

Jayne O'Connor

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Lamson Library

Plymouth, NH

Nicky Mandiola: Could state your name?

Jayne O'Connor: My name is Jayne O'Connor.

NM: What is your job?

JO: I'm president of the White Mountain Attractions Association.

NM: Wonderful. Where were you born?

JO: I was born in Franconia, New Hampshire.

NM: Have you always grown up there?

JO: I grew up in Franconia, yes, and move around here or there, and then moved back.

NM: What was your childhood like? What was your earliest memory?

JO: Earliest memory is probably associated with parents who worked as innkeepers. We had a country inn in Franconia, we always had a lot of people in and out, people from different nationalities, people from different parts of the country and the world, and because we had five children in the family, we were always helping, regardless of how young you were. You were always involved in helping with the inn, helping to make beds, helping to straighten out rooms, and take care of dishes, and things that you would do at an inn.

NM: What was the name of the inn?

JO: It was the Horse and Hound Inn, so it was a very British inn in New Hampshire.

NM: You said you had siblings.

JO: There were five of us. That's part of being an inn keeper. You have a lot of children, so you have a lot of help. (Laughter) Lots of help.

NM: What were your hobbies as a child, besides taking care of the inn?

JO: I liked horses an awful lot and we eventually did have a couple horses around at the inn. I liked hiking through the woods and skiing very much.

NM: Do you still ski?

JO: Still ski, mhhm.

NM: Where did you go to high school?

JO: I went to a couple different high schools. One was Littleton High School and then transferred to Profile High School which was new in 1976, so we transferred into that school.

NM: What clubs were you in?

JO: Skiing, of course, I think ski club was the big one. Things like 4-H, girl scouts. It was a rural area, so things like 4-H and girl scouts were like a social thing for you to do as well.

NM: To be with all your friends.

JO: Right.

NM: What kind of music did you listen to back then?

JO: Oh, typical from the late 60's into the 70's. I was born in 1960, so it started with things like The Beatles, of course, then it moved into things like The Eagles, Bruce Springsteen, and things that are still around now, which is kind of funny. Aerosmith, of course.

NM: So, who was your idol back then? Who did you look up to the most?

JO: You know, I think all of my idols were probably skiers back then, so Jean Claude Killy. Paula Valar was a local skier, she and her husband ran the ski schools. They were both from, I think one of them was from Austria and the other was from Switzerland, and I really learned to ski from them, so I think I really appreciated the ski racers, Billy Kidd, just a lot of the downhill skiers.

NM: Did you like school?

JO: I did like school. I went to a catholic school for six years and then to public school. I was always a little bit bored. I was always the kid who was reading a book under my desk while they were teaching class.

NM: What kind of books did you read?

JO: I liked biographies a lot, mysteries, biographies, history, a lot of history. So I would be sitting in a math class reading a history book. (Laughter)

NM: What did you go to college for?

JO: I went to school for engineering.

NM: Were you adamant about going to college?

JO: Yes, I think there was never any discussion on that. All the girls in the family went to college, my brother didn't, but my sisters all did. We just automatically went to college. My parents, of course, were both in college. My dad was a med student and a pilot and my mom was in a business school, so I think it was automatic that you would go to college. I started in engineering and then switched to communications.

NM: Why did you make that switch?

JO: You know, it was interesting because when I got into college and I took some writing courses, I found out that I really liked to write. I don't think I liked that as much when I was in high school. High school writing doesn't have as much freedom. You know, it's give us a three paged this or a six paged that, and when you get into college and get into creative writing, I think I really found that I enjoyed writing very much, so that was part of the reason I changed. The other part of the reason I changed was a very interesting female thing. They were very much trying in the 70's to get women into engineering, so it was not whether you liked engineering or you were acclimated to engineering, but they were trying to get more women into engineering. When I got into engineering, which I absolutely loved, I found that being left handed, this is really strange thing, but being left handed was a very difficult thing to be if you were an engineer because it was before the CAD system, where everything was computerized, you did everything by drawing and inking and being left handed you drag your hand over the ink. Although I did really well with a lot of the courses, I did terrible with anything that was architectural or drawing or inking and I had professors who told me I would never be an engineer because I was left handed, which is very strange. But probably five years later when they had the CAD systems come into the university, it was completely moot point, but by then I had got into writing, I was working in more creative things and I just decided I wanted to go in a more creative direction. So I worked my way into communications, into the radio station, newspapers, more creative type of processes and less with the engineering. I made it my switch after two years and decided I wanted to go into communications instead, which was a very good thing. I still hold on to a lot of the engineering things, I am the person in the family that fixes everything. (Laughter) If there's a frozen pipe, I'm the one that fixes it, if there is plumbing to be done, the car needs an oil change, I'm the one that does it. I still hold on to the fact that I had an engineering mind, but on the other hand, I've done much more creative things with the

writing and graphics and such. That's been the direction that I went instead. So it's funny what little funny things can change the direction of your life.

NM: Did you do any hobbies like the newspaper when you were in college or did you just do that outside?

JO: I worked at the radio station when I was in college, working with doing the news, but I found out that I didn't have a nice voice doing the news, but I was very good at writing it. Even though I had my license to do radio etc, I tried to stay more in the background.

NM: What was the biggest change you experienced in college besides switching majors? Did you find anything challenging when you were in school?

JO: Challenging in college...I think college is such a big change for you anyway. I came from a very small town; it had about 700 people at the time, to the University of Vermont which had many thousands of students and was in the big city of Burlington, so that was a huge change for me. I think primarily my biggest change was just a complete change of direction in what I was doing for studying. It was very interesting because I try to hang on to the creative and the analytical sides of what I like to do.

NM: What happened after you graduated? Did you get jobs right away or did you take a year off after you graduated?

JO: I did a lot of internships when I was in college, so that really helped to pave the way. I did an internship with a radio station down in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I did an internship with a stock photo agency in Georgetown down by D.C. I did an internship with a congresswoman from Rhode Island down in Washington, D.C. as well. And those sort of prolonged my education by at least a semester because I did so many internships that I was not at UVM and UNH very long, so I had to go an extra semester, but I learned a lot from them and they paved the way into things, so when I left school, when I graduated, I immediately had a job with a newspaper. Then I went to work for the Chamber of Commerce and ran the Chamber of Commerce for ten years. Newspaper work I really enjoyed. A lot of freedom in what you could choose to write about for articles and I worked a lot on articles that were featured articles which are more about people about things that are happening, less about the news and more about your surroundings. You could right feature articles about people tapping trees during the maple season, about someone who been overseas in the army and has come back after twenty years. A lot of different feature articles and you had a lot of freedom to choose what you wanted to do.

NM: How was it working for the congresswoman in Rhode Island?

JO: The congresswoman was very interesting. When you work in Washington, D.C., you find that you are pretty much as the center of the universe politically, so it's intoxicating. You get so wound up in it. I was down there at a very interesting time. I was down there in the spring of 1981, just when Ronald Reagan was shot. There was a huge change in everything in Washington, D.C. and around the country because it was almost like a 9/11, security changed. Before that, we had the freedom to roam around the capital building, the upstairs, the catacombs, you could roam through the press area freely, the congressman halls freely, and now, after Reagan was shot, everything became very secure. You had metal detectors at every door and you were very much restricted from certain areas. So, I got to see it before that and after that and it was like seeing life before 9/11 and after 9/11 when things completely changed. It was a wonderful place to work. Very interesting to learn , politically, how things really worked. For me with a communication degree, it was very interesting after President Reagan got shot, to see, immediately, all of the communications fall into place. Every one of the senators and congressmen, you've got 424 people, suddenly are lined up at the congressional TV station doing their little speeches about what's going on with Reagan and how concerned they are and what they feel people should take from this and how he was doing. It was very interesting to suddenly see how things work after an emergency from a communications point of view. So I learned a lot of lessons from that and when things have happened in my life and my business over the years, emergency situations, I go back to watching how that was done down in Washington with the experts, with the pros, how do you spin things, how do you turn a catastrophe like the President being shot into something that you are talking to your constituents about and getting points from your constituents and making sure they take certain information from it and that they remain calm and that you control the situation. That's what they did. They all controlled the situation in their own way. Every one of those 424 representatives and senators controlled that situation. I learned a lot from that. I was able to use it later in my career.

NM: Did you get married after college? How did you meet your partner?

JO: Well, like so many people in the North Country, I met my husband at a bar. (Laughter) He was one side of the bar and I was on the other. He was bartending. We ended up working together at the ski area as well. So, I met him at a bar and we were both very much into skiing. We were married four years later.

NM: So you've been together ever since.

JO: Mhmm, yes.

NM: Did you have any kids?

JO: Don't have any children, only the four-pawed variety.

NM: You have dog? How many dogs do you have?

JO: (Laughter) A dog and a cat. I have a nice dog, so I say I have an eight year old girl with short, blonde hair and four paws.

NM: What'd her name?

JO: Abby Rose.

NM: What'd your cat's name?

JO: Wanda Sue.

(Laughter)

NM: We're going to jump to job stuff. What is your favorite part about your job right now?

JO: My favorite part about my job is making a difference in the tourism economy of the White Mountains. I feel like that's the most satisfying part of it, that I can be in there every day feeling like we're making a difference and what people are able to have as businesses, what their able to earn as their living, the number of visitors that come to the White Mountains. It's our job to uphold that economy and make it strong and that gives a great satisfaction.

NM: What was it like winning Travel Person of the Year in 2011?

JO: That was a very warm feeling because it was something where I always just felt like I was doing my job, doing what I was supposed to do and then to be honored by your peers in such a way is a wonderful feeling. It makes you feel like you've been very useful over your life.

NM: What is the most challenging aspect about your job?

JO: I would say it's the emergencies that come up. You never quite know what's going to walk in the door each day. There have been big emergencies like when the Old Man of the Mountain fell and that's sort of like if you were the person responsible for promoting Niagara Falls and it stopped running one day or you were the head of the Boston Red Sox and Fenway Park burned down. It's the kind of same situation here. Our biggest tourism icon just, one day, fell. That was an interesting challenge. Another was Hurricane Irene. Waking up in the morning and thinking we all survived the hurricane and the tropical storm coming through and then finding out there was great destruction that happened over night. We had roads that were main tourism ways of getting through the White Mountains from east to west that were completely gone.

NM: What is daily life like in your position? What do you do every day?

JO: My job is in a lot of ways like being the coach. I have a lot of pots on the stove, projects that are running, we work on a project basis, so I have five employees under me year round and then up to about thirty employees during the summer. You have so many projects going on, deadlines, marketing projects, we run an attraction, we run Lost River Gorge, so you have an attraction that has to get up and running every day. People that have to be taken care of, customer service wise, we run a visitors center, 100,000 people through your visitor center every year. It's my job to keep the lids on all the pots, to coach the employees who are in charge of various projects, to make sure the deadlines get met, that people get taken care of, the marketing gets done, the reporting for the marketing gets done, the businesses that work with us are all kept happy. It's almost like running an orchestra. You have many, many different items that are happening all day long.

NM: You wear many hats.

JO: You wear many hats. I always tell my bosses, my board of directors, that we have three distinct businesses that we're running. We have the marketing association which does almost a million dollars worth of marketing for the White Mountains region and that every busy, of course, and then we have the visitors center, which is business on its own, where in there we have the information staff, the information desk. We have White Mountains National Forest employees, rangers that are in there as well. We have a gift shop. We have public restrooms that you have to take care of. You have the public coming in and out all day long, so that's a whole different business from the marketing association. Then we have the Lost River Gorge, which is something that we lease from the Forest Society, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, so we have to manage it for them, take care of it for them and manage it for the public, so the public has an excellent experience at Lost River. The attraction needs to make money so that can go into our marketing programs and the Forest Society's conservation programs, so you really have three businesses that you're running.

NM: Everything's tied together.

JO: They're all tied together. Some employees move from one part of the business to the other part of the business. They might work in the mornings at the information center and then in the afternoons at Lost River. They might work on weekends at consumer shows representing the White Mountains for us. Other times, they might be putting together ads or brochures or working on social media for us, so you have employees that are constantly moving around. You're definitely conducting an orchestra.

NM: So busy.

JO: It is, yes, it is.

NM: What do you think New Hampshire offers that you can't find anywhere else?

JO: It offers a little of everything. Of course, New Hampshire is part of New England. We always like to say New Hampshire is a microcosm of New England. You have a little bit of the coast, you've got the mountains, you've got the lakes, so you have a lot of tourism. I like to think that New Hampshire also is everyone's backyard. I don't know that is really the same in some of the other states. Vermont is much more of a restrictive situation, they don't have the big attractions that we have for instance, they don't have the ocean, they have Lake Champlain, but I think New Hampshire is expected to be everyone's back yard. It's really here for recreation and fun. I think in New Hampshire we all expect we're going to go out and enjoy our backyard, the state of New Hampshire.

NM: Where do you hope to see tourism in the next couple of years? Do you see it expanding? Do you think it will get busier in the next five years?

JO: It's interesting, we have such competition. Tourism goes in waves, it's definitely a cyclical type of business. I can remember seeing that through the 60's and the 70's and the 80's. It really goes in cycles. For instance, in the 70's, we were very much affected by the gas crisis. People couldn't get gas, so they could drive to the mountains if they wanted to, but they would be afraid they couldn't get gas to go home. It was rationed, so you might be able to get gas on a Saturday, but you couldn't get gas on a Sunday because you might be at part of the rationing where you could only get gas on even days or even numbered days or odd numbered days, so we had a very difficult time. I remember my parents even closed the inn during part of the 70's because people just could not get into the mountains. Other times we've had stock market crashes that have caused tourism to go down and then you have other times where tourism is very big and important and people seem to have lots of discretionary money because we're really dependent on discretionary money. During the 90's, people had a lot of discretionary money and then when had the crash again, that was gone. During 9/11, people stopped moving for awhile, it took us several years to build the business back up again and get people comfortable with traveling again. So, it goes up and down tremendously. I think that it always will. Our current challenge these days is that there are so many Disneyland type and Disneyworld type adventures out there, that all of our businesses have to up their bar a little bit. They have to find ways to keep people interested. Lost River is a good example. How do you keep people interested in taking a walk in the woods? It's an absolutely beautiful walk, beautiful walkways and waterfalls and things, when their used to going to Disneyworld or Universal Studios or even a mall that has lots of activities inside. I've seen malls with zip lines in them, so how do you compete with those sorts of things and convince people to still come to the White Mountains. That's really our job, to keep people interested in the White Mountains. The attractions that we have are very good at upping their game a little bit besides just going

out and painting buildings every spring and getting things cleaned up and ready to go. Every year, they're looking as what's the next thing that we need to add. What is going to keep people interested? What is going to keep bringing people back? You find that the attractions, whether it's the Mt. Washington Cog Railway building, the biodiesel trains, or its Story Land adding new wooden roller coasters and events for people, its Santa's Village adding new events, new things for them to do during the wintertime instead of just the summer. They do a Halloween event for families. They do a New Year's Event for families. Places like Attitash adding in zip lines. Cranmore has treetop tours. So, every year the attractions are looking at what they need to do to up their game a little bit more. So, I see us having to do a lot more of that. I see us always having to do more of that. Always looking around for what's the next thing that you need to have, how do you keep people interested. We have lots of people who come through the mountains; it's something like six million people a year, how do you get them to stop at your business. How do you get them to keep coming up and keep enjoying it?

Women of the White Mountains Questions

NM: This is the Women of the Whites portion of the interview. Do you remember your first trip to the White Mountains? What happened?

JO: Well, I have always lived in the White Mountains, but I do remember my mother was very good about getting us out around to see the sights, take the Kancamagus Highway for instance, go up Mt. Washington, take the tram right up Cannon Mountain. She was also very good about making sure we got out hiking. She was not a hiker herself, my mother had a heart problem, so she couldn't hike and she couldn't ski, but she made sure that all five of her children were out in the woods hiking and skiing. Sometimes, we would spend days, we would take our packs and our sleeping bags and go for days on hikes around the White Mountains and stay out in the woods. I'm very fortunate because even though my mother couldn't do those things, she made sure her children were out in the woods a lot and enjoyed the scenery, mountains, and the forest and learned to be self-sufficient.

NM: Did your ancestors live here or were you connected to the White Mountains in another way? Has your family always been living in the White Mountains?

JO: No, I guess my mother and father were the first ones here in our family. Both my parents came from the Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia area. So my ancestors were farmers in West Virginia. (Laughter) That was what my mother was used to, going out to the family farm in the summers and spending the summer out there. My father was from the Maryland, Pennsylvania border area and his father worked on the trains, the railroad, so there was no connection whatsoever to the White Mountains, but when my father was in college, after the army, he was in the second World War as a pilot, after the army, he went back to school and met a gentleman at his fraternity. They became good friends and decided to go, for some reason, to come around an inn in the White Mountains. Sight unseen, having no experience at all, so my mother came up with my father and his partner and ran the inn for 25 years. As I said, sight unseen with no experience whatsoever, they became innkeepers. It was during a very interesting time. It was during the 50's and the 60's, there was a lot of skiing, a lot of international people coming over to ski, they had Bette Davis lived in the area and she was a skier. There were a lot of famous people who came to the inn and it was a very exciting time for them and for us growing up having so many interesting people at the inn to meet and to work around. So, that's how my family ended up in New Hampshire, ended up in the mountains with no background in it at all. (Laughter)

NM: You just decided to stay?

JO: Right. They stayed, they sold the inn in the late 1970's after 25 years of being there and all five children have stayed in New Hampshire. Four of us still live up in the mountains. So, it

definitely was something that was not in our blood when we were born, but it certainly got into our blood over the years we've all stayed here.

NM: And you still live in the White Mountain area.

JO: Yes.

NM: As well as you three other brothers and sisters?

JO: Yes, four of us all together. I still live in Franconia after roaming around somewhat. I have a brother and a sister who lived there also. Another sister that lives a couple towns over, so we've stayed very close. We're all skiers, we all enjoy being out in the woods, and really love the mountains.

NM: What is your favorite area of the White Mountains?

JO: I'd have to say it's probably Mt. Lafayette. Anytime I can see Mt. Lafayette, I feel very comforted. The shape of the mountain is almost like shoulders, like you're being wrapped up in a hug, it's a beautiful mountain. It's beautiful from the top; it's probably the first one that I ever climbed when I was a kid. I've always really enjoyed being somewhere around Mt. Lafayette.

NM: What are the good things about the White Mountains? Is there anything you don't like?

JO: Well there's a lot of good about the White Mountains, it's very accessible to people, which is a very nice thing. I think that's important because people should be able to access the wilderness, the forest, the activities that you can find in the mountains, the kayaking, the rivers, the lakes, all of that. I think that's very important, so we're very fortunate that they can do that. That's one reason why we're very successful as a attractions area and as a recreational area is the accessibility. On one side of it, we have Interstate 93 coming right up through the mountains, on the other side; we have Interstate 95 and then route 16 that comes right up into the Mt. Washington valley. Then we have Interstate 91 that comes down to 93 from Canada, so accessible that way. It makes it very easy for people to get to the mountains and to get around the mountains. We have a wonderful scenic byway that encircles the mountains as well. It's a wonderful way to get people to move through the mountains and see all of it. If I had to say what I don't like about the mountains, that's a hard thing to think about, there's very little. I guess, the only thing I can think of, would be the off seasons, the fact that we do have off seasons. They're getting shorter every year. This year, for instance, we had skiing from mid-November and its going to end in mid to late April. That's six months, skiing in six months of the year, that's fantastic for a little area in New England. We're not the Rocky Mountains, we're not the Alps, but we can ski in six months of the year here and that's great for our economy. Immediately after that, almost, starts our summer season. End skiing in late April and then in

May you start your summer attractions up. I still do have a little bit of a break between the two and that still is very tough. I think probably what that boils down to is that the cycles of the seasons is probably the only thing that I don't like. It's tough on the business people, it's tough on the employees to make money for 52 weeks of the year. There are so many other areas where you work solidly for the entire year and that's not something that's possible for us. I think that's probably the one thing that I would like to change would be that it can be a very tough economy on people and I'd like to see people be able to make a good living all during the year, the whole year.

NM: Do you know what Title IX is? If so, what did you think of it when it first passed?

JO: Well, Title IX is the equality, particularly of sports, and when it passed, I'm trying to think of if it was the 70's...

NM: Mhmm.

JO: Yes, so I do know what Title IX is and approximately when it passed. What's the rest of the question?

NM: What did you think of it when it first passed?

JO: Oh, I thought it was way overdue. (Laughter) It's very true. I think that when it first passed we were all wondering how long it would take. Civil Rights passed years and years before that and it took forever to actually go into place. I think the same thing happened with Title IX; there was a lot of kickback for a long time. It took a lot of fussing about it to get it totally into place. I'm sure there are still some areas where it isn't. It's a good rule for us to have and its one of those that should be common sense and has helped dramatically and it's too bad we actually have to pass a law for equality.

NM: Did Title IX affect your relationship directly or indirectly with the White Mountains?

JO: I'm not sure that Title IX, I'm sure that it must have, but I'm not sure if I can think of exact thoughts on it, except that Title IX influences a lot of other things. It's the kind of law that spread into other areas, including equality of pay, because it causes people to think about equality in a different way. The longer it has been in place, the more people understand that it's just part of life. I think, therefore, it flows over into other things like equality of pay. I know that I did not have equality of pay when I was first starting out, women were never paid the same amount as men, they still aren't. I think it was probably much more drastic at the time. Probably a better example, and one that comes to mind, is when I was in college and after college I worked as a ski patrol at one of the local mountains and sometimes I was the only woman on the ski patrol, sometimes there was one other woman on the ski patrol, and it was

always a challenge to get equal treatment, let alone equal pay, but equal treatment was very difficult. There were days where it was very difficult to go to work. You were treated; you were not treated very well by several of the other ski patrol. There were some that would always be good, but you had to partner up as a ski patroller and there were often days that they would not partner with a woman. So, I was very fortunate that I had an older gentleman who sort of took me under his wing, he would partner with me, which was a good thing. If it was his day off, then it was tougher. They would not treat you; today they would have been aghast of the way they treated you, but back then it was just a part of their hazing ritual.

NM: Did you find that the younger men harder to pair with? You said you had one older man, so was it the younger ones that were more against working with a woman?

JO: I don't know that it was the younger ones. I think I was just lucky to find one who was older and just was not into playing the games that you can have in a work situation. I think I was very fortunate. It's funny because years later I found out he was actually a cousin to my husband. (Laughter)

NM: Really? All that time?

JO: (Laughter) Yes, all that time and my husband never realized that he was up there working. So it was very funny that it turned out to be a distant relative. (Laughter) He was just a no nonsense, common sense sort of person and he didn't put up with the foolishness. He was a wonderful person to work with. It was difficult and you did have issues with sexual harassment and things that would make you very uncomfortable. It was the way that they were. They did not want to have women on the ski patrol at the time, we may have been forced on them, so we had to put up with the hazing. I was there for awhile though, eventually things calmed down, I think in any kind of a work situation, when they realize that you're going to stay and that you can do the job that things will calm down. I was not the only person that was hazed, so to speak, they did it to newer men that came on board also if they had a reason not to like them. They could be equally unfortunate to those people.

NM: How have your feelings changed about the White Mountains over time?

JO: Well, I used to think that I would not stay in the White Mountains when I was younger. I think like a lot of people I wanted to see the world, move somewhere else, find taller mountains, higher mountains, places, go to cities. I did a bit of that in college and after college and found that the White Mountains has a comfort to it. I found, and this is what has changed, I found that I could live in the White Mountains, love the White Mountains, and go see other places at anytime, but always come back to the comfort of the White Mountains. They hold their own against a lot of the bigger more exciting places in the world. I'm a person who believes I can live anywhere in the world and be every happy and comfortable, but I think that I

enjoy the White Mountains; I think that it has so much if you get out and use it, it has so much of what people need. Peacefulness is becoming more and more important in my life. I think that you can find that very easily in the White Mountains.