

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
BONNIE J. LEWIS  
Nurse Corps, US Air Force  
2018

OH  
2136

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**2136**

**Lewis, Bonnie J.**, (1941–). Oral History Interview, 2018.

Approximate length: 1 hour 14 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Summary:**

This oral history interview with Bonnie Lewis (née Young) discusses her work in the United States Air Force Nurse Corps, her family life, and her experience with mental health treatment during and after her service.

Lewis grew up in Oklahoma. She describes being raised by her father, a First Baptist deacon and night superintendent at Continental Oil Company, and her homemaker mother. Lewis was the second-youngest child in a family of thirteen, growing up with seven half-siblings and three full siblings. After high school, she accepted a full nursing scholarship from the First Baptist Church of Atoka City.

Lewis began her education and career as a nurse at Enid General Hospital in Enid, Oklahoma. She recalls being given charge of hospital floors after just six months of training. She describes a great deal of camaraderie within her cohort and recalls hosting many parties with her roommates. Lewis remarks on her interactions with servicemembers from Vance Air Force Base at these parties, and recalls perceiving military service as admirable and glamorous.

After three years, Lewis left nursing school due to an instructor who intimidated and mistreated her. She eventually returned to the program, transferring to the Obstetrics and Gynecology ward and ultimately graduating in 1964. She discusses dating a serviceman during this time and enlisting in the Air Force as a second lieutenant later that summer.

Lewis describes her training in Alabama as full of lengthy lectures, but recalls enjoying the nights she and other female officer trainees socialized at the officers' club. She was later assigned to a hospital on Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Illinois. At Chanute, Lewis recalls running into another abusive supervisor. She recounts how a notorious female major singled her out, criticized every aspect of her appearance and work performance, and tried to have her dismissed based on fabricated accusations.

Lewis experienced a period of deep depression and insomnia during her service at Chanute. She began seeing a psychiatrist on base, Captain Alfred, who she describes as kind and compassionate. Alfred defended Lewis staunchly when the major attempted to harass her, and he played a key part in preventing Lewis' erroneous dismissal.

Lewis left the Air Force after approximately four months and cites RHIP (rank has its privileges) as the primary reason she left the military. Though she fondly remembers the social element of working at Chanute, Lewis expresses dissatisfaction with superior officers' ability to mistreat those of lower rank.

After returning to civilian life, Lewis regarded her time in the Air Force as a personal failure and continued working intermittently as a nurse in Oklahoma. She recounts a tumultuous life with her husband Jan, and the financial difficulties she faced raising her two children. Lewis struggled significantly with her bipolar disorder, then called manic depression. She describes being in and out of

civilian psychiatric care, and initially not knowing she qualified for veteran's benefits due to her short period of service. Lewis praises the considerable relief afforded to her by veteran disability benefits and mental healthcare. She largely credits Disabled American Veterans (DAV) assistance and her Baptist faith for the stability she now enjoys. She also remarks on her participation in the annual women's American Legion Camp held each June.

Lewis touches upon her strained relationship with her son, a veteran of the United States Army, and her daughter, who died in 2018. Lewis describes some family members with deep fondness, especially her granddaughter. She highlights the importance of religion in her life, and now positively views her service and experience as a veteran.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Bonnie J. Lewis was born and raised in Oklahoma. She trained as a civilian nurse in Enid, Oklahoma, before enlisting in the United States Air Force in 1964. Lewis served in the nurse corps at a hospital on Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Illinois. She elected to leave the military after four months and continued her career as a nurse in Oklahoma. She later moved to Stoughton, Wisconsin, to be closer to family.

### **Archivist's Notes:**

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2018.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2019.

Audit check by Kate Rowell, 2020.

Abstract written by Kate Rowell, 2020.

## Interview Transcript:

### [Beginning of OH2136.Lewis\_access.mp3]

Lewis: I'll always be young. [Brooks laughs] My first name is Bonnie, B. Young.

Brooks: B. Young. [Young laughs] Aw, I like that. That's great. [laughs] Okay, we'll do this little intro. Today is Monday, November 19, 2018. This is an interview Bonnie Lewis, née Young, who served with the Air Force in the Nurse Corps from January 1964 through April of 1964. This interview is being conducted at Mrs. Lewis' home in Stoughton, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. All right, so we can get into it. If you can tell me where and when you were born.

Lewis: I was born in Ponca City, Oklahoma on July 25, 1941. I was a preemie. I weighed three pounds.

Brooks: Ooh.

Lewis: My folks used to put me in a shoe box in their dresser drawers in their room at night, so they could watch me.

Brooks: Oh wow. Did you have any siblings?

Lewis: Oh yeah. I came from a family of eleven. I'd say I had—well, I had seven half-brothers and sisters, and then four of us, so really there was—that's quite a bunch.

Brooks: Yeah! [laughs]

Lewis: The brothers and sisters, they were all older. They were teenagers or older, and then they—when they graduated from high school, they all got out on their own.

Brooks: And what did your parents do?

Lewis: My father worked for the Continental Oil Company. He was night superintendent of the Continental Oil Company. And he was a very smart man.

Brooks: And your mom?

Lewis: And my mom was a stay-at-home mom. She did—I don't know how she took care—cooked for eleven people, eleven or twelve.

Brooks: And so, were you the very youngest?

Lewis: Youngest girl, and then a younger brother that was four years younger than me. But all—they're all gone now. Everybody's gone but me.

Brooks: Wow. Tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in Oklahoma.

Lewis: Well, I was raised in the First Baptist Church. I started going to church when I was young and stayed with it. My mom—what I can remember, my mom didn't go to church, but my dad was a deacon in the church at one time, and that's where they met was in church. And so—what was the question again? I forgot.

Brooks: Just tell me about growing up in Oklahoma.

Lewis: Oh, okay. Oklahoma was a lot different than Wisconsin. And the weather—the weather was hot in the summer, and I thought it was cold in Oklahoma 'til I moved up here, and then I decided I didn't know what cold was. And I had a terrible time my first year up here because I was so depressed because the sun didn't shine. So, I talked to my doctor about it, and he recommended that I get a sad light. Have you heard of them?

Brooks: I have.

Lewis: They work.

Brooks: They do.

Lewis: I've got one sitting in my closet. I don't use it, but if I need it, I've got it.

Brooks: Yeah. I've been meaning to get one.

Lewis: I tell you. I can't stand it when the sun doesn't shine because I'm used to it. So, but anyway.

Brooks: Did you go all the way up through high school in Oklahoma?

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Okay. So, what kind of student were you?

Lewis: I probably was a B student. I was gonna be a—I thought I wanted to be a school teacher, but with all those kids and everything, we didn't have money to send me to college, so I got a scholarship from the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City—Atoka City. And that paid my tuition, books, paid for everything. They said—anyway I—the scholarship was for a nursing program, so—

Brooks: Did you want to be a nurse at that point?

Lewis: Yeah. I can't remember exactly what happened to turn me toward nursing, but I know that I love people, and it gives you a good feeling to help somebody. So, I just said a prayer when I was going to—you have to take what's called a pre-entrance test.

[00:05:09]

It was a diploma school. It wasn't a college school. And so, I prayed that if the Lord wanted me to be a nurse, that he would see to it that I passed the pre-entrance test. I didn't pass the first one I took, but I went to another town and took another one, and I passed it. So, I started my nursing career as a student nurse at Enid General Hospital.

Brooks: And was that—did you go to college? Or was that your college experience?

Lewis: That was the diploma. The diploma school. There was no college. We had professors that taught us.

Brooks: So, you had to go to classes, but you also kind of had to start right away at the hospital?

Lewis: Uh-huh. Six months after we been there, they put us in charge of the floors.

Brooks: Wow.

Lewis: Six months, and we were just snot-nosed kids, I mean seventeen years old, eighteen years old. And it was very difficult. For one thing, I was very quiet and very shy, and it was hard for me to talk around people. But when you're a nurse, you've got to talk to people, and you've got to talk to the doctors and answer their questions. So, I just did the best that I could do, and the supervisor told me, she said if I had any questions about anything to call her. I called her all the time, and she didn't ever get upset with me. She was very nice. A little short lady. What was her name? I can't—I can see her, but I can't think of her name. Anyways, so.

Brooks: And where did you live at that time?

Lewis: We had a dormitory across the street from the hospital with a fence around it. In the summertime, we'd sunbathe in our swimsuits, and the people at the hospital could look down, on the second floor, and see us laying out there in our bathing suits. [laughs] Oh, it was so much fun. Those were the best days of my life.

Brooks: Did you make a lot of friends there?

Lewis: Yeah. Yeah. I did. It was so much fun. And that's when I started getting interested—we had—my friend dated a guy—Air Force guy, that was—he was training for jet pilots. And so, anyways, so we'd have parties, and I'd go, and I bet

I was real shy. I didn't have much to do with anybody. I just was there, you know? We lived in a four-bedroom house, and there was four of us that lived in that house. It was a very nice brick home. And we would call the troops, and they'd come over maybe ten, twelve, fifteen of them, and they'd bring their beer and their cards. And we'd sit down in a circle on the floor and play cards. That was fun. Then, they'd stay until nine, and then we had—we let this one—got this one girl to move in because she had a nice stereo. [laughs] She was a mess. But that was all right with her.

Brooks: So, there was an Air Force base nearby?

Lewis: Yeah, in the same city.

Brooks: Which—what was it called?

Lewis: What was what called?

Brooks: The base called.

Lewis: I can't remember.

Brooks: That's okay.

Lewis: Enid Air Force. It was in Enid.

Brooks: Enid, okay. They can always look it up.

Lewis: That's funny that I can't remember the name of it.

Brooks: I think names have a tendency to escape people. I think that's pretty normal. That's the kind of thing we can always—they can just look up what Air Force used to be there or maybe—do you know if it's still there?

Lewis: Uh-huh. Right.

Brooks: So, how long were you at this diploma school? How long were you training?

**[00:10:01]**

Lewis: Three years. Yeah.

Brooks: Three years, okay. So, how old were you when you graduated from that?

Lewis: I graduated in '64.

Brooks: So, you were about twenty-two or twenty-three?

Lewis: No, no, wait. I went in when I was right out of high school, so that would be '59. And I was—'59, '60, '61, yeah, '61, three years, '61.

Brooks: Okay, so you graduated in 1961.

Lewis: Well, I really—my class graduated in 1961, but I had some problems with the—one of the schools that they sent me to, and I got—I don't know why I had to run into difficult people, but I ran into a nurse teacher, professor, whatever you want to call her. She was—her name was Velma Lad Smith [??], and she was the most hateful teacher I have ever seen in my life. I was scared to death of her. And she'd come—she would be walking around the class looking at everybody, and she'd ask a question, and she'd get right down in your face and point her finger at you. And who could remember, you know? Anyway, it was—OB-GYN is what we went there for, and we were called affiliates. We went to another—I went there because I had some problems with the—I had some problems with this school. Anyway, so they sent me back to my home school, and they flunked me out because Velma Lad Smith didn't like me, and she didn't like my answers. And I was—I never did anything to her, you know? She was just difficult.

So anyway, so they flunked me out, and I went home thinking that I was out of college, and I was out of school. Oh, I was so depressed. And so, my—the director of the school called me and told me she wanted me to come back, and she said that they'd just extend my time. So, I went back and got back in the program and just went through the whole program all over again. So, but it worked out pretty well, and I was very fortunate because I—you know, when you try and attain a goal, it's kind of scary when somebody tells you, you can't do it anymore, but anyway. So, and I was—the nurses—we were called pre-clinicals, the first class was called pre-clinicals, and we had to do what the upperclassmen said do. And so, they—it was just kind of like indoctrination to—what do you call them?

Brooks: Sorority?

Lewis: Yeah, yeah. And we had to do just exactly what they said, you know? I'm sure it wasn't as severe as it was in a sorority because I've never been in a sorority, but from what I hear, they put you through the ringers. But well, I had a roommate—not a roommate, but an upperclassman. They assign an older student to you. Dorothea Byrull [??] was her name, and she was so cute. And she was just one big freckle. She had freckles all over. They just blended together, you know? She was a nice girl. She dated one of the guys from the Air Force base, too. And she's the one that had the house with a girl named—her name was Bonnie, too, and she had—she worked for National Cash Registers—she was a secretary. And then there was me and Dorothea... and Bonnie and—I can't think of her name.

[00:15:16]



Brooks: How long did you live in that house?

Lewis: Oh, I imagine several years, I think.

Brooks: Okay. So, do you remember about what year it was when you ended up finishing nursing school?

Lewis: Well, when I went into the service was '64, so it must have been '63, because I had extended time and had to go through so much stuff. And it was '64, I'm sure, when I was in the service, so it had to be '63, the year. Because my scholarship specified that I had to work for a year in a Baptist hospital, and they paid for everything, you know, but so I—so that's what I did. I worked in OB-GYN. And at that time, I ended up delivering four babies. The biggest one was thirteen pounds, and the smallest one was four.

Brooks: Goodness.

Lewis: And I was petrified. The stupid doctor broke somebody's water, and then just left. He wasn't very bright. And so, anyway, the way I got through that was I had a nurse anesthetist that coached me through it, and she told me just exactly what to do and when to do it. If she hadn't have been there, I couldn't have done it. She was a nice lady.

Brooks: And was that kind of the specialty that you wanted to go into, OB-GYN?

Lewis: No. No, I just liked working there. I was—the hardest thing for me was checking women's cervix to tell how far away they are or—you know.

Brooks: How dilated they were?

Lewis: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Brooks: Did you have a specialty or a specific are you wanted to focus on?

Lewis: Well, back in those days, everything was on the same floor. They didn't have specialties. They just had like—you might have an orthopedic patient, a surgery patient—OB was separate. They had an obstetrics ward. Oh, that was so much fun. They had—I took care of the mothers, I took care of the—when—there was a—when Rachel was gone—Rachel was the head of the department. And she was older, and she'd been in that department for years, and she knew what she was doing. And so, on the weekends, she was off, and so I was in charge of the mothers, the babies, labor and delivery, the whole shmear. And I had to—we had these little preemies, and they wouldn't eat, and we had to feed them in their back. Shoot formula or somehow—I guess it wasn't formula, but it was things to keep them going until we could get them to eat. So, that was really something, I loved it. And the mothers, I just remember how good I felt about being in charge of a

mess like that. [laughs] I was a good nurse. There's a picture right there of me in my—when I was in the Air Force.

Brooks: Oh yeah, yeah. That's great. So, tell me about the Air Force, and how did you decide to—I'm assuming you enlisted?

Lewis: Well, I started dating somebody finally from the service, and I just thought—well, it seemed glamorous to me, going into service, and I kind of thought that'd be a good connection for a life choice as a career in the service. I thought that would be good. So, I went in as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Air Force. And I wasn't one to drive much.

**[00:20:00]**

I drove from Oklahoma City to Alabama. I can't remember what town in Alabama, but anyway. But I stayed overnight at a motel, a real nice motel, and had dinner. It was real nice. And then, when I got out the next morning to leave, I noticed the landmarks. And I asked somebody which way—I asked them questions, so I'd know how to get out of there, and they told me what I thought was the truth, anyway, so I got in my car, and I drove. I drove all day long, and at the end of the day, I ended up at the same spot that I started out with. I had driven in a circle. And so, I was AWOL to the Air Force the first day. So, I just called them and told them that I had car trouble. I couldn't tell them that I drove in a circle and did something stupid like that. [laughs]

Brooks: So, your base that you were supposed to report to was in Alabama?

Lewis: Uh-huh. Well, that was basic training.

Brooks: Right. Okay. So, that's where you were trying to get.

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: So, you got there eventually?

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: So, tell me about your initial impressions about basic training.

Lewis: Well, it was boring. We didn't have—we were officers, so we didn't have any much—we had classes every day. And they'd lecture us all day long for hours and hours and hours, and it was boring. So, we'd sit there as long as we had to there, and then the night—at night, we'd go to the officers' club and party and dance. And that was fun. So, they'd tease me. They told me that I was—I joined the Air Force to see the world, and I saw Illinois and Alabama. [laughs] And also, what was it, they called me—oh, they, the troops teased me and told me that I was an

officer and a gentlemen. [Brooks laughs] Anyway, it was a blast in a lot of ways, but after my basic training, I got my uniforms and everything. Then, I went on to—back to Chanute, Rantoul, Illinois where my field—my base was. Rantoul.

And so, I had—my job was a nurse in the hospital. And I was kind of shy and kind of scared, you know? I'd never been into the service before, and then, it scared me. And there was a nurse—there was a Major, and everyone was scared to death of her. She was an evil, evil person. And she didn't like me. She didn't like any of the nurses, and she gave us all a hard time, but she picked me out to drive crazy, and she did. She actually did. I never had—and years later, I found out that I was bipolar. But back then, I didn't know. I just knew I was scared to death. And she would tell me to—in the service, they had a bay. A bay is like a room full of a bunch of beds where the guys slept, you know?

[00:25:01]

And she sent me, and she made me take temperature, blood pressure, pulse, and respiration, write them down, and give them back to her. So, I did. And there was a lot of them, and the guys were real nice to me, you know? Anyway, so I gave her my list, and she said they were all wrong. I had to do it again. So, I had to bother—those poor boys had to go through—I was mortified. And she just—my uniforms were too short, my hair was too long, my shoes weren't white enough. I mean, she just—everything, you know? No matter what I did, I was wrong. I couldn't win. So, I started seeing—she was on my back all the time. And I lived next door to a Captain, a nurse—it's a Captain. And so, I was seeing a psychiatrist, Captain Alfred was his name. I remember he was big, black, and beautiful, and he was so sweet to me. And anyway, he—I lost my train of thought.

Brooks: You said you lived next door to a—

Lewis: Oh yeah, yeah. I got so depressed when I was—been talking to him. I told him I couldn't sleep at night, so he put me on some—what's it called? I can't remember. It was 100 milligrams of it. I remember the dosage for some reason. Anyway, so I just got so terribly depressed. I had a roommate, but I don't really remember her. She was gone most of the time. Anyway, I went over to the Captain's house next door, and I took my pills. I had a big bottle of pills. And I took my pills over to her and told her—ask her if she'd keep them for me. So, she did. She called my doctor, and they put me in the hospital. And they put me in a little isolation—it was just a room, a little room. And so, I was there for several days, and then they switched me to Velma—I mean, not Velma. I told you her name. Anyway, they put me on the lady that gave me all the trouble's floor. And I'm like gosh. And so, she would come in my room, and she'd tell me to get up and make my bed, don't listen to the radio, don't—she'd just go on and on and on.

Brooks: This was the Major?

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Okay.

Lewis: And I said—well, I told Captain Alfred when he came. Oh, he got a stern look on his face, and he marched him—he’s about six foot four, and he marched himself down to the nurses’ station where she was, and he said, “I’m going to tell you this one time. You are not to disrupt Lieutenant Young. She is a patient. She is not on duty. Do not mistreat her. Do not talk back to her. Be nice to her. She is sick.” He had this booming voice that just carried clear down to the hall to my room. And she didn’t bother me. But then, later on, after I got out of the hospital and everything, my—Captain Alfred, that was what his name was, he said that he had received a letter from the Major about how I—she just put down all the things that I’d done wrong. A bunch of lies is what it was, and she even put down that I was underneath the pool table at the officers’ club drunk. Can you believe that? And so, she was trying to get me kicked out of the service, and I hadn’t done nothing.

**[00:30:03]**

Oh, I take it back. I did, too. I was put in pediatrics when I first got to that floor, and they wanted me to give this baby a shot, and so I asked the girl that was either coming on or going off duty to give it for me, and she did. And she reported that to Major Cooms [??], that’s what her name was. How could I forget that? And she was ugly. I mean, she looked like somebody hit her with an ugly stick. And she was just ugly and evil, and she just loved making people unhappy. She would—the troops would be out maybe in the platoon, just they’d be out like this, and she’d come walking this way, and they’d all just scatter because they didn’t want to deal with her. She was bad. And so, I decided—I talked to—Captain Alfred got me an appointment with CO [Commanding Officer], Company Commander, and he was so kind. He reminded me of somebody’s father, and he just asked me a bunch of questions. And he said there was no reason for me to be let go. She hadn’t proved anything. So what? I had somebody else give a shot. I was just—I just couldn’t do it. Didn’t want to do it. That was stupid because I—I just didn’t work with babies, you know? It was hard. Anyway, so I didn’t—I found my lipstick.

Brooks: Good.

Lewis: I think I’ll cut another one. Maybe this is—[laughs] Sorry.

Brooks: No, that’s okay.

Lewis: It’s in my pouch. [laughs]

Brooks: I know. You used to find things that you thought you lost.

Lewis: Anyway.

Brooks: So, what happened after the meeting with the CO?

Lewis: Well, he just assured me that I didn't have anything to worry about, that I'd be okay. But I got to thinking about it, and I just knew they'd put me back on that floor, and she'd start in on me again, and I couldn't—I couldn't deal with her. I just couldn't deal with her. And so, I took an honorable discharge, and my sister came after me on the train, and I had my car, and she drove me back in my car to Oklahoma City. So, but of course, I was so let down about—well, I felt like I failed, you know? I didn't fall. I was just afraid, that's all. And I just—I could have gone to another base, and they—but the thing is, RHIP, rank has its privileges, and they can say or do anything to you, and you can't do nothing about it.

Brooks: What is that? Did you say RHIP?

Lewis: RHIP. Rank has its privileges.

Brooks: Oh, okay. Got it. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yup.

Lewis: But I met some very nice people on that base. I had—I never had so many men after me in all my life. I didn't know whether to run to 'em or run from 'em. But anyway, I spent quite a bit of time in the officer's club. They teased me because I was from the South. Oklahoma's not South! That's what I told them. [Brooks laughs] But I had some really good memories. And then, she kinda—of course, the bad stood out, you know, because I kind of spoiled my career. It would have been wonderful if I could have stayed in, but I never would have had my two kids. My kids—those are my kids. My daughter passed away March the 6th. She's forty-seven years old.

Brooks: I'm sorry.

**[00:34:59]**

Lewis: And my son, that's an old—I haven't seen him lately, but she met—she saw him at QuikTrip one time, and he's lost a lot of weight, and he's totally white-headed. She said, "Curt, why don't you call mom?" He said, "I don't want to." Nine years, Thanksgiving since I've seen him.

Brooks: Wow.

Lewis: Nine years! And that's quite a blow. But I used to cry every Mother's Day and every birthday because he used to send me a dozen red roses, and we were close, you know. But—when we're through, I'll show you all my pictures.

Brooks: Okay.

Lewis: I want to show them, because they're precious to me.

Brooks: Yeah. That'd be great. Yeah. So, you were in for about four months? Four months and twelve days.

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: And do you still keep in touch with anybody who you served with, who you trained with or anything?

Lewis: No, no. It's been too many years ago, honey. I mean, that—back in '64, and we're in 2018. That's quite a number of years.

Brooks: So, what did your career path look like after you were discharged?

Lewis: Well, I went back into nursing. I lived with my oldest sister, oldest real sister and her husband and their four kids. That was a mistake. [laughs] Anyway, so I got a job as an RN working at Baptist Hospital in Oklahoma City. I just—I kind of moved around different places, but I—and my favorite place to work was Deaconess Hospital, but the place I worked at the longest was St. Anthony's Hospital. Yeah, St. Anthony's.

Brooks: Where was that?

Lewis: Oklahoma City.

Brooks: And how did you meet your husband?

Lewis: Well, I had a lot of psychological problems that I developed from what I went through in the service, and so I kept getting sick. My daughter was not a nice person, and she was bossy and controlling. She just—she was not—she's just too controlling. Anyway, she kicked me out of the house one night, and they threw all my clothes on the front porch. And I went and moved in with this stranger because I had no place to go. And anyway, it was tragic. I was on the street, and I kept having—I was in and out of the state mental hospital because I had so many problems, and I couldn't handle them. And I'm thinking that my sister put me in that hospital. I'm pretty sure that's how I got—ended up there. Oh, they'd come see me and bring my kids. That was traumatic. In and out of a psych unit. I'm here to tell you that I've been through it. And I've changed so much to what I was way back in high school first starting out, you know? And now, I can talk to anybody, and I can—I just got my act together. God is so good to me. He's blessed me so much. I've got a picture of him right there, and I talk to him all the time. Have you ever heard of Camp American Legion?

Brooks: What about American Legion?

Lewis: Have you heard of it?

Brooks: Oh yeah. Sure.

**[00:39:59]**

Lewis: Yeah, well I've been there about four times. And it is great. And they treat you like a hundred dollars—like a million dollars. Everybody has been in the service. Women, you know. Once—one week out of the year in June, they have a women's camp. But there was some men there, too. Families, you know, that they had let come. I think I had something else I wanted to tell you about what we were talking about before we stopped. Oh! I know what it was. I had been in and out of the state hospital and other hospitals, and I finally ended up—the last place I went to, civilian, was—I can't think of the name of it. Anyway, it was a civilian hospital. And I went there, and I had a real nice doctor. He was a resident, meaning he had a year—he was in his last year in becoming a doctor. I mean, he was a doctor, but he was—he completed that. He was just going through what everyone—whatever he was going to do after he got out. And so, he asked me if I'd been in the service, and I said yeah. He asked me how long, and I told him. He said, "What are you doing here? You belong in the VA [Veterans Administration] hospital." I said well, I didn't think I'd been in the service long enough to go to the VA. He said, "Honey, if you served one day, you can go to the VA." So, I did.

And I—they put on the ninth floor or something, the ward. There must have been fifty men in that ward, and me. That was interesting. They all just thought I was wonderful. [laughs] That was so funny. And so, they talked to me about how I should talk to service coordinator, service director—I don't remember what it—service—it's like—what do you call it? It's a group of—what do they call them? Service officer. And he filed—they said I should talk to him about filing for a disability. And so, I said okay, and I filed. And I got out of the hospital, and I still—for the first time, I wasn't afraid. I knew I had some place to go if I got sick, and they were nice to me, too. They were real nice to me. [laughs]

Brooks: Was that—sorry, go ahead.

Lewis: So, my—I had my two children, little children, and my mother, I was taking care of her. She was in her eighties. Well, I guess seventy-five. And she lived with me, and I took care of her and my kids. And I had filed for a service-connected disability, but I didn't hear anything for years, so I just thought well, I didn't get it. I didn't get it. So, I wasn't able to work because of my—I was—they used to call it—not bipolar, but manic depression.

**[00:45:00]**

They knew—they had found out what manic depression was. Anyway, so I saw a doctor, a psychiatrist, and he was so nice. He was head of the manic depression program. He's a good guy. And anyway, my mother—I told you I was taking care of my mother and my two kids, and—oh, I know what I was going to say. I didn't have any money, and I couldn't work, and so I filed for—what you call it? You know, where you go and sign up for free—

Brooks: Was it—did you file bankruptcy?

Lewis: No. No. No. It's—

Brooks: I know what you're thinking of. I can't think of the word either.

Lewis: Welfare.

Brooks: Yes. Welfare.

Lewis: Yeah. I signed up for welfare. And that was kind of a step down because I had been making really big money as a nurse. But, I mean I had to feed my kids, so you have to do what you have to do. So, that I did. And then, when I was in—then I found out—I'm jumping around a little bit here. I hope you're following me.

Brooks: That's okay. Yeah.

Lewis: They said—three months in a row, I did not get a check from welfare, so the manager of our complex, her and her associate came and told me that they thought that I was a great person, and that I'd been a really good tenant, but they had to have their money. And she gave me a real short time. We were going to be all kicked out on the street. Oh my goodness, I cried and cried and cried. My son, he was a little boy then, but he sat outside my door at night, because I was upset, you know? And anyway, so it had been a long time since I'd filed for my disability, and I figured I didn't get it and that was the end of it. I just stopped thinking about it. Anyway, after that—then, the day after they had told me, they gave me a week or something to get out or pay them. I went to the mailbox, and I found a check in the mail for \$5,000 from the VA. \$5,000! Back then, that was great money. So, I could pay all my bills off and pay my rent. Oh, God was so good to me. So, I got 100 percent service-connected, and that's how I got into the system. And they have been so good to me and blessed me so much. And I pray to God to bless the VA because they keep me going. And the doctors, I just—this Madison VA is something. I have never heard anybody say anything against it, and they better not say anything to me against them, because I will tell them how the cow ate the cabbage. [Both laugh]

Brooks: So, what brought you to Wisconsin?



Lewis: My son. He lived here. He'd been after me a long time to move up. Oh, you asked me about my husband. I met him in the bus station in Oklahoma City. I was going to Ponca to visit my brother. Anyway, so he was working there. He worked in the baggage department. Anyway, what was that guy's name? I can't think of his name. One of the guys—married guys is down there, ask me if I wanted to go to lunch. I didn't know he was married. I said yeah, so he took me for lunch. So, when I got back, Jan, that was my husband's name, his picture's right—I'll show you.

**[00:50:01]**

Brooks: Okay. He looks like George Carlin.

Lewis: Yeah. Somebody told me that before. [Brooks laughs] Anyway, turned out he was—he asked me to go down and have dinner with him, and I'd already eaten, but I went with him, and we had such a big time. Oh! He was just a—he was—I was crazy him. We were crazy about each other. But he was—turned out to be a womanizer, and he had charred through my money. Anyway. He—to make a long story short, he developed an aortic aneurism in his belly when he was in—he was in jail, prison I think. Yeah, he robbed a bank or something. He's been to prison three times, but he was not a good choice of a husband. I should have married a Christian man. My life would have been a lot easier. But anyway, so he died in the hospital. He went to Midwest City Memorial Hospital. He ruptured his aneurism, and they had to operate on him, and some people from Oklahoma called me saying they had to get permission for them to operate on him, and my son didn't want any part of it. Jan couldn't remember my number, but he remember Curt's number. And so, Curt told the police to contact to me, or told the people in Oklahoma or something. And so, they contacted me.

But he was in the hospital for a long time. He developed every kind of complication in the world. First of all, he was paralyzed from the waist down. He had a tracheotomy. He had holes in his belly that were infections that they couldn't heal. And anyway, he had a really hard time. I was real worried about him. I talked about my pastor to him. I was worried about his salvation because I knew he wasn't saved. He told me to contact my pastor in Oklahoma and have him go see Jan. And I had trouble getting ahold of my pastor. He was out of town for the weekend, but I didn't know it. Anyway, so finally he called me, and he apologized. And I told him that Jan was in the hospital, and he needed to be saved. And I knew he wasn't saved, and I asked him if he could go see him, and he did. So, he called me back sometime later, and he said that when he went to—when he went to Heaven, and then I went to Heaven, I would see him in Heaven. So, that made me feel really good. I've had a very interesting life. It has not been dull. Look at that.

Brooks: This card?

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Lewis: She is now—she'll be seventeen in March—

Brooks: Oh my goodness.

Lewis: —seventeen in February, 6th.

Brooks: So, this is your granddaughter.

Lewis: That is my granddaughter.

Brooks: Brianna?

Lewis: Brianna. Yeah. I found it the other day while I was cleaning out closets.

Brooks: Aw. It's a Halloween card? It looks like she drew when she was pretty small.

Lewis: Must've been five or six.

Brooks: That's cute.

Lewis: Isn't it cute?

Brooks: Yeah.

Lewis: Oh, and she—

Brooks: She put stickers on the back.

**[00:54:59]**

Lewis: Yeah.

Brooks: This is your daughter?

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Genuine?

Lewis: That's when she was young.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. 1970 to 2018. I'm sorry.

Lewis: Brianna wrote the obituary.

Brooks: Who did?

Lewis: Brianna.

Brooks: Her daughter?

Lewis: Mmm.

Brooks: Her daughter, okay. Do you have other grandkids?

Lewis: One in Oklahoma. Ryan. He's twenty-six, I think.

Brooks: And is he her daughter? Is he—or, son. Or is he Curt's son?

Lewis: Brother. It's her son.

Brooks: Okay. Mm-hmm, got it. Brianna, so Brianna and Ryan are Genine's [sp??] kids.

Lewis: Uh-huh. And that's it. That's her urn. That's my little—

Brooks: The wooden box?

Lewis: Mm-hmm.

Brooks: So, how long have you been in Wisconsin?

Lewis: About eight years.

Brooks: Okay. Did you—you moved up here because Curt was here?

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: And was Genine also here?

Lewis: No, she came up from Oklahoma. She drove me up there in my car.

Brooks: Okay, okay.

Lewis: And Brianna was a little tiny baby, she slept the whole way. [Brooks laughs]

Brooks: So, when you say that you've gotten involved with the American Legion, has that mostly been here in Madison, then?

Lewis: No. The DAV [Disabled American Veterans] got my 100 percent service-connected disability, and he took me—he was a black man. I can't remember his name, but he was soft-spoken, and he was really nice. He took me to Muskogee, and I talked to the head of the department. I think that's why I got that scholarship, that money. And then also, the guys told me that I ought to contact social security because I could get that, too. And I thought what the heck? So, I talked to them. I hired an attorney, actually, because they told me that's what I should do. Anyway, so she got me my service-connected—my social security disability. So, I'm sitting pretty.

Brooks: [laughs] When was that? Do you remember?

Lewis: '83, I think.

Brooks: That was—you were still in Oklahoma.

Lewis: Mm-hmm.

Brooks: Yeah. So, I see you have a nice—is that a quilt?

Lewis: Yeah. I got that at Camp American Legion.

Brooks: Okay.

Lewis: It's just a banner.

Brooks: Oh, okay. I see. Yeah. Did you make that? Was it made for you?

Lewis: No. The Auxiliary made it. Isn't it beautiful?

Brooks: That beautiful. Yeah, that's gorgeous. That's beautiful.

Lewis: They gave it all—everybody got one.

Brooks: And so, the Camp American Legion, is that something that's organized by the American Legion? By the—

Lewis: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Okay.

Lewis: Oh, it's a wonderful place to go. They just treat you like family. Come over here and see my babies.

Brooks: Okay... bring this [recorder] with me.

Lewis: This is my mom and dad right there. This is Brianna. Let's see. When she was five years old, she lived with me for six months when her mother was away.

Brooks: Okay.

Lewis: You know. Where is that picture at? Right there. Up there. I had dark hair then.

Brooks: That one? Okay. Mmhm.

Lewis: Yeah. She was—

Brooks: Cute.

Lewis: She went into foster care. I was taking—oh, this hurts to say, but I was taking care of her, and I took care of her for six months. Then, I lost twenty pounds. I was bipolar back then, and I just got so depressed, and I couldn't sleep. Anyway, I had a nervous breakdown, and so I went into the VA hospital, and the neighbor came and got her. And then, they told me—they'd do all these things for me if I just keep Brianna, and I just couldn't handle it. I just wasn't up to it.

**[01:00:00]**

And so, I told them that I was sorry, but anyways, it's my fault that she went into foster care because I couldn't meet terms, their terms. Isn't she beautiful?

Brooks: Mm-hmm.

Lewis: And she's still beautiful. This is Tori, her oldest sister that died with leukemia when she was four years old. She's nine months there. Then, this picture, this is when she was four, right before she went into the hospital. Isn't that sweet?

Brooks: Mhmm.

Lewis: And so, Brianna was five there, and then she was five here. Each year, I've got a picture of each year of her life. And this is her last year's picture.

Brooks: Okay. How old is she in that picture?

Lewis: Seventeen.

Brooks: Seventeen, okay. And where is she now?

Lewis: Madison. In school today.

Brooks: Oh, that's great. And who is this gentleman?

Lewis: She's going to become a nurse like her grandma.

Brooks: Oh, that's so great!

Lewis: And then, she wants to become a midwife.

Brooks: Okay.

Lewis: She said that she was interested in that. She has four years of Spanish.

Brooks: Oh wow! That's good. That's great.

Lewis: Uh-huh. And she can—any time of job—she can get any kind of job with being bilingual. It'll increase it, you know?

Brooks: Yeah, definitely. That's really important.

Lewis: And she's so busy. She works on the weekends. She goes to school all week long. I haven't seen her since—no, that's not true. I saw her on the fourteenth of the month. We got my ears re-pierced at Pagoda, and then we went to Penny's. I was hunting for a swimsuit, but I didn't think I could find one. But Brianna found me a swimsuit. There was two of 'em just alike, and one was too big.

Brooks: Oh, that's beautiful.

Lewis: Isn't that beautiful?

Brooks: Yeah! That's a good find.

Lewis: Then, I have shorts that I wear underneath it.

Brooks: Nice.

Lewis: I couldn't get—the bottoms were all too big.

Brooks: Yeah.

Lewis: Hold this for a minute.

Brooks: Yup.

Lewis: And the water aerobics. I ride—did you see my recumbent bicycle out there?

Brooks: No.

Lewis: Well, go look at it!

Brooks: Where? Oh, over there? Yeah. That's great. Right by the window, so you can see, look out.

Lewis: Uh-huh. So, I ride my bicycle almost an hour, every day of my life, and well.

Brooks: Yeah.

Lewis: And I do water aerobics two or three times a week.

Brooks: That's great.

Lewis: And sometimes I take walks.

Brooks: Nice.

Lewis: That's how I keep my weight off.

Brooks: Yeah. You have to stay active. Yeah.

Lewis: And it's very important for me to maintain my weight, so I'm trying real hard to keep it down.

Brooks: Mhm, that's great.

Lewis: But basically, I have the same thing to eat all the time, and it still tastes good to me. [laughs]

Brooks: Good. That's important.

Lewis: I eat a lot of salad... alternate chicken and fish. Small portion control.

Brooks: That's great. Well, is there anything about your time in the service or just even reflections that you kind of—that we haven't touched on that you want to mention?

Lewis: Well—

Brooks: It was kind of a unique experience that you had.

Lewis: It is. Well, I just feel like I should have stayed in the service. But I mean, I had such a rough life after I got out, you know? My daughter was evil to me, and she kept my car, and I didn't have a car to get around in. That was awful. I moved in with this girl I didn't know, and she had two men that came and crawled in bed with us. That was interesting. [laughs]

Brooks: Yeah. [laughs] You think it would have been easier or different if you'd stayed in the service?

Lewis: Oh yeah. I'd have married somebody—probably somebody that had a—was an officer. And it would have been—I'd have a whole new, different type of life. But I just—God didn't want me to do that apparently, because it didn't work out.

**[01:04:58]**

But, I am thankful. I praise the Lord that he has been with me every step of my life, and he has been there for me, and he's pulled me through everything. If it wasn't for him, I'd probably have killed myself a long time ago. I've been through too much. And my husband was not a good husband. And he didn't believe in God, and he'd argue with me about it, and that would upset me, you know?

Brooks: What do you think overall about how the military handles mental health issues?

Lewis: Well, the doctor I told you was excellent, but it was all—they didn't have a psychiatric unit. They just had beds on the floor, see, for you. But I think they—I wasn't even diagnosed with a psychiatric illness, but I just saw that—Captain Alfred because I was depressed, and I knew that I needed someone to talk to. He was so nice, and he was so good.

Brooks: Do you know what happened to him?

Lewis: No. But I'm sure he's great wherever he is. He probably has a fantastic practice, or he may even be out now. But he had a—I don't know if he stayed in. He was a Captain. I don't know if he stayed in or what, you know? But he was great. I really looked up to him.

Brooks: And these days, how do you think the military is handling mental health issues?

Lewis: A lot different. They have—for one thing, back when I was in, the only women in the Air Force were nurses. They didn't have all these other people. So... I've had a wonderful life. And I have two beautiful grandchildren and a great grandson. He's right there in that picture right behind the screen. He has a disability, he has—his fingers are like just flaps. And his arms are short. It looks like part of his arm's missing with just hands on him, you know? It was bizarre. But he's had I don't know how many surgeries. They're waiting for him to get to—his bones to develop to a certain something. Then they're going to operate on him. I hope they can give him some hands, but I don't see how they can. But he knows how—he can—when he was five years old, he could dress himself, he could feed himself. He went to kindergarten. He's so sweet.

Brooks: That's amazing. That's great.



Lewis: So—And his daddy just loves him.

Brooks: And you have a picture of someone in a uniform over there, a man, on your wall.

Lewis: That's Curt. That's my son.

Brooks: Okay. So, he was in the service as well?

Lewis: Yeah. He was in the Army. I went to—he begged me to come to Germany. He was stationed in Germany. And so, I flew—Jan didn't want me to go, he said it was too far for me to go alone, but I went and I had a wonderful time. I was there three weeks. And in Germany, the streets, they're different. They have—well, I was walking back then, you know, before I developed my neuropathy, and so I walked down to the corner and went this way, and I just kept walking and walking and walking and it didn't ever come to an end. So, I turned around and came back. [laughs] And on my way back home, there was an open grocery store, an open—there was no front to it. And I saw this woman, and she had this little bitty dog, and guess what that dog had in his mouth? A head of lettuce. [laughs]

**[01:10:01]**

I didn't laugh, but I wanted to, you know? [Brooks laughs] That was really weird. And we went on a train ride, went to Paris and stayed and had a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun with my son. I just love him so much. But he hasn't spoke to me in nine years. And I miss him so much. I know he did me bad, y'know, but I don't care. I want my son back, any day of the week. I think that the reason he hasn't come back is that he feels so guilty about the way he has done me, and he can't handle it. So, he chooses to ignore it. He's not saved, and he's not—he doesn't believe in God. And so, I pray for him, for his salvation, because everybody needs God in their life. My daughter's saved. My daughter's had a tragic life. She'd been in prison three times. And Brianna, I had Brianna—before Brianna went into foster care, I had her for six months. Oh, she says, “Grandma—“. The other day, she said, “Grandma, that was the best time of my life when I lived with you.” She's more like my kid than my granddaughter. We're really tight.

Brooks: That's great. That's really good.

Lewis: Oh, we used to get at the foot of the stairs, and we'd race up the stairs. And of course, she always beat me to the top. She'd say, “I beat you, Grandma!” And she slept with me. And I was trying to teach her to sleep by herself. But anyway, she—oh, she was so much—she is so much fun, so full of life, and she's gonna be a nurse. Did I tell you that?

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Lewis: Yeah. I'm so proud of her. And she's gonna be a good nurse, too, because she's been so much garbage with this foster care. She went—she was in foster care first, and then Stephanie got her in foster care, and then she adopted her because Genine, that's my daughter, they were giving her a hard time about—she was trying to get Brianna back, and they were giving her a hard time because they didn't want her to get her back. And so... anyway, so she told Stephanie about the situation, and she asked Stephanie if she would take Brianna, and Stephanie agreed to it. Then, I think that—she lived with my son Curt for seven years, and he kicked her out. And I know why, too. [laughs] Anyway... anyway.

Brooks: Bonnie, do you want to talk at all about your service anymore? Or do you think we should wrap up?

Lewis: No. I've talked about a lot of things other than my service, I'm sorry.

Brooks: No, no. That's okay! I just want to make sure we say everything you want to say about your service.

Lewis: Well, I just want to say that I appreciated my time in the service, and they were very nice to me except for that one lady. And I just felt like—I don't feel like I failed now. It was just—I just had a problem, and her name—and I know her name. And things were different back then, and I was shy. And now, I'm real different, and I can talk up for myself and talk back.

Brooks: What would you tell someone who was thinking about joining the service today?

Lewis: Go for it.

Brooks: Good. All right. Well, we can keep chatting, but if we're done talking about your service, I can go ahead and turn off the recorder, if that's all right.

Lewis: Okay. Uh-huh.

Brooks: Okay, great. Thank you.

**[End of OH2136.Lewis access]**

**[End of Interview]**