Dr. Cherie Clodfelter: An Educational Journey From Segregated South to the Height of Academia

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Interview of Dr. Cherie Clodfelter
Conducted by Kevin Thornton on February 24, 2016 in Irving Texas
Duration: 59:37
“C” denotes Dr. Clodfelter speaking
“K” denotes Kevin Thornton speaking

K: Alright. Here we go. So the first thing I’m supposed to do is just ask you to state your name for the record

C: Cherie Clodfelter

K: Cherie Clodfelter and the date is February 25.

C: And I was born and raised in Oklahoma.

K: Born and raised in Oklahoma

C: And I always ask the students are you from Oklahoma? And most of them say no but they laugh.

K: Alright. Ok so, I guess. The questions that I have for you are going to kind of focus on two areas. Your experience going through primary to college and also your experience as an educator at the college level and other levels. So the first question. Sorry. The first question I have is what are your earliest memories of going to school?

C: Well I never remember not being around schools. My Dad was superintendent of schools in Bartlesville Oklahoma. And So I came from that background. He was first to college he was in the olympics in 1932, wrestling.

K: Wow

C: And he didn't win and he always said the Jap beat him out. But my uncle won. And the olympics was in Los Angeles that year, whatever, 1932. But I don't remember the first time. That would be hard for me to say what I remember. I do remember vividly in my first grade teacher...her name was Ms. Huff. And you notice I say it with disgust.

K: You didn't like her?

C: Oh well, you will see why in a minute. She was reading a story to us, it was one of the grimms folktales. And...She started out and I interrupted her immediately. You know this was a 5-year old and she said...and I said you didn't start the story out right! And she said oh i did but let me look and see. So she looked back. So she started over. And she started I was... And I said you didn't start out right!And she said well how should I start it out. And I said you should start it
like my daddy does. He starts all his stories with “when I was a little boy.” And she said I’m not a little boy and that’s too bad.

K: Yeah

C: So that’s one of my first memories. I was always the smallest one in the class and..so therefore I often had to play the villain or play the person that was not the heroine of the story

K: yeah

C: And I… loved school I really did. It was a great experience because I only had my brother who you met when you came in and.. I love being around people particularly other children. I thought that it was fun to play games and whatever. So that’s my first memory of that. Also my mother and dad both reading stories to us, or telling stories to us. And what I found later in my work as an educator is that image of that voice...Well let me ask you this, do you have any memories of stories being read to you?

K: Yes. Of course.

C: And what voice do you hear?

K: My fathers.

C: See that..it goes together. I that that’s one of the things that children are not receiving today. They get things that are electronic or whatever and they don’t get the touch of the human voice that’s very very important. Ok, what’s next.

K: Next. Well, do you think…so you said your family..your dad was superintendent of schools, and how do you think...i guess being...how do you think the way your parents told you stories and bringing you up right...do you think that increased your classroom performance.

C: Oh gosh yes. It very much did. I’ll never forget when I decided..well I entered college on a music scholarship..organ and piano and i hated every minute of it. But i knew that i needed to help my parents with my education.

K: yeah

C: so i..you know…I went to OSU on that music scholarship. Thats where my dad went, my mother went and all my aunts and uncles went. And when I got there I was asked which wrestling clodfelter I was? And...because all my family went there. And I was playing volleyball one day. It was in the second semester of my...what I was doing where I had to practice. I got so
i could play with my feet. Id eat and pound on the piano in the practice room with my feet. It was ridiculous. It was ridiculous. Anyway I broke three of my fingers playing volleyball and the finger that was the most difficult to heal was this one, the thumb. So my scholarship went out the window and I went to science...earth science. And i loved earth science...oceanography...and all these things that deal with the surface of the earth. And I loved it. I just loved it. And I played golf

K: I play golf too.

C:Do You? I won the women's championship at OSU. But what's interesting is I only had three matches. Things happened along the way. I should've had six matches but somebody was sick...something happened to the field rain or something. So i only played three matches and won the championship. And I was very active in my sorority and by the way a lot of people at UD have erroneous information about sororities and fraternities. Most times they do a lot of good. Anyway...I think that the thing that was important to me was that I finally I realized that I needed to do what was important for me and that was the earth science thing. Now when I got out of college I came to irving to teach and was going to be married . And my fiancee was killed in a car wreck with a drunk. And...anyway so I came home and Texas by then payed a lot more for teachers than Oklahoma And Mother got dad to promise that when my brother and myself were in college he would quit the superintendency and do something that wasn't quite so hard to manage. The job of the superintendent is horrible in any public school. And we all liked texas it was good to be all in texas. Is that enough?

K: Yes that's great. So next question. Let me see here. What were you school buildings like in secondary school and high school?

C: Terrific. Bartlesville had a Dad started the idea of getting college credit while still in high school. And Tulsa was very close. OSU was very close, there were a number of college. They came about mostly through state funds. And college high was probably one of the best high schools in oklahoma. Well I had lovely wonderful buildings. There was this crazy idea at the time were girls all had to take home economics for two-years. Two credits. The guys all got to take things that deal with building something...i'm trying to think of the...mechanical arts. And they had to take two years of that. You could not graduate from high school unless you swam.

K: Swam. Thats interesting.
C: Well Oklahoma has more lakes than Minnesota. Well anyway that was part of it. At the time when i started high school The Jim Crow laws were in. That's where the blacks went to a separate school and the whites went to others. And the mason dixon line came right to the top of Oklahoma. So if you take a train to any place north you would see where that line was. Blacks just pouring into all the cars. And when never had any trouble whatsoever. Never never never. And when I got to College it was integrated and you did notice that the blacks stayed in small groups. They didn't, as they do now, want to mix. So the buildings they were super. That's the physical part of it. I know that more graduated from high school then, than they did later. But there's been a greater flux to take a test and get a diploma. Did you go to private school?

K: Yes I went to all boys school.

C: Catholic school?

K: Yes

C: I'm not Catholic but I can sure talk Catholic.

K: Yes I'm sure after your time at UD.

C: Yes when I was dean at UD I was particularly...I went to all the functions that the Catholic Church had at UD. And I almost could say that many of the things that you utter during the time at Church. If you're at a church service. But I love them. I never felt discriminated against. I think of myself as a very religious person because of my church. Its really strong in my soul. Alright what else?

K: Alright. So you said you went to College High and so was that a state funded public school?

C: Uh hm. See I never went to private school my entire life. Until I went to a private school to do some work on linguistics. I went to george washington University. And I had a complete scholarship there. And that's where I got my...most of my phd.

K: Alright, what years were you attending College high.

C: I graduated in 1963. And then I finished. Came to Irving and taught in elementary school. And also I taught high school because they couldn't find...they couldn't find an earth science teacher. So I finished with my elementary. It was about 3 o'clock, maybe 2:30. And you know what the first thing my students said to me?

K: What?
Transcript of recorded interview with Dr. Cherie Clodfelter
Interviewed by Kevin Thornton on February 25, 2016 in Irving Texas
Length of Interview: 58:37 seconds
“K:” denotes interviewer speaking
“C:” denotes Dr. Clodfelter speaking

C: They said there's no use in geology. There's no use in astronomy. I think that is what one of
the things that has in schools today.

K: Why do you think they were saying that back then.

C: Because it was taught as a thing that was rote. See I told all of the folktales to the
constellations. They all have wonderful tales, there mainly greek and...yeah there mainly greek.
But it was interesting what do we have to teach..why do we have to take this? I think they
realized that they had to take a lot of things that they didn't think about. My mother gave me the
best piece of advice I’ve ever had. And you remember this. She said “you're responsible for one
thing and one thing only when you teach And it's when your student leave you, they want to
know more.” See oneof the reasons I dislike economics. Even though Doyle teaches it. Because
I had a teacher who killed it for me. Absolutely killed it. Made it a drudgery. It wasn't something
that wasn't fun to learn. If you cannot pass that on to your students you should not be in the
classroom and we have many of those at UD. I think that UD has more in proportion to ones
that… like Charles Sullivan. Charlie, he is fantastic have you had him in history?

K: Dr. Sullivan? I have not had the privilege, but I’ve heard great things.

C: Now how are you classified? Are you a Junior or Senior?

K: Im a sophomore. Undeclared.

C: Undeclared. What are you thinking about?

K: Im considering History and English right now.

C: Go and talk to him. He is fabulous. He will leave you wanting to know more.

K: Ok, I will have to do that.

C: Be sure to tell him I sent you. Hes a good friend of mine.

K: Alright, let's continue here. Let me see. So...you said in college you were playing volleyball
and golf. And I'm assuming in high school were you also playing sports as well?
C: Yeah I did. I had a cloud over me in highschool mainly because I felt very responsible to doing anything that harmed my dads opinion of the students. Except one time I did a very ornery trick and put scotch tape over the fountains. And he immediately knew who it was. But the high school was huge in the sense that it was...I'm trying to think how many. I don't know but it was a huge highschool

K: Looking back on it did you sense any inequality regarding extracurriculars, were the more geared towards boys, were boys sports more important?

C: I didn't think about that back then. Right now I’ve joined some of the female faculty in objecting to the salaries for women at UD. But there was none of that in high school. I could care less if the boys had all these sports and I didn't.

K: So it wasn't an issue back then at all.

C: Yeah in fact we had our own..whatever.

K: Well even despite gender, what about general..well you said this was when Jim Crow laws were still in effect, but did you think that the class and race divide did that hit you as a student and make you feel different?

C: No because that's the way it had always been. My dad, one of his best friends as superintendent schools was the principal of the separate school. The black school. And he was a very good friend of his. And they were always going to this conference and that conference. So you...some of the blacks have made our problem today, they have made it out of what has been going on. Their are some leaders in the black community who I find absolutely appalling. And some of them are from Chicago.

K: Yeah it reminds me, I was reading this article the other day about this guy did an interview with one of the big, confederate, someone who you would call racist nowadays. And this guy was saying when he was in high school he thought he got along better with the black community than now. Because there's so much pressure to be politically correct. And he said that he had black friends but he would wear his confederate flag to school or whatever. And this was interesting to me. And from what it sounds like this experience is similar to yours. It was just what it was and you didn't experience any outbursts or anything in your schools.
C: No, absolutely not. Education was just education and you didn't have issues that dealt with things that were...you didn't have the crime that you do today, that is race...embedded in race. If you oppose the police...I mean it was...you should be shot...that's what the idea was then. But...one thing I cannot get used too. And that is a person from each race...black and white marrying...because I know what it does to the children.

K: Yeah…so as a student, looking back, did you see, which Im sure you did because Jim Crow laws were still in effect. Do you think that the social change in education such as government policies like Title IX and the integration of schools. Do you think these have helped or...qualify that. What do you think it's done to education so far?

C: If your talking about education... one of the most difficult times that we've had...and those that were in education had to deal with...we had to go to Austin and deal with it and so on and so forth. Because supposedly education is a matter of states-rights. Nothing in the constitution ever mentions education. It seems as if many of these laws are almost like blackmail from the federal government. The federal government is involved in our education and because of that you get a lot of...well the schools in Texas are still trying to recover from the blackmail of the federal government in doing this with this or that or whatever. Its very impossible to try and work through it and it's gone too far.

K: Do you think it's just over-

C; Kevin I think we've got to leave something alone and let it...I taught in the golden days of UD. That was about 20 years ago. Dr. Olenick were talking about it the other day. We talk about it quite often. And at that time you...We’ll let me tell you how I was hired at UD and you’ll get the idea by what I mean by how different it is now. I was in DC and I was visiting a friend, and mother called and said there's somebody at the University of Dallas and I gave her your number and she's probably going to try and get in touch with you. Now this was in August. And So I called and it was Dr. Teller who was chair of the Education department at the time. And he asked if I would consider a position at UD. I had talked in several cases to various groups at Ud and they had remembered me. So I said sure. I was working on my doctorate at the time. And I don't think you should work on a doctorate unless you have an idea of exactly where it's going to fit in, because it is too much work. So I came back and I went out to UD and was interviewed by Dr. Teller, and it went very well. And then I had to be interviewed by Dr. Cowan who was president of the University, it was a delight. We chatted and talked about various things that I had done, and that he had done, and he said after he had gone on for about 30 minutes or maybe a little
longer. He said, “What do you think about john dewey?” And I thought, do I say what I think or
do I try to fake him out? And I said I don't think much of him. And he said you're hired. And that
was it, hats the way it used to be in all the departments. And you had a strong leader in...for
example history, we had one of the most renowned..folk tales that collected folktales on
education. No let me tell you another story. There is a little town out in the panhandle of Texas
close to amarillo. And when they were building the railroad out there and this was gosh i don't
know my teens. And they finished the railroad and the first train came by and the engineer was
on it and there was nobody at the stop in this little town and he said what's the name of this burg?
And the guy on the platform said, it ain't got no name. And he said what's your name? And he
said Quanah. And he said that's the name
of this town. And it's had that name ever since. So you
had that kind of...education took time. I mean I’ll tell you one of the recent things i'm thinking
of. When they changed history and geography to social studies..boy did that foul things up

K: How so?

C: Because how do you study social when that's what you're in. Maybe you could if you're
working on some masters degree of something. But it's a shame that we've neglected geography
and other history. History is the thing that has suffered the most from it.

K: Ok let me see here. So when you first became a teacher were you teaching high school?

C; I was teaching elementary. Second grade. And that's when I was on released time from the
high school because the couldn't find an earth science teacher.

K: And what year was that? Post college or during?

C: No it was after I received my degree...1962

K: How was that, your first time being a teacher, teaching elementary school, did you go in with
any...

C: Do you want to teach?

K: Possibly.

C; Well keep it open because we are losing some of our brightest people to teach. And its
mainly because people find it boring and this and that..

K: You found it Exciting?
C: Oh, yes. To share your mind with others...i mean... my gosh to have a college ask you why
and you are able to explain something to them. Its exciting. And if you leave them with the idea
to learn more about something. But anyway I got off the subject there...you should leave so much
possibility. That you want to share with others what you know. What you're particularly keen
about. I had a young man write me several years ago and I had him in the second grade. And he
wrote to me when he was in college and he said I want you to know that I learned more about
astronomy in the second grade than I ever learned since. And i started it by going through the
idea of the myths and the legends. I mean you can't think of anything more exciting. Now have
you taken Astronomy?

K: No I haven't but I plan to with Dr. Olenick. Can't wait

C: He's very good.

K: Yes I've heard a lot. So... I guess is having things happen like when that student wrote that
letter is that what you strive for as a educator?

C: Sure! It's far above what ever you would think of as monetary value or things like that, its
when you've touched that persons soul.

K: Did you teach predominately, prior to UD, were you teaching mostly in public schools..so I
guess with public schools.

C: Well now wait a minute. Do I did in the private sector with UD....for a while there I was
going all over the country talking and....giving my beliefs...My mother then developed
Alzheimer’s and I had to really cut that out. But that's all right..let me tell you this. I love this
story. I went to Philadelphia, big big big conventions there and I was a keynote speaker there.
And So we got on the plane, and a friend of mine had gone with me to Philadelphia. And so we
were Very excited because you can always tell when your on and when you're not on. And so I
was really on in Philadelphia and it was a great experience and we just chatting about how great
it was and how it was wonderful. The plane didn't take off, and the plane didn't take off and
people got very restless. And finally the pilot came back and started chatting with people along
the line. And he came up to us and said, “ are you ladies going back to Dallas” And we said yes
and he said “and you’ve been to what? have you been to a convention” and we said yes, the IRA
and Hazel really fired him up and they were really going strong and it was wonderful. Just
wonderful. And at some place in that conversation I said “International Reading Association”
and he said that’s the name of your organization? And I said yes. And in I’ll say 5 minutes we
were taxiing down the runway. And so the guy in front of us leans over and said I turned you all
in. I thought you were Irish Republican Army. He said I couldn't imagine that she was, he said
pointing at Hazel. But I sure thought you were. But it was a great great experience. It was so
funny. I never thought of the Irish Republican Army and International Reading Association
before. I was teaching in Switzerland later on in the year, at the American University there. And
the convention for the IRA international was in Vienna, and it was a wonderful experience got to
speak and so forth.

K: What was the.. I guess main focus of the IRA? Just to create awareness for reading?

C: Say that again

K: I guess the International Reading Association, how did you get involved with that? And what
was the goal of that.

C: That’s an interesting question, I’ve never been asked that. Some of the most renowned people
in the field of reading, which is the basis of all education, were IRA, and when I visited in
Switzerland I was with 2 or 3 of the international people and I just felt it was important for me to
learn as much as I could and that way I could impart that info to students at UD or wherever I
was.

K: Alright Let me see here. So you said the advice from your mother where you said…

C: That's the thing that governed my entire teaching career. I thought of it as a very sacred
responsibility. That doesn't mean that..you know.. I think that often I was thought of as being
pretty hard-nosed working with the younger children and at UD. The greatest award I have had
Is there is award given in Texas to only Texas teachers involved in College work. Its called the
Minnie Stevens piper award. And I was nominated by my university which was UD. And I got it.
There is a very nice stipend that comes with it. And UD has won the Minnie Stevens Piper
award..for a small university it's almost impossible to think of the involvement that there's been.
Do you know who the Kelly’s were?

K: The Kellys? No I do not.

C: Well they were in charge of Drama and she won it. Louise Cowan won it. Rich Olenick has
won it. Frank Doe has won it. Churchill won it. Now you talk about a very bright person. Alot of
people don’t realize he’s a genius. He gets off the subject. I asked him to speak at various
organizations in Irving and He’ll get way up there and I’ll say come back to the meaning of it. But all those people have won the Minnie Stevens Piper Award.

K: Alright, so earlier when we were talking you mentioned..that you were on the petition to get better women's pay at UD.

C: Say that again

K: You had mentioned a petition to get better women's teacher pay at UD…

C: I don't know whether I signed a petition.

K: You supported it?

C: Yes I did. Dr. Ruth May who is in the school of business. She brought it up somewhere or other, and the president acted like he didn't know anything about it. Even though he did. So i supported Ruth.

K: Is this recently?

C: Yes well this is two maybe three years ago. And nothing much has changed.

K: Really?

C: But at least the president can't use the excuse that he didn't know about it.

K: I guess what I'm asking is, have you ever run into trouble with that in the past? Or have you ever been part of other organized change within a school.

C: I have been parts of other organized change, but I have never been reprimanded. I have never been talked to and said you cannot do that. Lots of times at a University they will have unspoken rules... you should no better than to violate them. UD doesn't function that way. It functions in a way that is...what is right? When I first came to UD it had the most docile student body I’ve ever heard of. And when they complained and came in and talked to me about whatever it was. I said you know how to go about this. Go about it in a way that is good for all. You may raise your voice and you may get angry, but there is no way things can get worse because of your involvement. Now that's easy for me to say. UD’s student body has got some teeth..they've
gotten some strength… in the way they participate in the way they participate in things. I've never known them to be able to change the date of something until, it was about two years ago they changed the date of a meeting that was thought of as being very important. But the meeting was, they didn't like the person who was coming. I’m being vague on purpose, but you had the right leadership of students at the time and they succeeded.

K: and this was a couple of years ago.

C: I retired in 1997, but I was still teaching. I taught the geology course. I guess the last time I taught a full course in 2010. No what was interesting about all this teaching that way, is they had very interesting way of... a former president worked with you in your retirement to see how you could deal with your retirement. My retirement went on till 2010. And... it was great.

K: Yeah, did it..was that nice to be able to relax and focus on what you wanted while at the same time have the opportunity to teach a couple of classes?

C: When my retirement hubbub...bring that over here. This is a paperback of the last book I did. And this is one, all kinds of people talked about me, “Cherie sheds light on the word and ideas that are hidden within each individual. She offers a lifetime of insight into what will help each person become a better and more knowledgeable student.” That’s good.

K: Sounds excellent.

C: That's not always the case, I had one of the best teachers at UD. Ms. K--...come in and Barbara cries very freely. I don't cry ever, never never never.. And she came in she was crying because she thought she failed a student. And I told her when you have a student whether they're in a college or in the first grade. You have them from that period of time to this period of time and you have them physically, but the impression that you leave them last them a lifetime. And I asked her and I didn't want her to answer of course, “did you do something that you're sorry about?” And she cried, “no I didn't do a thing that I sorry about!”

K: How often would you say..either professors at the college level or any teacher..how do you think they forget that what they're doing actually should and needs to have a continued impact on that student. How often do they have the mindset of oh I just need them to do well on this test.

C: Frank Doe, Doctor of Biology he gave the faculty a talk and said, “what do you think you're all doing?” The middle student, the b and c student, runs our world and they will continue running our world, not the brain who comes out with all A’s. And that’s true Kevin.

K: I would agree with that.
C: Where do you fit in?

K: I'm definitely the B student not the A student.

C: Well let me tell you something. Why did you come to UD in the first place?

K: Well.. my parents went here and that made me not want to go to UD. But then I visited and sat in on some classes and compared to state schools and other private schools and semi-ivy league schools that I looked at, it just seemed like everyone cared more about what they were doing at UD.

C: The religious part was important to you?

K: Yes definitely. And also…

C: Did you know DR. O is from Chicago?

K: I did not know that which is funny cause I’ve been to his house for a Christmas. I’ll have to talk to him more.

C: He calls himself an orphan right now. Because his sister died and he only had two sisters and the other one had died long ago and they were half sisters, 13 and 17 years older than Dr. Olenick. So Dr. O was really like he was an only child. You have brothers and sisters don’t you?

K: Yes five younger.

C: Oh my gosh all boys or girls or what?

K: One brother and four sisters.

C: What's the next one closest to you?

K: My sister, she's a freshman at UD.

C: UD? How nice, I guess.

K: Yeah we get to keep track of each other.
C: Alright, anything else?

K: Yes. Just two more and they kind of tie in together. I guess with the recent evolution of instructional resources and the internet and such and the use of media for education...do you think that's been a good thing or a bad thing?

C: I think that when they pair big boxes, which are referred to in every discipline people have the big boxes. In education you will have it in reading and all the subject area you can think of. The reason I love teaches linguistics and children's literature, those kind of subjects is because that's where the creative juices really begin to flow. I think some...well if you teach something by rote, your big boxes are super super fun. You do that much and give a test, and you do so much and give a test and that's it. But if you teach where your influence as a human being is thwarted that's going to cause problems.

K: I agree with that. And then I guess going from your experience being in primary school and having your dad be a superintendent through college high and growing up through all this change and then teaching at UD, where do you see the future? Are you worried?

C: Yeah I am. I'm worried about the fact that a lot of the things that are thought of as being in education and you even see this at UD. It's become something other than education. If ever you can remove the human being from the process that we call education, you've lost. This administration scares me to death, and I'm not being political here, it does. It scares me to death of what has been taken out of our schools and also parochial schools have been feeling the influence of it as well as public schools. It becomes rote. It has nothing to do with the human touch. And that's what worries me terribly. I won't be around to see it.

K: Do you think it's become too, I guess structured

C: Yes, see lots of time in your class when you see things that you'd like to do, but because of the structure of the course.

K: They don't let you and they pull you back.

C: The one room school was the greatest invention ever made. Teachers and students taught each other. My Dad went to a one room school in Oklahoma, and this was in the ancient days. But Oklahoma and some of the Dakotas and so forth have kept that whole livelihood, and it's amazing how they've let that whole thing skip by because of progress.

K: And also because of government interference. Ok one last thing, how often do you think you were teaching your students but actually learning more from them all the time?
C: Yes probably, you see the whole cliche that's used is that you teach the whole child, the whole individual at UD or no matter where it is and once you forget that and you start on the road of doing otherwise, you don't really get to see it. I’m sitting here and saying gee I’d like to get to know Kevin better but what's the restriction? That's why the one room school was so good.