

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

Berneice Anderson
Regional Patrol Commander
Eastern Region, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Interviewer: Sandra Forney

Berneice Anderson (BA): Good afternoon.

Sandra Forney (SF): Please let me... Give me your name, title address, and phone number.

B A: My name is Berneice Anderson, and I'm stationed at the regional office with the Eastern Region, here at 626 East Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53202.

SF: And your phone number.

BA: My phone number is 414-297-3841.

SF: And what is your current title?

BA: My title is regional patrol commander.

SF: Berneice, tell me a little something about your background, your profession, and what you're doing now with the Forest Service.

BA: Well currently serving as the commander. Base wing means that I'm in charge of the enforcement division, which is the uniformed division for law enforcement and investigations for this particular region. This region has a law enforcement branch as all other regions do, and we have two branches, the enforcement division and the investigations division. Prior to this position I was a patrol captain, and I was stationed on the Wayne National Forest at the supervisor's office, which is in Nelsonville, Ohio. And in that position I supervised three national forests, the Wayne, the Hoosier National Forest, as well as the Monongahela National Forest. So it was approximately a million and a half acres, and approximately six law enforcement officers that I supervised. Prior to that my first position in law enforcement with the agency was a field officer, a law enforcement officer, and I was stationed on the Shawnee National Forest which is in southern Illinois. And I was in that position for a little over three years.

SF: How many years do you have with the federal government?

BA: Practically fifteen years. One more month or so and it will be fifteen years with the agency.

SF: Wonderful.

BA: Yes.

SF: So Berneice, why did you choose this career or profession?

BA: Well, one of my main interests all of my life has been law. My real intent was to go to law school. My background was criminal justice and sociology, so I also have a joint love for counseling and mentoring and along the lines of psychology and analyzing behavior. So they really go hand in hand, really. And what I found out through working in the law enforcement arena, one of the most critical things is to be able to effectively analyze behavior. Actually I started out after graduating from college with a degree in criminal justice and sociology, I was working with a private firm in the private sector, and I was doing internal investigations, also some loss prevention, and I was recruited into the Forest Service into the Job Corps program. I was one of the first female dorm counselors that they had, which was very, very interesting, but actually I was able to do a little bit of both of my loves, which was a little bit of enforcement—there are rules and regulations that govern the Job Corps center—but also, the primary job is really to counsel at-risk youth. So that center comprised sixteen to twenty-four year olds. It was a residential facility, so I had a great opportunity of actually being able to do both. Fulfilled that counseling aspect as well as enforcing some rules and regulations. And after that I actually applied for a law enforcement position. But I stayed in the Job Corps position; I was with the Job Corps position for about five years. I promoted onto a supervisory position of the Nicolet National Forest, the Blackwell Job Corps Center. And after that is when I actually applied for a law enforcement job, and I was really ready to actually just deal with enforcing rules and regulations full time at that point.

SF: So where did you receive your degree?

BA: I attended Murray State University, and that's actually in southern Kentucky. It's right on the Kentucky-Tennessee border line. It's, actually we have another piece of land there that the national forest has recently acquired. A lot of people are not familiar with LBL, which stands for Land Between the Lakes, but actually Murray State is maybe ten minutes from Golden Pond, Kentucky. And I grew up in that area as well. I'm originally from western Kentucky, so I went to school in that areas as well. And as far as wanting to pursue the criminal law degree, I was also going to attend U of L, University of Louisville law school.

SF: So, why did you pick or choose or otherwise select the Forest Service as an employer?

BA: Well, working for the Forest Service and Job Corps, I really did not know very much about Job Corp. And when I was approached through Outreach and

Recruitment I was very secure in my job that I had. I really enjoyed my current job. I was in a supervisory position And I really was not educated about the Forest Service, nor was I educated about the Job Corps program. So I did apply for the job, and I was fortunate enough to get the job; so throughout working in that position I was also educated about the agency. I was very surprised to find out that the agency had a law enforcement branch. I really didn't know what they enforced, but I assumed that there were rules and regulations that governed the national forest. But at that particular time I was not very well aware of what the agency offered in the law enforcement and investigative arena.

SF: Did you receive any additional specialized training beyond your work in law enforcement within the agency?

BA: Yes I did. My first appointment as a law enforcement officer on the Shawnee. It's required of all law enforcement personnel. We have to attend the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, which is at Glynco, Georgia. Most of the federal agencies employees train at Glynco. There's only a couple of agencies that have their separate training academy. The training academy at that time when I attended in early '95, January '95, it was an eleven week course, with a two week add-on for agency-specific training. So the training actually comprised of legal exams, physical fitness exams, battery exams, defensive driving, firearms training, defensive tactics training. It's really stressful. It was excellent training, and I've always looked at that particular training as the most significant training that I've ever received. That training actually would make or break you. If you didn't survive that, really you don't have a job. That's the true test of knowing that you have what it takes to actually do the job once you return to your duty station. At that time Law Enforcement and Investigations did not have a field training program. Now we have a twelve week training program that is mandatory and it immediately follows your basic training at the academy. So you have an opportunity to work with a seasoned officer, a tenured officer that can actually give you additional guidance as you learn how to apply what you've learned at the academy in the field. So with my situation, after finishing at the academy, I returned to my duty station and I pretty much was on my own. So basically learning how to apply everything that you learned, it was a little stressful, because there's great expectations of you. But also the main thing is that you have to learn to be effective. Effective in your speech. You have to walk with confidence. And those were some of things that I felt I've always had. So as far as being able to apply that, I've never had much difficulty with that, interacting with the public, or actually violent individuals on the force. A lot of people think that everyone that actually visits the forest, they're out to have a very nice afternoon or weekend, and enjoy the natural resources and the scenery. And that's what we hope for. But we also know that at any given time we have to be prepared for the things that are negative. And that's why we receive the extensive training that we receive in order to be able to deal with those type of situations.

SF: Speaking of that, I understand that you are, you were recently honored with an award for being most likely to clear the Rainbow Gathering out of a forest single-handedly. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

BA: Well, at the academy, it's a bond that we all have. Your training class is basically made up of twenty-four individuals, and we become very close, a very close-knit group during that time, because we're all trying to support each other. The training is difficult. But more than anything it's stressful mentally. So we're there to try to support each other. So early on in my class, I think everyone sort of looked at me as one of the leaders. I got nicknamed Grandma. I was always trying to give some of the younger individuals in the class some guidance. If I saw them doing something that was borderline unethical or unsafe I would give them some guidance. And I think it was just my presence, my attitude, my persona basically, that actually got me that award. They actually named that, got me that little title, basically saying that I had the ability to clear the entire Rainbow Gathering by myself, which we know that would be astronomical in order to do that, because we're talking thousands of people, but I think they were just, I think they were impressed with the self-confidence that I displayed.

SF: And have you had some experience with the Rainbow Family on national forest land? And if so, could you maybe share a story about that experience?

BA: Yes. Most definitely. We always have Rainbow gatherings, and it's typically a gathering of individuals that want to come together. They're celebrating peace and freedom. But some of the things that they do involve themselves with are illegal. So law enforcement investigations were always on site to actually enforce the rules and regulations and protect the natural resources, but actually to oversee this gathering. Oftentimes they will get a permit, so it's a valid gathering, but the individuals that gather, even though they say they're gathering to be on one peaceful accord, the illegal activities that occur often result in arrests, multiple arrests. And as far as my personal involvement with the Rainbow Gatherings, I've had several involvements with them. Not only do they have an annual gathering, there's regional gatherings and there's mini-gatherings that they have on the forest. And personally I've had to deal with a mini-gathering pretty much solo. So I might have actually earned that title, I don't know. Being able to clear it. But as far as dealing with them one on one, it can be quite stressful. It's really, you're trying to actually manage conflict, is what you're trying to do. Oftentimes we're trying to deal with individuals that are under the influence of some type of intoxicant. That's really difficult. We work heavily with cooperative law enforcement agencies, so we have additional support along with our officers that are assigned to these events.

SF: I'm just curious. Are there many females in this particular field of the Forest Service?

BA: Not as many as we would love to have. We are currently trying to do outreach and recruitment and diversify our workforce. We do have several female employees in both branches, the Enforcement Division as well as the Investigations Division, but we are most definitely looking for more females. We would like to diversify the workforce. We're looking for more minorities as well, not just with gender but also with race. We feel that with our agency we're always promoting diversification, and we want to most definitely show that here in the Eastern Region we are a leader in that arena.

SF: Which reminds me. You also serve in another role here in the region. In special emphasis program area. Could you explain a little bit about your role?

BA: Well, I'm no longer in that position, but I did hold that position for a little over two years. The multicultural, the regional multicultural team is comprised of several different special emphasis groups. And I was the program manager for the African-American group. And basically my job was trying educate all employees about the African-American culture. That's what we're trying to do. Not only educating one about another ethnicity, but you're also the spearhead and the leader trying to actually do some outreach and recruitment. That's one of the things that's been very, very difficult with the Forest Service, and I'm not certain why it's difficult. I think part of it is that a lot of people really do not know very much about our agency. And sometimes I feel internally we have not done a very effective job in promoting our agency. The Forest Service is a great place to work. I've thoroughly enjoyed my career. I've been with the agency for almost fifteen years and intend to be around a lot longer.

SF: What kind of skills do you have, specialized skills or specialized tools, that you use in your work?

BA: Well, in law enforcement, as far as firearms training, we have a lot of cross-training in law enforcement. And when I say cross-training I'm talking about various weapons. But all law enforcement officers are issued a primary weapon. We also have an opportunity to have a backup weapon, which is going to be a smaller firearm than your primary weapon. We're also required to qualify on a shotgun, with a shotgun, and I'm also qualified on an assault rifle. And we carry these on our person and in our vehicle, when I was a patrol officer. And of course these weapons accompanied me also in my vehicle on my patrols as well. But we're also trained in defensive tactics. We have to be able to disarm individuals. We have to know how to de-escalate situations. But the most critical thing that we're really trained to do is how to communicate. Oftentimes some of the tools that we have on our duty belt, if it's our OC spray to defuse a situation, if it's our asp, our baton. Oftentimes we don't have to use our tools at all, if we can effectively communicate and de-escalate a situation.

SF: Can you think of a situation, an example, where you've had to manage disorder and use some of these tools?

BA: Yes.

SF: Would you like to share that with me?

BA: Well there's several situations that I could probably share. But probably one that stands out more than anything is as a brand new officer recently out of the academy. And the reason it stands out more than anything is because I was fresh out of the academy, and there's such a great expectation of myself. Probably more so, I'm more critical of myself than anyone else. Just wanting to ensure that I'm able to do a good job. Just recently out of the academy, I'd graduated and returned to my duty station. It was early May, and

Memorial Day weekend is always a big weekend, particularly in the Forest Service. People want to get out and recreate and enjoy this, first opportunity actually to enjoy good weather. So normally it's family outings, just individuals, recreating on the national forest doing a wide variety of different activities. I encountered a group of young people. I had actually started patrols around three o'clock in the afternoon, and typically we will work weekends and nights as law enforcement officers. This particular weekend I had a group of about six young people. And immediately upon arriving at the scene on foot, because I had parked my vehicle at the entrance and walked around until I had reached that particular campsite, I had smelled marijuana. They were very disruptive and very non-compliant. They were not willing to be cooperative at all. I did call for backup. With these six individuals, we did end up arresting all six. It was for possession. I also, I had to handcuff, I had to transport. I also had to withdraw my asp, which is a baton. I did not have to use the baton, but I felt like I was put in a position at that particular time, actually to protect myself as well, because they were non-compliant. And of course being outnumbered. You never know in any given situation when the tables are going to turn. Oftentimes in situations that we encounter on the national forest, you may have a potential domestic situation, and you think you have it pretty much under control, and the tables turn and both individuals are against you at this point. We have to be very careful, and it's very important and very critical, that we are effective in reading non-verbal communication, because the majority of the time, that's the real truth and that's the real picture, and being able to analyze that, we'll be able to take care of ourselves as well.

SF: With such a stressful, and as you mentioned you work long hours, sometimes long into the evening, how do you manage to balance your work and your personal life?
[Overlapping voices; inaudible]

BA: It gets difficult. But I'm very much into family. And working through the ranks I realized that it's very, very important also to know that this job is important. Being in law enforcement and investigations, your position is very critical, but also the time with your family is very valuable as well. I encourage all of my personnel to spend time with their family, because it's nothing that you can actually get back. I have two teenagers right now, and I have one that will be graduating in a couple of days, and I have no regrets, because I'm most definitely a very interactive person with my family as well as my children, even the children at my church. I ensure that I have time for them; I make time for them. But I think it's about time management. And I learned that very early in my career, really just in my personal life, how to manage my time. If I was not able to do that I think I'd be a little more stressed than I am. The job is stressful enough as it is, but being able to manage my time and spend time with my children, that's very important to me. So I make a point of being able to do that.

SF: What potential ideas would you offer for the Folklife Festival folks at the Smithsonian-- display, demonstration-- for representing law enforcement in the Forest Service on the Mall in 2005 as we commemorate our one hundredth year anniversary?

BA: One thing that comes to mind that I think would be a great opportunity to have an exhibit for law enforcement and also appreciate the new century of service: we have a

new centennial badge that was just released in Law Enforcement. What we did in our organization was provide an opportunity for employees to present a badge that they created on their own. So we had sort of an internal competition. And we have two beautiful badges that have just been released. And I think just to actually promote law enforcement and how our organization has grown over the years. We have not... We've come a long way. We're not exactly where we want to be, and we're still growing as an organization, but that's our goal. To promote diversity. It's our goal to be a very professional organization. And I think displaying our shield, and even possibly some of the other shields to show where we've grown from ranger to law enforcement officer to special agent, you will see the progression in our organization.

SF: Good. Would you like to share your knowledge about some of the history of Law Enforcement? You mentioned the evolution of the shield.

BA: Well the shield has changed over time. And I think the most critical thing is that someone decided that it's real important that law enforcement people supervise law enforcement people. There is a different mentality there. The way we prioritize our work. The way we look at the overall picture is quite different. Originally we were not a stovepipe organization. We were supervised by district rangers. We were supervised by forest supervisors. Now we have our own structure where we have a national director, which our new national director just recently came to us. His name is Ron Sprinkle. Where our Washington office headquarters is. We have a deputy director as well as the director, and we have assistant directors. That branches out into Enforcement and Investigations, the two divisions, but we have a special assistant in charge, which is similar to a regional forester as far as a regional director. And we have a special agent in charge of every region. We have a person in charge of the Investigative Division, as well as the Enforcement Division. And I'm very proud of how the organization has grown. When I was working for the Job Corps, the LEI division was not stovepiped at that particular time. And I saw some of the frustrations of the LEOs that felt they really did not have the authority to go out and do what they thought was the right thing to do because there was a lot of red tape. And that's one thing that we don't want to create in this agency, is create unnecessary steps, for our personnel to be able to go out and do their jobs. That's why the training at the academy is so significant. And annually we're required to have a refresher certification course; a forty-hour annual course. And that's for us to sharpen our skills, because oftentimes the Forest Service LEI personnel are trained on a lot of things, but you may not do all of those things. So it's our goal to insure that we sharpen your skills and keep you on top of your skills and be able to use all the tools that you're equipped with in order to do an effective job.

SF: Very good. Is there a possibility of getting a view of that new...?

BA: The new... The centennial badge, we've received the picture on the internet, so we do have a copy of it, so I can provide that with you. What we've done within the agency, the agency is not purchasing any of the badges, but all personnel will have an opportunity to individually purchase a shield on their own. And as soon as I purchase mine I'll be more than happy to allow you to use that if you'd like to do so.

SF: Good. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me or the folks at the Folklife Festival regarding our hundred years, on the occupation of law enforcement, or anything?

BA: I really think this is a great thing that you're doing. I think it's always a good opportunity to, first of all tell your employees that we really appreciate you. And also, it's an opportunity for your employees to say thank you. Because I feel that the Forest Service has given me more than I've given them. I've learned quite a bit by being in this position, and I feel like I've got a lot more room to grow. I thoroughly enjoy my job, and I'm looking forward to continuing to do outreach and recruitment to get highly qualified people into our organization so we can continue to promote it the way we have in the past few years.

SF: Thank you very much Berneice.

BA: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW