

Jean Houchins Cecil

Professor and Chair, Counselor Education

The University of Alabama

Tuscaloosa, AL

This was an interview with Dr. Debra C. Cobia as she reflected about the late Jean Cecil.

Acknowledgements and Introduction:

JB: *I would like to thank Dr. Debra C. Cobia for allowing time for this interview in July 2015. I would also express thanks to Dr. Morgan Kiper Riechel for conducting this interview. Dr. Cobia's interview offers some insight about a dedicated and respected counselor educator, Dr. Jean Cecil who served the counseling field for 28 years in various leadership capacities. Dr. Jean Cecil was on the forefront of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accreditation standards (see selected publications below). This interview offers a glimpse of her contributions. This version was approved by Dr. Cobia, prior to publication.*

MKR: *Joy Burnham and I have a few questions to ask you about Jean Cecil. Thank you so much for being willing to talk about her.*

DC: You're both welcome.

MKR: *We have interviewed about ten people over the past year. The interviews are on icons in counseling from the state of Alabama. Alright, we will jump right in here. Question number 1: When and where was she born?*

DC: I don't know the when, but she was born in West Virginia.

MKR: *What do you know about her early years? Her developmental years?*

DC: Well, I know that she had two brothers, and her father was a superintendent of schools. He might have been a principal for a while as well. So, she grew up, very much, in a family that valued education. She loved West Virginia, and she loved her childhood. She loved her family. When she talked about her childhood, it was a very idyllic time. I remember her typically talking about the fact that they were poor, as people in West

Virginia during the Depression were. But, they never really knew that. They were happy, and they had a very happy home-life. There were no real traumatic events in terms of development. I recall things being quite healthy...loving family...just a wonderful place to grow up.

MKR: *Do you have sense of the important influences in her life, or moments in her life that were kind of pillars in her development or life experience?*

DC: Well, as I said, her father was in education, and I think that his commitment to education and the part that played in her life was instrumental in everything that came thereafter. As well, she grew up in a time when women were not encouraged, necessarily, to pursue academic careers. However, she never had the sense from her family that there was something she couldn't do because she as a girl or woman. She participated in one of those summer institutes that began post-Sputnik and became a counselor and then became a guidance supervisor at her school district. She then decided to go on for a doctorate. I remember her telling me about someone saying to her, "Well, Jean, you know women are not professors." Then, she went on to become quite a prominent professor.

MKR: *Wow, that is a great story. Anything else about her early education that you think might have influenced her wanting to join the helping profession? Being a counselor, or counselor educator?*

DC: Jean was a math major, and she was really brilliant. She just had this phenomenal mind and part of that was a curiosity that never ended. Until the last day that I knew her, she was still curious about the world and what was going on around her. Her decision to become a counselor and then later a supervisor and educator probably grew out of her experiences as a teacher. Her desire to help and influence education more broadly for children, particularly underserved children. But then as she went to...I believe it was West Virginia University to get her doctorate, she became interested in assessment and diagnosis. I think she made a shift while there to wanting an academic career. Although, she always identified as a school counselor educator, she was very clinically grounded. Some of the best course work I had with her and some of the best conversations revolved around psychodynamic theory and assessment, Adlerian assessment, and so forth.

MKR: *When did she begin her professional career, do you have any dates...not specific dates...but just kind of general decades that we are talking about?*

DC: Let's see. She left The University of Alabama in 1990 or 1991. So she had been there for, I think, around 23 years. She came in the 60s, probably late 60s or early 70s.

MKR: *Does she ever talk any about the early years of counselor education in the state of Alabama?*

DC: Oh, yes...Often!

MKR: *What was your take on that? How have things changed?*

DC: Well, as with most counselor education programs, the profession in Alabama grew out of those summer institutes that were a result of the successful launching of Sputnik. They were intended to get kids interested in college, particularly in math and science. They ran a number of those at Alabama. Jean probably taught in some of those institutes. She had contacts all over the country related to those summer institutes. I have a very clear memory about a conversation I had with Jean about the profession in Alabama. She had worked diligently with the state department and tried to affect some significant changes particularly as elementary school counseling came into consciousness of the profession and also as we were moving away from the whole “guidance teacher” concept. During my time at Alabama, probably in 1989, we were having a conversation about whether the state would ever give up the requirement that people be teachers. Someone had called Jean and said, “Jean, won’t you please go to the state department and tell them that we need to revise this requirement. Jean said, “I’m not going back to the state department of Alabama”. And I said, “Really?” She (Jean) said, “No, I’ve been and I’ve been and I’ve been. You know, sometimes you just have to outlive somebody.” It was 20 years later that this was finally changed to permit well prepared school counselors from CACREP accredited programs to be certified without teaching experience. This change was largely due to Jean’s protégées who went on to lobby and lobby and lobby. I’m sorry she didn’t outlive them, but I’m glad some of us did.

MKR: *What else? As far as which theorists impacted her, you mentioned psychodynamic theory. Anything else that you would like to add about that?*

DC: She identified herself as socially-oriented psychoanalytic. So, she was strongly influenced by Freud but had much more of an Eriksonian spin with a real focus on healthy development. In that, she and Dr. Carl were quite different. They both had roots in the same formal school of thought. But, they each had a very different way of viewing the world through those psychodynamic lenses. So, it was always fun to have theoretical conversations with the two of them and hear those different perspectives and ways of looking at the world.

MKR: *What would you say has been her greatest impact on the profession? She’s done so much, but if you just picked out one or two things that have had the greatest, lasting impact.*

DC: I think her work in accreditation and being part of the initial standards development team for what eventually became CACREP probably moved the profession nationally forward more than any event in the history of counseling. She was a major force in that movement.

MKR: *You talked a little about her experience as a woman in higher education or at least thinking about getting a Ph.D. and becoming a professor. Did she ever talk to you, at all, about her experience as a woman in academia?*

DC: She did. I think she was very fortunate in the mentor with whom she related in West Virginia, Dr. Dana. He was strong in assessment, which I mentioned earlier that she really liked. He was so instrumental in continuing, almost like her father, to view her through a lens of “here’s an incredibly bright and capable person,” and she was so healthy. In his textbook, which is probably not used by anybody anymore, but it was a great textbook. He had case studies in there, and one of the cases that I read was so clearly about Jean. The case was just so healthy and bright. He had essentially done a big, thorough assessment of her and then reported on that assessment. He always treated her equally. Dr. Carl was also there at the same time. That’s how they met. They both worked a lot with Dr. Dana. So, she didn’t have a sense as she was getting her doctorate that being a woman was an obstacle. She said that she knew that she might not be able to get a job as a professor when she graduated, but if not she would go back to her work in the schools and that would be okay with her. After graduation, she got a job at the University of Alabama. When she told her department chair that she was going to get married, they brought Carl in to interview and hired him as well.

MKR: *That is love (laughs).*

DC: But, she really didn’t have a lot of patience or tolerance for women sitting around and complaining about what they didn’t have. She always just acted as if she could do anything, and she did. People responded to her in that way, too. I remember specifically when we would go, and we went many times through the years, to the women’s business network meetings. She was always very supportive of women, and almost every time we would walk out together, she would say that her experiences in higher ed were not the same as many of the women there. Again, she didn’t perceive or behave that being a woman limited her potential. She was a great role model for me both as a woman and as an academician.

MKR: *Such was a courageous woman.*

DC: Yeah, she was. Her early development and life experiences instilled in her that she could do whatever she wanted to do at a time when that wasn’t the message that women often got. She went on to do exactly what she wanted to do.

MKR: *Would you describe her as a trailblazer?*

DC: I would. Certainly, in the profession of counselor education, and I think as a woman in academia. She was the most influential professional role model that I had. Fortunately, for me we developed a close personal relationship as well. She also had mentees who are male, and they had exactly the same experience that I had. There was never any distinction between the advantages or disadvantages of being male or female. She was always very egalitarian.

MKR: *It is amazing how far we have come in just a couple of iterations. I am starting my third year as a professor, and it is just so interesting to me that after all of her work*

getting her Ph.D. that she was not sure if she could even get a job as a professor. She just kept working at it, and that 's amazing.

DC: I think one of the interesting points here is that she would have taken everything that she learned through her doctoral students back to school, and she would have made the same kind of difference there that she made in counselor education.

MKR: *Yeah, without a sense of bitterness or anything.*

DC: Right, just “this is what life is.”

MKR: *Yeah, just “make the most of it.”*

DC: Right, she always chose that, always. She always chose to be happy. It was a choice for her to be happy. If she encountered circumstances that she would like to change, she had a great attitude about those. Just like in the example I gave about the conversations regarding school counselor certification at the state department of education. She's like, “Okay, I've been there. I've done that. I've made every effort. I'm not angry, and I'm not going back. “

MKR: *Can you talk a little bit about her relationship with students? How she mentored? What was her style of working with students?*

DC: I can tell you about her relationship with me, not with a lot of other students. I came through the program with a very small cohort. There were two people in my class. I believe because I was in school counseling and because I was an artist as she was, we bonded. I had several people say to me through the years that she had mentees consistently across her career, but she wasn't the kind of person who had flocks of the students around her. There are some professors, and you will see them at meetings, and they will have a posse of students. That was not her style. Her mentoring relationship just emerged naturally out of mutual interest. I don't think you could ask for a better, stronger, more intellectual mentor. But, that wasn't what she sort of lived for. I mean, her style with me was always supportive and encouraging and incredibly challenging. I guess I came into the program right around the time that she had her first stroke. I was her doctoral graduate research assistant. The department was going through CACREP self-study at the time. So, I worked very closely with her, as well as with some of the other faculty, on some of the CACREP self-study. I shared her office. So, we had daily contact, and I wasn't just a graduate assistant; I was *the* departmental graduate assistant. I think just because of those circumstances, we meshed very well. She didn't have to challenge me to do my best, I wanted to be my best because I admired and respected her so much.

MKR: *Well it sounds like your mentoring relationship with her lasted beyond just your time as a student. Is that correct?*

DC: That's correct. She was able to stay at the university another year, and we continued some research that we began together. But, then she had a subsequent stroke. I spent a lot

of time with her and Dr. Carl both when they moved to West Virginia and afterwards. So, we continued to have a relationship when she no longer had the interest or capacity to be around professional issues. We would go out to the countryside of West Virginia and paint pictures and just do other things. So, it was really a wonderful relationship for me.

MKR: *Anything else that you would like to add about how she impacted you personally as a counseling professional?*

DC: Well, I have not had a class with her since 1989. Until the day I left the university in 2009, I continued to hear her and be guided by her voice. She had a very strong influence on me in so many ways. I can tell you one particular incident. We had, in one of our classes, another doctoral student who really struggled and struggled constantly to understand the content. So, one day I finally asked her, “Dr. Jean, how do you manage to stay so positive when you’re responding to him?” You know, as a student in the class, I would get frustrated, and I believe I would be as a counselor educator. She said, “Well, here’s my first thought: How can I help him understand in a way that also preserves his self-respect?” I remembered that often in my career. I can kind of hear her saying that when I would get impatient or think “oh gosh, I have said that five different ways! How can I say it again?” I would hear so clearly that refrain, and it helped me reframe or adopt a generosity of spirit that I didn’t always feel.

MKR: *Sounds like that is spoken as a true developmentalist, right? Challenge, but also provide support.*

DC: Absolutely.

MKR: *In terms of her legacy in the field, what do you think she would be most proud of?*

DC: Near the end of her career, she was awarded the *ACES Counselor Educator of the Year Award*. She was very proud of that. She won lots of awards, but the thing that she was most proud of was being a counselor educator. While she would have never personally sought that recognition, she was very pleased to receive it. ACES gave her the letters that people wrote about her. I remember how touched she was. Also, how pleased she was that people from different eras and different parts of the country who had different relationships with her, peers, mentees, etc. described her so consistently. The level of professionalism and commitment that she displayed and her personal style, her way of interacting with people (was evident in the letters). She was very pleased about that. I think that her work with ACES and her work particularly on accreditation were all major contributions to the profession. They all coalesced around that idea that being a counselor educator, a faculty member, means so much more than teaching classes. Of course, being a good teacher was important to her, but she really instilled in her students the importance of contributing to the profession and what it means to be a professional.

MKR: *Anything else that you would like to offer up about Jean?*

DC: I can't think of anything. I mean, we can talk accolades all day. You've gotten some of the most important facets of her personally and professionally with your questions.

MKR: *Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate you being willing to take our phone call today.*

DC: You're very welcome, and I look forward to reading about the project.

MKR: *Yes, absolutely.*

Selected Publications of Dr. Jean Cecil

Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1985). School counselors: An endangered species. *Alabama AICD Journal*, 12, 51-55

Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1986). Faculty perceptions of CACREP accreditation. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 25(3), 237-245.

Comas, R. E., & Cecil, J. H. (1986). Don't confuse me with the facts: I've already made up my mind. *AIACD Quarterly*.

Comas, R. E., Cecil, J. H., & Cecil, C. E. (1987). Using expert opinion to determine the professional development needs of school counselors. *The School Counselor*, 35(2), 81-87.

Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1987). *Development of strategies for the preservation of school counselor preparation programs: A monograph*. Alexandria, VA: AACD Foundation.
ERIC ED #CG 02084

Comas, R. E., & Cecil, J. H. (1987, Summer). SACTEC unanimously rejects option for school counselor certification proposed by AIACD, AISCD, and AIACES. *AIACD Quarterly*, 23(1), 1-10.

Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1987, Fall). SACES efforts spark national interest in school counseling issues. *AIACD Quarterly*, 23(2), 11.

Cecil, J. H., Comas, R. E., & Cecil, C. E. (1987). Program supervision: An issue in school counseling. *Alabama ACD Journal*, 13(2), 19-25.

Wilcoxon, S. A, Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1987). Student perceptions of accreditation of programs in counseling. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 27(2), 184-189.

Cecil, J. H., Havens, R. I., Moracco, J. C., Scott, N. A, Spooner, S. E., & Vaughn, C. M. (1987). CACREP accreditation intentions. *Counselor Education and Supervision*. 27(2), 174-183.

Deck, M. D., Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1988). School counselors in Alabama: An endangered species? *The ASCA Counselor*.

Cecil, J. H. (1988, Spring). School counseling interest network. *ACES Spectrum*, 13.

Winn, N. J., & Cecil, J. H. (1988). The decision to abort: Counseling issues to consider. *Journal of Counseling and Human Service Professions*, 2(2), 29-35.

Cecil, J. H., & Comas, R. E. (1988, Summer). Superintendents provide prompt response to counselor supply/demand survey. *AIACD Quarterly*, 24(1), p. 13.