Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean. I'm a mostly retired reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations who is now volunteering for the Kansas Oral History Project. Today is September 26th, 2026. We're at the Washburn University School of Law to interview Bill Kurtis, one of its esteemed graduates, the same Bill Kurtis who in 1966 uttered that famous tornado warning to the citizens of Topeka, "For God's sake, take cover!" He was a student here at the time and a part-time member of the WIBW news team.

Kurtis didn't end up practicing law. He instead used his law degree to inform his coverage of several epic trials as a reporter for WBBM in Chicago and later CBS News. A native Kansan, Bill is back in his home state to speak at the Kansas Book Festival and to us.

The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans. It's supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. This interview is part of an ongoing series of conversations with notable Kansans. Our videographer today is former Kansas Representative Dave Heinemann. Welcome, Bill, and thanks so much for doing this.

Bill Kurtis: Thank you. My pleasure.

JM: You have a storied career. We're going to get to all that because there are fantastic stories. I read—I'm holding up a copy of your book now because I just reread this book, and it's very much worth reading. It's hard to put down.

BK: Thank you. Good.

JM: But I want to start kind of at the beginning. You came into this world in 1940. As you put it in the book, the Depression was winding down. We were about ready to jump into World War II. Your father was a Marine aviator.

BK: Yes.

JM: What a time to come into the world in that post-Depression era.

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BK: And then just a few months before Pearl Harbor.

JM: Right.

BK: The folks who were affected by the Depression, as so many were all their lives—that means they didn't like to spend a lot of money, but they were a wonderful family, of course. Once we got into the war, things changed completely. He was involved with instructing the young pilots in Pensacola. I was born in Pensacola. So, they sent me back to my grandmother on the farm in Wayside, Kansas, very near Independence. That's where I spent the war for four or five years, maybe more.

I remember some things at that age. A lot of it is confirmed by Kodak snapshots.

JM: And family stories.

BK: That's right. But I go back and think about what I can remember. I remember a threshing machine. There it is, that big dinosaur-shaped instrument that preceded combines because they would take it out, and they would cut the wheat, throw the wheat into the hopper, and take the chaff off, and the seeds would blow into the truck. Then the most important part was lunch.

JM: You described that in the book. I did some haying in my time down in southeast Kansas. The farm lunch was epic.

BK: Oh, epic. There were about twenty men who worked on the threshing team. One person could not combine the crop. When the bell rang, all twenty would head for the home place. The home place was a nice veranda—kind of porch—and out would come the food. When the men hit, they were covered with dirt and dust. They had been working in the fields, with a terrible thirst that they needed to quench, but nobody was going to wait and wash up because they were afraid the food would be gone.

I had five aunts. I was the only grandchild, so they'd let me watch. Out would come the deviled eggs, the persimmon pie. They had a franchise going with all the pies that they made. They would pass the dishes around, one man to another to another. The aunts were young, in their

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twenties. Any woman would have been just like Ann Blyth at the time, the movie star. The men couldn't take their eyes off of them. And then there was the food. Right down, they just ate everything.

JM: You said some of the dishes didn't make it past halfway down the table.

BK: Yes, to the end. It was so vivid—black-and-white checked plastic dining room tablecloths with the picnic tables, end on end, twenty at a time, every lunch. Of course, they loved to do it. The men were there, and they were happy, and all the men were happy just to see the girls.

JM: It evokes a real scene of community. It's much different today, obviously. You reference one person could do the work that twenty used to do, but it's a vivid memory in your mind, and that's the environment in which you had your earliest years. You grew up in that rural environment. You then I think moved around. You were a military family, right? But then you somehow returned to Independence for your high school years. Is that correct? Or just before then?

BK: I was thirteen before we moved off the base, Cherry Point, El Toro, for Marine squadrons where my dad was an aviator. We had the utility fence. So, it was like the Berlin Wall. And then when I got free, it was Independence, and my dad retired. He went to Emporia [State University] So did my mother. They met there. She was from Independence. He was from Hope, Kansas. They moved finally, and they wanted to do this to make sure that I got to high school in one place, and there it was. It was kind of history. I started there in junior high and then moved into high school.

JM: So, you went to high school. You were an Independence Bulldog, and you played football, and you later—we'll get into this in a second—you got your start in your broadcasting career not long after that, too. But you were a good athlete in high school.

BK: Pretty good.

JM: And that seemed important to you in reading your book, your coach in particular.

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BK: I was obsessed with it. These days, you'd be obsessed on drugs and alcohol. I was obsessed on football. I'd have dreams of playing at the NFL. That's how young the NFL was. The coach usually is the second adult figure [with close personal influence], after your dad. I worked for my dad for a summer baling hay and then the oil fields. But the coach was a hard-nosed guy, sort of like a drill instructor in the Marines. He had this notion. He said, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go someplace that you do like?" It made a lot of sense to me.

JM: An interesting way to put it. Not "Get out of here," just "Go someplace you'd like better."

BK: Yes. What I learned was I like this place, and I do want to make it here. I'm going to take all this stuff, the kicking in the shins, and some rough talk along the way. Everybody's with him. Once we got on the team and started having games and playing together, you know, in a small town, we had played together for three years by the time we got to the senior year, and we had good games and bad games.

JM: But you won a lot.

BK: Starting in my senior year, they went six seasons undefeated, primarily due to Kayo Emmot.

JM: That was the name of your coach.

BK: Yes. I've never forgotten it.

JM: And you were a good football player, the quarterback of your team, the linebacker on defense, but you got injured. You injured your back pretty severely in your senior year just at the very beginning of the season.

BK: Yes. Two things happened. One, when I was sixteen, I got a job at the local radio station.

JM: KIND.

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BK: Right. For the three years at least, maybe a fourth, that was the best experience I'd ever had in radio. One might think, "Oh, well, there it is. It's easy. It's laid out for you. You're going to be a broadcaster." It came so easy that it didn't enter my mind. My focus was on football.

So, we were playing Fort Scott my senior year, and I was quarterback, the second game. They had a halfback coming through, and I was linebacker. As I hit him low, two of my players, teammates, fell on my shoulders and compressed my vertebrae, which is not a small injury. Fortunately, I owe kind of everything to a young doctor who jumped over the fence came out to see me. I would have gone right on and ruined my vertebrae and my life because I was that focused into it, and he put his arm behind me and felt the muscles starting to form around the injury and said, "Nope, you're going to the hospital."

So, I went, and he fashioned a metal brace to keep me straight. It allowed me to wear it for three months and go back to school, not for high school football, but it healed. I went to Independence Community College for a year to play football. I'd say it was one of the turning points—so, I don't have football anymore? Well, what am I going to do?

I had a very nice part-time job at the radio station. So, I was able to focus on that with another mentor besides Kayo Emmot, and that mentor was the boss, Nelson Rupard. He owned the station, he, coming out of the Depression, had a habit of not paying the young men who were keeping him alive very much. Not that we wanted anything, $1.33 an hour. I've been thinking, what was the value? Well, it was the experience, you know, how to cue up records and rip and read. The experience was that it was kind of a one-on-one, personal training, and you knew you had responsibility. I was turning on the transmitter and getting everybody on the air for a while. You had a responsibility to go on the air, do a good job, not screw it up, not make a lot of mistakes, and for three years—he's got his hand on your shoulder, was some of the best experience I've ever had.

JM: I had a similar experience in Parsons in KLKC radio, and I loved every minute of it. I'd do the news in the morning. I'd go to the local cafe on the square. All the merchants from

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downtown would be having their coffee break and talking about—you felt central to your community. You really felt right in the middle of it all.

BK: I went on to CBS News [in New York] and did the morning news. We didn't even know we were on the air until I got on the plane to go home. Then everybody said "I'll see you in the morning" or something because you're removed up there. What happened with the radio station and with the small town of Independence was again this community that almost—it was a village. It helped raise the child. You have churches. You have the schools that are very good. You have wonderful teachers. Without even knowing it, they had their arms around you and were watching. If you got out of line, they'd tell your folks, not that I was out of line a lot.

I think that experience in a small town was better than when my dad was in the service, and I went to a 2,000-person high school, George Washington in Alexandria, Virginia. Well, you didn't know anybody. Nobody knew you. You were kind of lost. You did whatever you could. Maybe there's something good to say for that. You're really looking at the competition. But the proof of the pudding is whenever my Class of '58 goes back [to Independence] everyone says the same thing, "We're home."

JM: Right.

BK: We're home, and this is what home feels like.

JM: In the blessing of that smaller town experience, you played football. You are into theatre. You tried out debate, which you credit many, many years later as being a really important thing in your life. So, it did allow you lots of opportunities.

BK: Yes. You're picking and choosing, but you can also do everything and find out, "Do I like this?" I was in two rather major plays there, wrote for the newspaper, and had an interesting first sign that I might like to write. Laura Todd was the English teacher. Not beyond just teaching English, one morning we came in and she said, "I'm going to give you an assignment, and I want each of you to write an essay. You choose the occasion but write the essay and turn it in tomorrow."

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Well, I had just been to the KU Relays. I had short legs, so I did not do well at the KU Relays [in the 100-yard hurdles] but at least I went. I thought, "What am I going to write about?" The experience there, I could still see it in my mind. The pennants were flying along the track. People were in the stands. The bands were playing. Everybody was ready to go. You get down, putting your hands there on the starting line.

JM: On the cinderblock track in those days.

BK: Oh, yes, and waiting for the gun to go off, and then looking down, the hurdles, you could see right straight through and then going into that automatic run. She chose that to read to the class. I said, "I haven't thought about writing anything before that." It was the descriptions that caught her eye. When it came time to write a book, I had to "delearn" my television writing and pick up the print again.

JM: Yes, because you didn't have the pictures to help. You had to paint the picture with your words.

BK: For television, you eliminate the adverbs and the adjectives.

JM: You don't want to get in the way of the video.

BK: Write to picture. That's the first thing they say, "Write to picture." The picture is like the second or third guy in your little compound, writing for the exercise. And they had the pictures, and you don't want to repeat what you're seeing on the screen.

JM: Right.

BK: So, you learn to just massage it and give them a different line of information.

JM: You've lived a charmed life. You were the star of your English class, the quarterback of your high school football team, homecoming king, too, probably, right?

BK: Right.

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JM: From Independence, you head up to the big city of Lawrence to go to the University of Kansas. You met another mentor there at the station that I also got my start in at KANU, now Kansas Public Radio, Glenn Price.

BK: Glenn Price. He's probably the nicest man I've ever met.

JM: I got to know him a little bit. He was at the tail end of his career by the time I got there, but he was a nice man.

BK: One day at KANU, he asked if I wanted to go along on a remote that was a professor who was retiring in his eighties. He was going to give a final recital at Hoch [Auditorium].

JM: An organ recital.

BK: An organ recital. So, I went over. This was where Wilt Chamberlain played basketball in this huge auditorium. I got all settled. Glenn was behind me. The professor walks out and sits down at the organ. Suddenly, this loud screech of a noise comes out, and I thought maybe that's modern organ.

JM: Discordant music.

BK: I thought, "That's the lost chord. We found it." But Glenn said, "Something's wrong." [The professor] had had a heart attack and fell face first right into the keys, and every key startled. I jumped out, and Glenn took over, and we headed back to the studio. That was a shock in my line of experiences.

JM: You talk about coming from a small town and then being at KANU and playing classical music to this high-brow crowd of listeners. That was a different experience for you.

BK: I use it today. The pronunciations. You will remember we had the announce booth upstairs so you could see into a number of studios. A wonderful architect that they built the studio for. It was a station designed for the intellectuals at KU. But we had the jazz portion among the symphonies.

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JM: Dick Wright was there, probably. It wasn't your last stint at public radio. We'll get to that later. So KANU, and then you got more experience as a top-40 disc jockey at a station here in Topeka. So, you were just racking up the broadcast experience real serendipitously at the time.

BK: And I wanted to. I wanted to do everything. I did Little League baseball play by play in high school. I did the same thing for Independence Community College. I did part-time commercials. They didn't want to pay me anything at KLWN. Remember that?

JM: Yes.

BK: In Lawrence. I just wanted the experience and designed to—do I like this? Do I like sports? Do I like news? So, I ultimately chose news because sports sort of had a dead end after the last football game of the season. Then you're over for that season. But news was like a carousel. The carousel keeps moving. You go on and off, and that's journalism.

JM: So, you really had the building blocks. Let's acknowledge it, partially because of your voice. I had a friend named Mark Hamrick who got his start in high school at KGGF in Coffeyville and then went on to bigger and better things because he had a voice similar to yours.

BK: He was the president of the Press Club in Washington, DC.

JM: That's right. He was.

BK: But KTOP was the Top 40 station. It was really hot in Topeka— #1 in the market. They had all the slogans. It was KTOP, 1490 on the dial, and they changed my name because of the deep voice to Tony. They thought that would be more appealing to their teen audience. "From Tony Kurtis, we'll go to J. Jazzmo Bop, Professor of the College of Knowledge at KTOP at midnight with the sonoramic cruiser #9 reporting in." They had everything. It sounds like a lot of fun, and it was.

JM: For a while.

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BK: For a while. And then about six months in, the same records, the same patter, the same commercials, I was going out of my mind just with the repetition and dullness, really, and not making the world a better place.

JM: It was a great experience because you learned something about what you didn't want to keep doing.

BK: Exactly. Checking them off. So, I went to WIBW. I broke my contract and went over to WIBW, the TV station.

JM: In Topeka.

BK: Actually, I did an interview with Michael Jordan once. He's actually a smart guy. I said, "What's success? How do you become a success?" He said, "Well, first of all, you assess your talents." So, I had a deep voice, and by assessment, I could do almost anything, and I chose something that contributes something. Then he said, "Then you'll have to kind of plan on where you want to go." For him, he wanted to be a champion. He didn't know six championships for the Bulls, but he said, "And then you figure out a way, a strategy to get there." He said, "For me, I knew I wasn't going to get there alone. I may be the best basketball player in the world, but alone, I can't"—

JM: See, nobody does, and that's a good lesson, too.

BK: Very. He said, "I'm going to get there, but I have to build a team myself or contribute to it for the owner and the managers." Well, that meant a lot. I was good at assessing what I had and what I didn't want to do, and I figured the rest would follow.

JM: Looking back, you might be able to articulate the same vision. That's the way it played out. You went to WIBW, and while you were there working part time, you went to law school. Again, you were interested in the law. You thought it might be something you wanted to do for a living, but you weren't sure. For a long time, you weren't sure whether you wanted to be a lawyer or a journalist.

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BK: Yes.

JM: But that's how you make up your mind, right?

BK: Yes, throughout college, I realized I haven't learned a thing here in terms of content. I did a very good job in getting that second parallel experience, the on-the-job training. I knew I had to do that. That was not available to the extent that I wanted it in college. So, I had that in my pocket. By the time I go to law school, it was great. I went into the Marine Reserves at the time. We had mandatory service. After the Marines, six months and working there at WIBW, again I wanted to do everything, and I did. I did the weather for two years. I was the weatherman for two years and an announcer, wherever I needed to be.

JM: While you were at WIBW and in law school, one of the things you emphasized in the book was your Moot Court experience because again, you were good at it. You talk about really being nationally recognized and going up in Moot Court. Was it Moot Court or debate—it might have been debate later on that you were famous for not using any notes?

BK: That was Moot Court. To get there, it adds to the strategy, we didn't have debate at Independence High School. We didn't have a swimming pool. Not that we were poor. We were rich in other things. So, I knew that I needed that talent and experience at least. So, at KU, I enrolled in the debate class with the freshmen. That's a big deal. The other thing I learned was don't ever debate a woman. She'll beat you every time.

JM: Really?

BK: And that can apply to your marriage. You must do everything they say with a smile on your face. But then at WIBW, by the time I graduated—well first, the Moot Court. At that point, I didn't know how to study. I never learned. I was too busy with the things that were fun—part-time jobs, football, and I never really learned how to extract the knowledge from the book, the written word. So, I was not doing very well in law school, and I came upon this competition called Moot Court. They give you a debate kind of—

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JM: A scenario, yes.

BK: And you try the case. You have to study, to look at books, federal reports, shepardize it—I don't even know what it means these days, but shepardize it by going 500 years back to English common law and read from them all the opinions that have had any relation to the issue that you're studying. And, suddenly, it kind of clicked, and I liked it. I was on a treasure hunt, totally immersive. You thought about it night and day, and then you would get the preparation, like pearls that you can apply to your case and argue before a judge.

So, we went to St. Louis and Washington University and we presented our case. I said "we." There was another, actually a couple on the Moot Court team, but two of us went. We didn't know how we did. The judges were pretty rough. We had a Supreme Court justice, Harry Blackman, who was very well-known at the time.

So, in comes the dinner at night, and they're going to announce the winners. And up comes Blackman who said, "Our winner is Horton Kurtis." That was my name at the time. It still is. "He is now being awarded the best oral argument for this competition."

Well, you could have shot me in the head, and I would have been walking out the door. I was so high. I had no idea. Neither did my partner. But as we leave, I say to myself, "You know, maybe I should be a lawyer. Maybe I'm not the bumbler that I think I am."

So, I started thinking that way. I was coming up to a pivot point in my career, my life, and that was, do I stay in broadcasting? I had ten years' experience part time, or do I accept a job with a law firm?

By the time senior year rolls around, I accepted the job with a law firm.

JM: Wichita law firm.

BK: Yes. John Frank and Pat Kelly. They wanted a trial man. Well, who better than the oral argument champion?

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JM: You were married at this time and thought that would be a safe career.

BK: That's right.

JM: And then fate intervened in June of 1966.

BK: Did it ever. I had already made the decision. I was going to be a lawyer in Wichita, but I wasn't sure. There's broadcasting that I had the talent for. The news director, Tom Parmley, asked me as we were studying for the bar [exam] in a tax class, "I'm going on vacation. Could you fill in for me to do the 6:00 News?" I leave [class] early, and I filled in. I went on at 6:00, happy to leave tax review class and do the 6:00. The general manager said, "You'd better stick around. We have some high winds coming in from Manhattan, [Kansas]."

Little did we know it was a full-blown tornado that had hit Manhattan. We just thought some roofs had blown off.

JM: And you didn't have the kind of modern equipment in those days. You made a big point of that. You really had, until it got to you, you had no idea what was heading Topeka's way.

BK: Absolutely. We had our own spotters that we would send out. They would work for us and civil defense. There were civil defense sirens that didn't go off for our warning. The communication was a two-way radio. That was about it. The satellite—we hadn't walked on the moon yet—and no satellite truck like we have today.

So, time passes, time within that half hour, and we're coming up to 7:00, and Charlie says, "Well, you'd better go stand in front of the camera. We know it's going to dissipate. They always do, but we'll give the warning anyway. We don't want to go in too far into the show because that would upset people." It was *Lost in Space*.

I'm standing there, and we have Ed Rutherford who was the cameraman.

JM: Mr. Ed. I knew him, too. A cameraman for WIBW for many, many years.

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BK: That you believe.

JM: Yes. He calls in and he says, "We have a tornado on the ground." On the far side of Burnett's Mound, and, of course, we all think, "Well, if it goes over Burnett's Mound, the old Indian mound, the Indian myth was that it would hit the mound and then dissipate." But it didn't. So, we waited after that first report for a second report to confirm it. The second report, it wiped out two apartment complexes. Charlie said, "Give the warning." So, suddenly, twenty-six years old, there's no manual you follow. I was thinking, "Should I cuss?" I've got to break through—

JM: An urgency.

BK: Apathy that people have. Do I cuss or do what? Well, I just go with my gut and said, "For God's sake, take cover" with an urgency that communicated very clearly as the fellow who wrote a book, Mr. Menninger said, "Bill Kurtis stepped through the television camera and was able to talk directly and sincerely." So, everybody got the message.

JM: That just came to you in the moment?

BK: It just came. Then we would go ahead and we were on the air 24 hours. It was that moment that determined the safety of everybody except for seventeen people who died. It was the most destructive tornado at the time in the country. And those five words would determine the next sixty years of my life in a career in broadcasting. So, I had to write the letter to the law firm and say, "I can't come now." They understood because everybody thought Topeka had been wiped out. We know what happened. A lot of it was.

So, I'm now essentially without a job although WIBW made me a program director even in the weeks after this happened, I went ahead and took the bar and passed the bar. I sent out my tapes as we do in the broadcasting business.

JM: When you sent them, I was intrigued by this. You didn't mess around with Wichita. You sent them to major markets.

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BK: Yes. New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami, Los Angeles.

JM: Big stations.

BK: Yes, because that's where I wanted to be, and I knew that's where I had to be if I wanted to work at the level—

JM: The Michael Jordan championship thing.

BK: Yes. I knew that much. I had an offer from WBBM in Chicago. I said, "Oh, my god. Here's the second largest market in"—I passed through there headed for bootcamp, but I didn't know anything. So, I accepted and tied my activities up in Topeka, put my wife and six-month-old baby in a Nash Rambler, Tom Mix Rambler [Dealership] and pulled a U-Haul trailer out of Kansas.

JM: And headed to the Windy City.

BK: On the Yellow Brick Road.

JM: That happened very quickly after—wasn't it a matter of months?

BK: Three months.

JM: Three months, and you were in Chicago.

BK: Three months. So, I arrived in Chicago. I didn't know where I was going. I got to the lake. I thought it was a parking lot because it was so dark. I had to wait until the morning to realize here's a body of water that I can't see across, Lake Michigan, and started working.

My first job as a full-time news reporter for television, my first story assigned—I walked into the newsroom—[was a surprise]. Most of them were old newspaper guys working with what now we would call primitive communication on film—processing film, editing film. They said, "We want you to

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cover this trial." "Well, okay, what is it?" Well, Richard Speck had just paralyzed the city because he had killed eight student nurses. It was the biggest one in the country.

JM: It was national news, a sensational crime.

BK: So, I swallowed and went on. I applied myself like Moot Court.

JM: Yes.

BK: I realized that reporting is kind of like that. It's immersive. You have to get the facts accurate. You have to get them on the air fast and well written. Anyway, so we got into it. As the trial starts and I get in deeper, I realize—I was the only one to pick it up because of my law degree—that there are two landmark cases that are going to be important to this trial that nobody knows about, just handed down by the [US] Supreme Court. One was *Miranda* [*Miranda v. Arizona,* 384 U.S. 436 (1966)], the Miranda Rights, and the other was "Fair Trial and the Free Press" [*Sheppard v. Maxwell*, 384 U.S. 333 (1966)].

Well, we were preparing "Fair Trial and the Free Press" as an issue for the next year's Moot Court. So, I had a little to do with that. The *Miranda* thing, and I'm saying to myself, it's the "whatever you say can be held against you" rule.

JM: Speck had not been Mirandized.

BK: I realized, "has he been given his rights?" Well, in fact, he hadn't. What do I do? Do I raise it with the judge? I was too green to say anything but waited for it to play a role and it never did.

JM: And the Fair Trial and the Free Press issue was other trials that had preceded this one had been made into circuses by the media presence and everything else. So, those issues were converging at that very time that that trial was taking place in Chicago, and you as an attorney had an insight into those things. You talk about in the book how you kind of unwittingly—at some point, you did clue into it. You kind of were the first specialized legal reporter, a reporter

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with a law degree who could report on those trials and so forth in a way that maybe other journalists couldn't.

BK: Absolutely. It was my dream in trying to make up my mind—do I go into broadcasting or the other? I figured out, "Well, maybe I could combine law and broadcasting." There were only three others in the country, and they were covering the Supreme Court. That was kind of out of possibility. I had forgotten about it, but it was still in the back of my planning.

JM: Well, to depart from our linear track through your career because it's apropos to what you just talked about, you ended up covering several epic trials. You covered the Chicago 7 trial in the aftermath of the riots of the 1968 Democratic Convention. Then you left WBBM for a time to be assigned to CBS's West Coast bureau, and you covered the Manson trial, Charlie Manson and his cult following and the murder trial. You covered some of the biggest trials of the 20th century.

BK: And then Angela Davis who was the biggest at her time. For the Manson trial, it was almost the same. I was the junior correspondent. The senior guys who should have been covering the Manson trial didn't want to do it because they had just gone through the Sirhan Sirhan trial, Bobby Kennedy's killer.

JM: Assassin.

BK: It was boring most of the time.

JM: It tied you down to one story for a long period of time.

BK: Exactly. And we were at a time when everybody wanted to do the environment. We were covering twelve states, Hawaii, Alaska. So, I don't blame them. Anyway, they assigned me. They said, "Look, New York doesn't really want to do it. It's just another murder story. Don't feel bad. You're going to be on the air with [Walter] Cronkite for the one story at least, but then probably they won't pick it up." "Okay, fine. I'll go on to something else."

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I got in there and kind of made friends. The other thing that the law degree does is you can talk the language of the players. So, Vincent Bugliosi was the prosecutor. I was befriended by him. "Here's a guy who knows what we're talking about in having to prove that even though Charlie was never at a crime scene, he could still"—

JM: Be responsible for what his disciples did.

BK: He ordered them in. So, I went on. I covered it at the Hall of Justice in LA. We had twelve reporters in the courtroom, and then networks, three networks, the local stations. O. J. Simpson would have 3,000 with the satellite trucks, becoming a circus really.

I realized that—I forget how I did—the first witness, Vince told me that's who he was going to call [as his first witness who] usually lays out the case, the murders, and what the prosecution will prove. Her name was Linda Kasabian. She was a very cute flower child who was part of the cult, part of the murder group, but she dropped out. I think she did. She wasn't there during the actual killing, but she knew it all.

On comes her testimony. It was so gripping about this group of—this strange cult. We didn't even know it was a cult at the time, but a man who had turned them into zombies, kids who went to Girl Scouts and church, like all of us. How did he make killers out of these people who did in fact go in and slaughter five people with twenty-seven stab wounds for Sharon Tate.

Anyway, she goes on and goes through the first day of testimony, and it is so riveting that the entire country is hooked, maybe the world. She would go on for twelve days, giving her testimony. After the first day, the [Cronkite show] called to say, "We'll want another piece." "Oh, how many would that be?" "Well, every day that's she's going to be on the air, and you are there for the trial."

The senior correspondents tried to suddenly take over.

JM: They changed their minds suddenly.

BK: They changed their mind.

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JM: Terry Drinkwater and Bob Stout.

BK: Bill Stout, yes. That's exactly right. But New York, I don't know who was in my corner back there, but they said, "No, he's doing a good job."

JM: "Kurtis has got this one."

BK: Yes.

JM: Aside from the trials you covered, I was intrigued. One of the stories you talked about, and you're still fairly new to WBBM at the time, was befriending Tokyo Rose [Iva Toguri D'Aquino].

BK: Yes.

JM: And understanding, other reporters had tried to get her to tell her story. You took a different tack. You went into the grocery store she was working at, and you just, over time, kept going in for soy sauce or something else to earn her trust. And eventually she decided she wanted to talk to you about it. She was a US citizen who had gone to Japan to visit an ailing relative. She essentially got trapped there when the war started.

BK: Yes.

JM: Was put on the radio essentially against her will and doing programming for some American prisoners of war. She was prosecuted in this country after the war unfairly. Does that sum it up?

BK: Yes, very well. She was betrayed by the press. When we occupied Japan, the press wanted to meet two people: Tojo [Hideki Tojo] who they'd heard so much about and Tokyo Rose. She was appealing. In fact, there was never a broadcaster named Toyo Rose. But they went into Radio Tokyo—

JM: That's what the GIs called her.

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BK: Yes, called her, and on two-way radio, shortwave radio, they broadcast indeed all over the Pacific. It never did it reach the US. So, whoever they designated as Tokyo Rose would get the—

JM: Ostensibly though the point was to make American GIs homesick.

BK: Yes.

JM: Because she just would play music and—

BK: She had a wonderful little voice. She was from LA, graduated from UCLA, wanted to be a doctor, and had convinced me that she had a story that really should be told, had not been told before. She was convicted of treason.

JM: She spent six years in prison.

BK: Yes, but got off [a ten-year sentence] on good [behavior], and then she went back to Chicago and spent the rest of her time there.

You're right. I did go in—I knew it was a joke that the editors would send a new cub reporter—"Go down and interview Tokyo Rose," knowing that she had not given an interview since the war.

So, I went in. She was a cute woman. We really became friends. I think it was a month after I popped the question. I said, "You know, you have a story that should be told." She wanted to tell it because she felt ashamed within her Japanese family and for her father. She thought she brought dishonor on him, and she finally said yes.

So, I did the interview. From the book, everybody picks out that story because I don't think everybody knows—

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JM: Just the way you approached her and the patience you had. You didn't charge in there, demanding an interview. You kind of sized her up and decided she'd been burned before, and you weren't going to do that to her.

BK: I let her talk and tell her story. I did a half-hour documentary that's now in the Library of Congress so it's open to everyone, and it's out there. Suddenly, it's out there. And it was the beginning of my documentaries.

JM: That you say many times in the book that is your favorite thing to do.

BK: Yes, indeed. We became very good friend. In my kids' life, she was a charming great-aunt and lived to be eighty, in her eighties.

JM: You stayed friends.

BK: Yes, we certainly did.

JM: There are so many things we could talk about in terms of your journalistic career and the stories you did because you did—you went to Chernobyl a couple of times, but you point out in the book that what you thought was your biggest story was when you broke the Agent Orange story, the defoliate that was used in Vietnam. You did a documentary at WBBM about the health effects of that on not only American GIs, but later on, the Vietnamese people. That was your story, and you had to go up against the US Army and the Veterans Department, everything, who denied that Agent Orange was the culprit.

BK: And denied it for the next fifty years. Using the law degree from Washburn gave me the tools to essentially prosecute the case. There were forty years of research from farmers who used these two chemicals, 2,4D and 2,4,5-T, to take the leaves off the trees and kill those hedge trees all around the Flint Hills. I had actually used it with my dad out spraying the trees.

JM: In a less concentrated version of it, as it turned out.

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BK: Yes, indeed. So, I had to prove three things that usually would stop an investigative reporter in their tracks. One, I had to prove that men through their sperm could actually cause birth defects. Usually up to that time and still a lot of them believe only women could cause that in the first three months of pregnancy. Then how were they exposed and who got it among the Armed Services? Well, the chemical companies were coming at me, saying, "Look, we have this, and we can prove—the research says that it's harmless to people." But on the other hand, I'm talking to the GIs and Marines who are coming back. "Well, wait a minute. We were in the field." Usually the defoliate takes several weeks to react. It's a hormone that causes the leaves to grow faster. The veterans said, "We saw it. We were sprayed with it and saw it dripping off the leaves in two hours." Well, who do you believe? The VA, the quote government or the best evidence which according to my law training was from someone actually on the scene.

JM: The eyewitnesses.

BK: Yes, and the lessons of the lawyers. So, we made our—there was one point. I guess I come to these important, epic moments. Five chemists and lawyers were sent by the chemical companies. They wanted to talk to me. "We want to talk to the guy who broke the story, the smart guy." I'll never forget my first question, "Do you say that forty years of research shows that it's harmless to people—your research says that? Well, what about the research that you've done recently on human beings?" Quiet. They hadn't done any. So, right away, we have incompetence. From that moment on, I was in the position of strength.

JM: You took the documentary to Congress, a Congressman from Illinois.

BK: Yes. They wanted to show it to the Armed Services Committee, and CBS set it up and filled the viewing room. The government had given them the word and said, "It's just a small local station where the story came out of. If it were big, why, the networks would have it."

So, they rolled the film. Everybody's sitting around. Usually, they send the staff members because their bosses don't want to spend the time, the big guys. So, they were still talking [when

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the film rolled]. Well, in the documentary, I had interviewed a [veteran] from Mattoon, Illinois. We were doing it in the living room. His five-year-old son came in, and he stood by Daddy while he gave the interview and put his hand on his knee. We could see, the cameraman and I, the tip of his little finger dangling off in a congenital defect held by the skin. I really didn't plan it like this although I knew it was a blockbuster video. And we came to that point in the screening.

JM: That was a moment where everybody paid attention.

BK: Yes. The oxygen went out of the room. It went silent. This is a hundred people. From that moment, everybody was on my side and realized, "Oh, my god. What have we done?" The implication was "We sprayed the defoliant over millions of acres, but we wanted to get the enemy," forgetting that it was also falling on our own soldiers. If true, we were conducting biological warfare, chemical warfare and just our own incompetence.

Well, it was then a legal fight. At first, they were ready and promised to give everybody compensation who was complaining of these things, but still there was no proof of the connection, the causal connection. But there was enough—once you broadcast journalism, print, or the other. And, we had this Congressman who invited me down, he said, "You know, sometimes truth has its own voice, and you'd better listen."

So, we were listening, and the months turned into years. The Congress got into it. They had a lawsuit of $180 million, which was pennies [and amounted to only a couple thousand dollars for the veterans in the lawsuit]. Anyway, let me jump ahead fifty years. It's the most consistent story to come—as a matter of fact, I'd say the big stories coming out of Vietnam are two—one is Agent Orange because they've compensated 630,000 for Agent Orange poison.

JM: Because of the work you did.

BK: Yes.

JM: You still get emotional about that.

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BK: I do.

JM: It was such an impact.

BK: Every time. That's what you want as a journalist. You want the truth, and you want to have an impact.

JM: Yes.

BK: All these guys, they may still die from prostate cancer, but at least the government has to compensate. At the time, we had to prove that they served in Vietnam, served up near Pleiku and Da Nang so they could have seen the spray come down. Now all they have to prove is that they set one foot in Vietnam.

JM: That leads me to a question that I hadn't planned to ask until, but the power of journalism when done well and the times that we're living in now, and the fact that when I got into reporting, I got in the post-Watergate years when everybody wanted to be a journalist for the right reasons, for the reasons that you did it. And now it just seems like the world has changed so much. Too many journalistic outlets are failing. The power to force that kind of recognition and to get the truth out there in a way to a very divided country, it just seems like it's a completely different world than the one that you and I worked in when we were reporting.

BK: Well, we knew the rules. There were rules. There were rights that we lived by. It's the First Amendment to the Constitution. We have someone in the presidency who doesn't believe in the Constitution, apparently. I don't think he's ever read it. This is the document that gives the president authority to be president, Congress to vote, the judicial system to reside in the Supreme Court, oh, yes, and we forgot, we need a way to check on their actions so we know whether they've done the right thing or the wrong thing.

JM: The so-called Fourth Estate.

BK: The Fourth Estate with the First Amendment.

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JM: Right.

BK: So, take that away. We have gone through the fight. Take that away, and you don't have a Constitution. And without a Constitution, you don't have a country. So, in addition to having to work upstream, there's somebody working against you who's in the White House, we have to deal with all of the technological changes. There's satellites now that can come to you from the frontline, in the frontlines, and we're all still after the truth. Can you trust the government? No, not if it's coming out of the White House. And that rolls downhill. Who can you trust?

JM: And too much of news today is entertainment and not news.

BK: Yes.

JM: We didn't even get into the fact that you kind of reinvented the way local news was delivered when you went back to WBBM, but our time is getting short, and I did want to touch on the fact that you had a separate career beyond your journalistic career. You went Hollywood on us. It was classic. You were the narrator in the movie, "Anchorman". You went back and forth about whether you wanted to do that. I love the line in your book when you said, "Come on. You're not Edward R. Murrow. Go ahead and give it a shot."

BK: Yes.

JM: But you had a great time doing that.

BK: I was afraid my career was gone because newsmen didn't do movies.

JM: I know.

BK: On the other hand, I was retired. News isn't what it used to be. This was not going to be a documentary. My wife, Donna LaPietra, who is my executive producer, we called around to our friends and said, "Hey, am I going to throw away my career?" So, I was a little scared when it came out. It was not a documentary about it. It was a platform for Will Ferrell to do his thing as a comedian, and it was a lot of fun.

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JM: I thought your touch added a lot to that movie.

BK: They wanted the solid, real anchorman that they could play off of.

JM: The voice.

BK: The voice! We became friends. And the line, it's only seventeen seconds, "There was a time, a time before cable when only men read the news. And in San Diego, that man was Ron Burgundy." A helicopter comes down, white shoes. "His voice could make a wolverine purr."

JM: That's a great line.

BK: "He wore suits better than Sinatra," and from that point, it goes on.

JM: One of the things that got you the job was when you were reading the script, you laughed, and they were so pleased that their lines were actually evoking laughter from you.

BK: I couldn't hold it back.

JM: I loved the scene in the movie where he plays the jazz flute. It's just farcical. But beyond that then, you did a long stint on National Public Radio on the show, *Wait Wait…Don't Tell Me!*, a news quiz kind of a comedy program, a great show. I love it. You were the straight man on that show for how long?

BK: Twelve years. Peter Sagal was a friend, and when Carl Kasell retired—

JM: Another man with a resonant voice.

BK: Yes, and NPR, stalwart. He asked me if I would fill in for a day. Well, a day turned into twelve years because I got laughter.

JM: You were great. And the writers started writing you lines, too.

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BK: Yes. My favorite was, "My voice is so smooth, it started your aunt Sally's sexual awakening."

JM: Yes, that was in the book.

BK: There's one line after another like that. Now the audience is waiting.

JM: Yes, for the line.

BK: Yes.

JM: You had a great time there, too.

BK: Oh, yes. It was a lot of fun. Peter tries to explain that you have to have humor as well as the seriousness, that there is good to come from comedy.

JM: Again, another lesson. One of the things you point out that you learned there is that it's another way to convey news to people. With a little humor, they pay attention. It resonates in a way that it doesn't if you're just giving it straight to them from the anchor desk.

BK: I get more reaction from *Wait Wait…Don't Tell Me!* than anything else I've done

JM: Yes.

BK: The other stuff is boring.

JM: Again, from that smart NPR audience.

BK: Yes. We have a lot of fun with it.

JM: Bill Kurtis, this has been an absolute pleasure for me to do. We could go on forever, but you have a schedule to keep today at the book festival, and I want to keep you on time. But I can't tell you how much we appreciate you taking some time for us.

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BK: Anybody from Parsons, [Kansas] is a friend.

JM: Listen, thank you. It's been a joy for me. Thanks

BK: Thanks.

[End of File]

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