

Interviewee: Joan Ganz Cooney

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Interviewer: Sharon Zane

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Q: I was looking through the transcript and I thought it would be interesting if you could just talk a little bit about, from your own background what interests and experience led you into the whole field of TV programming.

Cooney: Well actually the experience that I had did not point the way because I majored in education in college. I went to Washington right out of college and worked for the State Department as a clerk typist in the foreign student exchange program. I just wanted to see what it was like to live in Washington and work for the Federal Government. I had a friend doing the same thing so we did it together. And then I went out to Phoenix and worked on the local newspaper in order to save enough money to move to New York. When I came to New York I thought I would probably work in print, but of course this great new medium of television was blossoming. The year was late 1953 I came to New York. And so while I interviewed at news organizations, print news, and was offered a job in fact at the *New York Times* on their women's page, but I didn't want to do that, I went to work at RCA and then transferred down to NBC and became a publicist for soap operas which was what I was offered and happy to have. What qualified me was the newspaper work. You couldn't get a publicity job in New York if you hadn't worked on a newspaper, and then I went on to work for the U.S. Steel Corporation on their show, "The U.S. Steel Hour" so there was nothing that really pointed the way except my passion which was to be in educational television. When I heard there was such a thing, there wasn't a station in New York, but I heard about WGBH in Boston and became obsessed with going into education television. It

just hit me as exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I don't mean because of the education degree I had, it was that I wanted to see the medium do constructive things and I could see that that was really the way. Finally [in 1962] the Educational Broadcasting Corporation acquired Channel 13 which was an entertainment, or regular station, licensed in New Jersey, and after a court battle the non-profit Educational Broadcasting Corporation acquired it, and the second I saw that in the newspapers I started calling people saying, "Do you know anyone at Channel 13 that I could interview?" And finally I found a friend who knew Dick Heffner who was head of the station, and was general manager of the station and so I went in and said, "I want to do the publicity for Channel 13. Can I have that job?" And he said, "No, I have someone already doing that. I need producers." And I said, "Oh I could do that too." And I knew I could. What he wanted was -- These were mainly talking head programs. Thirteen had very little money, and they, he wanted a show put on of debates, in a format called the Court of Reason which was two advocates, one for each side of the question, and three judges. And I had spent a lot of time helping *Partisan Review* raise money, and working in the Democratic Reform movement writing publicity releases for them as a volunteer, and so I knew who was who and I was [also] a great reader and so I knew what the issues were and so I said, "I don't know all the people personally that you would have on the air, but I know what the issues are and I know who the people are who espouse what positions on what issues. I can do that show." And somehow he believed me and I took, I was making twelve thousand dollars a year at U.S. Steel Corporation and he said, "You'd have to take a cut in pay," and so I was cut to nine thousand a year and I had a thousand dollars in the bank and I figured I would spend, I'd need a hundred dollars more a month to live, but by the time I ran out of money I would get a raise and that's just the way it worked out. But all during this period at Thirteen, which was the next five years, where I graduated from Court of Reason and talking head

shows to little documentaries, and became fascinated through, through a person named Tim [Timothy J.] Cooney who was to become my first husband. He was in the city government and he would call me every now and then, just as a producer at Thirteen, we barely knew each other, to say there's a really interesting adult literacy project in Harlem. And so I did a little documentary about adult illiterates learning to read in Harlem. And then he called one day and said, "Martin Deutsch is, with federal money, conducting a little program for little children in Harlem, young children," he said, "three and four year olds." And he said it's a pilot for a big government program that may be coming on stream. Now it wasn't called Head Start at that time, nobody knew Head Start was coming on-stream but the federal government had started financing certain child development people, Martin Deutsch being one of them, to see if [it would help them if] you brought in four year olds for an enrichment program, cognitively oriented at that time. All of Head Start was not cognitive, as it developed, but initially this was, it was fairly cognitively oriented. And so I went up to see Martin Deutsch and his wife who ran this little [program], what was a precursor to Head Start, and I did a little documentary on it called "A Chance At The Beginning," and it became -- Head Start, when it started a few months later, bought a hundred and twenty five prints of the program to use as training films for their teachers. So I had become deeply involved -- I also did a program about teenagers in Harlem in a federally funded program called HARYOU. I had become absolutely involved intellectually and spiritually with the Civil Rights Movement and with the educational deficit that poverty created. I was not necessarily focused on young children though. I mean if Lloyd Morrisett at Carnegie had said would you be interested in doing a program for teenagers, I would have been dumb enough to say yes and the reason I say dumb enough is that it's almost impossible, once you get to the teen years, even past eight or nine years old, to be dealing with a whole universe of kids who are in pretty much the same place scholastically,

educationally. The socioeconomic groups start to separate, so that the knowledge of a ten year old in an upper middle class home in private schools is going to be a lot greater than a child in the lower socioeconomic groups in, let us say, a not very good public school. So pre-schoolers are the great group to do television for, if you want to reach the entire universe of children regardless of socioeconomic status. So when Lloyd was eventually to ask me -- he and Mary Morrisett, his wife, and I had become friends, and then my husband, by then I was married to Tim Cooney, the four of became friends, and at a dinner party at our apartment one night, he heard my boss, Lewis Freedman, talk about the untapped potential of television as a teacher. Now unbeknownst to me, Lloyd, I mean Carnegie, was financing child development research with people like Jerome Bruner and so on, and so Lloyd was thinking about the early child development research they were doing. He had become a father after ten years of marriage. He and Mary had a baby and then they had another baby two years later. So suddenly he was a father of young children. He knew that Carnegie -- he was responsible I believe for Carnegie's doing this child development research. Something clicked in his mind because I didn't realize his daughters were at home watching test patterns as he discovered at six in the morning waiting for some program to come on. And when the program came on it usually wasn't very good.

Q: Well what was some of the programming for children at that time and would it be considered educational at that time or --

Cooney: At that time the programming for children, I believe the only one that you could call constructive, not educational but really constructive as we would understand that term, was "Captain Kangaroo" which was on CBS every morning for an hour. And no, it had no followers in the networks; nobody else was doing anything like that. There were cartoons

on Saturday morning, and probably some in maybe on some station or another in the late day, and slapstick stuff was on in the late day but nothing appropriate for children except "Captain Kangaroo." There had been in the 50s a program on NBC called "Ding Dong School" for pre-schoolers that Francis Horowitz [had hosted], which lasted a few years, but it was off the air by the early 60s and now I had done, I did the study for Carnegie in 1966 that led to "Sesame Street." By then it was only "Captain Kangaroo."

Q: And when you say constructive versus educational the distinction would be --

Cooney: The distinction between, in my view, between constructive and educational is constructive is a show that is going to increase the imagination of your children, going to entertain your children, it's a safe place for the children to be, it's a nice little show where there's funny stuff you know, humorous stuff going on, and little things being taught but not with any curricula, not curriculum based. There's no educational advisors. "Sesame Street" had, beneath the form of merriment and entertainment, a very well constructed curriculum, and we had a board of advisors, and we had constructed a curriculum that was laced all the way through that program. Almost everything that was done on "Sesame Street" was done for an educational reason.

Q: So what you're saying is television had not been used really up until that time, with maybe one exception, as an educational --

Cooney: That's right. It was not -- I think even to this day there are many people that don't consider it, who are in it, and viewers as well, that don't consider it an educational medium, but some of us saw it had great potential for education and, certainly educational

television was premised on the idea that people could learn from it. Not only were they teaching you about science and so, public television has science programs, all those things, and did in its early days, but actually it [commercial television] had shows like “Sunrise Semester,” or the networks, someone was even putting on [college] courses early in the morning. Educational television was putting on sometimes language courses, sometimes painting courses. But it was education in the broadest sense of the word rather than curriculum based. Even educational television was not curriculum based, but it did have a purpose. Every program had a purpose. Our show, every segment had a purpose. The show was laced with purpose. And that was a kind of first that curriculum was set by a board of advisors, that a research department was put together that worked hand in glove with the producers, and you could not tell the difference between Ed Palmer who was head of our research division, and Dave Connell who was executive producer of “Sesame Street.” If you had heard them talking you would not have been able to ascertain which one was the producer and which was one was the researcher -- They were utter partners. And in fact one of the humorous things that happened along the way was I remember a producer saying, “Well what would be the educational purpose?” to Ed. And Ed said, “We’re doing a television show for heavens sake. We have to have children watch. We can’t just be hitting them over the head with education.” So you had the producers becoming more educational than the researchers. We also had the Educational Testing Service as an independent entity doing what was called “summative evaluation,” where children were pre- and post-tested after a season of “Sesame Street” to see if they learned what we wanted them to learn, which were letters, counting to ten, sound of letters, certain concepts. It was quite a simple curriculum that first season, but ETS did the [summative] work.

Q: Let’s just go back because I think we truncated the story of the dinner party and then

the subsequent birth of “Sesame Street” if you would tell that story.

Cooney: The dinner party? You want me to go back on that? The famous dinner party was [when] I was a producer at Channel 13, and a friend of Lloyd Morrisett’s and Mary Morrisett’s, and my husband Tim Cooney was also at this dinner party, was the Morrisetts and Lewis Freedman who was my boss at Thirteen, head of programming, a stunning and dramatic and brilliant man. Ann Bement was also there. She was my assistant. She was my associate producer at Channel Thirteen. So there were six of us, and Lewis started talking about the great educa -- the untapped potential of TV as an educator. And he was so stunning and so persuasive, and so interesting in talking about it that something clicked in Lloyd’s mind. Unbeknownst to me Carnegie was financing this child development work with various researchers, how children learn. And he was the father of two very young daughters. And as I say something clicked in his mind and few days later he called and asked if Lewis Freedman and I would come over to Carnegie and meet with him and Barbara and Margaret Mahoney. I believe that was the group. So there were five of us in that room where Lloyd talked about the possibility of Carnegie financing a little study, a little three month study where a researcher, or the investigator would go around the country talking to various child development people that Carnegie would provide a list of and that would be added to as time went on, because one leads to another. Would we be interested, Lewis and me? And Lewis said, “Well Joan wouldn’t be interested, she’s a public affairs producer,” and I remember saying, “Oh yes I would,” and I didn’t know it until that moment that I would be interested. I just suddenly saw that I could do little documentaries on Channel 13 for the rest of my life and have no impact on the affairs of the world or on poverty, and on alleviating poverty, and helping people. So I suddenly saw that this was a way of making television do something for the people that needed the help. And

it all just flashed before me, I mean it really was a kind of St. Paul on the highway. I just saw it so clearly. And, but after I said, "Oh yes I would be interested," it died because Lewis was determined to keep me as a public affairs producer at Channel 13. So he said to Lloyd, "Well let me think about it and maybe I'll come up with somebody who might do this investigation for Carnegie." So I was chewing my nails as Lewis was suggesting somebody who would not have been right, really not right. It was someone he didn't really care if she was tied up for a few months. It was the worst kind of decision. It was like solving two problems. And [a few days later] my husband was going to have lunch with Lloyd on an unrelated matter and he said, "Do you want me to tell Lloyd that you are interested because this is sort of going to flake away if somebody doesn't step in here?" and I said, "Yes, tell him." And I never told Lewis. Lewis is no longer [alive, he] died two or three years ago and I never told him how this happened. But my husband said to Lloyd, "Joan *is* interested in doing the investigation for Carnegie." So Lloyd called Lewis and said, "I've decided we want Joan to do the investigation," so he foreclosed the idea of somebody else. And so Carnegie gave a fifteen thousand dollar grant to Channel 13 to cover my expense and my salary for three months, and provide me with an assistant to help me. And I went all over the country, and to Canada, talking to various people about how they would feel about a television show to do real pre-school education. And whether it was Ann Marie Roeper in Michigan who runs a school for gifted children, or Carl Bereites who ran the most dramatic of the Head Starts out in Colorado, dramatic because it was really cognitive, unabashedly, unmitigatedly cognitive. And whether it was all the range of people they were said, "Absolutely. Try it, try a television show. It certainly can't hurt and it may help." We kept saying can television teach. I mean that was the question: the potential uses of television in pre-school education. The real question behind that title was can television teach. Well we knew the answer. I knew the answer right away. Every child in



America was singing beer commercials. Now where had they learned beer commercials? Every, a lot of children in America were walking into supermarkets and identifying products by having seen "Cheer" on the television screen, or "Wonderbread" on the screen, and you had four and five year old kids saying, "Wonderbread, Cheers" etc. So to me it was an absolute no brainer but we had to take it one step at a time. And the first was Lloyd was very brilliant in figuring out how to do this, how to get the consensus of the educators and the child development people, and then how to get, then he, I took another month after I came back from my travels and wrote the report at home. I never went near the office. And Lloyd would call, you know, once every week or so and say, "Tell me how you're laying out the chapters?" I would go through that. He'd say, "Perfect, go." I would, I had given him a bottom line which was there was huge, a total consensus for this, to try this, among all these people that would mean something in the world of child development and certainly to Carnegie trustees and Carnegie's executives. So I sent the report called "The Potential Uses of Television in Pre-school Education" to Lloyd, I would say in probably October, and there was instant interest. It was quite stunning the -- it was so logical. It was called, I remember Mac Bundy calling it the revolutionary, no the pioneering report and the revolutionary report. There was nothing revolutionary about it. In a way it was the most conservative thing in the world to say why don't we teach children letters and numbers, and that kind of thing using television. But it was one of those Tolstoy I think said, "Great ideas are always the simple ones." It was a simple and great idea. So the report, it was like I was a genius and I wasn't. That was what was so humorous to me about it was that it all seemed so obvious to me even, from day one it seemed so obvious to me. And I think to Lloyd because he was seeing his children watch television so he certainly got it, but you can't say, "Gee, you know, my gut tells me this will work." That isn't how the world works, the world of foundations and government. So he, let's see, the report was very well received

at Carnegie. Channel 13 did not know what to make of it and did not really bid very hard on the project, because they just didn't quite understand it. So Alan Pifer and Lloyd said to me, "We really think you ought to leave Channel 13 and come to Carnegie for a year. We'll guarantee you a year's employment at Carnegie and see where this goes." But you're going to be constrained about who to recommend should administer such a project, all of that if you're working at Channel 13 you can't say I think NET ought to do it, which was the big program distributor financed by The Ford Foundation. So I went to work at Carnegie and by then Mac Bundy had seen the report and liked it. Champ Ward at Ford had not liked it, had not thought it worth much but the secretary of Ford Foundation, Howard Dresner read it and he ran over, he told me, he ran over to Mac's office and said, "You read this because it's going to get lost here, it's just being discarded by our education department." Champ Ward years later said, "Boy was I wrong." It was very cute. So Mac got very interested, Mac Bundy was a great man, a great leader at the foundation, at The Ford Foundation, and a copy of the report was sent to Harold Howe as well, and he expressed some interest. So then it became clear that what we had to do was write-- [Interruption] Harold Howe, called Doc, he was always called "Doc" Howe. I'm not even sure he had a Ph.D. but he was called "Doc" nonetheless, Harold Howe III was [United States] Commissioner of Education. He would not be called Secretary of Education but at the time it was the U.S. Office of Education in HEW, Health, Education & Welfare. He, Harold Howe, expressed interest and so Lloyd said, "We need someone to help us write a very, a sales document," a slick proposal in other words and so I knew this writer, Linda Gottlieb and asked her if she'd come in and work with me. And Lloyd and Barbara Finberg would ask us questions as if they were funders, which they were, but they were playing the role of other funders, outside funders, and so then Linda and I would leave and go and talk, and talk, and talk, and then she would write down what we decided. So we ended up with a very tight, very readable

little sales, sales document because it really was promoting the idea, but it told exactly how it would be set up. I went home one night and figured out exactly what departments should be there, there should be research, production, outreach, and PR administration. I made, we decided to make the recommendation that NET administer the project because we were asking just for eighteen months of funding, two years. We were guaranteeing everybody two years employment and the idea, if the show failed, the question was should we have had a lot of lawyers and accountants in a free-standing operation, so my suggestion was that we be a semi-autonomous part of NET, housed separately, but that they supply the lawyers and accountants, and be the body that can be 501-C3, that could receive the funding. So all of that was in this proposal and it went down to Lloyd and I took it down to Harold Howe, Doc, called "Doc", Doc Howe at the U.S. Office of Education. I remember sitting around a table and Doc went around the table to each of his people at various departments each of them said, "We don't have the money, this isn't for us, this isn't for us, this isn't for us, this isn't for us." And when it got to Doc he said, "The ayes have it," the old Lincoln cabinet story. He said, "Listen, don't tell me you all don't have research money squirreled away somewhere, you know you do, I do even. We'll call this a research project," which is what it should have been called. I mean that was a great idea. And he said, "We'll raise some money from Head Start and other groups within HEW that have an interest." [He turned to] Lou [Louis] Hausman, a man sitting on his right who was his aide and was a refugee from commercial television of all things, he said, "Lou, you raise the money from other agencies, we will supply half of the budget for this project." At the time I'm not sure we knew it was, that that meant four million dollars from government. We -- I don't -- at the time I think we didn't know if this was a six or seven or eight million dollar project. We hadn't run those numbers yet to figure out what it was. But they said, "We didn't want more than fifty percent from government. We didn't want them controlling it or telling us

that we couldn't go any higher on certain salaries and so on." They have a lot of rules, but at fifty percent they would not control the project. Ford Foundation decided based on that to come in, based on the fact that the train was leaving the station clearly and that this was the project. Ford had an interest in having a reading program for inner-city youngsters which was never a realistic idea. You can't have something called "The Poor Children's Hour" on television and, and, but they really, they kept saying [they wanted] a reading program for ghetto children, and finally Doc Howe called Mac Bundy and said, "Look there isn't enough money for two projects; you really ought to come in on this." And so Mac, I think himself, made the decision to do that. They came in with, for two hundred and fifty thousand and said if the seminars went well [they would give us more]. We were proposing to do five or six seminars that summer so that the producers could learn from the experts what was to be taught in the show. Again I pretty much knew what the show would teach because I had talked to all these people. I knew what was recommended by the experts, but the producers didn't, and they needed to be taken through the process. Joe Raposo, the musician, the music man, the music writer who wrote the brilliant music for "Sesame Street" came to some of those. Jim Henson, the puppeteer who -- these producers that I had hired who were all ex- "Captain Kangaroo" producers came in and went through the seminars and got Jim Henson involved. They knew him and they talked him into coming aboard. Gerry Lesser at Harvard became the chairman of our board of advisors, and an extremely critical person to this process because he was putting together the seminars. And he really rolled up his sleeves and, you know, he got into production issues, he got into everything. He was just fabulous. Everyone was fabulous. We got Ed Palmer from Oregon to head the research, we got Bob Hatch from the Peace Corps to head the outreach and publicity, and he was a genius at it. We got Evelyn [Y.] Davis to come in and do the community outreach work with Bob [Robert] Hatch doing the publicity and promotion --

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Q: Let's just go back for a minute. Maybe we could clarify, talk a little bit more about the role of the funders during this period and the structure that was put into place.

Cooney: The role of the funders, once it was decided, the financing was decided, that there would be Carnegie, Ford, and the U.S. Office of Education, and it was hoped the Corporation for Public Broadcasting which hadn't quite been invented, or hadn't come into being in March of '68 but was to come into being at the end of the year and we knew that. We were aware and we also believed that they would be one, become one of the funders, and they did. The role of the funders, it was decided that CTW would be a semi-autonomous arm of NET and that I would report to Jack White who was president of NET and through him to the board of NET, and because it was semi autonomous it was decided that Lloyd Morrisett would represent Carnegie, and Lou Hausman would represent the U.S. Office of Education, and Ed [Edward] Meade, who was head of the education department at Ford would represent Ford, and that Jack White would represent NET on this little board. It wasn't quite a board, but this little group, and that I would be the fifth member of this group and that it would only meet if there was a problem to meet on, and I don't recall it ever meeting because we just didn't have those kinds of problems. I was in touch with Lloyd [and] if he felt he had something to tell them, he would call and tell them, but everything really went pretty smoothly from the time that we decided to be part of NET, and to have them do the administration. No one interfered at all. The funders, Jack White, nobody had anything much to say about what we were doing once we had, we had promised the funders we would hold curriculum meetings, seminars to set -- a three day one on

arithmetic, a three day one on pre-reading skills, another one on perception, another one on affect, conceptual, there was on I think concepts, but it doesn't matter. [For] each one Gerry Lesser had experts come and talk back and forth with the producers for three days and we -- and there was someone transcribing, taking notes all the time about what was said. The report on those seminars went to the funders so that they knew they had been held, and they were invited to attend them if they wished as audience, not as participants. I don't recall them ever raising a question or an issue. It's not very proper for funders to get into -- once they fund something they don't really get involved. They can refuse to go on with the funding if they don't like what's happening. They can quietly raise issues on the side but it was so acknowledged and understood that Gerry Lesser was a real pro with real standing in the child development world, so with him putting these seminars together [and] with Educational Testing Service attending these seminars to set, to begin to think about what they were going to test for in the summative evaluation, with Ed Palmer thinking about the formative evaluation as it's called, the research that's done as you go along. Now Carnegie's role was extremely crucial in this research area because they knew the people. They knew the child development people. Gerry Lesser came aboard because of Lloyd Morrisett. I don't think he would have come otherwise. So while the U.S. Office of Education and Ford [and Carnegie all] wanted research, and so when Carnegie played the key role there in [selecting] the people and in a sense the emphasis and how it was set up, but after that, the funders were not involved in substance. They were given reports on what was going on. I was in touch with Lloyd frequently, regularly, telling him who I'd hired, how it was going. And he was a great advisor and great mentor to the project and to me. But it was pretty much from the beginning [that] we were so lucky in the people we got, and so lucky in Gerry Lesser that there wasn't any reason for the funders to be very involved.

Q: Was the setting of curriculum a fairly smooth process? Or was there significant dissension in that?

Cooney: I don't think there was dissension. There were certainly arguments back and forth between producers and researchers and advisors in these meetings because there was great give and take. It was robust discussion, and robust argument. And I remember at one point Sam Gibbon, a producer, shouting out, "Why don't you guys speak English?" to the experts. So there was that kind of thing. What we did not actually -- each seminar decided what was important in the area. Then it meant Gerry Lesser and Ed Palmer, and ETS and the producers and myself sat around a table day after day after all this was over and, and played what Gerry Lesser called "Bet Your Asterisk" which was what are we really going to teach here? And so we knew that we would be really not smart to come up with ten, twelve things that we announced we were going to teach, that it was -- Frank Pace who was the chairman of the newly created Corporation for Public Broadcasting said to me and Dave Connell, "Pick four or five things you know you can do or think you can do and do them. Don't try to do ten or twelve things," and so we really did this asterisk game day after day until we decided that we would teach counting one to ten. It turned out that was, we could have done counting one to twenty and we did the second season right away. That turned out to be a very easy goal to accomplish. We would teach the alphabet, the recitation of the alphabet, recognition of letters, recognition of numbers when you see them, certain sounds of letters, maybe sounds, because we were phonetic, we believed that phonics was the way to go, that learning the sounds of letters was useful. We did not have really affective goals at the time. We had cognitive ones because those are the easiest to prove in testing. The show was always affective in that clearly the "Sesame Street" characters were so wonderful

to each other, it was an integrated show, it was the first show that really worked at integration, at not only black and white men and women but Muppets and human beings. So it was a show that really taught kindness to one another but this, these were not stated aims that we were testing for. It wasn't until the second season that we decided to see if we could teach the concept of cooperation, and actually have had many affective goals since, but that first season it was really basically cognitive that we were trying to prove we could do because the government absolutely had to have proof that these goals were achieved by the show, these cognitive goals.

Q: What about the decisions on the creative elements, how these kinds of goals were going to be accomplished, the development of "Sesame Street"?

Cooney: Well that was really interesting. In the seminars the experts and researchers and so on would come up with desirable things and ideas, production ideas. And I remember one said, "You know it would be really nice to show a child being smarter than the adults so that you're modeling really smart kids." And I said, "God, we'd be run out of town is the problem to show a kid putting, it would be like putting grown-ups down." But out of that came Bert and Ernie; that Bert and Ernie are peers, they're the same age, but Bert is clearly the sort of stiff adult and Ernie is this, clearly this funny little kid. And Ernie is forever topping Bert. So that was how that idea got in there. Someone else along the way said that it would be nice to show a child as a child is, that they are awkward, and they're asking questions a lot. And that with Big Bird, the reason he is so popular with kids is he is a kid, and he is awkward, and he doesn't know a lot, and he's forever asking, "What do I do, you know how do you do, how do you get, where are Susan and Gordon?" I mean he gets lost and he has imaginary friends and real friends, so Big Bird really came out of that. I'm



trying to think of what other characters, Oscar the Grouch. One of the experts at the seminar said, "You know children ought to be taught that it's okay to be, not to be happy all the time, and not to be pleasant all the time. If they're in a bad mood that's okay, that's acceptable." So Oscar the Grouch came out of that. But each seminar would break down into sub-groups in which they were charged with coming up with show ideas, experts working with producers so that very specific show ideas for animations, and live action films, studio pieces, and Muppets, as it turned out Muppets, because of these ideas Muppets were born. Jim Henson sketched Big Bird at a meeting. We have those sketches. So we were -- we were beginning to see it out of these seminars because they were real ideas that were real show ideas. We said frequently to them, "You can't do the, don't try to tell us what can be done in a classroom. You've got to remember this is on television. So it was decided you shouldn't sequence anything because children would be watching sporadically. They might watch for three days in a row and then go, not see it again for a week. So we had -- it wasn't let's teach "A" the first day, "B" the second day, "C", it was that we would teach everything at the same time. So a number of decisions were made with the educators based on the fact that this was television, not the classroom.

Q: Such as the ones you just described. Where did the name "Sesame Street" come from?

Cooney: Well it was born very painfully. We couldn't come up with a name, and the head of our promotion and publicity, Bob Hatch said, "How do you expect me to promote something with no name? And so finally writers were asked, writers, or anyone who wished, were asked to submit ideas and so that where about fifty titles were on a page, and we decided that the least objectionable one on the page was something called "Sesame Street." I worried a lot because we knew we were going to have an inner city street that,

that we had decided. I'd said how can you say sesame-- that would look like see-same to a child that read. How would they know even how to pronounce it? All of those worries were for naught. The truth is if you have a very popular show, it probably doesn't matter what you call it; people are going to learn to pronounce it. But we went with it because it was the least, it seemed like the least bad title. It came from "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" of open sesame, and we felt that we were opening children to knowledge and education.

Q: I'd like to jump back before we talk about that first program. One other thing: I know you had a very large, for that time, promotional budget, and what were some of the things that you were looking to do with this promotional budget that you had?

Cooney: We did have a -- we were an eight million dollar project and we budgeted over nine hundred thousand dollars for promotion and outreach, and what I mean by promotion and outreach is traditional publicity and promotion as well as outreach into the inner cities. Public television in those days, and still is, largely on UHF [Ultra High Frequency] channels, but nowadays with cable it doesn't matter if you're on UHF. You get a UHF channel as easily as you get a VHF [Very High Frequency] channel. Not true in those days. You really had to work with the set and move the antenna around and so on to get a clear picture. Washington D.C. for example was UHF, very important markets. Fortunately Boston and New York were VHF. L.A., very important market, UHF. So many people thought we could not register a Neilson number, meaning, registering a number means you come in [with a] one or higher, and we, many bet that we would be below minimal standards, it's called BMS in Neilson, Neilson E's, and it means that it's just too low to, too small an audience, to register a number. Bob Hatch and Evelyn Davis, Bob Hatch on the promotion side, promotion and publicity, and Evelyn Davis in the inner city outreach,

worked together to try to reach every parent, caretaker, YMCA, YWCA, churches, every place they could possibly reach. Schools were very important, day care centers, any place we could find where we could say this show is coming was reached. Bob Hatch did not have problems getting us an immense amount of publicity in the regular press. There was an immense interest in this show from the beginning. It was financed in such a way that it caught the attention of the world. Eight million dollars would be like thirty million of more today, and nothing like that had ever been spent on a children's program. The world was very attuned to poverty problems at that time, and to the, because of Head Start there was an immense focus on pre-school children. There was hope that you could, there was still hope in the air that you could make a big difference in the inner city problems with government programs and so on, so this had caught the attention of the world when it was announced front page *New York Times* in March of '68, so that it, we had no trouble getting the press interested. *Look Magazine* right away said that they would follow me around [for days, including to] a congressional hearing [in Washington]. This is all before the show went on the air. *Look Magazine* did a big feature on me and what we were trying to do. I spent a lot of time being interviewed. I mean it was very troubling because you had to take time out from work to do it, but we had to do it. But even before it went on the air we had no problems getting the conventional regular press covering us. So we weren't so worried about reaching middle class children, given the amount of press we were getting, but we were very worried about inner-city children and rural poor. And we worked, and worked, and worked at that and absolutely achieved it. In the early 70s we had Yankolovitch do a survey of the inner cities, in Chicago, another VHF market, by the way, and New York, [which] showed saturation of inner city children watching "Sesame Street." It's often said to me, "Well you know I'm sure you've reached the middle class but what about the poor?" And I say the poor do not know that it's not their program. You go to the inner cities and

they are as aware of Big Bird as anybody else in America is. I went to the live show at Madison Square Garden with my baby grandchild, my sixteen, then fourteen or fifteen month old grandchild a few months ago, and it was in the theater at Madison Square Garden, a live action show of "Sesame Street" that travels around the country, and it was, there were literally thousands of children in that auditorium. I don't know what it holds maybe two thousand, or fifteen hundred. And I would say that maybe my grandchild was the only white child in the auditorium. There may have been five others but school groups would come in from all over, pre-school groups, and parents, and children, and it was all Latino and African American, and I thought, "Boy, we did reach the poor and the less advantaged."

Q: What was the initial response to the first season?

Cooney: It was just unbelievable. It was like a swoosh that you can't describe. We went on the air and the phone then started ringing off the wall, with toy manufacturers for one thing. What none of us understood was the degree to which people see a way of making money out of anything that is this big a hit this fast. And the press was, almost without exception just fabulous on, it was like thank God. *Variety* had this big headline, "St. Joan gets Sesame Street on the air." And I've always been jokingly called St. Joan since, but the reason they called me St. Joan was it was as if the world had been waiting for this. I said, you know, the timing was incredible. This is the late 60s, it was 1969. Richard Nixon has been elected president, is president I guess. The election was in '68. Yes, he had been inaugurated. The cities had been burning, there had been riots following King's death, and Robert, and Robert Kennedy had been shot. And every night the TV set brought you bad news. I mean every night there was one more terrible piece of news, and finally, it was as if

the public was saying "So do something!" to the TV set, and one day they turned on the TV set and the TV set did something. And everyone understood that for a change TV was doing something. As I've said, only "Captain Kangaroo" was on the air for children. But it was, you know, a very middle class oriented program, and this was clearly meant for all kids right from day one, and the public got it. So the reception was immense of the public and the press for this. There were eventually carpers, critics and carpers in, one or two academics, two or three, and I was always asked about it, "What do you say to your critics?" You know in a funny way when it's pro one thousand to one [or two or three] against, you really don't pay a lot of, and I would always start to say what critics, and then I'd say, "Oh that." It was so minor compared to the huzzahs we were getting that we never paid a lot of attention except to respond. We always responded to criticism from sources that we respected, and there were those.

Q: Could you give an example of that?

Cooney: Well a man named Cooke took all of our research in the mid 70s and synthesized it in his own way and decided that we had widened the gap between the rich and the poor. And he had said we had promised to narrow the gap. I foolishly had talked about narrowing the gap before we went on the air which was very stupid on my part because obviously if you're bringing up the disadvantaged up to here, you're also moving the advantaged up so both socioeconomic groups moved at the same rate. The gap was still the same. What you had done, though, was get the lower socioeconomic groups to a literacy, to a point where they would be able to read, and that's what we said, finally we got clarified and said what we want to do is make sure that all children when they get to school can learn and have success in school. Some may have more than others but we want all

children to have success. Cooke said we had widened the gap. It was, our researchers believe it's a misreading of the data, that that is simply not correct. But he got -- any critic of ours got a lot of publicity, always got, I mean always got a little *New York Times* story and it was always picked up by *U.S.A Today*, you always saw it here and there, and it had a life. So we always responded but it always kind of made me laugh because in interviews I'd always be asked about quote our critics, and I would, you know, there'd be one at a time every three years. The Singers at Yale emerged as big critics. They're paid by another children's show. It was not a very, they were never, they never did full disclosure on their criticism. I don't question, by the way, the sincerity of some of the critics. Neal Postman at NYU [New York University] sincerely hates television, sincerely hates it. In some ways I think he hates the 20th century, but he's utterly sincere. So when he takes on "Sesame Street" I give it to him. I think that there have been, there has been a lowering of standards in the late 20th century, and I with him am sorry that mass media have lowered the standards, there's no question. "Sesame Street" I'm proud to say has kept very high standards.

Q: "Sesame Street" now is seen by children all over the world.

Cooney: All over the world.

Q: What would you say about that phenomenon and what you feel about the impact that that's having?

Cooney: The idea was a good one, and at the time that we were interested in educating four year olds, that idea was really penetrating all over. The Muppets created a universality

and made it very easy to adapt “Sesame Street” to other cultures. They are absolutely, they absolutely work in any language. It’s just extraordinary. And that, the foreign countries saw that right away. Animation obviously works in any language and can be dubbed. Live action films, ours have a universality and can be easily dubbed. So what we did was suggest that they do half hour versions, these foreign countries that wanted adaptations, and have actors from their own country. In Mexico and Latin America it’s called “Plaza Sesamo,” and instead of a street it’s a plaza and so their own characters are in the studio portions. They sometimes make their own animation because obviously the Arab world has a different alphabet, Russia has a different alphabet, Chinese have a different alphabet. So they can’t use our animations for letters and numbers. But they can use Muppet inserts, excuse me. Can we stop [the] tape for a minute?

[END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE]

Q: We were just talking about the phenomenal success of “Sesame Street” spreading to children all over the world. I would like to ask you to talk a little bit about the impact that you believe “Sesame Street” had had on educational television since that time and where we are today?

Cooney: Well “Sesame Street” had a huge impact on educational television. Carnegie Corporation of course had a huge impact itself because thanks to the Carnegie Commission educational television became public television, called public television after the Carnegie Commission Report recommended it, so Carnegie was really responsible for that name change. I am, in retrospect, not sure that was brilliant because I think the word “educational” probably differentiated public television in some ways that might have made

it easier to get government support but we'll never know. In any case I like the sound of public television better and it certainly was, seemed like a good idea at the time. The impact "Sesame Street" had on public television was to bring the first large audience to a public television show. By the time "Sesame Street" went on the air the network was in place, that is to say educational television had bicycled tapes around. It was called bicycling. You made X number of copies of every show and sent them out to X number of stations who aired them for a week, off and on, often repeating them several times, and then sent them onto the next group of stations. And that was called bicycling. It meant you couldn't promote a show nationally because you didn't even know that it would be on the same week in markets, much less the same day. Networking permitted everyone to see the same show at the same time, even if some stations put on "Sesame Street" at nine in the morning and some put it on at ten in the morning. Everyone had the same "Sesame Street" program the same day. So there, that was a huge impact that "Sesame Street" had on, that not only did we have a network but it brought a huge audience. No show had ever spent this kind of money on publicity and getting audience before in public broadcasting. And from then on public television saw itself as [a provider of children's programming], you see they had "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," so it now had two really fine children's shows. Mr. Rogers had started I think the year before "Sesame Street," or two years before, I'm just not sure whether it was a year or two. They began to add to that, they saw themselves as able to provide, to differentiate themselves and to have impact by providing good children's programming, and the Congress then understood what public television did that nobody else did, and so gave them money. Now Congress has never given them enough money, but nonetheless they [public television] wouldn't be around today, I don't think, if they hadn't had "Sesame Street." That became what was held up -- I've said it's held up as a crucifix is to a vampire. Every time Congress comes at public television Big Bird is held up and it is,



“Would you shoot this bird? Would you kill this bird?” And they always back off. So it is *the* icon of public broadcasting. That’s the impact it’s had on public broadcasting. Not only is, had it saved it many times, but it has caused other children’s programming to be on public television and made it the best program carrier in the nation for young children. That said, twenty five years later you began to see others, others [also] carrying better children’s programming, by that I mean Nickelodeon started caring about educational programming and now has a nice program on the air, very popular, called “Blue’s Clues.” More shows like “Barney” came into public television. Those shows might have gone to commercial television or never been invented, but it was noticed I think by, by producers that money could be made. “Sesame Street” supports itself with licensing, and --

Q: “Sesame Street” has supported itself through licensing for how many years?

Cooney: Since the early ‘80s. ‘81 or ‘82 the government was no longer involved. They were our last funder, outside funder. PBS gives us a fee for the programming. They pay about a quarter of the cost maybe of the program through license fees, or through a contract to pay part of the production. But out of twenty-two million dollars, maybe it’s three or four millions, four or five, it’s not a big part of the -- we support it basically. It was noticed that a popular children’s show particularly aimed at pre-schoolers, that there’s a licensing business that goes with that. So now you see much, many more programs on the air for children, some of them absolutely wonderful. “Arthur” is on public television based on a book series that was already had been around for years. “Barney”, I don’t happen to like the show very much but it’s very popular with kids and makes a lot of money for its producers, and a little for public television. They get a little bit of that. “Blue’s Clues” is on Nickelodeon. “Magic School Bus” was a wonderful program on public broadcasting, and Fox

bought it. Fox, which only does pretty much what I call hard core cartoons decided they wanted one educational program. Now they're just going to put it in re-runs and they'll wear it out. But it's a very good program and it really tells you a lot that Fox is interested in having an educational program on the air. So after twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven years, we're now on the air twenty-nine years, suddenly "Sesame Street" is paying off in that way. Why it didn't happen earlier I don't know. I think it wasn't noticed what a money maker children's programming can be, A. B, many, it's very expensive to do good children's production, and many producers I think said, "Well there's 'Sesame Street'." I mean I've heard many say that, networks and so on. They often argued that "Sesame Street" is on the air, why should we do anything else. Well that's sort of, that's a real cop out. In the first place children watch television at various times during the day, some of them watch more hours than one, they're entitled, there's nothing on on weekends, very little for children that's worthwhile. So our research shows that children are better off watching good educational programming than if they were watching no television at all. So parents who say to me, "We don't own a set and I don't let my child watch TV," I always say, "Well that's too bad for your child," that they ought to be allowed to watch 'Sesame Street' and 'Blue's Clues'," I don't mean just sitting for an hour or two, sitting for three hours watching these shows, but they will benefit from good educational programs. Even "Teletubbies" which is the controversial British program, the new one for very, very young children. It's aimed at children nine months to two years; it's got a little educational value. I would do it differently but it's got a little educational value in it. So now everyone wants to be able to say, "We're educational," and I don't know why the effect was so delayed but it certainly is "Sesame Street" that caused this to happen.

Q: Last question. The future. You were on the scene early, understanding what television

could do in terms of educating young children. The next fifty years with the technological revolution, do you think about that and how you can --

Cooney: The workshop has been very involved in the future. One, we have recently formed a partnership with Nickelodeon to create a third channel, a different, totally different channel called "Noggin" that will be a digital channel, as against regular cable. There will be digital cable, and that's thought it will be here sooner rather than later. Noggin will be available on certain regular cable channels too, and it will be a mixture of our library, "Sesame Street" repackaged in some way, "Electric Company" which Carnegie helped finance and helped get on the air two years after "Sesame Street." It was the same group of funders that came back in to do "Electric Company." It's a reading program for six to nine year olds, seven to nine year olds. It hasn't been on the air in years, and we'll repackage it for Noggin. "Three, Two, One Contact," and "Square One TV" will also be back and I think Carnegie financed, helped to finance either "Square One TV" or "Three, Two, One Contact." Those have been in retirement. One's a science program, one's a math program. They will be brought back on Noggin. And then Nickelodeon's library will be brought in and so it will start with these repackaged shows that have been on the air and we will gradually do new production. We are also investing a lot of money in the internet, and we will have a web, a big website of The Family Television Workshop that will be information for parents, and games for children, and games that parents can play together. But a lot of information for parents. And we do CD ROMs and that kind of thing. We've been doing those for years, various kinds of software. [And] we will continue to do old fashioned software -- books. [Books] are still the biggest thing, biggest toy for children. People forget that [with] little children, their first toy is this little soft book and they are devoted to their various books. We will continue to do a lot of that but we're very aware of the future and I think we're

there. I mean I think we've made, placed our bets correctly and are doing the right thing.

Q: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]