

Susan Blandford was born in Grand Rapids, MI. Her father, a dentist, had been born in Memphis, TN, and her mother, a housewife, originally came from the Oklahoma Territory. Susan had two younger sisters. On her maternal side, Susan was the fourth generation living in this country. Her mother's maiden name was translated from "Borzefield" to "Burchfield" when her great-grandparents "came over." Her grandparents were born in America.

About her father, Susan said, "He was a dentist when it didn't interfere with his hunting and fishing. . . . When I was very young, . . . I didn't see very much of him, and . . . he very clearly would have preferred to have a son and didn't have. . . . Most of the time my father was a fairly distant person for me." She had a similar memory of her mother. "[She] was a social butterfly. . . . She was a housewife who loved to play bridge, who had her church circle, who . . . entertained quite a bit and was also a fairly distant person to me," Susan recalled.

Susan was also not close to her two sisters. Although her one sister was only 2 1/2 years her junior, Susan described their relationship as "rivals growing up." The other sister was "quite a bit younger, so "by the time she was something other than the baby in the family, [Susan] was off in college."

Consequently, as a result of her lack of closeness with her family members, according to Susan, she had ". . . a very strong need to prove [herself] because [she] never felt quite accepted. "My mother's favorite phrase when I [had been] bad was, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' Well, the horrible part . . . was I wasn't. . . . [My parents] gave me the ambition to be a bit of a fighter for what I believed in," concluded Susan. For example, she told the story about when she was 12 years old, she went to Ramona Theater at Ramona Park by herself to see "light musical comedies." One time the girl who was sitting next to her shared her opera glasses with Susan. "I was so excited. I got to really see the faces on stage," she reminisced. "I went home and told Mom about this most marvelous person in the world because she shared those opera glasses with me." The conversation went well, according to Susan, until she mentioned that the girl was black. Then, "my mother never let me go back to the theater . . . because she didn't realize those kind of people . . . I was furious with her" she recalled.

Susan went to kindergarten at East Grand Rapids Public Schools in "that marvelous old river stone house [that was torn down to make way for a football field]." She also attended first through sixth grades in that school system. "Elementary school, I guess, was pretty good. . . . I had a good friend all the way through until we were separated in seventh grade. . . . In high school I didn't seem to fit. . . . It had its high points and low points. I wouldn't redo high school for anything," concluded Susan. What was consistent throughout her growing up years, however, was her interest in art. She wanted to be both an architect and a fashion designer. She was the first girl in the history of East Grand Rapids High School to take Mechanical Drawing. "I was good at [art], and I did thoroughly enjoy it and went on to college as an art major," said Susan.

At the time she was "taking the tour" of colleges, WWII was winding down and many men were coming back from military service overseas (mid-1940s). Susan "ended up going to Ward Junior College in Nashville, TN, which was a "traditional girls' school." For example, according to Susan, when she left the campus, she wore a hat and gloves and heels. About her college experience, Susan said, "I really rather enjoyed it. I had already met Tom [her future husband] by

[that] time, so that [was] my social life, which was kind of meager; [it] wasn't a real major problem. I studied a lot and made the National Honor Society, and . . . my parents were very pleased with their choice."

After she graduated from Ward, Susan went on to the University of Michigan School of Architecture and Design, but she stayed only 18 months. She left to be with Tom, who had been drafted into the Army to serve in the Korean War. After they were married, for 3 ½ years the couple went from army base to army base. During that time, they had their first child. As a result, Susan never completed her bachelor's degree.

With the birth of their first-born child, Susan focused mostly on being a housewife and mother. For a 6 month period, however, she did paid work for the local chapter of the American Red Cross (ARC). She organized volunteers in a 20-county area to find senior citizens who were not on food stamps but were eligible for them. It was a pilot project between the ARC and the federal government. Although Susan brought her program in on time and under budget, others did not, so the project was ended. Susan attributed her success to being a "long-range planner—nothing very exciting—but it's a goal, and that's very handy in business."

In 1975, Susan joined her husband's commercial/industrial appraisal business as a bookkeeper. "Now, of course, I didn't like math. That was not my field. My field was English and writing, things where you can do a paragraph, not where you do a column," said Susan. "Then I began handling staff problems and went onto doing hiring and firing (things my husband [did] not like to do) and long-range planning and dealing with the bankers and everything outside of the real estate appraisals. . . . Then I'm the sounding board for the real estate appraisers . . . as more of a review person, and I'm involved in running a small business. . . . I've taken the business from four people to twelve people," she said.

Susan also recalled, "When I came into the business world, many people said to me, 'Why aren't you home with the children? You ought to be staying home. You're taking jobs that men ought to have, etc., etc.' I said, 'Hey, there is no one home for me to stay home for anymore. I've been there.' Any man who wants my job can compete for it and have it if he's better than I."

With her strong beliefs and assertiveness, Susan was unsure whether she could work well with her husband. "Appraising is an area of compromise . . . and I wasn't sure that . . . would be very good for the marriage, so we divided up the work," she said. The same goes for their hobby of "birding" together. Because of a problem with her hands, Susan could no longer do craft work. So, following her husband's lead, she became a "birder." "When we're birding, Tom is better at sounds. I am much better at behavior, so again we can complement each other a little bit better," she concluded.

Even before she became involved in her husband's business, Susan "felt that [she] could do something in some of the areas of volunteer work." About volunteerism, she said, "I could maybe right some of the things that were wrong or I could maybe accomplish something. I've always liked things that were hard to do. . . ." She first volunteered for the League of Women Voters "one night out every so often." The older women [e.g. Dorothy Judd] who served as role models were "very good for [her] because they . . . were doing things [and taught her how to get

things done].” Consequently, Susan said, “I’ve tried to do that same sort of thing when I’ve had the opportunity to bring some other women along with me to understand how [the organization] works.”

After serving as the board president for the local council of the Girl Scouts of America, Susan went to the United Way (UW) board. However, her focus shifted from fund raising for the Girl Scouts to allocations and planning for UW. For 8 years, Susan served in various positions on the board, finally acting as vice president. During that time, she said, “I was arguing that both sides [i.e., chairman of campaign and someone on allocations and planning committee] should be routes to the chairmanship, and we had the break through . . . with Bill VantHof, who was the first one coming from the [allocations and planning] side. . . .”

Then, it was Susan’s turn. “The next person in line . . . on the planning side was a woman. Not only that, she was a fairly outspoken woman who had caused a fair amount of lively discussion at board meetings. . . . not a combative kind of person but . . . I really [enjoyed] a bit of confrontation now and again when it [was] important,” she said.

However, her style was “not the way of UW meetings.” They were more “show and tell affairs,” according to Susan. But there was “this problem woman [who] asked difficult questions some times.” And she was next in line to be the board chair. Susan said that she conducted no campaign for the position. “I simply sat back to wait and see what was going to happen.”

What happened was “the most embarrassing, maddening experience . . . [Susan] had had.” Two men from the nominating committee came to her and said that they would like her as chair, “but [she was] going to have to change [her] ways.” No more questions. No more “pushing.” “In other words, hey, lady, if you want this plum, you’re going to have to act like our version of a quiet lady,” she said. “I felt that I wanted to be chairman because unless I was, I didn’t know when we’d get a woman who would be in that position.”

Susan told the two men that she could not “possibly change [her] style if it [was her] style [they were] objecting to because [her] style was [her].” In the end, the nominating committee did ask her to be the candidate for the chair. But Susan said, “It was awful. . . . I did say when they asked me, ‘You understand that I am who I am, and we shall have a fascinating year, but I cannot guarantee that it’s going to be peace and quiet.’” During her year as chairman, Susan said she did two things: “We changed the direction by changing the executive [director of UW] and put an emphasis on minority concerns.”

Susan was also on the board of the Grand Rapids Foundation as the representative of the Bank Clearinghouse, which, according to her, was a coalition of all the large banks and was an anachronism because they no longer exchanged money as they had in the past. At the time of the interview, according to Susan, the members of the Clearinghouse actually did nothing, except meet occasionally. A staff person was assigned each year “to be in charge.” Susan’s focus on that board was to be “supportive of new and unknown and somewhat seemingly inept . . . organizations.” She tried to offset the members who “would look at who was on the board and say, ‘Oh, George. Oh, yes, this has got to be a good one.’ There was a lot of old boys’ network going on in some of the requests that were granted,” she recalled. Nevertheless, Susan said, “I think that the work with the Grand Rapids Foundation was the most interesting of the volunteer

assignments that I've had because [I] had such an enormous scope of projects, groups that [I] came in contact with, and [I] really felt like [I] had a fairly broad view of what the community needed and what the community's responses were to some of those needs, and . . . it was a time of immense change."

In the early 1970s, after serving on the board of Butterworth Hospital, Susan was appointed by then Governor William Milliken to the State Board of Dentistry. She was the first woman and first non-dental member of that group. According to Susan, its focus was on general health and the same kinds of problems as medical groups. She was on that board for 8 years. She also served on the National Dental Association's long-range planning and other facility planning committee. At the time of this interview, Susan had been on the Health Corporation Board for 2 years.

In addition, at the time of this interview, Susan was serving on the board of the local chapter of the American Red Cross. Years before, after working on that pilot project for 6 months, she had volunteered for another 2 years. Then in 1984, she was asked to join the board. "There were some problems with the leadership, staff leadership at the chapter and with volunteers, and I often . . . am called in when there is something that has to be taken care of . . .," said Susan. At the time of this interview, she was in her last year as board chairperson, and then she had one more year on board.

Furthermore, at the time of this interview, Susan was still working at the family's small business. When she retired, Susan said she would "keep in touch with the community. I would have to do that. . . . I need to be plugged into a community. . . . I think there are things that need fixing, and I'd love to be a part of the growth and development. . . . I've always been interested in women. But . . . if women aren't interested in women, then no one's going to be because . . . it's the rare man who really worries about the fate of women. There are [some], . . . but not enough."