

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Nancy L. Fortna
Interviewer: Brian Knowles
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MR. BRIAN KNOWLES: I am Brian Knowles. I am acting as an oral historian for the National Archives and Records Administration. Today's date is 25 April 2014.

I am conducting an Oral History Interview with Mrs. Nancy Fortna, recently retired. She is formerly of the Customer Services Unit at Archives I, Washington, D.C. All right. Nancy—

MRS. NANCY FORTNA: [Interposing] Yes.

MR. KNOWLES: May I call you Nancy?

MRS. FORTNA: Yes, please.

MR. KNOWLES: Please provide a brief overview of your career with NARA, from when to when.

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. I started on December 7, 1987, so a day that would live in infamy. Yes. And I started... and I just ended, I just retired on the 10th of January, 2014.

MR. KNOWLES: Nice.

MRS. FORTNA: Am I speaking loud enough?

MR. KNOWLES: No, perfect.

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. All right. So, my voice tends to drop. I started out with what, I'll say, we called it NC, which was the National Archives. And it was Records Centers Office. It has changed to other acronyms, NR, etc. I don't even know what it is now. But it was the head, the headquarter office for Records Centers. And we worked for David Peterson at the time.

We were on K Street. We were in, I think, 11 different places all over town because we had no room. You know, all the offices, this was before we built Archives II out at College Park.

MR. KNOWLES: Oh, yeah.

MRS. FORTNA: So we were down on K Street. And, of course, when we moved to College Park we were in the boondocks. And we were like, "We miss K Street. We miss our vendors." It was a great place down there. And we had a great bunch of people. But it was basically an office building. And we had most of the third floor for that.

Do you want me just to go through quickly, and then come back to what I did? Or just tell you a little bit—

MR. KNOWLES: Let's, let me ask you, for your background. Did your education influence your decision to come to NARA?

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. Right. I have a degree in history and I also have a Master's of Arts and History. When I was working, actually I had just gotten my undergrad degree.

And then I went to work for the state of Pennsylvania because I figured if you were in government work, you could have a nine-to-five job. And you don't have to work weekends. That was my theory.

So I went to work for them. But until I figured out what I wanted to do, I worked as a clerk typist at the Department of Environmental Resources. And then while I was there I went for my master's.

MR. KNOWLES: All right.

MRS. FORTNA: You could do a couple of things. You could write a dissertation or you could do an internship. So I did an internship at the Pennsylvania State Archives. And that's what got me into the archival field.

MR. KNOWLES: Nice.

MRS. FORTNA: After I got my degree, then I applied for a position there. And they didn't have any way to get us into an archivist position, so they got us into a microfilm operator position. So three of us with Master's degrees in History, who wanted to get into this field, did some microfilming of borough and city council minutes.

It was a project that actually the National Archives, you know, the NHPRC was handling. We had money from them. That's how I got into the field. And then got to be an archivist.

And one of the people that had worked for me in that project was Becky Collier. And she called me from the National Archives one day and said, there's this perfect job for you. You need to apply. You've got a week.

I would not have applied if I had worked here for a while. Because I figured if you had a week to get it in that means it's pegged for somebody, you know. So, but I went ahead and applied. And I got the job.

MR. KNOWLES: That's nice.

MRS. FORTNA: So, came down...we moved down here.

MR. KNOWLES: Great. Great. What year was this, or time frame?

MRS. FORTNA: 1987.

MR. KNOWLES: 1987. All right. Let's see. So what were your impressions of the agency when you first got here, when you first came on board?

MRS. FORTNA: Well, when I was in Pennsylvania I came down here for the Modern Archives Institute. This was when I was still in Pennsylvania and I had an idea, and it was the same when I got here, that this was such a big place, compared to Pennsylvania.

We went out and did a tour at the Records Center in Suitland. And we looked at one bay. And that was like bigger than the archives in Pennsylvania. And I just couldn't believe. It was a football field, basically, size. And so it was just that it was so big.

I had had a lot of experience in a lot of different things in Pennsylvania. So I was impressed by the fact that everything was so specialized here. You know, I wasn't going to work with photographs one day, and then work with the county government and bring their records in the next day, or work with state government, transfer records to the archives the next day. You had to be more of a specialist here. And that was kind of hard for me because I really liked to see the whole picture.

And it was difficult, even though we had some training and people came in and talked to us and told us a little bit about the agency. But it was just that it was so big and, I know that sounds funny now. But it was so big and it was national, of course.

So, you know, in Pennsylvania, it was just Harrisburg. Here, it was not just D.C., it was all these places, Presidential Libraries, and Federal Record Centers and Regional Archives, all over the United States. So the size of it and the specialization was one thing that really was my first impression.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. So you worked at the Office of Federal Records Centers from 1987 to 1995.

MRS. FORTNA: Right.

MR. KNOWLES: What were your duties and responsibilities, generally?

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. They switched. They progressed. I started out looking at—I can't think of the name of it—when people are sending in requests—

MR. KNOWLES: [Interposing] Correspondence?

MRS. FORTNA: —215, no, 115s. People were sending in requests to transfer records to the Archives.

MR. KNOWLES: Oh.

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. No, to get them approved. Record Schedules, that's what it is. Okay. So I was working with records, see, I'm retired, it doesn't matter anymore!

I was working with Record Schedules. And there were certain things that our office had to look at on each Record Schedule. So I was assigned certain agencies.

And I had to look at these and approve them in certain ways. And then we sent them on to other offices in the National Archives. Because a lot of offices had to sign off on them. So that was what I started with.

During that time, I had my son and I came back. And we had some new people on staff. And I had a new boss, Alan Kramer. And he said, I'd like to see whether you would like to do some administrative things, which I ate up. I just loved it.

I worked with, in EEO complaints. I worked with the new offices that Trudy Peterson, as Deputy, as Archivist of the United States, Temporary Archivist, had asked us to look into certain things, do some projects.

And so I was on one of the committees to develop an EEO office, Equal Employment Opportunity Office, EEO. And that was really interesting because we started from the ground up.

We looked at the legislation. And we prepared documents that would say, okay, this is the way the office ought to be run. Here are the positions you ought to have. And so that was more of an administrative thing that I was doing. And I loved that—administrative, personnel type work. I also was in charge of the training program that Office of Federal Records Centers, NC at the time, had developed for its archive specialists and archivists. Mary Rephlo had developed one for archivists. And so I talked to her and developed one for the archive specialists.

And this was an internship where people who would come in, they would actually work for us. They were actually employees, full-time employees, permanent employees. And they would work in different areas of the Office of Federal Records Centers. And have different task and different duties. So that they could learn all about Federal Records Centers.

Because they could be sent to any Records Center or to Central Office. So we needed to give them some hands-on experience. So I developed that training program. And I think I had maybe 15, 20 of them in, people in that time frame, that short time frame to get through that program.

There was something else I was thinking of. I might think of it later. But also, at that time, the Vice President, who was Al Gore at the time, had spearheaded a project called the Government Performance and Results Act, GPRA, G-P-R-A. And so we had volunteered, the National Archives, to be a pilot for that project.

This was happening all over the United States in government and industry and all over the place. So we had to do the pilot and I had to really spearhead that, actually run that project.

And that involved people from all of the field offices, all of the Records Centers, being able to work with us. And develop different guidelines and things that they could do to streamline what we do, to make it more efficient which was kind of the reason to have this project. So I worked on that and that was basically a full-time job in addition to these other things that I was doing. I just remembered what the other thing was.

We would go out on inspections of the Federal Records Centers. And we would check all of the areas that they have, whether it was the accessioning area, whether it was being able to make sure that we described these records correctly, whether it was getting them shelved correctly, whatever it was, quality assurance, they had a quality assurance staff, we checked all of those.

So I went out on a few of these inspections. But Alan asked me to write up the final reports. So I went on some inspections. Other ones I didn't. But the people who did go would come back, four or five of them, and hand me their reports and I would have to put them all into a certain report, a report so that it sounded like one report, not five different people speaking. That I loved to do. I loved that writing.

MR. KNOWLES: What are some of the Centers that you've been to?

MRS. FORTNA: That I've been to?

MR. KNOWLES: Where you did these inventories?

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. They did them all over. But I've been to Boston, St. Louis, the Military Records Center there, not the civilian. San Bruno in California. Fort Worth, the Fort Worth one. Let's see if there

was anything else. I can't think of any others right now. But I did at least those four. But I wrote reports for all of them.

MR. KNOWLES: During those trips, did anything stand out to you as surprising or interesting?

MRS. FORTNA: What was interesting was that I found out how they felt about central office. And it's like central office was needed. But, don't get too close, "because we have our own way of doing things."

And that was fine within guidelines, which is what we did the inspections for. But I found that they had their own way of doing things and it was efficient. And it was well done. And it was...well sometimes it's better to have a more hands-off approach.

Just give them general guidelines. They're intelligent people, they knew the area and knew the records, knew their customers, and they were able to do the job much better than anybody from D.C. handing down an edict for them to do. So that's basically, you know, the way that the office was run.

I also then was surprised because I had been here for a few years at how small those areas were. Because coming from Pennsylvania, I was surprised how huge this area was. But then going out to the Records Centers, you know, Fort Worth Records Center is big, but it's not like Suitland. You know, so they had certain records for only certain states. And so that was kind of a shock going back the other way.

I found that the personnel was absolutely wonderful and that they really catered to us when we came. I know we were inspecting them, but they were so gracious and so kind, and would have us into their homes for meals. One assistant director's wife made a beautiful meal and invited us over.

And it was just really a nice time to really get to know people, because I'd only dealt with them on the phone or through email. So it was really nice to get to know lots of great people in the Record Centers.

MR. KNOWLES: Did you ever come across any issues or any errors during these trips?

MRS. FORTNA: Very minor errors.

MR. KNOWLES: Very minor.

MRS. FORTNA: Very minor. These people knew their stuff.

MR. KNOWLES: Do you have an example of like one of the minor ones?

MRS. FORTNA: Oh, let's see. Maybe, I think like when we were looking at the time and attendance, there might have been an error, keeping time and attendance. But usually not, you know. But, okay, so instead of 22 hours of annual leave, the person may have had 22.3 hours of annual leave—something very, very minor like that. And we just didn't find that many mistakes, at least the parts that I inspected. We just didn't find very many mistakes at all.

MR. KNOWLES: So when you first came to NARA, what was the situation as far as a mentor showing you around or instructing you how to train or conduct, do your job?

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. I think that's something that actually the National Archives needs to further develop. Because I think that a mentoring program...I know we try it. But we don't have it really, it's hit or miss.

It's whatever office in which you are located. I had several people who were there in that particular office, down on K Street, who were to show me how to do the Records Schedules. And they did, to a limited degree.

But they sent me out to Suitland to learn a little bit more. So I'd go out there, like once a week or, I think, I went out there one time for a week at a time to learn exactly how they handle requests out there for records from the agencies. Exactly what they do. And that would help me a little bit to understand that end of it. And I had really good supervisors who would spend whatever time they needed to help me do that.

When I did the administrative things that was basically learn by experience. Because they hadn't had anybody that I know of that had done a lot of that stuff. So I just kind of learned by experience.

I would look in the regulations, talk to people in the different offices that we were dealing with, consult with other people in other offices, other staff members, and go to my supervisors, and say, "this is what I found. What do you think? Here are three ways that I think we could do this. I'm suggesting this because of these reasons. What do you think?" And I was given really a go ahead. I was really able to develop that part of the program. But it was the Records Schedules that I had like, specific instruction.

When I went to other offices, I would have varying degrees of mentoring, some good, some bad, some non-existent, some, you know, extremely well done. It just varied on the job.

But you have to realize that I was promoted throughout this. And it was to the point where, as a GS-13, I should be able to figure something out like that, you know, just general guidelines. This is what we want, do it. And that's basically what I did.

MR. KNOWLES: Well when you first started here in '87, the agency hadn't been separated from GSA for that long.

MRS. FORTNA: No.

MR. KNOWLES: Was there still independence growing pains at that point?

MRS. FORTNA: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. They were so ecstatic about becoming independent. When I was in Pennsylvania we wrote letters to our Congressmen to say, "Please let them become independent." There was a big campaign going on.

But, yeah. They were still getting used to certain things that, we now did, that GSA had done before. And in Records Centers, the big thing, I think, was that GSA still owns the buildings. They still owned the buildings that our records were in.

But we now owned the records. We had intellectual and physical control of the records. But they still had to do the upkeep for the buildings. So it was a slow process in some regards, becoming independent. I don't know now if the office, if the Records Centers are still owned by GSA or not. I don't know.

MR. KNOWLES: That's interesting.

MRS. FORTNA: Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: We'll have to find out.

MRS. FORTNA: Yeah. I don't know. Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. Okay, a question dealing with the same time frame, '87 to '95, the development of technology, especially on the administrative side. How did that influence your job, how you conducted just day-to-day business? What was the influence?

MRS. FORTNA: Well usually, it was find somebody. Because we were so isolated. Very seldom did we come down to the main building. We were down on K Street. So we'd have to call people and talk to them on the phone. Or get on the Metro and come down and visit different offices.

When I went in I had an officemate and we shared a computer, which was interesting. And I didn't really think of it as a computer, because we weren't connected to the Internet, really. It was a way to get some things done, but we weren't emailing. There was no email that we did. There was nothing electronically being sent to anybody.

MR. KNOWLES: Like, word processing?

MRS. FORTNA: That's about it, word processing, yeah. That was about it. Yeah. Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: So when did email, the Internet, really have an effect on your career?

MRS. FORTNA: Well when we moved to Archives II, which was November of 1993, all the sudden we had our own computers. And we were hooked up. We were, you know, hooked up to the world, you know. So that made a difference. So now we could email people.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. Your next position, was with the Professional Development and Training Office. How did that transfer take place? Or why?

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. After I was in Federal Records Centers for a year, I went from GS-11 to a GS-12. And then I was looking into getting a promotion at that office. And the paperwork was with my boss. And he was looking it over, getting ready to do that for a GS-13.

And this GS-13 came open. And it would be in the Training Office, which would be common needs training. Training that everybody would need. I mean, if you worked in photographs, you would need certain types of training. If I worked, you know, with Records Centers, I would need something else. But there would be things that would be common that we could all, like writing skills or public speaking skills or conflict management. Things like that that were common to everybody.

And when I was doing a little bit of training with the interns at Federal Records Centers, I talked to Trudy Peterson. And I suggested to her that I'm trying to get like computer classes for some of our people, writing skills classes, and they're very expensive to go to.

But I found out that if you have someone come in and present to 10, 15, 20 people, it is so much cheaper per person.

So that's what this office was going to be doing. They were going to bring people, bring vendors in, people who would teach. And it would make it just so much cheaper for us and more efficient again, for the National Archives to train its people in those common needs trainings. We call those universal competencies now.

I think it's still on the website. We had universal competencies and supplemental competencies. But the universal competencies are the things that everybody needs for their job.

So I had been interested in that. So when this opened up, I thought I would apply. The person that I had been involved with the internships, Mary Rephlo, had been moved to that office. And she said, "Nance, look." So I applied for that and interviewed. And I got the position. And then transferred over.

We were in Archives II at College Park by then. And so I just moved down the hall and went to work for Donn Neal. And Mary Rephlo was there and Regina Campbell. So it was the four of us in this brand new office.

MR. KNOWLES: How'd you like it out at AII?

MRS. FORTNA: I didn't. And I'm thinking of a commute, like the commute there.

And the isolation out there. When we went out there in November of '93, of course, I couldn't Metro. And I had Metro. We bought a house two miles from the Metro so that I could Metro to K Street.

This was a problem for me. But it was really a problem for people from Virginia who now had to get in their cars and commute a long distance every day.

We had no Metro. And the building is like rather sterile compared to things here, downtown, that were all built in the 30s. And it all kind of looks alike, what we think of as Federal buildings, the government's buildings.

This looked like, I don't know, some kind of a monstrosity, you know. But it was all steel and white, you know, everywhere. And it was so big. And when we were moving out there, office by office, it was like you were in a mausoleum.

It was like, I don't know, is there anybody here...am I the only person left here? You know, because there was nobody in the halls. And you would try to go to the fitness center and you'd get lost coming back. You know, that kind of stuff.

But when we went out there, there was no cafeteria, which came later. There was no vending...I mean, there were vending machines, but there was no change machine. So you had to bring everything you wanted to eat for the day. And if you needed something from the vending machine, you could put your money in, but if the vending machine had run out of change and you had a buck, you were out of luck, you know. No little convenience store, nothing.

Plus it was the worst winter. We had sleet storms maybe two times a week. And here I was driving now, instead of Metro-ing. So we didn't like it.

And I remember one of my colleagues saying, "I really miss my popcorn vendor." Because we had been on K Street. And we were used to just taking two minutes and go get food wherever we wanted to, any type of restaurant. He had gone down every morning to get his popcorn. So we were all in some kind of a shock going out there. And we never really fully recovered.

MR. KNOWLES: And you were out there, well, for this position you were there '95 to 2000?

MRS. FORTNA: Right.

MR. KNOWLES: And you were out at All the whole time.

MRS. FORTNA: Mm-hmm.

MR. KNOWLES: And did you travel at all or like you said go out to the centers or anywhere for training or teaching?

MRS. FORTNA: I did teach some. I took some training. Actually that was when I was in Records Centers. I went and did some microfilm training on how to microfilm records, went to Denver. But in this office I didn't really do a whole lot of traveling. I can't think of when I travelled for that, for the particular position there.

We brought vendors in. I spoke to them, emailed them, had them come in and meet with me, and then we hired them to come in and do the training there.

MR. KNOWLES: Mm. Okay. Your next position was over with Life Cycle Management from 2000 to 2004.

MRS. FORTNA: Mm-hmm.

MR. KNOWLES: Again, why this transfer?

MRS. FORTNA: Because it was quite obvious that our main boss for this area, Donn Neal's boss, Ren Cahoon, wanted to change the climate of this office and the duties of this office. So Mary and I switched to different places. Donn retired. Regina got another job. And he was able to hire people to come in and do the training the way, actually not really do much training, but to do more facilitation work with meetings that they were having. So we just saw that we were being phased out. So I talked to my Michael Kurtz, who was the head of the Washington office, that would be NW. N for National Archives, W for Washington office.

And he talked to some people and said, "You know, Marie Allen has some positions open. And this would be in Life Cycle Management. And you would probably be teaching classes."

Well, I'm in training. I have seen how people have come in and taught classes. So I thought, well I'd like to take a stab at that. I've done teaching outside of NARA. And I thought that would be great. It's a completely different office. I mean, a completely different audience, excuse me.

These were records officers from different Federal agencies that we were teaching. So we were teaching them on how to set up their programs. How to go through their records. How to come up and write the schedules that we had improved a few years ago. And make their departments, their agencies, their units more efficient in their paperwork control.

MR. KNOWLES: How important is that?

MRS. FORTNA: Well it's extremely important. Because if you just have a mess you can't find out what you really need to keep permanently. And, as you know, the National Archives keeps 3 to 5% of what the government manufactures, creates.

So you have what we used to call paperwork tiger, you know, jungle, whatever it was. We just needed to say, "Look, you can save space, you can save money, you can save time finding things, if you do it at the front of the life cycle, at the creation stage and the maintenance and use stage."

If you take care of your records then when you try to schedule it you'll know what to schedule. And when you try to transfer it, you won't have to worry about all the stuff, you don't have to sift through anything then.

We know that from personal experience at home. You open a drawer and there's 50 years' worth of photographs in there. Oh, great. Now what? You know, I can't find the one photograph I wanted because nothing's organized.

So it was, I think, it was really, really important. It still is, to be able to help them. And now, you know, with so many electronic records, it's the same, but it's a little different.

MR. KNOWLES: So, what were your duties and responsibilities in that department?

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. Joe Byrnes and I were both training officers and we really had the same job. We were making sure that those classes that we offered had the proper materials in the, in there, and that the teachers, the instructors, our fellow colleagues had what they needed to teach the classes and that they were scheduled and that they were publicized. In addition to that, we taught some of the classes.

So we had to prepare our scripts, our hand-outs, our examples that we used, and made it something that would mean something to Federal officers. That was basically it. There were a few schedules. There were a few things that we had to look at too, Records Schedules, but not much. It was mainly in the area of training.

MR. KNOWLES: None of that, death by PowerPoint, at this stage?

MRS. FORTNA: Oh, yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: Yeah?

MRS. FORTNA: Oh, yeah. Everybody was learning PowerPoint, you know. Let's have an all-day class and have 3,000 PowerPoint slides, you know. So we know to try to help other instructors who would need some help with, "How do I organize this? Is this too much? Is this..." okay.

And so we would say, you know, that, and we would sit in on some of the classes, if they asked us to. And we'd give them our feedback. Since we were trainers we would give them our feedback on how they presented the material, if they wanted it.

But people were really learning the PowerPoint, thinking that was going to save, be the end all for training, was give them a PowerPoint.

MR. KNOWLES: So you, well, up to this point, did you become a subject area expert in anything? Or would you consider yourself an expert in any particular subject of NARA's collections or part of the agency?

MRS. FORTNA: No. Never really worked with the records here. I worked with them in Pennsylvania. But when I came here, things are so specialized here. I never accessioned anything. I never looked at the records, organized them, did a scope and content note. I never did anything like that.

Now we were there to inspect what other people had done. But I basically worked in records scheduling and training.

MR. KNOWLES: Wow.

MRS. FORTNA: I just thought that was interesting. Because I worked a lot with the records in Pennsylvania, you know. There's old legal size yellow tablets where you did your box listings and all of that. That's what we did in Pennsylvania, by hand, no computers.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. Well from there, from 2004 to 2014, you worked with Customer Services. Again, why this transfer?

MRS. FORTNA: This transfer? Because I had had a wonderful two years of the four years in Life Cycle Management. And then we had a change in personnel. And I decided that I needed to move on.

And still, again, I would love to do something in the training area. But those jobs are really hard to find in the National Archives. So I was looking outside of the National Archives, saying I would still like to do something in training, and talked to a couple of people about that.

Deputy Archivist for the Washington, D.C. area, Sharon Thibodeau, talked to me a little bit. I gave her a rundown of the experience that I had had in Pennsylvania and here. And she said, oh, well, I had no idea. Let me think about this.

The next thing I knew I was talking to Diane Dimkoff who later became my supervisor. And Sharon had said that Diane was looking for a training officer. They had redone the Archives I area, the research area. And Diane was in charge of both Research Rooms at Archives I, downtown in D.C., and then Archives II, the facility in College Park.

And she wanted somebody who would develop some programs that would help researchers, as well as staff. So I talked to Diane for a few minutes and she said, wow, let's have you come for 120-day detail. Because I have some ideas. We're talking the same thing here. Come over. We'll work together to see what we can come up with.

After a few weeks Diane said, I want you permanently. And she got the FTE, the position itself moved over. And so I was able just to move over.

It was a lateral. But I didn't have to, you know, apply for the job and get selected as being qualified and then interview because I'd been doing the job. So I came over.

And we worked on a program which really kind of exploded. And it was not only, like I said, training the public on what records we have here, but it was also training our staff on what records we have here which would help them in their research or in their jobs.

It would also help if they were handling the public. And could say, "Wait a minute, you want something like this? Hey, why don't you check this Record Group?" Because they had learned about the records. So that was it, the detail turned into a full-time position. And I was there for ten years. Loving every minute of it. Loved it.

Not that I didn't love what I had done before, but I really, really enjoyed my time at Customer Service.

MR. KNOWLES: Now was it, was your time mainly with the staff or was it with the public?

MRS. FORTNA: It was both. In fact, some things that we started for the public, ended up being for the staff too, so both things. And I can go into detail on those, whenever you want me to.

MR. KNOWLES: That's where we're at in this stage. Go—

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. All right. So, they had redone the research area here. It was beautiful. It was green. It was carpeted. It was lovely. But Diane said, oh, you know, "let's get reacquainted."

So she had started a little, I think it was a weekly, I think it was weekly, program, called, "Let's Get Reacquainted," where researchers, the public, would come in and learn a little bit more about the records that we had here. Because some of the records stayed here, some when to archives, you know, around different area. And these records down here were mainly genealogical in nature.

But, there are things that are out at Archives II, photographs, motion pictures, all types of different records that might help researchers down here, particularly genealogical researchers. So she had these programs and had staff come in and talk about different types of records that they worked with.

Well that was really popular and staff said, "Can we come too? We want to know about these records. You know, Joe's working on military records, you know, from the 18th Century. I don't know anything about that. But I have people coming into the Research Room, and I could use that information too."

So, she had done that a short time before I got there. So when I got there she said we're going to continue that program, but we're going to give it a different look.

Let's see, how do I want to say this? She said, let's come up with a title. And I said, well, you want them to get acquainted with the records. Yeah. So we talked and talked and talked. And we came up with "Know Your Records." K-N-O-W. Know Your Records. This is called the Know Your Records Program.

So the first thing we did was have these weekly sessions where we would invite people and we publicized it. So people from all walks of life would come in. All types of researchers or just people who were, wonder what the Archives is about? You know, or ah, gee, "I'd like to look into my grandfather's pension record. I think I'll come here to this session on pensions."

So we had all types of people, and again, staff, also came to that. That was the first thing we did, this lecture series. And we thought, gee, there are lots of people that can't come on Tuesdays at 11 o'clock, downtown D.C. So we said, let's ask the people, the staff people who teach that, to teach again on Thursday at Archives II, and have a different audience out there.

And then we thought, well, that's fine. But there's still people that won't be able to see that. So we had it filmed. They filmed it at Archives II, every week. And now we have some of those online, so that people can just sit at home in their bunny slippers and tune in and get the lecture, you know, from Denver, or London, or wherever. They can just tune in and get that lecture.

So that's a big thing now, is getting things digitized and getting things up online so that people can attend, "attend" in that way. So I thought, well, that's great. This is what we're doing.

But Diane is a very innovative person and she said, let's do some other things. I said, okay. So she said, I think it would be great if we would have a newsletter. I went, okay. All right. So we'll have a newsletter. And this will be a newsletter for customers. We're going to call these researchers customers now. This is the Customer Services Division.

And we would tell them what's happening here in the D.C. area. If something's going on with the building that they need to be careful of when they're coming in, physically with the building. If we have

new types of records, which are going online. If we have someone who has written an article in *Prologue*, you know. So we put all that type of stuff into these newsletters. And so we started doing those quarterly.

And then she said, well, you know, “the lectures are going great. Why don’t we have some big one or two-day symposium?” All right. So we did one on Hispanic Records. And we did one on African American Records. The Hispanic one was a one-day session down here, in downtown D.C.

And the African American was a two-day symposium. And it happened to be out at College Park. Not because that’s where we wanted it to be but because we had a hurricane and we flooded out the theatre here. So it was under water and was going to take a while to get rebuilt. So we booked it out there at Archives II. And we had several hundred people attend that.

All right. So we have these little lectures every week. We have these yearly or bi-yearly symposia. How about a big genealogy fair? Let’s have everybody come in. Let’s get all different types of people to come in and speak about different records. We could get people from the Library of Congress to come in. We could get people from wherever, to come in and talk about their records, INS, could come in and talk about their records. We did that.

We started that in ‘05, I think. I think it was ‘05. Yeah. And that was our first genealogy fair. We had it inside in this building. There was little space to have people come in. But we packed in 300 people. And we had sessions and it was a huge success. People were really excited about this. The next year we had it. We had about the same amount of people. I think because we made it just D.C. records. We just narrowed the focus.

Then the next year we expanded the focus. We had 500 people, then a 1,000, then 1,500. It just kept going up and up. And then in 2013, with the cut of all kinds of money in the Federal government, having tents out in front of our building, because we eventually were so big we had to go outside under tents for these sessions.

That “optics,” I think, is what they called it. So that wouldn’t look good to be spending money, even though it wasn’t our money, it was raised by the Foundation for the National Archives. So we decided, hey, let’s go digital. Let’s have a digital genealogy fair. And we did.

And that way, we think, that there were maybe, I think the numbers are around 10,000. We had that many people that came in and out in that two-day session to see that, to see the sessions that were online.

And these were people, okay, what do we call it when we Tweet? We had Tweets coming in during the sessions. And these Tweets were not only from the United States, they were from all over the world. The people...so this was really a big thing, a huge thing. I think they’re going to continue to do that. I think they have one scheduled or they’re thinking about October of this year. So people were really, really excited about that.

Our speakers weren’t real thrilled about being on camera, but, oh, well. It really, really reached a lot of people. So there were lots of things that we’re doing, that were going on here.

Now this ended up being a really full-time job for me. We brought on Andrea Matney. And she took over the whole Know Your Records Program. So that I was able to work on the other part of my job which

was staff training. I had been so busy with Know Your Records and that was expanding and expanding and expanding.

But we saw that there was a need for training, back to that common needs training, that I had worked on with Donn Neal. There were things that were common to the people in Customer Service. And there were several hundred people in Customer Service between the two buildings. Common things that are common to everybody; that they needed to be able to do their job correctly.

The first think I did was, was to come up with a curriculum, a one-day class on presentation skills, oral presentation skills. And that I really got into. I just loved doing that. That was my favorite class.

But doing all of the research and preparing the curriculum and then running a pilot with a couple of our people to see if we were covering everything, to see how it ran, to see how it worked, to get it to be timed within six hours. So we trained over 100 people in public speaking skills.

After that I worked on customer service skills. And so I developed a class for customer service training. And last year, 2013, we trained about 400 people in the two buildings on customer service. I had—

MR. KNOWLES: [Interposing] I was one of those.

MRS. FORTNA: Yes, you were. Yes, you were. So what'd you think? Was it okay?

MR. KNOWLES: It was good.

MRS. FORTNA: Okay. I had really good responses from that. I had like one or two people that say, "Why don't you do this? Why don't you do this?" That's good. I want feedback. I always want feedback. Just like with the public speaking, I had a couple of people say, we need an intermediate. You know, after we have learned how to speak in public and gotten over our fright, and now we're progressed, you know. Now we're doing 20-minute speeches, or let's have another intermediate class. I wasn't able to do that, because I had to stop, do the customer service training and then I retired. So, but that would have been a lot of fun too, to take people who had worked on their presentation skills and were able to get them challenged in a different way in an intermediate type class.

But the customer service, I had pretty good response from that. People came in with their lower lips dragging on the floor. You know, like, oh, man, because it was mandatory. And I would just look at them and say, "We're going to have fun." And they go, "really?" And I said, "Yeah. Because I'm spending three hours here with you. And if I'm not having fun, why am I here? So, you know, let's have fun and learn at the same time."

And some of them were really hesitant to participate. But when we start out with, give me some horror stories of when you were a customer. All the sudden, they were sharing. And that would help us learn that if we don't like being treated a certain way, then maybe we need to treat the customer with dignity and respect and be helpful to them. So that's where I was when I retired.

MR. KNOWLES: Nice. Let's see. What were some of the challenges you faced while in your career with the agency, just things in general?

MRS. FORTNA: Well, I think, computers, the technology was a challenge. Every time we all learned this new computer thing, then it changed, you know. Every we time we got, like, learned the email, the way to do the email, then it changed.

So I think that was something that was challenging to everybody, particularly those of us who were older and had not grown up with computers. We were pushed into the digital age, you know, in our 20s and 30s. And it was fine. It was great. But everything changes so quickly, you know. Was that, was that Alice in Wonderland, people come and go so quickly here? Or was that who, I don't know, anyway. Things change so quickly here, whatever it was. I should, I know what I'm talking about before I say it, but so that was one of the challenges.

Another challenge, frankly, were the people that were in supervisory or maybe, let's say, managerial positions. Trying to get them to understand what we needed and what we did. And how it could be more efficient. I was pretty lucky most of the time to have supervisors, not so much their managers, but supervisors who would understand what we needed.

In fact, every couple of weeks Diane would say to me, "is there anything that I can do for you to make your job easier?" Because she knew that her position as a supervisor was to be able to help her people be able to do their jobs and to do them well.

MR. KNOWLES: What is the most enjoyable aspect of working for the agency, the National Archive?

MRS. FORTNA: Teaching. I loved to teach. I liked to develop curriculum. Curriculum for our class, and then teach it. So the last few years have been just a dream come true, basically. I get to do what I want to do and I get paid for it. So what'd I do? I retired. But, whatever. Anyway. Now I get to do nothing and I get paid for it. Not really. But, yeah. I loved doing that.

Because I've had some really great teachers in my life. And I've really been able to learn a lot. And I just want to be able to help people. And particularly, I mean, I liked, I liked it when I was teaching federal records officers. I liked it when we were bringing in other people to train.

And I like it when we were training, helping public and researchers, but I really liked training staff. I really enjoy that. I get to know people and some really fantastic people here, really fantastic people. We're really dedicated people.

And I'm just, I mean, I was having a great time getting to know them and being able to teach and having them say, this helps. This doesn't help. What can we do? And when they're my customers. I want to be able to give them what they need.

MR. KNOWLES: Okay. Let's see. What was your... or did you have an involvement with the National Archives Assembly?

MRS. FORTNA: Not really. I think I joined one year and just I really didn't have much of an involvement.

MR. KNOWLES: Okay.

MRS. FORTNA: I was involved with other agencies, I mean, like, NAGARA, things like that, so, I don't know if that's—

MR. KNOWLES: Sure. Sure.

MRS. FORTNA: The National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, that's kind of the SAA, Society of American Archivists equivalent, but it's just government records, just for government records. And people who handle government records. We call it NAGARA. It used to be

NASARA, National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators. And then they made it nation-wide. So that people can come to these conferences from federal, state, and local governments.

And, you know, we have a lot of records that are very similar. Sometimes we have copies of ones that another Federal agency or whatever would have. State would have a copy. Local would have a copy. We have a lot of things in common. And I belonged to that. I was on the Board for about ten years. I was Treasurer for around four or five years, I guess.

But that was really interesting because we got to know and network with people that had the same types of challenges, the same types of problems, with the same types of records.

MR. KNOWLES: Any other associations, such as Society of American Archivists or with MARAC?

MRS. FORTNA: I was involved with MARAC, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. And that's Mid-Atlantic. And it's all types of archives, whether it is church archives, you know, historical societies, all different types of agencies, institutions. And I really was a part of MARAC more when I was in Pennsylvania, at the state archives. I spoke at a couple of the sessions, conferences. And was involved with planning of the program. More so with NAGARA, because I was a Program Chair and Local Arrangements Chair, when it was in D.C. SAA, Society of American Archivists, I have gone to a couple of the conferences. The only real work that I've done, I did speak a couple of times. But the very real intricate work that I did, was I was on a, I was NAGARA's, one of two of NAGARA's representatives on the committee when we did a joint meeting of the three, SAA, NAGARA and COSA, which is, it's State again, Council of State Archives, I think, or Archivists. They'll shoot me if they hear that I can't remember that right now. But those three institutions had a joint meeting. In fact, they're having another one this year in D.C.

But, to be able to say, okay, what sessions are we going to offer? You know, lots of people apply. And I was on that one Board that decided which sessions we would accept for that particular conference. That's my extent of working with SAA.

MR. KNOWLES: Mm. All right. Getting back to the Archives, was there any other sections that you would have wanted to work in?

MRS. FORTNA: Mm. Wow. Well there was one area that, in Pennsylvania, that I didn't get to work with, and that was with photographs. So that might have been kind of fun to be able to work in still pics, in Still Pictures. Well, that and Conservation.

Those were the areas that I got a smattering in Pennsylvania of everything else. But conservationists dealt mainly with still pictures there. I just find it fascinating what photographs we have.

And I find it fascinating how our conservationists deal with reconstructing basically records that are falling apart. It just amazes me. And so that would have been something that I would have been interested in learning a little bit about.

MR. KNOWLES: Were there any records collections you wish you had the opportunity to work with?

MRS. FORTNA: Kennedy Assassination, I think. Yeah.

MR. KNOWLES: Do you have any opinions about the reorganizations that NARA's gone through?

MRS. FORTNA: Yeah. Did you really want me to say it here?

MR. KNOWLES: As much or as little as you'd like.

MRS. FORTNA: The longer I was here, the more all the changes were the same, you know, basically. I mean, okay, here we go again. Okay. We're going to change this. Okay. Fine. I'm trying to be flexible and I change. And we go through a reiteration of everything that we just did before. And it's just the same thing. I'm sorry. That's what I feel.

But this last time, when they started to change the acronyms again, I went, "it's time to retire. I'm not learning these again. I'm just not learning these again." I'll adjust any other way, but I'm not learning acronyms again. And we really have our alphabet soup here, don't we?

But I think that we've had archivists, we've had governors, and now we have a librarian, who's in charge of the National Archives. And I see that there have been good points and shortcomings in all respects.

Maybe being an archivist makes you too insular, I don't know. A governor, really good at being able to talk to people on the Hill. And get us the funding that we needed for stuff. I may not have agreed with everything that that Archivist did, or how he may have reconstructed things. I agreed with some of it. Some of it, I didn't. But he got us the funding that we needed.

I don't know this Archivist as well as I knew some of the other ones. But, there's always been this chasm between librarians and archivists. And so it was a little strange to have a librarian become Archivist of the United States. So it makes me wonder if he understands the Archives. I know he understands libraries. But does he understand the Archives?

So, some of the decisions that have been made, I don't understand why they've been made. There may be excellent reasons for that. But I don't understand why they've been made.

And different Archivists have communicated in different ways and to different extents. This Archivist is able to communicate more effectively. Because he streams this to everybody all at once. And talks to everybody. And you can see him on the screen, if you're not here. And so there's a better opportunity to be able to let us know what is going on and what direction we're headed in.

I do think that the many changes that we've gone through has had its toll. I'm not saying so much in changes from the top administration. But just a lot of the things that we've gone through, growing pains or whatever you want to call it. But you can see that the surveys for customers or for staff satisfaction were really low, government-wide.

MR. KNOWLES: Yeah

MRS. FORTNA: I don't know why. I don't know why we, such a little agency and we're so low. You would think that, you know, like Defense would be, you know, really low. Or another big agency.

But this one, I haven't really be able to keep a pulse on exactly where this present Archivist is going. So I can't really say how that's working out. And I've left in the middle of his tenure. So I don't know where this is going to end up because we're still in the midst of it.

So, that was a long answer to something that could have been short like, agreed with some of them, some of them I didn't agree with.

MR. KNOWLES: Well, looking into the future, what do you think is the Archives' greatest challenge—

MRS. FORTNA: [Interposing] Electronic—

MR. KNOWLES: —you think we'll face?

MRS. FORTNA: Electronic records. We've been struggling with that forever. We tend to get records 30 years, a lot of them, 30 years after they've been created. And so we're a museum of hardware. So that we can actually read or view whatever records we get. But now, they're transferring electronic records. Because we've had electronic records now for like 30 years.

And coming up with standards for that. I mean, ERA Project was a tough project for staff to work on and work with. And I don't think that it's going to get any easier just because things are electronic. It may be harder.

It's the same principles for records management, it's just that it's electronic. So, that can be easier or harder, I don't know.

MR. KNOWLES: What strikes you most about how the agency has changed since you first started?

MRS. FORTNA: When I first started, I may be wrong, but I got the impression that there were so many subject matter experts. Someone was the expert on a certain record series, certain types of records, certain time frames, certain war, whatever. And people were hesitant to talk to each other, have exchanges of ideas. We are an agency of introverts. I'm being one of them.

But what I've seen change, has been the fact that we have gotten together and exchanged ideas. Different offices have gotten together and actually worked together on certain projects. And I just thought that was, not miraculous, but it was new for the Archives to do this. And I think that's something that has been for the better.

MR. KNOWLES: Good answer. What advice would you have offered yourself back when you first started in 1987?

MRS. FORTNA: Mm. Well, if it was career advice. I guess I might have advised myself to not be quite so happy where I am and keep looking to be able to expand where I wanted to go. I'm the type of person that I'll stay somewhere if I'm happy, you know. I had an opportunity to move again, to another facility in the National Archives. And I didn't take it because I didn't want to move and I was happy where I was. And that would have ended up with a GS-14 or probably a GS-15 by now. But that's okay, because I'm happy. I was happy where I was. I'm happy where I am here. And I didn't want to move my family again.

So I might have said, if maybe, that if I was younger, try some new things. Experiment. Move. Go somewhere else. Apply for other positions. And it's just hard for me. I see that a lot of young people doing that. They're there two years, later they're gone. They're somewhere else, you know.

And I'm just from the old school that you, you know, you got into a career, "career" and you stayed there. And you were loyal. And we have a lot of loyal people to this agency. And by loyal, I mean, we make a career of it. You stay there for 40 years or whatever.

So, I might have taken more of a chance, or advised myself to do that. I tried to be flexible and with the changes that were coming about. And I did end up in different areas of the Archives. And loved doing

those changes. And trying to do that, what I could, learn what I could and experience that to the fullest. But I think that would be about the main thing. I'm trying to think of other things.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. What are your plans for retirement?

MRS. FORTNA: Everybody asks me that. What are you going to do with all your free time? And it's like, I don't have free time. I just say I'm trying to do everything that I did when I was working. But I was so tightly scheduled and so stressed, particularly with the commute, to get where I needed to go in the evenings. So I'm doing all of those things that I was doing before, plus I'm going to be taking some training on teaching English as a second language. And be involved with that program in Montgomery County.

I might, I don't want to do it now, because I don't want a full-time job right now. But I might want to look into teaching public speaking somewhere. Could be, you know, a Community College in Montgomery County. I hear Frederick County has some areas, some colleges, that, that, you know, there's a possibility I could maybe apply there. But I would like to continue to teach and I do that in my church. But I would like to continue to teach the public speaking. Because I've been there, scared to death to get up in front of anybody and speak at all.

And so for me to be able to do that and be able to help somebody else who is walking in scared to death, not knowing how to keep their hands from shaking, not, how to keep their voice from shaking, you know, not knowing how to organize what they want to say. That is something that I've been through, worked through, struggled with, and I loved helping people to be able to do that. So that's something that I would like to do.

MR. KNOWLES: Okay. We'll be calling you professor.

MRS. FORTNA: I'm not going for a doctorate. That's one thing I will not do.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. That was my last question for you other than if there is anything else you wanted to add, or is there any name dropping you want to say? Anybody who's really supported you, helped you out in your career?

MRS. FORTNA: Oh, wow. Here at NARA? Alan Kramer and Debbie Leahy and Greg Pomicter right away. The first day. Well, Alan came a little bit later, but the first position I had, they were fantastic. And very supportive and have become very good friends, actually.

Donn Neal was my second supervisor. And I'll always be very grateful for him for saying, "Here's what we want to do; here's the program, Nancy. Let's talk about what you want to do. Okay. Go forth and do it. Just check in with me to make sure that we can afford it or whatever, you know. Check in with me, make sure I know what you're doing, you know."

And Alan was like that too. "Here's what we want you to do. What are your ideas?" I loved that. "What are your ideas?" And then say, "Go forth and do it." I loved that.

Sharon Thibodeau, for giving me a chance. And Lee Ann Potter and Paula Poulos for getting me into talk to Sharon or listening to me. Mike Hamilton, also lent an ear when I needed to work through some things. Marie Allen, who I worked for.

And then, Diane Dimkoff. I mean she is just something else. She is something else. I loved working with Diane Dimkoff and Jessie White and Andrea Matney.

And Jessie White is someone who knows everybody and knows how to get things done. And I have watched her work through insurmountable, or what I thought were insurmountable challenges, and get the job done. And she's just been a delight to work with too.

But all of my supervisors, but Diane, just has made the last ten years very enjoyable. She and Jessie and Andrea.

MR. KNOWLES: All right. Well thank you very much for your time.

MRS. FORTNA: Well, thank you for the opportunity.

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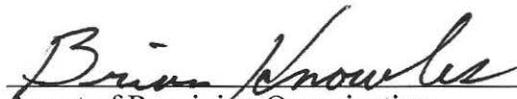
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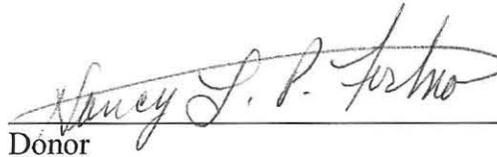
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