

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENDA SMULL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

JUNE 1, 2022

TRANSCRIPT BY

MOLLY GRAHAM

Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Brenda Smull, on June 1, 2022. I'm Kate Rizzi, and I'm located in Branchburg, New Jersey. Brenda, thank you so much for joining me for this third interview session.

Brenda Smull: Thank you for having me. Good morning.

KR: To start off for today, I want to ask you a couple of reflection questions. First, I'd like to ask about your transition from the military to your civilian career. You were a member of ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] in college. Then, you served active duty for a number of years, punctuated by your service in the Gulf War. What was it like for you to transition from the military to the civilian side of your career?

BS: I was a little nervous. This was 1992. It's funny, when I got the commission in 1989, when I graduated Rutgers, the job market was not that good. I was happy to have a steady full-time job in the military, active duty. But, by 1992, there still were issues and concerns about getting a job in the civilian world. My husband and I, at the time, went to a group that specialized in help--they were called a headhunter--for military officers to help you find a job, while you're still serving, in the civilian world. It was a group called Lucas Recruiting, and we went through them. They scheduled a number of interviews for us at a job fair in Chicago at the time. We flew up from Texas to Chicago, and I remember going to this hotel and having an awkward suit and going to all these different conference rooms, interviewing with eight different employers. I did get a job out of that job fair, and we moved to Chicago. That company definitely helped to transition; they helped you do your resume and to translate what you did in the military to how you can serve in a civilian job. That's how it went.

It's funny, my first job in corporate America after the Army was in a pharmaceutical company, which was in line--I was a biochemistry major. But what I did in the Army had nothing to do with biochemistry; it was more IT [information technology]. I got a job as a pharmaceutical sales rep [representative] working in Chicago. That was my first job, at Glaxo. It was interesting. I had wanted to be a doctor early on in my college career. That didn't work out. I didn't become a doctor, but I always had an interest in medicine. I did that for a year. It was interesting, certainly not something I chose to stay with, but that's what the military officers at the time--a lot of former military officers become pharmaceutical sales reps. I don't know if you knew that. I guess they know that we're disciplined and structured, because you're on your own all day long, driving in a car to different doctors' offices and visiting pharmacists, talking about your product. That's what I did.

KR: What struck you about the differences in culture between the military and the corporate world?

BS: That was huge. As you can imagine, going from Fort Hood, Texas, in a unit, a combat or a military unit, to going to Chicago, Illinois, and having your own corporate car, driving by yourself all day, trying to get in to see a doctor for two minutes, it was startling, the difference in culture. I didn't like it as well. I liked being part of a team. I liked being collaborative. This first job certainly wasn't that; you spent a lot of time by yourself. You tried to make connections with the receptionist in the doctor's office, at the front gate, the gatekeepers. The nurses, the

doctors, you'd try to get them to talk to you, usually bribing them with food. [laughter] You'd bring food. Then, I also had pharmaceutical drug samples. I did have good products to share. We sold antibiotics, allergy medicine. At the time, Zantac was prescription, so the doctors all wanted my Zantac samples. That was my way in to get to talk to them for a few seconds about another product we were trying to promote. Definitely a different culture.

KR: In your career, you shifted from pharma sales to IT and more of a technical field.

BS: That's right.

KR: How did you make that move?

BS: It only took a year for my spouse and I to realize that Chicago was not the place we wanted to be, and that the first careers we got out of the military were not the right ones for us. We then leveraged my husband's military contacts with West Point, the U.S. Military Academy. The Military Academy grads have a very cohesive network; they help each other a lot. We had a friend that we served with at Fort Gordon, when we were in Officer Basic [Course], and he had a job in Arkansas at the Walmart headquarters. It was through this connection that my husband got a job at Walmart. Then, I interviewed straight away, and I got a job. That was my entry back into IT, essentially doing what I did in the military but for Walmart. I was a network operations center manager. We monitored all of the network to the thousands of Walmart stores around the country. We did that for a number of years. That was a different culture as well. Walmart was more like the military: very structured, very disciplined, great teamwork. It was its own special thing that certainly shaped me in who I am today. We were there for four years in Arkansas.

KR: Take me through your career. Trace your career for me and the different places that you have worked.

BS: Oh, my. [laughter] I'll try to slim it down a bit, because there have been over thirteen employers in the last thirty years, but I'll just give you the highlights and the big ones. After the Army, it was Glaxo Pharmaceuticals. After that was Walmart headquarters. Then, after that, we decided to get out of that kind of environment in Arkansas and become consultants. That was the big thing. In the '90s, the networks were booming, the internet. I had another connection with another West Point military grad to get a job at a consulting firm. It was called International Network Services. It was then subsequently bought by Lucent, who was based out in New Jersey, Bell Labs. I kind of stayed with IT and networking, which was quite fascinating. I was pretty happy to join that consulting firm. It was a great opportunity, and I definitely got a lot of promotions and accolades. But the thing I liked most--when Lucent bought the company, I loop back to my father, my father in New Jersey, who worked for Western Union and Bell Labs and AT&T all through the '70s and '80s. Now, here's this company that he had worked with that I worked for. I called my father, "Dad, I'm working with Lucent now." He was like, "Wow." That was kind of cool.

I did this network consulting for a number of years. Then, we decided to change again, and I had other careers with firms such as Western Union; Experian; CA, which is Computer Associates,

that was based out of Long Island; and a number of technical jobs. That wasn't unusual back in the '90s for people to change employers to stay on track.

After a few of those other smaller companies and jobs, I landed with Charles Schwab, and that's my current employer. I've been with Schwab almost ten years now. That was in Denver, Colorado, which is a place that I chose to move to, after living in nine different states. One of the things I like to do when I'm not working is ride bikes, so I love mountain biking. I was like, "All right, where can we go where there's great mountains and mountain biking?" [We] went to Colorado and got a job at Charles Schwab, so I've been there. My career at Schwab over these ten years has been great. I've gotten a number of promotions. One of the things that got me these promotions was, one, I think, my military background, and the second would be my communication skills. That's what sets you apart in corporate America. When you have those two things, people tend to like that, if you get good results.

KR: You mentioned before we started recording that you had some breaking news.

BS: [laughter] Yes. They're just announcing it today. I've been tapped to do another big project at Charles Schwab. I've been the director of the Incident Command Team for about three-and-a-half years. That was a big promotion, and it's an important role. Now, I'm going to be a Program Director for a huge new project at Schwab called the Data Center Decommissioning. This, again, is a huge undertaking. Our company Schwab bought TD Ameritrade about eighteen months ago. We're currently combining our computer systems, TD Ameritrade and Schwab's all on the same computer network, so we're building out other data centers. But, at some point, we have too many data centers--one in New Jersey, two extra in Texas--and those need to be drawn down and all the assets accounted for. It's a pretty big deal, a huge program. The thing is, they came to me and asked me if I would be interested in doing that, and I interviewed for it. I just got the announcement that I got the position. I'm pretty excited. I'll hopefully get to come back to New Jersey and visit Rutgers more.

KR: That's amazing. Congratulations.

BS: Thank you.

KR: You mentioned coming back to New Jersey. Is this partially based in New Jersey, this project?

BS: It is, yes. Edison is where some of the work will be done. Schwab now has, thanks to the TD Ameritrade merger, a very nice office in Jersey City. I can go visit there, which is where my parents were both born, and I have relatives in Bergen County, so that's also nice.

KR: Oh, that's great. It's great that you'll have the opportunity to come back to New Jersey more.

BS: Absolutely.

KR: What challenges do you think you have faced over the course of your career?

BS: The first challenge is getting the respect from my peers and the people that I have to work for, their trust and respect. I tend to have a youthful look, so I've always looked a few years younger than I actually was. It was funny, one of the reasons I wanted to wear glasses at work is because it made me look more intellectual and studious. [laughter] But I do actually need them, now that I'm over forty. One would be the respect, but I do my homework. I was a biochemistry major. I know how to study and learn new concepts. I would always work extra hard to learn the new technologies on any new team or project I joined, learn it and then just ask a lot of questions. When you ask questions of people, they respect you more, especially when you go to them, "Hey, I've got a question. I want to ask your advice on this." If you say those words, people will help you and share with you anything you want. One of the things I did learn in the Army is you don't know everything, and you need the team to help you. Having that humility, I suppose you'd call it, the humility to know you don't know everything and you need other people's help. Those were the challenges I dealt with most.

Occasionally, there would be sexual harassment. That occurred the most in Arkansas. Again, this was the mid-'90s. Hillary Clinton was the First Lady in Arkansas in the late '80s and early '90s, but by then, she had gone on and become First Lady of the United States. I just remember the attitude of some of the people, some of the men that were reporting to me, it was demeaning, but I blew it off. Ultimately, I was treated with respect once they got to know me. That was another challenge, but I haven't had that lately. Certainly, attitudes have improved in that area as more and more women in the workplace have proven themselves and shown to be strong leaders.

KR: When you were working for these different companies in IT, what were the demographics? Were there many other women?

BS: Not in the '90s. I'd say maybe ten percent. It was similar to the percent of women that were in the Army, but, again, that's also changed. I've had teams of computer programmers, engineers, there's just not a lot of women from the United States that go into that field. We do have a lot of people from India; they're mostly contractors. There are a lot more women that are Indian that are in the IT field, but, again, at this point, it's still not a very high percentage. I don't know if that's what people are choosing to study in college, or they just don't have an interest in this field, but I still think it's underrepresented. That's to my advantage as a strong female leader who is interested in technology; it's given me more opportunities to shine and get promoted.

KR: Back to the sexual harassment, it sounds like you just had to deal with it yourself, just handle it and go on. Was there ever a time you thought of any recourse?

BS: Not really. A lot of victims of sexual harassment just don't say anything. Mine was just verbal; it was nothing physical. I didn't report it or do anything. I suppose if it was something more serious, I might have reported it to HR [human resources]. Again, in just the last five, ten years, there's much more training at work and awareness of this and how you would report it. I would hope that people today, if they are harassed in the workplace, would report it more so than--in my case, this was twenty years ago. It's just verbal things that you just shake off and blow off. That's how most people deal with it.

KR: When you were in the military, did you encounter things like verbal sexual harassment?

BS: Oh, yeah, I think everybody did, men and women, for that matter. Not much to say about that, but, yes, it was there. People are under a lot of pressure and do things they probably wouldn't normally do. When you're deployed to a war and there's nothing else going on and you think you might be hurt or die, people will do and say strange things.

KR: How about the so-called glass ceiling? Did you ever encounter instances where you thought you were up against the glass ceiling?

BS: A little bit. Not anymore, now that I see women getting to the highest levels of VP [vice president]. But it still does exist because there's not that many female CEOs [chief executive officers]. To get to the highest [positions], it's still male-dominated, but I will say there's more of an effort to have a more balanced board of leaders. Boards of directors certainly are more diverse. Directors and VPs actively look for strong women. In that way, that glass ceiling is gone. But I'm not sure if at the highest levels--I mean, we haven't had a female president yet in our country, and so many other places have. That's probably going to be the last one in our country in that way. Hopefully, that'll be soon. I feel like if I wanted to be a CEO and I put my mind to it, I could do that if that was the path I wanted. It might not be as easy as if I were a man, but I think it could. I don't think it's a glass ceiling for me.

KR: This is a big question. What do you think are the biggest changes you have seen in your field over the course of your career thus far?

BS: Wow, that's a big one. I'd have to say the adoption of Agile. Let me explain what that is. I write about it in my book. It's been a mindset change of how we do work. When I started, things were more traditional. You'd have this big project. You did all this planning, you do the project, and the project could take years. That's traditional project management. Now, there's this new way of thinking--it's not that new but over twenty years--and it's called Agile, and that's more iterative development. I got into this at Schwab, being a Scrum Master. We'd have daily stand-ups. It's definitely more innovative. It's more adaptive. It's more modern. A lot of IT shops now use this methodology. That was a big change. I embrace it. I love it because I like change and I like the concept of doing things small, looking at what you've done, adjusting, and then doing another little piece. Not biting off more than you can chew is the example. You get to the top of the mountain one step at a time; you don't just get to the top in one step. That's a process thing.

Then, as far as the people change at work, certainly with COVID, everything's changed on how we work. I'm in an office building that's mostly empty. People don't want to be as interactive and face to face anymore, which is a shame. I think we've lost a lot. We've lost a lot of training and collaboration and effectiveness being separated. Hopefully, that'll change over time. But I never would have thought that all of these office buildings would be so empty for so long. I've been coming in the whole time during the pandemic, because I'm in more of a data center, where you had to keep the lights on and people had to keep coming here to watch the computers. That would be the other huge change, and that's just the whole world. So, those two things. I can't

think of anything else. That's a big question, though. I'm sure there's others I'll think of, but that's it for now.

KR: During your service in the Gulf War, you were on the cutting edge of technological innovation when you were leading the Signal Corps platoon.

Over your time in IT, I'm wondering, what are some of the major advancements that you have seen that have struck you as being exciting and really innovative?

BS: Sure. Oh, there's so many I can list. A fun, innovative project that I did about five years ago here at Schwab was this concept of a Robo-Advisor, an automated way to invest, and I had a Scrum team. We were called "The Condors," the name of the Scrum team. We helped develop and build for Schwab the Schwab Intelligent Portfolio (SIP) application. It's more geared for young people that have mobile devices. It's all very visual. You put your money in, and it automatically rebalances your portfolio and tells you what to do. It's not for day traders. With that, I love the technology, the donut charts, the allocation, almost like Fitbit, the steps and the donut charts. It looked visually more like things people use on their devices to track. Instead of tracking your steps and your calories, you're tracking your money. That was great, just the whole digital interface on the iPhones, away from the big computers and onto handheld devices. That's been a big one.

The other one, if I go back to the '90s and my roots in networking, would just be the explosion of high-speed internet. That's the enabler, the superhighway. Without that, we wouldn't have these cell phones where we can do anything we want anywhere, if we have a cell connection. That would be the other.

I was on the cutting edge when I worked for Walmart in the '90s. They certainly were one of the first stores to have that kind of high-speed connection to every store, getting away from the satellites. When I joined in the early '90s, they had satellites on the top of every store to communicate, which was actually quite slow, very slow speeds. When the satellites filled up with snow in the northern states, it stopped working, so that wasn't good. Then, they got with AT&T and established this high-speed connection to every store. That's standard now, of course, but back then, it wasn't. I got to do that. That was the start of the internet in the early '90s.

KR: What did your work as leader of the Incident Command Team at Schwab entail?

BS: I have a specialized team; it's almost like being the lead of a paramedics group, an EMT [emergency medical technician], where, when things break, my team mobilizes to fix it. I'm not the one facilitating doing all these calls to fix things, but I'm the one helping guide the team and train them. I'm the one that has to give the status updates to the executives on what's happening. It was a lot of communication, a lot of guidance, a lot of stress, because it seems like there's always something breaking in a huge network like my company has. Anytime they make changes, and you have to make changes to keep things current, something goes wrong when things change--not always, but we try to minimize it. That's what I do day to day. You get on calls. Anytime something is down, we all get on a bridge, and we're bringing people to get on the call to troubleshoot, find the root cause, and then restore service. It was exciting. It's very dynamic; no two days are the same. But it was a lot like the military. You train, when you're not

on these calls, to learn things to prepare to do it. Then, when you get called, just like a fireman, you drop everything, you get on this call, and you work to fix it. That's what we've been doing. I'm definitely specialized, like a SWAT [special weapons and tactics] team almost.

KR: Have you encountered any issues with cyberattacks?

BS: Everybody has. That is a specialized group in our company, and they take care of that. It's definitely more quiet and confidential. But, yes, no company is shielded from that. We have our defenses up.

KR: What are some other career highlights that we have not touched upon?

BS: Oh, goodness. The thing I'm most proud of is getting this director promotion at Schwab. I've had two promotions while I've been here. I started as a project manager at Schwab in 2013. I did that for a number of years. I got into the Agile with the Scrum Master, and that's when I did that big project, that Intelligent Portfolio. That was a big success, short timeframe, needed a strong leader, and I think I did well. I got rewarded for that with my first promotion to senior manager. Then, from there, I did the senior manager for a few years. I wanted more. I wanted a challenge. Part of who I am, my DNA, and what I did in the Army, I like getting a new assignment every three to four years. If I had stayed in the military, I would have moved to a new state every three to four years. That's what I did on my own in corporate America anyway. But after I was senior manager, I wanted a new challenge, so I sought it out.

It's funny, it was another military connection that got me the job. I remember going to LinkedIn and just kind of looking around. I saw a post from someone on LinkedIn for my company. He was an Army Academy grad, again, the West Point connection. It seems like it just keeps coming back in my career. I saw that, and I was like, "Hmm." I go back into work the next day, and I'm on the Schwab network. I IM-ed [instant messaged] this guy, and I said, "Hey, I see you posted a director role." He's like, "Oh, yeah, I just started interviewing." I said, "Well, I'm perfect for this job. I was in the Army like you." We were around the same age, so he knew what I had done in Desert Storm. Actually, I was one year older than him, so he didn't actually go to Desert Storm, and I did. This was the VP that I needed to convince to hire me and promote me to director. He looked at my background. He was living in Colorado. My time in Colorado and all the companies I worked with there, he knew, Level 3 and Quest and US West, so that came in handy. I got the job a month later. That was my big break here. That's where I've been ever since. It's funny how, I think, military people look out for each other, help each other out when they can. That's been a big help. It's good to have these groups. The Rutgers alumni group is the same way. The military veterans' group at work. You have these cohorts of people that share a common background or a common interest, and you need to tap into them when you're looking for new opportunities or if you need some help. That's been a positive.

KR: You talked in one of your earlier interviews about how a military connection brought you into Toastmasters.

BS: [laughter] That's right. That was at Walmart. It was a Navy officer friend of my husband's. That's right. You have a good memory.



KR: Thanks. Let's talk a little bit about your involvement in Toastmasters. You have been involved for many, many years. What are some of the activities that you have done?

BS: I've done most of them. [laughter] I joined Toastmasters International in 1994 while I was living in Rogers, Arkansas. Every place I moved, I found a new club. That was my network of friends across the country now. I've done all the club officer roles. There's president, vice president of education and training and membership, and all of that. Then, I eventually worked my way up to district level. There's clubs and areas and divisions and districts. It was very hierarchical, again, much like the military, probably similar to the Rotary Club, the Lions Club and the American Legion. I made it up to district, which is fairly big. It was called Lieutenant Governor of Marketing, that kind of thing. I did that.

Then, I was tapped on the shoulder one day when I was in Colorado about ten years ago. Someone said, "Brenda, you should apply to this international position." I replied, "What? I don't even know what that is." They said, "Yes, it's called Region Advisor, and it's all about marketing. You'd be great." I responded, "Oh, I don't know. I haven't made it to the top district governor level yet." They said, "Oh, you don't need to." Actually, most people did, but I just went for it. I interviewed for this international--it's all volunteer--but this international position for region. A region had like seven districts under it, and you would help mentor all these district leaders to help the clubs. I got it. I was shocked. I was happy and excited because, at the time, I was in Colorado, and this region one spanned all to the northwest of the country, up through British Columbia and Alaska. I got the opportunity to travel to all those places, Seattle, Washington, Oregon, and other places, Vancouver and then Fairbanks, Alaska. It was volunteer, but they paid for your travel. That was great. I did that in Toastmasters. That was my highest level of achievement.

The other thing I've done within the organization is, they have different levels of education, and I've reached the highest level. It's called DTM, and that stands for Distinguished Toastmaster; it's kind of like a black belt. I've done that. You have to complete many speeches and leadership opportunities to get to the DTM. That's something I'm proud of that I did as well.

Now, I'm back at the club level and mentoring. I do that a lot. I've done that the whole time. I think I've probably mentored over twenty women across probably four or five states in the last twenty-eight years. I like doing that the most, working one on one with someone to help them and to help them be a more confident communicator. I still do that, and that's where I'm at right now. I'm a member of three clubs, one here at work at Schwab and then two community clubs in Phoenix, one that meets at seven AM and the other that meets in the evening.

KR: How do you think that Toastmasters has shaped you and helped you to advance your career and advance your goals? Then, on the flip side, how have you shaped Toastmasters?

BS: These are good questions. These are like what's called Table Topics Questions. Part of a Toastmaster meeting is Table Topics, which is extemporaneous speaking, speaking off the cuff, to answer a question like the one you just posed and to be able to think of an answer and succinctly answer it in one to two minutes. That's a challenge for a lot of people. A lot of people

say a lot of words and really don't get to the point and say anything. I've prided myself in learning how to be succinct and to get to the point quickly and powerfully. That's helped me a lot. If you ever go into meetings in corporate America--I don't know if it's true in academia--but you'll hear a lot of people use a lot of crutch words, "uh," "um," "you know," and it's something that they'll make noise and ding you on it right as you're speaking, and you train yourself to not say these words. I don't know if you've noticed; I use some crutch words but not nearly as much as a lot of people might when they're speaking. When they don't know what to say, they'll fill it with a word. When I don't know what to say, I try to be quiet for a few seconds and think about it and then share my words. That's what helped me the most is learning to answer questions off the cuff and do well with that. Where that helps you, that helps you in job interviews. I am a great interviewer for a new job. I do a lot of preparation, but typically my communication skills help me.

The other thing that helps is at work when you have to give a status update. You're on a call, and there's many people listening. They're like, "Okay, Brenda, what's going on? Go." If you can nail a status update in thirty seconds to a minute and you're clear and concise, the people remember you, like, "Wow, who was that? She sounds like she knows what she's talking about." The ability to be comfortable and confident, that's the last thing I'd say Toastmasters has done is helped me be a more confident leader. It certainly honed my skills. I was confident when I was in the Army, but this took me to a whole other level, enough where I would go for these positions that I didn't think I would get. I'd try it and go for it anyway, and sometimes I would get them.

The second part of your question is how did I shape Toastmasters. I would like to think that each club I was in, I added a little bit of energy, a little bit of creativity. Even though I am a bit left-brain dominant--I am analytical--I think I'm also right-brain dominant and I have some creativity aspects, something out-of-the-box different that a lot of people might not have done or thought about. I'll be a little stereotypical, but men tend not to be as creative and out-of-the-box as some women are, on the artistic side. So, I would bring that to it.

Interestingly, speaking of male-dominated, Toastmasters International started in the 1920s. It was male-only until 1973-'74 timeframe; there were no women. I got to meet and speak with one of the women that was the first. I was living in San Diego at the time, and I was midway through my Toastmaster career, so I was probably ten years in. This woman was a Navy veteran, and her name was Helen Blanchard. She wanted to be in a Toastmaster Club in 1973, but the rules wouldn't let you. So, she joined as "Homer." She signed the application. The men in her club supported her; the men in her club respected her because she was a Navy officer. She was a strong, intelligent woman. Helen joined. Then, ultimately, it came out that Homer was Helen, and then they changed the bylaws of Toastmasters and let women in. Now, at all levels in Toastmaster leadership, it's dominant women. It's over fifty percent at the club level, and women are just stepping up and volunteering more. That was kind of exciting that I got to know her and meet her and tell that story. Life is all about telling stories. I mean, we're doing this oral history archive. You are capturing people's stories, and that's what people need to hear and love to listen to. Everybody likes a story. So, I just shared one about Helen.

KR: I have your book, *Strong Words and Simple Truths: The Courage to Communicate*, right here. I want to ask you about your book. We talked about this a lot in your first session, but what are your takeaways from your experiences writing this book, both in the messages that you are sending and also what you learned through the process?

BS: The takeaways, oh, that's a tough one. Much of the book was written over nine years, so most of the content was done in my blogs. Then, I had to create an interesting structure to stitch it all together. I call it a patchwork quilt. One of the takeaways was that the content was not related, and some people might think that some of the topics were boring. I wanted to make it a little more fun and interesting and have kind of a Jersey flair to it. I created the whole story about Ernie and Elizabeth as these main characters in the beginning. They're off to the circus. It was using experiences from my past that people might have also experienced, and one of my big experiences was going to New York, to Madison Square Garden, and seeing the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and loving the acrobats and the elephants, and all of that. I use that background to make the story more interesting. I think I achieved that.

Also, another takeaway was the importance of finding a good editor. In the beginning, I hired one editor who didn't agree with the content of some of my stories and wanted me to change or remove them or edit them, and I said, "No, these are my ideas and words. I'm not removing that." She thought I should remove one of them, and I chose not to. I found another editor. I paid her, I thanked her, and then I found someone that wasn't going to judge my content. That was an interesting takeaway. I went with a company (10-10-10 Publishing) that guided me through most of the process. I think that's helpful for first-time authors, to find a company that can guide you through it, if you don't know the ins and outs. It was fairly easy to get from manuscript to published on Amazon when you have people that have done this before. That was another takeaway.

I also know that people may buy your book, but they might never read it. You just have to accept that. I felt like it was interesting and important to share, but other people in today's world don't really have the time and aren't as into reading print books. At least I added some cool pictures. I hired a very talented young woman, who was the niece of my best friend from New Jersey. We collaborated and customized each image. Each image had a symbolic meaning. The strong man in the book represents military veterans. I talk about my father and my cousins, who all served. The unicycle and the hedgehog represent a part of me and my childhood. I rode a unicycle. When I was at Rutgers, I rode my unicycle around campus. That's part of my history. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed writing the book. I think if I were to do another one, I would narrow my scope and focus on one topic as opposed to more of a *Reader's Digest* of hundreds of topics.

KR: Are you thinking about possible future books that you could write?

BS: I am. Actually, I've already started with the concept. I wrote a twenty-minute keynote speech. For a Toastmaster project, you have to do a twenty-minute speech. Most of the speeches in Toastmasters are seven minutes, five to seven minutes. Twenty minutes is a longer speech. I wrote it, and I delivered it last week. It's called "The Power of Small," S-M-A-L-L. Now, my last name is Smull, like "small" with a "U." "The Power of Small," it's about taking

things in incremental steps. It's back to that Agile methodology that I talk about in the book. That's what I'm thinking could be an interesting angle on a topic of iteration and how to do things in life one step at a time.

KR: That's neat. Pun intended.

BS: Yes. [laughter] That could be my subtitle.

KR: We have less than ten minutes left. I could ask you questions all day, but I'll just end with two more questions, if that sounds good to you.

BS: Yes.

KR: What sort of alumni involvement have you had with Rutgers over the years?

BS: There hasn't been much. I left right after graduation and I really haven't been back to stay, though the one connection I do have is with the Army ROTC folks. I did visit with them this year. It was great. I plan to have more connection with them in supporting them. I'd like the opportunity to do more with Rutgers alumni. Hopefully, this opportunity will give me that.

KR: Yes, that's great. Our office has a fairly close relationship with Army ROTC and Navy ROTC. The cadets come to our events and post the colors.

BS: Oh, that's great.

KR: What does your military service mean to you? In particular, what does it mean to you to be a war veteran?

BS: The meaning for me goes back to my family and the traditions of my father and all my uncles who served in World War II. I didn't realize it at the time just how much my father influenced me. He didn't tell me or want me to join the military, but I suppose watching him in the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] all those years, and then when I was on campus at Rutgers, realizing that my family doesn't have a lot of money, getting that scholarship was key. It means a lot to represent your country, and to help keep our freedom, it means a lot to me. I'm all about liberty and freedom in our country. Memorial Day was just on Monday. Today's Wednesday. On Memorial Day, I did what I've done for many years with my family, and that's go to a cemetery service, where we posted the colors. We played "Taps." This year was very emotional. It was the first time we've all been together since COVID, so it was a big crowd. It's a connection to my past and my parents. My parents are both passed away for quite some time. It makes me feel closer to them when I do these traditions and rituals that I think are so important for our country to remember the sacrifices people made in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam, and so many others. That's what it means.

I get emotional. It's heartfelt. It wasn't just a job. I wouldn't say it was an adventure. [laughter] It was an amazing experience. I saw some things, the way people in other countries live, and it made me come home--literally when I got home from Desert Storm, I kissed the ground, because

the women in Saudi Arabia at the time didn't have freedom to drive a car or freedom to leave the house unaccompanied. I'm an American woman; I have a lot of freedom. It's just a reminder when you see that of what a great country we have.

It was an honor to serve. When I put my uniform on, I feel proud of the country and the other veterans. Most of us volunteered, at least of my generation. I know a lot of Vietnam vets, World War II, some of them volunteered, but a lot of them were drafted. It's a different mindset when you willingly raise your hand and say, "Sure, I'll go do that," knowing that you could be hurt, and many of us were hurt, psychologically or physically. Who knows? My autoimmune disease, was that caused by serving? Maybe. I don't know. But I have a bad autoimmune disease. You get through it and be as healthy as you can be. That's a long-winded answer. Again, we could talk for hours about this. Maybe I should write another book.

KR: [laughter] Just one last question for today. You've talked about and I also saw on your website that you're very involved in veterans organizations, and a lot of that is service. Can you speak briefly about what you do?

BS: Sure. I also have some more news on that. When I came to Phoenix, I found a new veterans' organization, and I'm now active in the American Legion. They do have VFWs here as well, but there was a nice American Legion in my local town. The interesting thing about this post is it's mostly Vietnam vets, so they're seventy-five years old and I'm only fifty-four. I'm the young one. I'm the youngest one. I've taken on [being] their webmaster, since I know computers and IT. I'm helping them with their website, Facebook, and all of that. They dubbed me the information officer. It's not an official thing, but I'm the post information officer. This year, we're noticing that the membership is dropping, a lot of the members are getting older, some are passing on, and we really need to get younger people engaged. I'm working with a small team to do membership drives and do new things, get some energy. The elections are coming up. Every year, they elect new officers in the post. Just this week, I talked to some people about potentially doing a bigger officer role in this post to keep it going and expand to some younger veterans that are my age or younger. We'll see what happens in the nominations and elections next week. Maybe I'll be doing more in the American Legion. More to come on that one.

KR: I want to thank you so much for meeting with me. As your career is still advancing and you're still involved with Toastmasters and your veterans' service, maybe in a few years, we could do another interview.

BS: Yes. Thank you. Maybe when I'm sixty.

KR: Yes, sounds good. Save the date for October 21st. That's the Annual Meeting of the Rutgers Living History Society.

BS: Great. Well, thank you so much. It's been an honor and a pleasure. You're one of the best interviewers I've ever had.

KR: Thank you so much. I really appreciate all the time that I have spent with you.

BS: Thank you. Take care.

KR: Have a great day. Bye-bye.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Transcribed and reviewed by Molly A. Graham 6/6/2022

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 6/12/2022

Reviewed by Brenda Smull 8/22/2022