Oral History Interview of Karen Blum

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Interview Summary
Karen Blum, professor of law emerita, reflects on her forty-plus years at Suffolk University Law School, first as a law student and then as a member of the faculty. The interview highlights her nationally recognized legal scholarship on civil rights and police misconduct. Among her accomplishments at Suffolk, she describes the development of curriculum focused on civil rights and police reform, the creation of an internship program for first-year students, and her role as the founding director of the Masterman Institute on the First Amendment and Fourth Estate. She reflects on the major developments and changes in the law school, efforts to diversify the student body, and the growth of the university as a whole. Throughout the interview, Blum shares personal memories of her mentors and colleagues at Suffolk, as well as the challenges of being a woman on the law faculty early in her career.

Subject Headings

Blum, Karen
Suffolk University -- History
Constitutional law -- United States.
Universities and colleges—Faculty
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

NANCY STOLL: I'm Nancy Stoll, dean of students emerita at Suffolk University. And this is an oral history interview with Karen Blum, professor of law emerita at Suffolk. The interview is happening through Zoom, on Tuesday, October 13th, 2020. Karen, let’s begin with the basics. What years did you work at Suffolk?

[00:00:26]

KAREN BLUM: Well, I actually went to Suffolk Law School. I was a student there, an evening student, from 1970 to ’74. And immediately upon graduation, I started teaching in the Legal Writing Skills Program, known as Legal Practical Skills. I started teaching as an instructor in 1974 and stopped teaching in 2017, so 43 years teaching.

NANCY STOLL: And how did you come to decide that you wanted to serve on the faculty right after you—

KAREN BLUM: Well, it was actually pretty fortuitous. I went to law school really, to be honest, I went because I married a guy who was going to go to law school. In 1968, I met my then future husband, [Jeffrey Blum]. And he wanted to go to law school. But it was, of course, during the height of Vietnam. He was number 16 in the draft lottery and would have been drafted in a minute if he went to law school.

[00:01:53]

At the time, they were giving deferments for teachers, public school teachers. So that’s where we actually met. We met in a program that was geared toward liberal arts college graduates. We had both just graduated from college. And [the program] was to train you to be a teacher. We were both in New Haven, Connecticut, at the time. We became public school teachers. [This made it possible for Jeff to] go to law school at night, teach during the day, and get the deferment for teachers. So that’s a long answer.
So, when we became engaged, he had already applied and been accepted at Suffolk to go in the evening division. It was one of the few places around that had an evening school. So that was in January of 1970. [When we became engaged,] I ran out and took the LSATs, and applied just to Suffolk. I had never been to Boston, knew nothing about Suffolk. I got in, and we got married in June of ’70, both got jobs teaching up here in the Boston area, [Jeff] in Boston and myself in Stoneham.

[00:03:11]
[So, newly married and in a new city, we] started law school [at night, and began] new jobs as teachers. It was a pretty hectic time. So that’s how we ended up here. So, the point is, I've always loved school. I was an academic. I loved law school and it turned out that I was pretty good at it. I was the first evening student to be an editor on the [Suffolk University] Law Review. And when I graduated, I was asked if I wanted to teach in the then, really, very small legal practical skills program, which I did. And I was able to do an LL. M at Harvard while I was teaching the legal writing course. I taught in that [program] for two years.

And, at the end of the two years as an instructor, and I had my LLM at that point, it was suggested to me by someone in the administration, that perhaps I should apply for a full-time tenure slot as a professor, which I was thrilled to do. It’s not a path you could take today. But then, I think Catherine Judge, and maybe Valerie Epps were there at the time, had just started. There were only two women on the faculty. I was thrilled to apply, and got a position.

[00:04:45]
And the rest has been history. So that’s how I came to be on the faculty, a very circuitous route. But it was one that worked for me. I never looked back, and it’s been a good ride.

NANCY STOLL:  I believe you were the first woman graduate at Suffolk Law, to be appointed to the faculty. Correct?
KAREN BLUM: [audio breakup] Where did Catherine Judge go to law school?¹ Wasn’t she a Suffolk grad? Or maybe not.

NANCY STOLL: I don’t think so, according the history book.

[00:05:23]

KAREN BLUM: Oh, if I was, then good for me. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: The history book written by Suffolk, says you, along with Bernie Ortwein, Bill Corbett, Russ Murphy, and Bernie Keenan were made fulltime faculty by David Sargent, who was then the dean of the Law School.²

KAREN BLUM: Right.

NANCY STOLL: 1980. That’s when the history book says the five of you were made full-time faculty.

[00:05:47]

KAREN BLUM: Right, 1980. I remember it well, because that’s when my first son was born. I wasn’t going to have children until I was tenured, so—[laughter]

NANCY STOLL: Yeah, okay.


NANCY STOLL: What are your most vivid memories of those early days at Suffolk?

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² Professor Blum was an instructor from 1974-1976. She transitioned to a tenure-track position in 1976 and was awarded tenure in 1980.
KAREN BLUM: Well, the early days, of course, the faculty was much smaller and there were very few women. But it felt like family; I always felt welcomed. We had faculty meetings in a room that’s much smaller than the one that we have [meetings] in now. And it was an exciting time. We all taught day and evening. I have very fond memories. The students were great. Of course, the building was quite different. We were over behind the State House. The facilities weren't luxurious. But, it was a good time.

[00:07:17]
You know, at the time, there was one law review. I think my first or second year of teaching, or maybe it was a little bit later, but I helped a student who was interested in starting the International or Transnational Law [Review]. I went down to Dean Sargent’s—then Dean Sargent’s office. I didn’t teach international law, and really knew very little about it. But the student was passionate about it. Her name was Liz Matthews. And I remember taking her down to the dean’s office [and making the case for another journal.]

We said, “Well, we’d like to at least do one issue, this year, if you’d fund it.” And I think we asked for, I don’t know, maybe 100 dollars. [Dean Sargent] gave it to us, and [Liz] started the Transnational Law Journal, which of course now is very, very well respected. I think they do two or three, or maybe four issues a year. But the early days were interesting, that’s for sure.

NANCY STOLL: Well during your time as a student, the Law School had its largest student enrollment ever. I think it was around 2,100. And then, during the early days of your time as faculty, and this was, I think under the deanship of Dean Sargent, there was a deliberate effort to reduce the size of the student body, and increase the size of the fulltime faculty, and bringing diversity to both populations, and positioned the law school for some appropriate accreditations. How did these kind of changes impact your role as a faculty member in those days?

[00:09:10]
KAREN BLUM: Well, that was a major turning point, frankly, for the law school, right, when we got our AALS (American Association of Law Schools). We had the ABA (American Bar Association) accreditation, of course. But Dean Sargent was very instrumental in getting us the AALS accreditation, which really made a huge difference in the kinds of students we could attract, and the scope and the breadth and the depth of the courses that were taught. It was a very large student body.

[00:09:46]
But the one thing I have to say about Suffolk is that the size of the student body, and the size of the faculty never changed the core sense of [Suffolk being] a family. One semester, I filled in for somebody over at BU (Boston University), taught a course. And it was just such a different atmosphere. I was a visitor, but still, in terms of the students and the faculty, you never had that sense of a community that you have at Suffolk. I think at one point, we went back and forth with Harvard as to who has the largest student body for the law school. We definitely had a lot of students, but it was a community, a real community, with a good sense of belonging.

NANCY STOLL: Your specialty areas for teaching are civil procedure, federal courts, civil rights, and police misconduct litigation. How did you select those areas as your—

[00:11:18]
KAREN BLUM: Oh, well, civil procedure was assigned to me. I came to love it and I taught it for many years. It wasn’t a course that I would have said, “Oh gee, I want to teach civil procedure.” But I did it. I did like it. It was fun and interesting. And it was a good course to teach, because it was a first-year course. And I loved first year students. So that was all good.

The rest, I was truly passionate about. I'm a Libra. I guess maybe that’s part of it, I don’t know. I was born with the Scales of Justice in my head or something. But I have always been passionate about fairness and justice, loved history and constitutional law. So, the big mystery is why I never ended up teaching constitutional law. I don’t know. I kind of
skirted around that. And I taught everything I loved about constitutional law, the civil rights part of it, and the federal courts part of it. But never actually taught the course.

[00:12:29]
I think I was the first person in the country to teach [Police Misconduct Litigation] as a course unto itself. I started teaching it in the late ‘70s. And it clearly became my focal point. It still is. I'm still very involved in all kinds of programs and writing. And I'm on more committees now than I want to be on, involving police reform and that kind of thing.

To this day, I am on the computer every single morning, researching cases in the section—what we call Section 1983 area, that is the civil rights and police misconduct kinds of cases. I literally do it every day of the year. There's not a day I've missed, I think, in the last 30 years. [laughter] So some call that obsessive-compulsive. I just call it dedicated, devoted.

NANCY STOLL: Well, your writing and research focused on which areas the most?

[00:13:54]
KAREN BLUM: Oh, definitely the area of Section 1983, which is a reference to a statute, a federal statute under which most civil rights cases are brought. They're civil cases, seeking money damages. So, any of these police misconduct cases that you hear so much about now, where the plaintiffs bring a civil suit, are under that statute. My writing has really all been in that area. And especially lately, about this defense that has finally made it to the mainstream papers and news, [the defense of] Qualified Immunity, which I'm sure, by the time anybody is listening to this oral history, they will know what it is or what it was, hopefully. I hope it’s gone by the time this is history.

My writing has really all been in that area. It’s fascinating, just fascinating. I focus a lot on case law development in the federal courts, because the way our federal courts system is set up, the federal circuits tend to differ in their approaches. And it’s all the same law
they're applying, but the results can be quite different. There's kind of an incestuous small group of people who do this, specialize in this Section 1983 area.

[00:15:35]
Over the years, [the scholars in this group, mostly scholars at other schools, and lawyers who do this kind of work, have] become very good friends. I have developed quite a network across the country of people with whom I do programs. We collaborate on things. We may join in amicus briefs in the Supreme Court and so on. I'm still doing a part of [the Police Misconduct: Law and Litigation] treatise that I became involved with over 30 years ago. [I do this treatise] with coauthors Michael Avery, David Rudovsky and Jennifer Laurin. I kind of drafted Jennifer Laurin, who’s a brilliant young law professor at University of Texas and brought her in when I started thinking about phasing out and retiring. I thought, well, let me bring her in to take over certain parts of the treatise that I might be giving up.

Any way, it’s all been very interesting, and stimulating. And I still find it a fascinating area of the law.

NANCY STOLL: That’s great.

KAREN BLUM: Really love it.

NANCY STOLL: I think most of us have people that influenced us in our professional development over the years. And I'm wondering, who were the people at Suffolk who had the most impact or effect on your personal or professional development?

[00:17:17]
KAREN BLUM: Well at Suffolk, I have to say, of course, Catherine Judge was an early role model. She was one of the only women at Suffolk. I would always try to imagine what it must have been like for her when she first started. She was the registrar, right. I mean she went to law school but she was the registrar at the school for a certain period of time. I
always respected her, mostly because, while she wasn’t a scholar, in the sense that she wrote and did a lot of scholarly research and writing, she was a true, dedicated, just devoted teacher, who put the students above everything else. She was terrifying in the classroom. I had her as a teacher. I was terrified when I first met her. [laughter] But then, when you learned that her bark was much worse than her bite, and got to really know her, you understood that she just had certain expectations. She was going to make sure that everybody lived up to them. And so, shame on you if you didn’t read every case that she assigned. She was quite demanding.

We taught the same section of law students for many years. And it was always a question of who flunked more students. [laughter] We were both very tough graders, very tough graders. I think my students, at one point, were calling me “The Terminator.” [laughter] But I distinctly remember her marching over to my office with blue books in her hand, and showing me, “Look at this. Look at this. You know, how could they write this? They don’t do the reading.” Or I don’t know. She would have some kind of an explosion, and then go back. She was—she was clearly a big force in my early years.

[00:19:33]
Valerie Epps is somebody, too, who [was a role model.] We went through many years together as colleagues. And, we would take turns. She had two sons, I had two sons. We alternated our pregnancies. [laughter] so that there wouldn’t be two pregnant women on the faculty at the same time. But Valerie is a true scholar, and totally put more hours in than anyone I knew. She was an excellent teacher, but also, outside the classroom, when students would hold events [for which it] was important for faculty to show up, Valerie was always one of the people you could count on to attend, to help. She’d put in endless hours with the moot court teams, her national moot court teams, and the international moot court team. She definitely, definitely had a big influence on me.

NANCY STOLL: I don’t know that she influenced you, in terms of your mode of transportation.
Oral History Interview of Karen Blum (SOH-053)

[00:20:52]

**KAREN BLUM:** No, no. I always used to yell at her about that. [laughter] “Valerie, you can't ride that. You have two children and a lot of law students. You can't ride that thing.” But she did, I know.

**NANCY STOLL:** You mentioned that some fellow students might have called you “The Terminator.” How would you say that students in your classes would describe your teaching style?

**KAREN BLUM:** That’s interesting. Well, I think they always put down, “We have too much reading.” [laughter] So I know I was demanding. But you know, my teaching style, it changed a bit over time. I think it got better. I hope it got better. But, of course, the advent of technology made [a huge impact]—you had to change and adapt. Students learned more visually. I started using more visual tools. And then, the interactive kind of things with Turning Point and PowerPoint. You could ask them questions and test them in class, and have them respond, and keep track, you know. It almost felt like spying to a certain degree. But you could keep track of what students were answering, and what students were doing well, and not.

[00:22:21]

But it was actually a good way to—I’d call people into my office and say, “Hey, you know, you haven't done too well in the last three kind of little test questions I've given in class. I loved the first-year students. You have to really try to keep them engaged. And civil procedure was not the easiest course to teach or take for a first-year student. I think I was tough on them, in the sense that, look you just have to be in class and do the work. And if you do that, you’ll be fine.

I tried to—I always called students by their first name, which I know a lot of professors don’t do. But I liked to make them feel sort of, I don’t know, more at ease. And I think calling them by their first names did that. I tried to keep them engaged. In my police misconduct class, that was probably the most difficult class to walk a line, because of
course I always used to tell them, from day one, it’s not a cop bashing course. There were usually two sides to every story, usually, not always.

[00:23:44] Over the years, a number of police officers were students in my class. They were usually some of the best students, because they’d be more outraged by some of the cases we read than other people. That was a class where students really engaged. And you had to—you know, you had to address some very tough issues, race certainly, which I didn’t back away from. I always used to get, whatever, good reviews, evaluations. And, as I say, the most common complaint was too much reading. But, you know, that’s too bad. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: I think most faculty expand their interests to other tasks, other than just classroom instruction as you through the years. How did your role in the Law School develop and change over the years?

[00:24:51] KAREN BLUM: I was so interested in the civil rights area, and the Section 1983 area, I started very early attending programs at other places, and getting involved through the AALS and so forth. I was the first chair of the Civil Rights Section of the AALS. If you can believe it, there wasn’t one [prior to our forming such a Section]. I don’t remember what year that was, but very early on, we decided to start one. And I served as the first chair, which put me in contact with, as I said, this relatively small group of academics who specialize in this area.

Now, of course, there are more [faculty who teach in the area of Section 1983]. Over the years, my reputation grew due to my writing and my involvement with these programs and groups. I was doing a number of programs nationally for various [schools and organizations]—Chicago-Kent, Georgetown, [and the Practicing Law Institute ]. I actually chaired the Georgetown Law School program on Section 1983 for a long time. And I finally said, “You know, why am I chairing a program for Georgetown?”
Over the years, I became more and more involved with these national programs. I started doing programs in 1990, I think it was, for the Federal Judicial Center. And that’s been wonderful. I'm still involved with them. I started doing workshops for federal judges all over the country, and national workshops for the federal district court judges, and for the federal magistrate judges, circuit conferences, and so on. I’ve done more programs for them than I can count.

And that’s been a fantastic kind of platform, for both the law school and myself, because I spoke to virtually every federal judge in the country at some point or other. It has been a great kind of connecting point for our students as well, getting clerkships and so on. I've helped a number of students get federal clerkships through my connections with federal judges.

I'm on the Advisory Board of the National Police Accountability Project. When I was teaching my police misconduct course, I was able to match students up with attorneys literally all over the country, if they wanted to do a project, work on a case with an attorney. So that was part of my course. It wasn’t billed as a clinical course but it had this component to it way before clinical courses became popular. I’d ask [my students]: “Do you want to work with a plaintiff’s attorney, somebody who’s suing the police? Or do you want to work with someone who’s defending the police?”

I gave the students a choice. Then I would match them with an attorney on either side. I would review the final written project, whatever it is they worked on, and grade it. But it was a way of not only helping students to get jobs, but you know, giving some kind of a practical experience in that area of the law. I’d say that my work outside of the classroom became as important, frankly, as some work I was doing in the classroom.
I always felt like my teaching benefited so much from my exposure to both attorneys and judges who were involved in this area of the law. I think that was a really important part. And, of course, later, when I was Associate Dean of—I called it Associate Dean of Schmooze, I was basically an outreach person for alumni all over the place. And one of the reasons—I think the primary reason I was picked to do that, was because when I traveled so much for these programs, I was traveling, obviously, on somebody else’s dime. When I’d get to Chicago or San Francisco or wherever I was doing a program, I could reach out to alums of the law school, tell them I was going to be there, set up some kind of a dinner or reception, and kind of get them re-engaged with the Law School. So, you know, it was—it was a good way of connecting.

NANCY STOLL: When were you Associate Dean of Schmooze?

[00:30:55] KAREN BLUM: Well, let’s see. It was when Camille Nelson was the dean. [I think it was 2009 to 2014. I think it was four or five years].

NANCY STOLL: [audio breakup]

KAREN BLUM: What year did she come? Later maybe. Yeah, I should know the years, but I can't think of the exact year. I ended, I think, 2014. I think it was 2009 to 2014. I think it was four or five years.

NANCY STOLL: Yeah, under Dean Nelson, okay. I know that in 2008, you were appointed the first director of the Masterman Institute, on the First Amendment.

[00:31:51] KAREN BLUM: Right, right, right. That was a terrific experience as well. Ed Masterman, who’s a wonderful, wonderful man, and his [terrific] wife [Sydell], set up this institute on the First Amendment and the Fourth Estate. We organized one symposium every year. For our first program, we had Anthony Lewis, who, of course, was a giant in
the First Amendment area. I think my national connections in the civil rights area really helped, of course, land excellent speakers. We brought in Erwin Chemerinsky, who’s a personal friend, and nationally known. He’s now dean of Berkeley, but a nationally known constitutional scholar.

[Other key note speakers included] Linda Greenhouse, Dahlia Lithwick, Pam Karlan, and Phil Balboni. We had a series of speakers who were just outstanding. Fred Aman was the dean who asked me if I would do that program and run that institute. I had a lot of good experiences with that.

**NANCY STOLL:** You also served on the Massachusetts Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

**KAREN BLUM:** You're bringing up a lot of things I actually forgot.

**NANCY STOLL:** Oh, and I'm wondering how that particular involvement impacted your teaching.

[00:33:56]

**KAREN BLUM:** You know, I have mixed feelings about that, because it was the Civil Rights Commission under an administration that really didn’t care that much about civil rights. I don’t know how to put it. But the committee itself was fine. We had some good people on the committee. We did some really interesting work. One of the things we looked into was the school-to-jail kind of pipeline. [We looked into the] use of school resource officers in the schools. We held hearings, where we had people from the state, from the legislature, from the police department and experts on children and so forth, all testified. We held hearings for two days, I think, on that issue.

[00:35:10]

It was some very interesting work. And we would write up proposals and so on. But to be honest, I eventually thought, you know, we do all of this work, and write up those reports.
And then, you know, it was kind of a black hole, I felt like. This information was going down the drain, or whatever. I served for—I think it was three-year terms, maybe. I know I served for at least one, if not two.

But at one point, when I was asked to renew, I just said, “You know, I don’t feel like I want to do this, because it’s too frustrating. We’re doing a lot of work, and it’s going nowhere, frankly.” So that’s when that ended. [laughter] But you know, again, it was one of those situations where I met a lot of great people, and we did a lot of great work. But it just, in my mind, wasn’t productive in the end. But you're right. I was on that commission. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: Going back to Suffolk, the changes in Suffolk over the 40 years or 40-plus years that you were on faculty were incredibly significant. What are some of the institutional changes that you witnessed and experienced, that particularly impacted the law School?

[00:36:43]

KAREN BLUM: Right. So obviously, the move from Temple Street to Tremont Street was major, just a total sea change. [Before the move], you’d always have to say Suffolk Law School, right behind the State House building[laughter]. And then, all of a sudden, it was kind of, “You know that great big building with the pillars right on Tremont Street? You can't miss it when you get off at Park Street Station.” It was kind of going from complete obscurity to wow. Here we are. That was a real step for us, I think, getting into that new building.

[00:37:38]

And then the development of so many other programs. I think institutionally, when I was in the LPS program teaching legal writing, there were two of us who taught fulltime in the LPS program, with, I don’t know 1,500 students or something at the school. And, basically 300 first year students or more, in the day division, and the same at night. And then, we go
from that to where we are ranked in *U.S. News and World Report* in the top schools, in terms of our legal writing and our clinical programs.

So, likewise, when I first started, in clinical programs, I think we had the Defenders and the Prosecutors [programs]. Those were the two clinical programs we engaged in. We didn’t have anything with domestic violence [audio breakup] or juvenile law. We have a ton of clinical programs now, IP law. We’ve got all kinds of clinics. I don’t know even how many clinical instructors or professors we have now. We have a whole army of people who do the clinical programs now.

[00:39:02]
So those are just major changes. I also think our younger faculty are off the charts. When I see what they're doing, and what they're involved in, and the level of their scholarship, I mean people like Sharmila Murthy, and John Infranca, who just both won awards for their scholarship and teaching. They're amazing, just amazing. And we have so many of these younger people on the faculty now who bring great attention, in a positive way, to the law school.

So that’s a real change. I think we went from a law school that was not particularly demanding, in terms of scholarship requirements, to a place where we have faculty now whose scholarship is really on the frontlines, and whose scholarship is bringing all kinds of positive attention to the law school.

**NANCY STOLL:** Excluding interim deanships, I think you served under seven deans?

[00:40:26]
**KAREN BLUM:** You can count them. [laughter]

**NANCY STOLL:** I served under six presidents. So, I think you [simultaneous conversation]
KAREN BLUM: There were a lot of them.

NANCY STOLL: These deanships obviously varied in length and accomplishments. And they varied in accomplishments. I wonder if you could reflect, if you would reflect on the impact that each of the deans had on the growth and development of the law school, in your view.

KAREN BLUM: Oh.

NANCY STOLL: Back with Sargent?

[00:40:58]

KAREN BLUM: Well Dean Sargent had major impact. I mean putting that building on Tremont Street, and getting us our AALS accreditation, you know, we can't deny that he did a lot for the law school. He really did. It was unfortunate—I don't know, that it didn't come to such a nice end, I guess. But I always felt that he was a major force. And it was a different generation. It was a different time. Certainly, like everyone else, he had faults, but, in terms of his commitment to seeing the law school become a nationally recognized institution, [there were no doubts]. He did that. I can't say anything bad about that. Okay, now move me on from Dean Sargent. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: I should have gone on to the next dean.

[00:42:19]

KAREN BLUM: I don't know if we want to go through dean by dean, but next was Paul Sugarman, who was a lawyer, a practitioner, a businessperson. He understood, I think, the dynamics of the law school, and how it was important to have the law school that mattered in a practical way, too. I think, to be honest with you, I got along with most of the deans. Deans have their own style. They have their own agendas. And you know, you kind of go with the flow.
I got along with even those who didn’t stay very long, like Fred Aman. I loved Fred. I thought he was a great guy. Bob Smith, of course, a wonderful, wonderful man. And really just a fine, fine person. I loved having him, and still do, as a colleague. He just did a phase out, so he’s not teaching. But he really loved constitutional law, and was a real scholar, and just a smart, smart guy, and a fine, fine person.

They all had their distinct styles. I think, Bill Corbett stepped in when we needed him. He did a great job of getting us through a tough period. And so that was all good. Camille Nelson, of course, was totally different, right, from anything we had ever seen before. She was a young woman of color, who came on the scene. It was very exciting to have her there. I think mistakes were made. I think that things could have been done better. But, you live and you learn.

And Andy is great, our current dean, of course. I think he’s brought a lot of stability and just a sense of what the current legal education needs and demands [are]. He sees [and thinks] outside the box, [and has embraced the role of] technology [in the law]. A lot of that is beyond me, but he certainly has a great grasp on it. And I think he understands what the law school has to do to compete now. So yeah, I missed some I know. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: The only one that you didn’t comment on was Dean Fenton.

KAREN BLUM: Oh, yeah, I forgot he was dean for a while, you know. Everybody loved Judge Fenton.

NANCY STOLL: He was between Sugarman and Smith.

KAREN BLUM: Yeah, right, right, right, right. I mean Dean Fenton, he was a great guy. He was part of the original kind of institutional fabric of the place. You couldn’t dislike him. He wasn’t a man of the modern sort of legal school. But he had a wonderful
reputation here. And he certainly loved the law school. I got along with him just fine. He was somebody that was easy to work with, and served a purpose, I think, at the time.

NANCY STOLL: Dean Fenton used to be so upset when students would wear hats to class.

KAREN BLUM: Oh right, right.

NANCY STOLL: [simultaneous conversation]

[00:46:35]

KAREN BLUM: There you go. Oh, Catherine Judge was of that opinion as well. You wouldn’t dare wear a baseball cap into her class, let me tell you.

NANCY STOLL: She said, “How do I get them not to wear their hats to class?”

KAREN BLUM: Right, right.

NANCY STOLL: For the students, it didn’t seem to be a huge priority. But he was certainly very upset about that.

[00:46:55]

KAREN BLUM: Well, I remember—now I'm really telling stories. But I remember one time, we had Dean Sargent in class. He was a professor, and I was a student. And I just remember him, it was a student who evidently must have brought a beer or something to class. I think he was drinking a beer in class. [laughter] And I just remember him stopping everything, walking out, and saying something. But it was startling. I thought, oh my. Anyhow. Yeah, there were some interesting stories back then.

NANCY STOLL: Well, Dean Fenton was also the one who decided that the law school needed a dean of students.
KAREN BLUM: A dean of students, yeah. That was a good move.

NANCY STOLL: I heard it was probably somehow connected to the hats. I think were larger issues at play that the dean of students might be able to be helpful with. So that was an interesting change that I think made a lot of sense.

KAREN BLUM: Yeah, yeah.

NANCY STOLL: There was always this sort of tension about the law school and the rest of the institution, and how we could be one institution rather than three standalone schools. And I'm wondering, what's your take on that particular issue, which sort of spread through all the years you were there? And it was never really resolved.

[00:48:41]
KAREN BLUM: Right. Well, you know, I'll just be honest with you as to my impression and how it changed over the years. Early on, I always got the sense that most of the people on the law school faculty felt like the law school was carrying the university. It was the law school’s reputation and it was the law school’s funding and all this kind of stuff that was really supporting the university. And we [felt we] weren't getting our fair share. I don’t know all the math surrounding it. But I know there was a lot of tension there.

[00:49:26]
And I think early on, probably, the law school did have a better reputation than the liberal arts or the undergraduate school. But, over time I think that the reality and the perception changed. I think the university, the undergraduate part of the university has really grown in leaps and bounds, in terms of both reputation and in terms of excellence.

The more interaction we had, especially after we moved to Tremont Street, that’s when I started to really notice a change in the nature of the relationship. Maybe just physically we
were closer to each other in some way. Certainly, when the university moved into 73 Tremont, it became more a part of the same campus. You didn’t have that sense before.

[00:50:44]
We [began to have] more interaction. The schools made an attempt to have cross-teaching, and programs that involved people from both the law school and the undergraduate. I mean I remember, frankly, seeing—I’d be reading something and whatever it’d be, a school publication or something, I’d say, “Wow. There's somebody over in the undergraduate school who’s teaching this or teaching that. And why don’t I know about this? This would be a great person to talk to about a particular issue or whatever.”
The Ford Hall Forum, I think, brought people together from all over the institution, to certain common themes, and big topics of discussion. I know I ended up doing some. And the theatre part, too

I became much more engaged myself with the university in the last, let’s say, 10-15 years that I was teaching, than I had been ever before. Remember Charles Fried from Harvard, taught at Harvard Law School and he became a Justice on the Supreme Judicial Court. I can't remember how many years he did that, it wasn’t a long time, because I think he decided it was too restrictive, and he didn’t particularly enjoy it. He’d rather go back and teach.

Judge Fenton was instrumental in [supporting Justice Charles Fried’s appointment as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court, as well his confirmation]. Judge Fenton, of course, was very politically well-connected, and you know, he was somebody that could talk to those who were in power. I don’t think it was quite a quid pro quo, but in return, Justice Fried agreed to teach some kind of a course at Suffolk Law School. But he wanted to co-teach it, I guess, so he wouldn’t have to grade exams and that kind of stuff. [laughter]

So anyway, and the bottom line is, I ended up co-teaching this course with Justice Fried, which was one of the most unusual and really great experiences I had as a teacher. We used—He used one Supreme Court decision for the course. And we went through it, from beginning to end, up to the briefs in the Supreme Court. We picked it apart, step by step
[and got the students to understand how the case was litigated from beginning to end]. I would be in every class and we would take turns doing this or doing that. It was a terrific experience.

[00:54:15]
So later, when Justice Fried’s son became a member of [the Suffolk University] faculty, we engaged in some programs and some exchanges together. I think the relationship has developed into a nice one now. I do think there's a lot more respect, and well-deserved respect, coming from the law faculty now for the rest of the faculty at the university and the institution.

And I think that Marisa Kelly, frankly, I don’t know what everybody thinks of her. I love her. I think she’s a great president, and I think she’s helped to bring the university, as a whole, together. I now pay attention. She’s made it, I think, more of a coherent institution.

NANCY STOLL:  Yeah. What do you consider to be your most important contributions to the law school?

[00:55:47]
KAREN BLUM:  Well, I guess two things. One, the fact that I did develop on the scholarship front, and on the speaking/lecturing front, this kind of national reputation. I think I may be one of the—I don’t know if I'm the only, or certainly one of the few law professors at the school who’s been cited by the Supreme Court and by a ton of lower federal courts. So, I think I've helped with the reputation of the law school by having this national kind of presence [through my lecturing and] my scholarship.

But the other thing that I'm personally most proud of is the program that I started, [that we called ]FYSIP, First Year Summer Internship Program. I started it just on a whim, myself, when I was—I can't remember what year it was. It was maybe 15 years ago or so. I don’t know how many years we've been doing it now. Probably 20 years.
Oral History Interview of Karen Blum (SOH-053)

[00:57:17]  
I said to myself, our first-year students have a really rough time getting a job in the law that first summer after the first year. You know, second year, they seem to be able to get out there and do something. But first year students, it’s really hard to get a job after their first year. So, I thought, well, we have a lot of Suffolk grads who are judges all over the place, you know, in Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, New Hampshire, in the New England area.

So, I wrote to a bunch of them, ones that I frankly had had as students, or that I knew went to Suffolk, or whatever. And I said, “Would you be willing to take a first-year student, a law student, as a summer intern? No pay, no credit, no paperwork. You don’t have to worry. We just want you to give this student an experience with a judge, doing whatever it is that you do, or whatever you want the student to do.

[00:58:34]  
And the first summer I did it, I did it with just students in my own section. I probably placed about, I don’t know, ten students, 10 to 15, maybe, the first couple of years I did it. And I was really doing it on my own. It wasn’t an institutional thing. I was just helping to place these students with judges for their first summer. But it turned out, when these students did this, and when they came back, they were so much more confident. They had this thing, now, on their résumé, that they had interned for a judge. It really gave them a leg up for the next summer. They just were able to land a better job for the second year.

So anyway, I did it pretty much myself for maybe two or three years. And then the program grew and it eventually led to hiring somebody. And this woman Margaret Talmers, who unfortunately is not with us any longer, came into the Career Development Office, as a clerkship advisor. [The program became] part of her job [and also came under the auspices] of the faculty clerkship committee of the law school.

[00:59:59]
Anyway, it grew. We were placing, at one point, over 100 first-year students with judges after their first year of law school, for summer internships. It really just became a magnificent program. We screened all the students and the matching with judges was done on a very personal kind of basis. I would call. I would email judges at all hours of the day. I would go through the students’ résumés, and this and that. Is there some kind of a connection I can make with this one or that one?

[01:00:46]

And it turned out to be just an amazing kind of program. So, it’s still there. I don’t know with COVID now, what’s going on. But, at the time, we started a fund just to pay for the travel expenses of the students. You know, they're doing it for no credit and no pay. Because the program grew so much, and [we were] now placing students with judges in different states, [we needed some support for students’ travel expenses]. We came up with a fund to pay for commuter rail kind of costs, or if the student had to go to Brockton, or if the student had to go to Fall River, or if the student had to go to Providence to do this internship, we could help at least with travel expenses. From all the feedback I've gotten about the program, I think it’s one of the best things, frankly, that I ever did at Suffolk. [laughter] Yeah, that was very satisfying.

NANCY STOLL: If you could change anything about your years at Suffolk, what would you change?

[01:02:17]

KAREN BLUM: If I could change anything? Well, you know, I had a good experience at Suffolk. I think when I decided to retire, it was not the best of times. When I made the decision to do the phase out, it was a time when law schools all over, frankly, were having a tough time. But I felt like we were—It was just about an open admissions policy, to be

3 Professor Blum noted that Stanton Dodge, a Suffolk Law School alum and former student, made a generous donation in Blum’s name to the FYSIP Fund. The program is now known as the Karen Blum First Year Summer Internship Program.
honest with you. It was really hard to get students. The pool had shrunk to a degree where we had to [sacrifice standards to get students]. And, of course, we got what was filtered down from some of the other law schools.

So that was a tough time. I don’t know what I could have done to change that but that was not a pleasant period. When we moved over to Tremont Street, we had a lot of meetings about how should Suffolk define itself? And what can we be as a law school, that others may not be? One of the things I said was that we always had a reputation as being kind of connected to the State House, whether that was good or bad. But I thought we should have embraced that. And we could have had a center, some kind of a center for government, lawyers, state and local government lawyers. We were the ideal kind of place for that kind of a program and center. That never went anywhere.

[01:04:17]

We had the Rappaport Institute and kind of, I think, made a lot of mistakes with respect to that institute. It’s now at BC, and doing quite well, and getting a lot of attention. I think they had a whole two-page spread in the Globe the other day or whatever. Anyway, there are certainly things that, you know, that I would have done differently. But I think every institution has some things you do well, and some mistakes you make, and you learn.

NANCY STOLL: I'm wondering if there are one or two experiences that you had at Suffolk, that really stand out for you as representative of the importance of community.

KAREN BLUM: The importance of?

NANCY STOLL: -- community and the university. Experiences that stand out to you as representing that.

[01:05:27]

KAREN BLUM: Well, the importance of community, I mean there are both good and bad things I could say there. I think we always—as long as I have been there, it was very
much a family. And maybe you can't run a law school that way, I understand. But I think that there were some decisions made that were just kind of contrary to our culture and the way we had always treated people. So, we went through a phase, frankly, where a lot of people who had been dedicated to the institution for a lot of years were treated, I thought, rather poorly, in either eliminating their positions, or putting pressure on them to retire, or phase out, or whatever. So that was, again, a troublesome period for me. And that may have led, in some degree, to my decision to leave, although I was approaching 70, so I felt like it was time.

[01:06:50]
But now that I find out that retirement ain't all it's cracked up to be, and that I'm working 24/7, I'm wondering what I was thinking. But anyway, so that's not a good story. But it is a story about when I felt like we kind of let the community down, in a sense. Other than that, I think there are lots of times when—and I can't—I don't think I can point to one specific time but for the most part, I got along with people at Suffolk, and felt like everybody was supporting one another. We always had our differences in faculty meetings and so on. But, you know, we could laugh about it and we’d go on to the next day and not feel that anyone was going to be insulted or injured or feel like they weren't part of a community. I don’t know. Most of my memories, and most of my thoughts about the institution are positive ones and good ones, in terms of support.

NANCY STOLL: The diversity of the population of the law school changed enormously over—as it did in the rest of the institution, both with American groups and with international students. And I'm wondering what your reflection is on the changes and the makeup of the backgrounds of the students that were coming to the law school, and how that impacted some of the direction the law school chose to take?

[01:08:48]
KAREN BLUM: Well, there's no question there's more diversity in the law school now. That’s a good thing. There's not nearly enough. We still have a long way to go, I think. When I was on the admissions committee, and this goes way back, we were still on
Temple Street then and we wanted to get more students of color in the law school. So, what could we do? We said, “Well, let’s just offer a scholarship to everybody who’s a person of color who applies,” which we did. And not surprisingly, we got the largest number of minority students that year. And, as a product of that, we have judges. We had a law school dean. We have very successful attorneys in big firms. And these were all the students who came during that period. It’s amazing.

[01:10:24]
But you can't do that anymore. [A scholarship designated just for students of color would probably face a number of legal challenges]. But we could do more. We could come up with something to attract students, [especially] now that we've got a lot of affinity groups and so on. We didn’t have [such groups] then in the law school and in the undergraduate school. So, students need to relate. They need to see people that look like them in the student body.

I can't say I ever had a class that was diverse enough. Very often, just the one black face, or the two black faces. And that’s got to change. It’s a combination of things. Boston is not the most hospitable place for students of color. It’s improving. It has improved. But I think it’s got a long way to go. Boston is a funny city, you know. It’s one of the few large cities where you can go downtown to the theatre, to a sporting event, to a restaurant, and see really just white faces and very few people of color.

[01:12:09]
So, it’s not just a problem at Suffolk; I think it’s a problem with the city as well. And I think people are trying to do better. Certainly, we’re trying to do better. I know that all of the attention now on police misconduct has certainly made it even more important to understand and to include voices that are different from our own, [especially those] who have felt excluded. And I think the law school has been trying to do a good job with that.

Cherina Wright, the dean of diversity and inclusion at the law school, has done a great job. She’s running a lot of programs. I was on a panel right after the George Floyd [killing, a
panel] put together [by Cherina]. It was a good discussion. I know that Dean Perlman is working on a number of projects that will help to reach out to people on some of these very tough, tough issues.

**NANCY STOLL:** This is kind of an aside. But do you remember, there's a picture of you that's in the archives. [audio breakup] It's of you at a podium and obviously in a classroom and roses on a podium.

**KAREN BLUM:** Roses? Oh.

**NANCY STOLL:** And you have a very curly Afro hairdo.

**KAREN BLUM:** My Afro, yeah. [laughter]

**NANCY STOLL:** And there's no information about that picture, what it was signifying, what you were doing, what was happening.

[01:14:17]

**KAREN BLUM:** Yeah, it probably—I'm guessing it was probably the end of the year. Students often would give me flowers the last class or something, or whatever. So, I'm guessing that's what it is. But I did have—Believe it or not, my hair was naturally curly all my life, until I got pregnant and had kids. [laughter] I had this Afro for a number of years. It was early on. I have a couple of those pictures myself. Once, we had some kind of a reception down in D.C., I remember. And I said, “Oh yeah, wow. I forgot I had that.”

**NANCY STOLL:** Well—

[01:15:11]

**KAREN BLUM:** I planned both my kids to be born the very last week in April, because we didn’t have maternity leaves then, which is an interesting bit of history that someone listening to this might not realize. [laughter] My first son was born on April 24th, and my
second son was born on April 22nd four years later. So that I could just wrap up, I doubled up on a few classes, wrapped up my teaching, and then just had my exams to grade. So that worked out, thankfully. I was able to plan that. [laughter] Then I did my exams and had the summer basically, and then went back to teaching.

NANCY STOLL: I must say, I did the same thing. Both of my children were April.

KAREN BLUM: Is that right? See.

NANCY STOLL: You needed the summer to be—

[01:16:32]
KAREN BLUM: Yeah, yeah, exactly. That’s funny.

NANCY STOLL: I understand that.

KAREN BLUM: Right, right. I think Valerie’s [children] were also similarly planned. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: I know that you’re continuing to be professionally active, even in retirement. You’ve already made some comments about how busy you still are with a lot of your interests. What activities are claiming your time these days?

[01:16:57]
KAREN BLUM: Well, I've got, I don’t know, four programs coming up in the next four weeks. I'm still very actively engaged in the Section 1983 Circuit, or whatever you want to call it. And I'm doing a program this week for Practicing Law Institute (PLI). That’s one I've done for years, out of New York. Of course, everything is virtual now. I'm doing that one. Then I'm doing a program for [federal] judges in the federal court in upstate New York, Western District of New York. [A federal judge from] Rochester called me and asked if I would participate in a program for pro bono attorneys. These are attorneys that
they want to encourage to take civil rights cases, but who don’t know enough about the law to feel comfortable to do that. So, they have a workshop for them to introduce them to some of the basic principles and things they want to know before they engage in this kind of litigation. I'm doing that program.

[01:18:14]
Then I'm doing another program that’s been put together by the University of New Hampshire School of Law. It’s a panel on qualified immunity and that’s coming up in the next few weeks. Then I'm doing one for the Federal Bar Association in November. I also am on the—Well, I've given testimony recently for the Mass Bar Association. [The MBA] had a committee on police reform. We testified to the legislators on the bills that have been introduced in both the house and the senate here on the state level.

I was on a panel and one of the panelists was Devin McCourty. My sons were very impressed that I was on a panel with a football player. [laughter] And he was very thoughtful, a very intelligent guy. But anyway, I've done that. I'm on the Boston Bar Association taskforce on police reforms. We've been meeting quite frequently, trying to put together some proposals on both police reform and accountability issues. And that gets into the qualified immunity area that I'm really a specialist in. I’m working up and writing a proposal in that area.

[01:19:59]
I'm trying to think. I actually—I finally had to make myself a little—I can't keep track of it on my phone anymore. I had to make myself this—well, you can't see it—a sheet that has what I'm doing when and which hours because I just have more going on than I can keep track of in my head at this point. I'm also a trustee at my undergraduate school. And that’s been no small feat with the coronavirus. We were holding meetings just about every week during the whole summer, to try to figure lots of issues out. It’s a small liberal arts college, Wells College in upstate New York. It used to be all women and now it’s co-ed. And still quite small.
NANCY STOLL: [audio breakup]

KAREN BLUM: Excuse me?

NANCY STOLL: You were the commencement speaker? [audio breakup]

[01:21:04]

KAREN BLUM: I did give a commencement speech there a few years ago, right. That’s how they hook you in, you know. They give you an alumni award and then you give the commencement speech. And then, all of a sudden, you're a trustee and then you're writing checks. But anyway, it is a beautiful place. And I love it dearly. And we had a lot of hard decisions. Like all small liberal arts colleges, we were on the brink before coronavirus. But we’re doing okay. We did manage to open and we are COVID-free at the moment. So yeah, that’s all going well. But that’s another kind of major time commitment.

NANCY STOLL: Yeah.

KAREN BLUM: We also have a police misconduct group of plaintiffs’ attorneys, who meet regularly, at least pre-COVID. I would host them at Suffolk. And we’d meet about once every six to eight weeks. But now, we’re meeting virtually. We have another meeting of that group coming up. And I'm on the advisory board of the National Police Accountability Project, which is a national group of plaintiffs’ attorneys who do civil rights work.

[01:22:35]

And the other thing I do is I have a set of materials that I update on a regular basis. I update them quarterly for the federal judges. I send them to the Federal Judicial Center, and they post them online to the federal judges. One set of materials is now over 3,000 pages. The other one is about 2,500 pages. And I update those [materials] every three months and that’s really a full-time kind of job that I've done for 30 years. They don’t pay me. That’s pro bono.
NANCY STOLL: As we begin to close out this interview, I wonder, is there anything else that you would like to address, that we have not discussed in our conversation?

[01:23:38]

KAREN BLUM: Gee. I don’t know. I just think, I guess in the end, I would like to leave a message for everyone involved at the university and the law school to keep up the good work and keep in mind where we came from. Suffolk was founded as this place for those who did not have an opportunity to go to another law school or another university. It’s one of the rare situations where the law school actually was founded first because of the inability of those who were in minority groups to get into the Harvard and the Yale and the other places of learning.

I think it’s important to keep our origins in mind, where we came from, and the importance has always been, for me, Suffolk has been a family, and to keep that kind of culture at the heart of whatever we do. Suffolk has just grown and developed and expanded but that core is important to the institution. I hope that people will help preserve that.

NANCY STOLL: Well, I want to thank you, Karen, for your time and your willingness to add your voice to the history of Suffolk. I think with the personal experiences of those who devoted their professional lives to the university, the history is made much richer. And the archives benefit from those kind of opportunities that the interview provides, to really see the university growth and development through the eyes of people who contributed the most to it over many years. I thank you for your willingness to do this, and appreciate—

KAREN BLUM: Thank you, Nancy. You're an institution unto yourself. I appreciate your taking the time to do this. It’s really, really good of you.

NANCY STOLL: Well, this is an important project to keep alive.
KAREN BLUM: Right!

END OF INTERVIEW