical roles. Then she entered her career as an assistant in – a classroom assistant in the school system. My brother, Jerry, was a banker.

CP: And you mentioned that the pharmacist was the first African American –

AB: Yes.

CP: – pharmacy student at OSU.

AB: Mhm.

CP: What years were they there?

AB: He was there – it would have been – late 50's early 60's.

CP: Did he ever comment on his experience?

AB: Oh yes he did. One of the things – they went down there the year I graduated from high school and his wife went down early because she got a job there on campus because she was a secretary. He was fearful for a living staying in Corvallis – they had a little house they rented near the campus. I went down to stay with her while he worked in Portland on a summer job.

CP: So the atmosphere was not a good one?

AB: No, it wasn't conducive. He did fine in the program and everything, but the atmosphere was just very different in Corvallis in those days.

CP: In the town?

AB: Yes.

[00:04:36]

CP: So where did you go to school when you were in Portland?

AB: I went to Holladay Grade School which is long since closed. It's where Lloyd Center sits. Then I went to Washington High School, also long since closed, which was in Southeast Portland even though we lived closer to Grant but in those days, they kind of gerrymandered the district boundary lines. I went to Portland State University for most of my undergraduate work.

CP: What did you study?

AB: Education. I mean, in those days you didn't have too many choices. You were either going to be a social worker or a school teacher. So I chose to teach school. I think my father chose it for me.

CP: So you said for most of your education it was at—

AB: Portland State and then the year I got married—during my senior year—and I became very ill for a few years. So I was home and then I had my children. Part of the illness was trying to have children. We had two boys and then when they got to be school age, there was a federal program—it's called B2—where they actually paid you to go become an intern because I was within twelve hours or fifteen hours of completing my degree. They hired me for that program and I was assigned as an intern at Grant High School and then Grant hired me that year. They said "Don't sign any other contracts. We will hire you to teach social studies at Grant High School."

CP: And how long were you at Grant?

AB: I was at Grant for 14 years. I became a counselor there and then—well I did grad school at night at Portland State to finish my masters and then get a counseling certificate. I also started working on an administrative certificate and then I was appointed the Vice Principal there. I left Grant to go to Seminary.

CP: O.K. And so that was 1983 you said?

AB: Yes, yes.

CP: So you were at – O.K. What was your husband's occupation?

AB: My husband was a personnel administrator. He was a – well he started out originally he was a history major at the University of Portland. That's where he graduated. Then he worked for the Juvenile Court – as a counselor at the Juvenile Court. Then he went to work for Job Corps. Then he became a personnel administrator, first with a telephone company and then with Portland General Electric. He left that job to go down to CDSP where he did everything including becoming a substitute teacher in San Ramon County Schools. And then he went to Portland Community College when we came back. At the time that he died, he was the manager – personnel manager they now call it Vice-President of Human Resources. That's what he did at the time of his death.

CP: And what year was that?

AB: That was 1990.

CP: And you had children.

AB: Yes, we have two sons. My oldest son, Bentley, had his fiftieth birthday last Sunday. He is autistic, but he does have a part time job and he still lives at home. The other son, Clark, he's a graduate of Oregon State also. He worked in the schools for a while as a counselor for at-risk kids and then he became ill for a few years and no longer could he work for the school system, but now he works for Trimet. He's an operator.

CP: So the whole family stayed in Portland?

AB: Yes.

CP: So, were you involved in the Church your whole life?

AB: Yes, yes. Even the times when I was having a war with God, I was involved with the Church. See, our two boys – basically Bentley was autistic which took awhile to diagnose and our younger son had congenital glaucoma and when they did the surgery, when he was six months old, we almost lost him to this rare thing that is called Malignant Hypothermia where people undergo the anesthesia and it gives them a very high fever that can almost take you out of here. They didn't know a lot about it in those days. They really just went back through his records and diagnosed that when he had polymyositis. They were trying to diagnose that and the anesthesiologist got all excited

and he said, “He was here as a child, we’ve got his records and now we know what happened to him.”

CP: Were your parents involved in the Church as well?

AB: Yes. My mother was involved in the Church and my Dad – even though he ran on the railroads, so he wasn’t very here – but one of the things – his children – we all wanted when he died was his prayer book because even though he couldn’t attend church every Sunday, he was a devout Anglican and he read that Book of Common Prayer every day. Because he worked on the railroad the pages are all messy and everything, so we have a little ceremony where the oldest male in the family always gets that prayer book.

CP: So what church were you raised in then?

AB: Right here!

CP: O.K. This one, wow.

AB: This one, yeah. I remember the old building was here when I was six years old. They sort of demolished that and this Parish hall was the first part built and we worshipped here. Then they put up a sanctuary.

[00:09:52]

CP: So the seminary was clearly a big leap for you and your family. What sort of lead to that? I mean, how did this come about?

AB: Well, it came about – as I said, I was having a war with God because Father Stone – bless his heart – when I was sitting there with the one child who was in jeopardy of his life that had the malignant hypothermia after the surgery and then the same week they told us about Bentley, finally diagnosed him as being autistic, Father Stone said, “Alcena, God wouldn’t give you any more than you could stand.” I just looked at him, and I said, “Father Stone, if God wonders what I can stand, we’re just about there and a loving God wouldn’t do this to me.” So I didn’t go to Church for a long time. My husband would dress the kids and take them to Church and I just decided I wasn’t doing this thing anymore. Then gradually I’ve gotten back because one of the things that hit me one day was I was a very shy, timid woman, but after having these kids and having to start a fight for their services – because my husband worked two jobs so we could pay for the medical care – one day it struck me, you’re not the same person you were before you had these kids. There’s some good that comes out of everything.

So then I started back – coming back to Church and working most of the time. I did clerical stuff here. Then we had a priest here, one of about two priests after Father Stone, and a lot of the people who were a part of that founding generation were becoming old and could no longer get here to receive the sacraments of the Church. I was really on the case of this priest saying, “Father, you need to get out there. Those people need the sacrament.” He said, “Well I don’t have a deacon.” And I said, “What do you mean you don’t have a deacon?” “I need a deacon. Deacons do that.” And I said, “Well what do you have to do to be the deacon? I’ll be the deacon –” never realizing what I was saying.

So I thought about that a little more and when I told my husband, James, about it – who had a tremendous sense of humor – he just said, “All I have to tell you is this has got to be the greatest conversion since St. Paul” [laughs].

We had a local Diocesan School of Theology and I did that and I did some of the – took classes at some of the different theological schools around this area. Then I took the exam – because that’s how they trained deacons at that time – and became a deacon, thinking that was my call. At the time I was ordained a deacon, my husband told me that “you know, you’ve been called to be a priest” and this was in the ‘70s, you know, women – “No, no, didn’t call me to be a priest. Besides, God would tell me first, not you, if I was called to be a priest.” When he did that and then we said – I said that they’re not gonna ordain a – for men at that time, they would actually ordain men if they continued local training. Women – they would tell you, you have to go to seminary. It was really a not too subtle strategy of keeping you out. So he went out to see the Bishop with me and he said “she’s going. That’s what she has to do. She’s going.” That’s when he went out and sold that Porsche.

CP: Uh-huh.

AB: So we went down there and it was – it was a good time. I mean one day we were in a nice house in Irvington and then we were in this little dinky apartment down in Berkeley.

CP: Were there any other women in that circumstance in the Portland area at the time?

AB: There were very few. There were women in some of the other, you know, some of the other denominations. There were very few because I think in Oregon – in the Dioceses of Oregon, I think I was the third woman who was ordained. There were very few of us for a while. As for African American women in the Episcopal Church, at that time there were only three of us nationally who had been ordained.

CP: Wow.

AB: Now they're just – now half the people in seminary are women and almost half the priests in the Church are very shortly going to be females.

CP: Uh-huh. Who are some people who have been influential in your life?

AB: Well some of the people that I mentioned here – needless-to-say Father Stone, a very strong influence on my life. Carl's wife, Judge Mercedes Deiz because she always encouraged people. My own parents. My husband was a great influence on my life because he always just was "keep pushing," that "you know, you could do a lot of stuff" and always very supportive. My oldest sister who is now deceased, Dolores LaGrone, who was a member of this Parish too. And then in terms of people I didn't meet but considered an influence on my life would be Mary McLeod Bethune and W.E.B. Dubois because I used to read him a lot and he was also an Episcopalian.

[00:14:32]

CP: How about in terms of the social side of your life. What's been important there? Has it been revolving mostly around the Church, or was there another sort of component of what you did for fun with your friends, that kind of thing.

AB: Well, I was active as an educator and in those circles, a lot of things – I was an avid hiker. Now my knees are recovering, but I did have an awful lot of fun blowing them out over the years. I went down – I did the White Mountain in New Hampshire and I did the Canadian Rockies and up in Alaska, in Denali park, not Denali, but in the park hiking. I went down to Peru and did the trek from Cusco to Machu Picchu. I loved to do that. At age 64, I completed the Portland marathon, which I consider one of the highlights of my life just to have finished.

CP: Sure, yeah.

AB: Then I'm an activist of sorts too. I've been out in the street demonstrating for a lot of stuff over the years.

CP: Yeah, tell me a little more about that.

AB: Well, in the early years, when they had things dealing with desegregation. Recently, I've also been involved with the Worker's Rights Board because the people working in the hospitals – the cleaning staff, the food service staff – are really treated abysmally by some of the hospitals, lead organizations. So Worker's Rights and a lot of clergy have been involved with that. We have demonstrated outside in front of the hospitals and things. It sort of startles them some times to see all the clergy in their collars out there. But we were – Providence I spent a lot of time outside there because that one still isn't really settled. We were out in front of Legacy there because at that

time, I was on my cane and I just sort of – and the administrators were looking out the window and I shook my cane at them and said “shame on you!” [laughs]

Then I worked with the Albina Ministerial Alliance. There’s a coalition for justice in police reform and we’ve been really involved with that for the past two or three years since the Campbell’s shooting and some of the other shootings.

CP: Any other hobbies?

AB: Hobbies? I loved to garden and we did some – and one time before the parking lot went in here, we had a community garden out here. I was involved here when we started the program of feeding the poor. At first they thought I was out of my mind, you know, when I came here and said “we can do this every Saturday.” When I got here, they were doing it once a month, or once every other month. I sort of said, “We really could do this every Saturday.” So people started jumping in and helping. I discovered a long time ago, folks will do a lot more with you than for you.

CP: O.K. so are there any other important themes or events in your life that you want us to know about as we start to prepare for more in depth conversation?

AB: Oh, probably just the evolution about what is happening in terms of churches and involvement in the public sphere because in terms of politics, you know, there is a separation between church and state, but yet most clergy will tell you if they’re thinking at all that budgets are moral documents. So we have to get involved and a lot of my preaching revolves around social justice issues. I believe in the prophetic office of the Church.

CP: Well you mentioned Dubois and Bethune. Are there any other folks who have influenced you sort of philosophically?

AB: I think in terms of theologically and philosophically, Julian of Norwich who was a 14th century mystic. Gosh, there’s so many. John Howard Yoder was a theologian who writes and is still, I believe, teaching. And Hauerwas, yes, Emily Hauerwas. Some of those writings have influenced me, and then Howard Thurman who was a mystic and a theologian and teacher. Yeah, those folks are the – and then, I love reading Elaine Pagels who’s – who gets into the public sphere you know with some of her writings.

CP: O.K. well that’s what I’ve have to ask you.

AB: O.K.

CP: Thank you very much.

[end 00:19:17]