

Jones, Don

Interview with Don Jones, a founder of Washington County Community Action Organization -- At his home in Washington County -- July 9, 1999
Joan C. Johnson, Interviewer

Q. How did you first get involved with Washington County Community Action?

D.J. I don't remember exactly... The "War on Poverty" program was just getting off the ground... Community Action was one of the ideas that was part of that program. I was a professor at Pacific University (in Forest Grove, OR) at the time... Working with Community Action cost my job...

Q. Working with Community Action cost you your job?

D.J. Yeah. They wouldn't renew my contract.

Q. When was that, Mr. Jones?

D.J. That was in the late sixties... 1968 or something. At that time, Pacific was a very reactionary place. Of course, Forest Grove and generally Washington County was extremely reactionary.

Someone asked me to become involved. The problem was to form a board for the organization, which we did, and I got people from all over the county to be on the board... And they were a good group. They always came to monthly board meetings.

One of the key problems...it was federal money. We had to organize in order to apply (for the money). This kept us out of the control of the county government, which looked on us very suspiciously. They looked on us as Communists. That was during the time when, if you didn't agree with somebody, you called them a Communist. Fortunately, they eventually got over that.

They had a three-person county board in those days... and they ran things without any regard for the public. They were an inside group. They were very resentful that we had organized and they were not asked to be involved.

Eventually, (Congresswoman) Edith Green was prevailed upon to get an amendment to the Community Action Program which said the county commission was to have a seat on the (CA) board. That was after I left, however. I've always been amused about that because they thought, "Now we can control things." But they only had one person on the board and they suddenly discovered that Community Action was then coming to them, looking for money. So it cost them.

We started the first Head Start (program) in Oregon... in North Plains.

Another major project we had was dental care for the children's teeth. We found, especially among poor people, that their children's teeth were just terrible. We

got two or three dentists to run a monthly clinic and we'd run the kids through and get their teeth fixed. That was a big project.

Q. What did you do after you lost your job (with Pacific University)?

D.J. Oh, well... I became a management consultant... and then I began to take assignments from the United Nations... I went to Yemen, India, places like that... consulting with business organizations on their human relations problems, personnel policies, and reorganizations to improve communications. So I did better financially and in some ways it was more interesting than Pacific...

With the United Nations, I helped set up what became a college in India to train business managers to upgrade the management of their country... In Yemen, I planned the reorganization of most of their government that had to do with economic development.

I recall they asked me to look at the organization plan for a huge new automated cement factory built by the Japanese for them. The Japanese had finished it and were ready to turn it over to them. I was asked to look at the organization plan, etc. It was an excellent plant, very modern... and their organization plan was fine... except that they needed about 200 engineers and we could only find one in Yemen. I pointed out that they needed -- which they should have done when they started building the plant -- to start sending young people to the universities in India, Europe, and the United States to train them. I told them it would be at least four years before they would get out of engineering school... with no experience. They ended up going to the Philippines and hiring some 17 engineers... and they finally ended up writing a contract with the Japanese to run the plant for them.

So that was the kind of thing I was doing after I left Pacific...

To get back to Community Action... One of the things they had in the so-called War on Poverty was a program that was like summer school... Forest Grove set up a program at Pacific University... part of the enticement was to pay them a stipend to go to school. (The program) was terribly badly managed... The director would use the payments as a weapon... threaten not to pay them (the students) if they didn't do what she wanted them to do... Well, it turned out for their yearly review, the Community Action Organization had the responsibility for sending in a report... and our review was very negative. So that cost me my job.

Oh, yes... that's the real world.

There was one guy... he was actually a state legislator for Forest Grove, Cornelius, Hillsboro... he was a Democrat... What he did was he went around buying up all these beat-up old houses... he was a slum-landlord type. So we worked on that kind of problem... These people were paying the rent but they weren't getting the kind of house (they were paying for)...

Q. It sounds like... since you went around and got the people to form a board... you are really the "father" of Community Action here in Washington County...

D.J. I was the first chairman... but there were a lot of other people... There was a building in Hillsboro – up on Tenth – owned by a realtor, and he donated that building at rent of just a nominal fee for our use as a base of operations. So that's the other side of the story... We don't normally think of a realtor as being on a change-of-society edge...

Q. Do you remember his name?

D.J. No, I can't. I've lost track of him... My first assignment after Pacific was in Guam, so I rented out my house. And that guy was my agent... so he got paid back a little bit...

We had an interesting group of poor people who showed up in the beginning, very smart, articulate and aggressive. These guys and girls knew all about welfare and all of that...

I recall an incident... a couple called up and asked for food – they were from North Plains, 16 and 17-year-olds, a boy and girl living together. They were starving. They were part of a family that had left for Idaho or somewhere to pick hops and they had left these kids behind. So this "inside group" of poor people knew just what to do... they knew how to go to the federal government to get surplus food. I don't know what they do with it (the food) nowadays, but in those days once a month they made surplus foods available... like cornmeal, dried beans, butter, all kinds of stuff like that.

Then they showed the couple how to apply for state welfare. The state welfare then had about a six weeks waiting period after you applied... I don't know what the bureaucracy did with that six weeks but anyway, you had to wait before you could start getting welfare. But, it turns out there was an emergency clause, and these guys and gals knew that... so they got them some groceries real quick-like.

Then the deal was to get the kid a job. They got a hold of the Forestry Service – they had a regional office here at Forest Grove – and yeah, they could use some help. But they go to work at seven o'clock and this kid had never worked and the idea of getting up early to go from North Plains to Forest Grove by seven o'clock was entirely a new idea. So he really didn't know how to manage this... but this "inside group" we were working with, said "no problem." So they organized themselves into a group of five, one for each workday, and they would get over to his place, wake him up, get the girl to get him some breakfast, and get him out on the road. The arrangement was that one of the other employees of the Forest Service who lived near there would pick him up and get him to work. So their job was to teach this kid how to do this... to get out on the highway in time to get his ride. They worked with him for a couple of months before the girl got the idea that she could get him up and fix some breakfast and help him get out there on the road...

Well, this worked out, except the family learned that they had a family member back in Oregon with a paying job, so the whole 14 of them came back from Idaho and descended on him. So there he was with his little old laborer's salary. So the "in group" worked on that and discovered there was a mother – don't know if it was his mother or her mother – who had gone off to Texas and established herself there. So they told him they were going to get him out of there and send him to Texas where his

mother lived and told him he could get work down there. So they got them on a Greyhound Bus and sneaked them out of town and left this family with nothing...

So those were the kind of things we worked on back then... These two kids were good kids, willing to try, but they didn't know anything. They had never worked, never had an organized schedule of daily life, never had any training at all. But with a little help, they did fine.

Q. Now were these people who helped the young couple VISTA workers?

D.J. No, they came in later. These were people from the community. Their idea was to get jobs with Community Action. But they didn't stop there... they did work anyway, whether they got a job or not.

There was one woman who helped with clerical work in the office who had a child who was hyper-active; he couldn't slow down. She didn't know what to do. We had a program at the time for kids' dental care and so we asked the dentist what to do. He said there was a drug that would help but that a regular doctor would have to prescribe it -- he couldn't do that. So we got the kid to a doctor and the Community Action Board bought the first batch of the medicine -- to get more, she would have to do it herself. That was our idea -- to push people, to give them a hand but encourage them to help themselves. Well, apparently the drug worked wonders. The kid slowed down and became a regular little fellow. I forget the name of that drug... I think it was Ritalin... For him it worked perfectly. Once the woman saw the value of it (as I said, she was a clerk in the office), when she got paid, she said, "Now, this dollar goes for the Ritalin fund." So she began to plan her money so she could use it intelligently.

We saw this kind growth, those changes. It was extremely interesting, but the official government that controlled the society of Washington County was very much opposed to all of this -- it was "communism." But you see, people would pop up to help -- like the dentists or the State Forestry Service. There were a lot who were not tied in to "this status quo, we run things for ourselves, and we're in charge" orientation. (The next sentence could not be understood due to background noise.)

Q. I think there's always an element of that when you're working for change, don't you?

D.J. There is a real prejudice against poor people. Admittedly, they have problems part of which may cause them to be poor... but people who aren't poor have problems, too. They kill each other and get divorced and all the other messes people get into -- just a different set of problems.

Q. Do you recall who was the first person hired to direct Community Action?

D.J. I'm trying to think of the fellow's name. We had a young man who we made manager of the program, but I can't think of his name anymore. He worked for a couple of years and then wandered off to other things...

I arranged it so that all of his spending of money was approved by me as chairman of the Board. Then I reported monthly to the Board. So he would come

down to my office at Pacific University with all these checks because I had arranged it so they would have to have two signatures. And this was the way I kept track of what was going on and that worked out fine... Nobody could touch us for scandal...

We went to the United Way... we needed some operating money to get started until the federal government's bureaucracy came through with the regular funds. I made that presentation and we got our grant right away... no problem at all. We got a couple of thousand dollars or something, and they arranged it so that once the federal money came in, we would pay it back.

Q Judy Schilling, whom you know, remembers that one of the early managers was a Carla Johnson? Do you remember that name? Perhaps she came after the young man?

D.J. I don't recall that name.

They (Community Action) have gotten organized in a different way over the years, partly because they found through the Bureau of Aging and Senior Citizens program in the county, there were sometimes funds available and they had to conform to the (requirements of) bureaucracy. I guess over the years they've been able to accommodate these agencies but I haven't followed it too closely.

Q. Have you been to the new (Community Action) building?

D.J. No. I know about it but I haven't been there.

Well, a lot of programs they have now were developed after I left... like going around to poor people's houses and fixing them up to keep out the cold weather.

Q. What made you get involved with Community Action in the beginning?

D.J. I don't remember... I was active in the Democratic Party at the time... and the three-man county council had a vacancy... the other two were Republicans but they had to have one Democrat – that was the rule then. So they appointed a guy from out this way who was about as reactionary a Republican as you could find although his party was Democrat. And we had a rather progressive county manager...

I know how it happened... this county manager fellow promoted me to get involved with Community Action. I remember now we went to some meeting and while there he proposed I be made chairman... and I was surprised... I remember that now.

Anyway, there was some issue with the County Council and this county manager person had a very strong position on it – and he told them that if they voted against his position, he would quit. So one guy voted for it and one guy voted against it and the third one was this so-called Democrat from Gaston. He voted against the manager's position, so the manager quit. And we lost a very good man there... he went down to California and became city manager for San Jose, which is a very big city...

So that was being played out at the same time as Community Action was being established...

The thing during my period was to get it (Community Action) established... one of the things we were supposed to do to start with was to make an inventory of the poor people in Washington County... to identify them. We tried... but I don't think we did a very good job of that. We tried.

The problem is to find them, to identify who is a poor person. Poor people tend to be mobile... they don't stay in one place very long. They tend to go where they hear about a job or something. They don't last in one place very long... they always rent; they don't own property. It's hard to locate them.

It was poor people who made it work. They needed people like me to run interference with the federal government, the United Way, county government, stuff like that. But they were in there and made it work.

I don't know how it is now... I think it's kind of bureaucratic. One of the things I've observed that we organize in our society an operation to solve a problem. Well, let's say we solved the problem but now what are we going to do with this organization? The idea of disbanding it... we don't do that. By the time we've solved the problem, the bureaucracy within the organization has established itself and they will not tolerate disbanding... that means they would have to go look for jobs somewhere else. But it would be cheaper in the long run, if we disbanded when a problem is solved...

Q. From what Judy (Schilling) told me, the strange thing is that amid so much affluence, many people live from pay check to pay check... and if anything happens, they're in trouble...

D.J. There's a whole strata of people on the edges of our society who are in a state of _____(?)... and so if there is a little upset of any kind... The general society doesn't identify these people very well. We have welfare programs but they are always manipulating them and cutting them down, cut out the health benefits or some damn thing... And poor people out on the edge are not organized very well... they're not a voting bloc so they get ripped off all the time...

So we need something (like) Community Action... the only trouble is that in order for it to remain financially viable, it has given up a lot of its advocacy role and promotion of causes. It's lost its edge in terms of being a force in the process for change. That's my opinion... You don't have to agree with me on that...

Back then we were an advocacy group and a cutting edge... such as it was. Big deal! That was in the midst of the Cold War and the view of the power elite was that such action was communistic. A lot of people didn't buy that at all – there was a dentist here, a doctor there, a worker here, who all put themselves out to help. I don't know what they say now... they haven't got communism to blame.

Poor people are identified as lazy, they don't work, they go on welfare, they have babies, and so on... We discovered they don't have as many babies as the rest of society does... but they're stereotyped... They're not like that. There are all kinds

of them... there are crooks, there are lazy ones, some will sleep with anyone... but that's true of the rest of society... I don't idolize them but they are just people with all kinds of potentials and problems.

Q. Mr. Jones, I've taken up almost an hour of your time and I really do appreciate your insights... You've given me a real picture of how Community Action began..

D.J. My feeling is they have moved away from advocacy to become just a service organization... It seems to me that they ought to remain an advocacy group and encourage other agencies to provide the services...

I don't have any responsibility any more, so I can voice my opinion...

One other thing... we had the first Head Start (program) in the state... with the superintendent of the North Plains public schools. I don't know what happened to him... he and his wife were divorced and he moved away...

Community Action for a while had a transportation program... would get volunteers like me to take the kids to Head Start...

TAPE JAMMED – LOST LAST FEW SENTENCES
END OF INTERVIEW.