

NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

DEBRA L. JOHNSON
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
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WRIGHT: Today is August 29th, 2012. This interview with Debra Johnson is being conducted for the NASA Johnson Space Center Oral History Project in Houston, Texas. Interviewer is Rebecca Wright, assisted by Sandra Johnson. Thank you again for finding time in your busy schedule for us. We'd like to begin with you sharing with us how you began your career here at Johnson Space Center.

JOHNSON: Many many years ago. Actually I started through the NASA co-op program. I was actually a sophomore at Texas Southern University [Houston, Texas]. I was approached about becoming a co-op student at NASA, and that's how I started here, as a sophomore in college. I stayed to finish my undergraduate degree, and was hired here at NASA in 1975. Then I went back to Texas Southern and completed my MBA in 1978. I've been here ever since.

WRIGHT: It was quite an ambitious goal in the late '80s to get an MBA, because those were really starting to become popular.

JOHNSON: Very popular back then, yes.

WRIGHT: So you knew you wanted to be in business, and wanted to stay here.

JOHNSON: I did. I knew I wanted to be in business. In fact my undergraduate was in business. When I came to NASA we had the option to rotate co-op through the Budget Office or the HR [Human Resources] Office or the Procurement Office. What always intrigued me about the Procurement Office is that you get to spend other people's money. So I knew that was the career for me. I came and actually co-opped and did all of my co-op tours through the Procurement Office. I went to Budget for one tour, then when they offered me a job I selected to come to do contracts here.

WRIGHT: Tell us about the first role, and then how that position evolved through the years.

JOHNSON: As a student I came in, and actually I was at the back of the Center in Building 419. That's when procurement was located in the back of the Center. I stayed out there for a couple of years buying, starting with the very beginning, buying basics: pens, Xerox paper, those type of functions. But it was a great place to learn the process. I've been so thankful for that now, that I came in and started at the back of the Center. I learned all about receiving products and buying them and following them all the way through from the time that you buy them to the time that you receive them to the time that they send an invoice to make sure it's what you actually bought that you paid for, and through the whole process. So, I actually started at the bottom and really learned my way all the way through.

WRIGHT: It's a big task. When you moved from the back, where were you assigned to next?

JOHNSON: After we were moved from the back, I was moved to the 225 Building. We thought that was really moving up in the world to be out in 225 right at the back where the Printing Office is, because we were closer to the front, to Building 1. I actually got to know a lot of people in the print plant because we were right next door to them. It really paid off. That's when I started realizing the benefit of relationships at all levels and all different people.

Some of those people that I made friends with when I was still a student in college, I was able to utilize those relationships when I came over to Building 1 and started doing large procurement projects. I needed somebody to help me get the printing out, and it was great to walk up there and know everybody in the print plant. They would take care of my products and move them up a little bit in the line. That's when I learned the value of having relationships. Most people target the top, but I learned the value of having relationships throughout all levels of the organization. That has always paid off.

WRIGHT: The Office of Procurement literally touches every aspect of the Center, doesn't it, one way or the other?

JOHNSON: It does. I always say this when I go talk to the SIL [Seminar in Leadership] classes and the SIM [Seminar in Management] classes, engineers and MOD [Mission Operations Directorate] and all the guys that work in the technical areas. Sooner or later you will cross procurement, because if you're the project manager, you have a program. You will have a budget, and you will want to spend that budget. That's where you'll cross procurement, sooner or later.

WRIGHT: What do you feel was part of your biggest promotion or your biggest change from working with the basics to moving more into a role of responsibility and authority as part of the Office of Procurement as you were working your way up to this position?

JOHNSON: I always tell people as I mentor people now and sponsor people, I tell them one of the things that you need to do is to set yourself apart. You need to do something that nobody else wants to do. You need to take on that job, the ugly job, and then be successful at it. People will always remember you for that.

But you need to be careful not to be the only one that does that forever, because if you are, they'll always keep you there. So as soon as you become the expert, you need to train someone else so that you can plan your exit. I've seen a lot of people that became specialists in areas. They were so unique that they couldn't lose them, so they were not available for promotion or doing different things. It's great to do something different. I took on a couple of ugly jobs throughout my career. One of them was small business.

In order to do small business, you have to learn the regular procurement regs [regulations] and then there's another reg. Most people just don't want to be bothered with it. Nobody wanted to do it, and I took that on, and just learned it and became an expert at it. So I was always called upon. No matter where they were, they would always say, "Well let's go ask Debra about small business." That set me aside and gave me a little bit different aspect than everybody else.

Then I started training other people, and I moved on to the next thing, which was ADP [Automated Data Processing] or IT [Information Technology], which nobody wanted to do because that required a lot of other work too. But throughout my year I tell people that the things

that will set you aside is everybody does a great job and that's great, but what makes you different from the others is you have to have something special going for you. Sometimes it's doing the ugly job nobody else wants to do.

WRIGHT: You're right. That's interesting. When you were talking about those, it made me think of one of the questions I really would like for you to share the information with us, because the depths of services that you give spread across both sides. You affect so many people in the public sector. Yet you have to maintain the government regulations as well. Talk about how you have moved yourself through that process where you are well schooled on both sides of those, and how you've managed to stay up. We know federal regulations never stay the same.

JOHNSON: When I took over this position eight years ago, one of the things I characterized us as is not just a procurement organization, but we're deal makers. That opens it up. We don't just write federal government contracts—we do write those—but we write commercial contracts, and we have for many years. In fact we have all of the international contracting that's done at the agency here at the Johnson Space Center. We have a contract with ESA, the European Space Agency, and Japan. We negotiate all those contracts here at the Johnson Space Center. So we do commercial contracting.

We've done the first Space Act Agreements with SpaceX and Orbital [Sciences]. Those were done here at the Johnson Space Center. Even the Commercial Crew Program now that's located at [NASA] Kennedy [Space Center, Florida, KSC], the deputy program manager is located here. Kennedy sends people down here for us to do the procurements and for them to

look over our shoulders, because we've become experts at that. It is a matter of looking ahead to see where we're going and then planting yourself there.

We have the ability to do government contracting if that's what we want. We can do commercial contracting. We can do Space Act Agreements. We can do barters; we can do hybrids. This is one of the things I love about bringing in the new people that we have coming in, that they're open, they're ready to do all of it. When I first got here we were strictly federal government contracting where you went by the regs and that's all we did. But we have learned that it takes all of that now to exist in this economy. That's what we do. We can do it all.

WRIGHT: What seemed to be the tipping point? Or at what point in what year did you start to see that that was where the movement was going?

JOHNSON: When I came to this building from working out at the other buildings I started doing program procurement—back then it was just Shuttle Program, then followed by the [International Space] Station Program—there were different needs. A lot of the things that we wanted to do were no longer available just from people that did government contracting. Sometimes they would say, "I don't want to sign a government contract." So we had to find other ways of doing things, like we bartered for an airplane before. I loved that. I love making deals. We had to learn to use those skills other than just what was required by the regulations, be innovative and creative. You don't have to follow the rules. What would you do? So, if you were going to go buy something on your personal [account], you would ask all these questions and try to cut these deals. We have the ability to do that now.

I love the fact that we can take government regulations and use those when we have to, but we can step away from those and let's start this agreement with a blank sheet of paper. We have some of those agreements also.

WRIGHT: What changed? Did the Congress have to change laws?

JOHNSON: No, I don't think they did. I think we have enough flexibility within our regulations now to do almost anything we want to. Except there are some—Congress says we can't contract with China—those are “thou shalt nots.” We can't get around those. But the how tos, I think with enough innovation, enough benchmarking, which is where we send people out benchmarking all the time. We benchmark DoD [Department of Defense] and we benchmark on traditional customers like Shell. I'm on a group of chief procurement officers across the city of Houston, and that includes people from Shell, Exxon Mobil, and the hospitals and the city of Houston. I listen to what they're doing and how they're doing things, and I have found out there's very few things that they do that we cannot do. We just haven't thought of them that way. So I think our regulations are opening up and that allows us enough flexibility to do what we have to to meet the new needs of the agency.

The agency is moving toward more commercial contracting. It's moving toward doing nontraditional things. As you know we have contractors in our facilities now. When I first got here back in the '70s that was unheard of, because these were government-only [buildings]. We didn't have a pool then, but as soon as we built the NBL [Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory, Sonny Carter Training Facility] that was for our astronauts only. Now we have a lot of commercial companies utilizing our pools. It took our ability to write those agreements to make that happen.

That means that we have to think outside the box, because they are not interested in doing a government contract. They're not interested in waiting a year to get one. They want it done right now. So it took us thinking differently.

But also being able to do the traditional contracting when we need to do that. So we can do it all. That's what makes us so flexible.

WRIGHT: What year did you take over as the Director?

JOHNSON: 2004. April 1st. April Fools' Day, 2004.

WRIGHT: That was a memorable day. Before that you were the Deputy Director.

JOHNSON: I was the Deputy Director.

WRIGHT: Were you also in that position able to start to suggest, recommend, move towards some of these trends that you have put in place?

JOHNSON: I think I was. I had a good Director that allowed me to be a participant and manage an organization. A lot of times the Director is consumed with it, because I'm in that role now, with taking care of up and out management. The deputy has a lot of down and in duties. That's when I had the leeway to sit back and look at what we were trending toward doing, and start preparing training opportunities to open our minds to think outside of government contracting. I think it really started in the deputy role.

WRIGHT: How long were you in that role?

JOHNSON: I was in the deputy role for seven years.

WRIGHT: That was a good learning, applying, and then ready to move. That was a good seven years. Well, now I'm going to have to go back and ask you to tell us how you bartered for that airplane. Give us the story behind what that is.

JOHNSON: Actually we have a group of people that support the Flight Crew Operations Directorate, FCO, and part of them are out at Ellington [Field, Houston] with all the T-38s. So those guys were actually doing it. I was the deputy at that time, but they approached us. There was a plane that we wanted that was owned by a company that was a foreign company. We couldn't go directly to them, so we had to go to someone to be the intermediary for us to get the plane from that person, from that company, make it American-owned, and then we went to get it from them. We had to set up an agreement to make all of those work. It was nice. I love it. Love doing those things. I love it when somebody walks in and they have a unique problem. If you just want to buy paper, anybody can do that. But if you come in and you have a unique problem that we have to figure out how to go do it, love it.

I got a call today from one of the directors. Steve [Stephen J.] Altemus called me up to talk about—he lives on the edge, and I love that, with [Project] Morpheus, and buying all the new things in what we're doing. "We want to do this, how can we do it?" That's strategizing. As the Director, a lot of times you don't get the opportunity to do that, because that's what the

people do. So when they call up and say, "I want to talk about strategizing a little bit," that is the beautiful thing about contracting, going out and trying to make it work.

WRIGHT: They've gotten smart enough now to pull you in at the beginning of their strategy.

JOHNSON: Isn't that wonderful? That is wonderful. We have evolved in procurement, and that I do think is a result of the last couple of Center Directors. We're a player at the table at the beginning, and they make sure of that. The way that the leadership works is it starts at the top. Mr. [Michael L.] Coats values procurement. Before him General [Jefferson D.] Howell valued procurement. They made sure that we were at the table at the beginning of the conversation. They don't plan it all and then call procurement and say, "Go make it happen." We're there at the beginning, and that helps a lot.

WRIGHT: Can you give us an example of the difference before that concept came into play? Maybe an example of procurement was called in at the end, and you had to use smoke and mirrors to get whatever you got.

JOHNSON: We were actually located all together over in Building 45 at one time. I think that was part of it is that we were not with our customers. So they would go about planning and never think of us. We were an afterthought. The way that we were brought in is when you wrote the purchase request and had the money, then you sent it to procurement. So they would throw things over the fence to us, because we were all over there. Now we sit with our customers. I think that makes a big difference in that we have somebody sitting right in FCOD's suite with

them. When they start talking about getting a plan, they're right there. Then we start planning and wait a minute, now you need to call legal for this. I think that makes a big difference in that we don't have to go in and clean up at the end or tell them where you made mistakes.

Nobody wants to be invited to the party if you're the policeman. That ended up what we were more likely being, because we were invited so late, we had to correct what they had already done. But now they realize that we're a team player and that we can help them through it rather than stop them. That's all about how you handle the—we can't do it their way, but we can do it another way, or let us try a different way, rather than just saying no. It took a while for the NASA culture, just not this Center but NASA procurement culture period. It had to change from “No, the regulations won't allow you to do that,” to “Yes, let me find a way to help you do that.” I think that culture change has happened all across procurement.

WRIGHT: Do you feel that the steps that you helped put in place trended toward the agency? Did JSC help set some of those trends in place?

JOHNSON: You just want us to brag.

WRIGHT: Yes we do.

JOHNSON: Yes. I think JSC leads the agency in lots of things, but I'll talk specifically about procurement. I think that some of the things that we're doing right now. All procurements over \$50 million that are competitive have to go through a Source Evaluation Board process. Most people think it's forever, but normally it's about 15 to 18 months. What we've done is we've

streamlined a process that says that you can get a procurement that's over \$50 million through a significantly less time. We're talking about 12 months. We're streamlining that process. We've done it at the Center several times without [NASA] Headquarters' [Washington, DC] permission because it was under \$50 million. Once it's over \$50 million we have to get their permission. So they're letting us do a pilot now that all of the other Centers are waiting for us to complete so that they can use it.

We've done that with a streamlined procurement approach, we've done it with the award fee approach. This Center has more award fee contracts than many of the other Centers. We developed an award fee approach that was great, because when Bob [Robert D.] Cabana, who's now the Center Director at KSC, when he was here as the Deputy Center Director, he was the fee determination official in most of those contracts. The approach which he helped us do, being the fee determination official, helped us develop a great process for award fee. The rest of the Centers have used that. In fact as soon as he moved to KSC he had the Procurement Office there call me. He said, "Send me all your award fee stuff." So we've actually piloted a lot of different things in procurement at the Center, at JSC, that we're not shy in using it. We will let other Centers use it, the same way we benchmark other agencies to get information. As soon as we develop something we send it out and let everybody use. They do the same with us.

WRIGHT: It feels good to know you have a coalition of like-minded people that you can share. There's no territory there. It's more of how can you help each other be more efficient.

JOHNSON: Absolutely.

WRIGHT: I would have to think that over the years you might have had to follow the same process as so many people, having to do more for less, or with less people. What other areas have you been able to put in place to make things more efficient? For example when I was looking on the procurement page before we came, I noticed that you have so many things for the public sector to be able to access online now. How did that all come into play? How much were you involved with getting that set up so they can get that information?

JOHNSON: That's a good one. That started with being transparent. One of the things I found out in working small business is that a lot of them will come in and say, "I would love to compete on this, I would love to get a contract, but I don't know how." This was all before we had Web sites. I've been here a while. So they would come in, and they'd have to take away hard copies of documents and go and read and figure out how to do it. It became wonderful when we started with the Web site. Then we can just put things up. I applaud this Center for being one of the most transparent ones as far as the procurement process and being involved in procurements that come up. Mr. Coats and before him Mr. Howell opened their door for contractors to come in and see them. So they set the standards.

Then when the other technical organizations have procurements, contractors can walk in and talk to them about it. It's not the same way at different agencies, and not the same way at different Centers. It's time-consuming. It is. But the investment that you make up front in talking to them about your ideas and what you expect and explaining to them what you expect for them to propose to, and how you're going to make the selection, then at the end we give them a copy of the selection statement that says why we did or did not pick you and what the other person had that you didn't have. It's a learning process.

We've seen better proposals, better contracts, better relationships because we are transparent up front. It all starts with the ninth floor and the Center Director saying, "This is what I want the Center to look like." We get kudos from contractors all the time that we're very open. When we make changes to any of our process, I have a meeting with all the contractors. I call them in and say, "You used to send it this way. We're going to change things. They're going to be—." When we adopted the new award fee process, we had an open forum with all the contractors. They came in, pencils and pens, because that's a part of their dollars. They need to understand how we're going to evaluate them. So we have a meeting with them, and we get feedback. Sometimes we don't always get it just right. They'll give us feedback and say, "You're not quite doing this right." We implement that. We look at it and we implement some of those changes.

WRIGHT: You're not only procurement officer and director and manager. You're also more like an educator as well. You're sharing so much information with people to help them be successful working with the Center. Your strings I guess don't ever get cut with SBA [Small Business Administration], do they? You always are working with them in a way.

JOHNSON: In fact we have an entire Industry Assistance Office that sits out at the front gate right next to [Building] 111. We have entire office out there. That's all they do is help industry do business with us – large businesses and small businesses. But SBA is integral. They assign us goals every year that we have to meet also.

WRIGHT: You'll never get out of that ugly job. It's just become prettier.

JOHNSON: I actually love it; that's second to my heart. I really love watching businesses. We've had businesses grow up. When I started back in the '70s, I remember some of those businesses. Muniz Engineering [MEI Technologies]—Ed [Edelmiro] Muniz was here. Back then he walked the halls. He didn't have a contract, and now he's been so successful. He's a large business now.

Watching Barrios Technology. When I first came up, watching those contractors grow over the years, and now we've birthed some others, and watching them go through the process. So it's rewarding.

WRIGHT: Talk about the international agreements and how much of your time or of your staff's time is involved. It's now become multilayer. It's translators or whatever. But explain to us that process, and how does that work, working with all those international groups?

JOHNSON: It is amazing in that it has all the government regulations; on top of that it's got state regulations and then federal regulations. It is wonderful to get to know the different cultures, because you can't negotiate until you understand their culture. We actually have classes that we go to out here. We not only learn the language but learn the culture of negotiations. How people start negotiations. They're insulted if you just start out negotiating. You have to have a social engagement, and you walk through those different things.

We have specialists that specialize in negotiating with the Europeans, with the Russians, with the Japanese. We also have specialists that talk about negotiating with our commercial contractors, with SpaceX and Orbital, because they do things differently too. So it is learning

what works best in each situation and being adaptable, and having in your grasp the ability to negotiate with any of those at any one time. Whether you're talking to DoD, which is strictly federal government to the extreme, and then having the commercial company that says, "I can take one page. Just sign it right there. That's my contract." So you have to be adaptable all along the way. The fun part about it is learning each one and being able to master each one of them.

WRIGHT: Is your main purpose to ensure that the Johnson Space Center is—I don't want to use the word protected, but I don't know what that word is. But I guess that's your main goal?

JOHNSON: Always. Always. I think that's one of the things that we're charged with. We're a mission support organization that's here to support the mission. Our goal is to go in and get what the mission wants, but then we have to take care of all the other things also. So the people that work in the Space Station Office are tutored on contracting rules, then the different cultural rules, then the different grammatical and pronouncing words, and also closing the deal. They have to really work on each stage of that. It takes a lot, but it's so rewarding. When they come back, and they've done the deal, they signed with Russia to get the seats done. Very difficult negotiations, very difficult. And it's always ending on something very small that you have to be very careful about.

WRIGHT: It's not over till it's signed.

JOHNSON: That's right.

WRIGHT: How many people do you have in your organization?

JOHNSON: The whole organization I have about 136 civil servants, and probably another 50 contractors.

WRIGHT: Do you find a lot of turnover in your area, or do people enjoy the different aspects of procurement? Have some of these people been with you a long time?

JOHNSON: There are a lot of us that have been here a long time, but I can tell you the new ones that are coming in are looking for different opportunities. I think actually that's a plus. I allow people to go out and do different things. I've allowed people to go to work in outreach and education and resources that want to do that. I think it's a compliment to us to have procurement people that can get jobs in other organizations, so I have several people that have come here and then gone to do other things. I also have people that go out and rotate for experiences. Many of them inside can do that because they come back enriched.

We have several people that have an undergraduate that's a technical undergraduate, then an MBA on top of that. Sometimes they want to go back and do their technical first love. But I think actually when I first got here it was probably seen a little bit differently. It was frowned upon. You're in procurement, you stay in procurement. You never leave. Now it's looked upon a little bit differently. We want people to be exposed to as much as possible. We can't all get up and go at one time, but we have a rotation process that people apply to. They say, "Well, next

year if it works with the manager I'd like to go over and do this for six months or a year." We work that out. We also have people coming into procurement also.

WRIGHT: It's interesting. Bringing in their fields. Talk to us about your relationship with Headquarters, then of course the relationship that you have with the NASA Shared Service Center [NSSC], and how that has changed the way that procedures were done here and now that you've had to shift over the last years as part of that center.

JOHNSON: I love the NASA Shared Service Centers because what they've done is they've offloaded things that we can give to them, and then we can go do other things. Our plate is always full. Running over. I know some Centers have uncovered capacity, whatever the buzz name is for people that don't have work to do, but we have more than enough work to do in procurement. When they were developed, when they started buying things, they were buying all the software licenses for IT work. Fine. Take and do that, because I have more than enough work to do. So they provide a benefit for us; they take some of those things that they can do and get lots of discounts for having quantity. They do a lot of those purchases. I love the fact that they can do that, because then it frees the people here at the JSC to do other things. I think it's a positive thing that they're here.

A lot of times people are really not understanding that purpose, but now the purpose is pretty clear. I know the Procurement Office in NSSC very well. I think we have a good relationship in that they support us in taking things to free us up to do the things we love doing, like international or commercial, and getting better at those things.

WRIGHT: So it became more of a partnership than a shift of services.

JOHNSON: Absolutely. I think it is a partnership. Our customers still sit here, so a lot of times they will call and ask us to look into some of the things that were bought at NSSC. We call those contracting guys—we're all contracts people—and talk to them about that. So NSSC serves a valuable input for us.

WRIGHT: What about Headquarters? What is the relationship with your position with Headquarters and the rules and regulations that they impose upon how you do work?

JOHNSON: I think what Headquarters does for us basically is provides us a groundwork to grow. They actually go to Congress and negotiate rules and regulations that we don't have to individually do, and then they give them to all the Centers. I think Headquarters provides us guidance, but as far as the actual procurement work, most of our procurements have been delegated to the Center. We do the procurements here, we make the selections here, and Headquarters provides us guidance. It goes different ways. Sometimes Headquarters has been intimately involved in our procurements over the years as I've been here. Then sometimes the procurement officer will back off and say, "Just go do those and report to me." I think at this point we have a great relationship with Headquarters.

The procurement officer at Headquarters that I work with is a great strategist. So he gets involved at the beginning of the procurement, of those over \$50 million. Sometimes he'll strategize with us, but after we start implementing it then they just back up and ask us for feedback where you're going, statuses, that type of thing.

WRIGHT: Are you in close contact with legal as well?

JOHNSON: I'm a partner with legal. That's my buddy, the Legal Office. Different ways to perceive legal. I think we have adapted to the fact that legal is our partner. When we go to strategize at meetings, he comes with me. In fact people always ask me, "Where's Bernie?" Bernie [Bernard J. Roan] is the Chief Counsel here at the Legal Office. We come as a pair. I think that really has helped our young people in knowing that I can walk over to the Legal Office and it's not a bad thing. I want to throw this idea. We're thinking about doing this. It's great to know up front that they will just set the framework. I love their perspective too. They're not there to tell us "no," they're there to help us to find a yes. That's the approach that they have. So it's wonderful to go down the hallway and say, "I was thinking about—" and talk that over with an attorney.

Bernie has also had to groom his organization to support the type of procurement organization that we have. If we want to sit around and talk about what ifs, a lot of people say that's a lot of time invested, but it's better to catch me on the front before I go design this new creature than you tell me at the end that it's not the right one.

So they come in at the very beginning. As soon as we're at the table, legal is at the table with us also.

WRIGHT: Do you recall maybe one of the first times that you came up with one of your out of the box suggestions and the reaction that you might have gotten?

JOHNSON: There've been several of those. I'll tell you one of the things that I love doing is trying new things, especially if I've benchmarked them at other organizations. One of the things I did back when I was in Information Technology, which was called ADPE [Automated Data Processing Equipment], is that one of our technical guys had found some equipment that was on the excess list, and we could still use it. Another government agency had it that was outside of NASA, but it was perfectly good equipment that we could have used. But the regulations required that you have to put it out for notice, let other people have an opportunity. We wanted it. So we got with legal and devised a new process to say, "We're ready to take it." There were some shipping costs that we were able to pay. Working with them, first thing, they came and said, "No, you can't do that because regulations say you have to do this, this and this." Then the next question was well, how do you get around those. Getting around them for legal is not probably a comfortable term with them. We had to do an alternate approach for them to say, "Well, that doesn't work. I can tell you another way of doing it, but I can't get around the regulations." We had to change our terminology, but they assisted us doing that. We got the equipment and got a good cost savings award. The technical organization and the Procurement Office and Legal Office were all giving awards for cost savings. We figured out a way to work that within the system, not get around it.

WRIGHT: That's interesting. It probably made more sense. Have you helped write new regulations?

JOHNSON: Oh yes. I have. One of the first things I did in setting myself apart was I came up with a process that's called the screening process for small businesses. The way that SBA has it

worked out, if I want to buy paper, I would call them up and say, "I want to buy 1,000 reams of paper." They would come back and say, "Here's three companies. Go buy from them. Get quotes from them."

Well, what happens, we don't know the companies. We don't know anything about them. SBA has just recommended them. So I would say, "Okay. Let's start another process. When you give me your three names, then let me bring them out here and let me interview them. Let me give them a statement of work. Let them make a presentation about the company. Let the technical people and I get in a room, and then we'll pick the one we want rather than you giving me one."

So we started that screening process, and now that's part of the regulations. Any procurement that we have from SBA that's not at the competition level where we have to go for formal competition, instead of the SBA giving me one name, they have to give me several names. We bring them out, and they actually do a presentation to the technical organization as well as procurement organization. We pick one based upon that.

I did not like the fact that we were given somebody that we knew nothing about. It sets everybody up for failure. The technical people don't have any confidence in them. They don't know us, we don't know them, and you just set up for failure. But once you bring them in, and the technical guy can pick, then they've invested in that company, and they will help them succeed. Rather than I don't know them and they're just failing.

After that our small business program really became positive, because the technical person felt well, I picked them, so I'm going to help them succeed. That's what I implemented. I wrote it up, and put it in the newspaper at Headquarters. They're using it all across the agency. That was many many years ago.

WRIGHT: But they're still doing that.

JOHNSON: Absolutely. It is the best way of doing things. It's made all the difference in the world.

WRIGHT: Can you think of any more of those types of instances that you set up new processes and have made those types of differences that have come through?

JOHNSON: I think a lot of things that I've done have been more on the soft skills side. When I came in there was only one person in the Office of Procurement that was a minority. In fact it was a minority male. One of the things that I did since I've come in is I looked at females that were not [in leadership positions], because back in the '70s most of the women were in administrative positions. There were none in leadership positions. When I came in I had a degree. There were several other females that came in with degrees, and we started working together informally. We worked together, finding out what all the unwritten rules are, and there are unwritten rules. There are ways that women have to approach positions. Back in the '70s when we came with IBM, we had our little bowties on, we had the suits on, and we looked like men. The only thing that we were taught in school was the way that men handled things.

When we got out here and started looking at getting promoted, we realized that as women we could not use the way that men did things. They were not received. So we got together and started looking at ways that we could advance ourselves. All of us ended up being managers. In fact one of the ladies that was in our group ended up being the head of the Office of Procurement

at NASA Headquarters and went on to be the head of OFPP. It was great, she's done wonderful. The OFPP, Office of Federal Procurement Policy.

All of us ended up being managers. We account that today to us getting together and going through what does it take. There are unwritten rules. There are things that you have to do to make yourself attractive to people, to be mentored and sponsored. Without a sponsor there's no way you're going to get a promotion. When the door closed back in the '70s and early '80s and the people that decided who would get a promotion, they were all men. So there was nobody in the room to speak for a woman unless she had already been sponsored by a man. We had to figure out how to get the men to sponsor us.

If we're ever going to get in that room and be managers—back then we called it—because that was the main thing—we called it the key to the men's room. How we were going to get that key to the men's room. We got together and did that, and then we passed that on.

When we came in there were no rules to get promoted and you didn't know what it was going to take. Back then I started as a [GS] 5. To get from a 5 to a 7 to a 9, that was unwritten. Right now we have a roadmap, and I applaud us for doing that. That is still in place, reiterations of it, different levels of change, but we started that. To go from a 5 to a 7 you should have negotiated a contract. You should have bought 50,000 things, whatever it takes to move. We wrote that down because nobody told us. We had to get with that. So basically how we learned was through observation. We found out how those guys got to the positions they were in and we started using those things. That's how we got promoted.

Then we started telling everybody that came in. Now it's a formal process. What it takes to get ahead is actually written down so that it's not a secret. When they go behind the closed

doors and the magic name came out now. That's the way it was in the past. Now people know what goes on behind those closed doors.

WRIGHT: What an accomplishment you have put in place.

JOHNSON: Yes.

WRIGHT: Your team. How many was in your initial group.

JOHNSON: There were four of us. I'm the only one that's still working. The other three have retired. I'm the one that's still here.

WRIGHT: Were you all in the procurement area?

JOHNSON: Yes. All in the procurement areas. Absolutely.

WRIGHT: That's pretty interesting. How rewarding that you all did make management, so you managed to change the key, and had a women's room.

JOHNSON: We did. We absolutely did. Back then when we came out here, some of the buildings didn't even have—literally—didn't have female restrooms. I was in [Building] 225 and one of the other ladies was in 36, one of the science buildings. There were no restrooms for females in that building. Eventually they converted them as women became more of a

population out here, they converted some of the men's rooms to female. But there were no restrooms for women. A long time ago.

WRIGHT: You were not only female, but you were also a minority.

JOHNSON: Absolutely.

WRIGHT: Did you feel like that could have possibly held you back one more step than if you hadn't kept moving forward?

JOHNSON: I think you look at it virtually different ways. I look at it as an opportunity. Because there was not one before me, I was going to be the first. I've been the first at a lot. I was the first CO [contracting officer], the first branch chief, first division chief, first deputy, first procurement officer. Absolutely. In fact when all the procurement officers meet across the agency I am still the only minority female. There are other females now but I am still the only minority female.

Working through that gave me a lot of opportunity to make changes. I've actually had a wonderful career. It has been wonderful in that everything that I wanted to do I got to do. It doesn't mean I didn't have to work for it, but I got to do it.

WRIGHT: It sounds like although some people believe that once you get into something like procurement it's the same thing in and out, but you created such an evolution as you came through, so you made a lot of changes.

JOHNSON: It is what you make it. If I was coming through again—the ones that we're hiring right now, students coming with MBAs, they come in—I would rotate out. I didn't then. You stayed in, because that's what you're required to do. Then after you got to be a manager, I didn't think it was time for me to go out. But I would go back and rotate out and do things like going to the Education Office, doing outreach, taking a tour in the budget area and HR, or one of the program offices. I would do that now, because it really broadens you. Back then when we couldn't go, we would just have to make sure we knew what was going on and study, or get with our customers and if we knew somebody else in that area, to go meet with them, and learn about it. I encourage a lot of people when I talk to them, don't just stay in your field. Learn what's going on across the whole agency, not just JSC but the whole agency.

WRIGHT: Talk to us some about the training that you put your staff through. How do you get them to be so well rounded or prepare them to do everything from bartering to negotiations? How do you set them up to be successful within your organization?

JOHNSON: The first thing that we do is organizational training, the team building. We do a lot of leading at the speed of trust. In fact I just set up a seminar today where I'm going to have women go over and talk about their voice. Women speak with a different voice than men, and women cannot take the tone or approach that men do. That's going to be a telecon. At least those things are available. Back in the '70s you couldn't find those things. That came across my desk, and I set that up. We're going to invite the women to do that in a couple weeks.

But those type of things, if you make those available to the managers. I require every one of my division managers and deputies to take at least one training class every year, to participate in fellowships and take training. Then they have to have at least one retreat with their organization a year. It helps build that team building, and also make sure that they know that we're training them. So I set up training measures for my direct reports, and then we all get together as a team and set it up for their organization. It's taking advantage of a lot of things. It's negotiating, it's how do you approach, how do you be a professional at work. It's how you're taken seriously. So all of those things help people become well rounded and not just a procurement person but a good businessperson that can make a deal.

If you look at it that way, we're not just procurement people. I train people with that broader perspective and that when you leave procurement—and one day you will leave—you can go do other things and not just procurement.

WRIGHT: If you could rename your office do you have a new name for it?

JOHNSON: I've always thought about getting away from the Procurement Office and talk about the support that we bring to the organization in that we make agreements or we make deals. That's what I would go after, something like that, agreements or partnerships or deals to support the agency, rather than procurement. Procurement is just a small part of the process. We send it over and think about how to do it. That's the planning up front that we don't ever get credit for. Procurement is just actually buying it. The planning is the part of it that we love, the strategizing and getting there.

WRIGHT: Definitely a strategic partner. You mentioned earlier that you're on an organization with the other procurement chiefs in the Houston area. Is that the Texas Business Alliance? Or is that something else that you're part of?

JOHNSON: No, that's something else. The Chief Procurement Organization is one that came out of—I'm on the board of directors at the Houston Minority Supplier Development Council as well as the Women's Business Alliance, which is the women's business part of that. The Texas Business Alliance is another board of directors that I'm on, and because of that I'm down in the Houston area a lot. Then some of the other people on the board were chief procurement officers. They said, "Why don't you come join this?" Out here I'm isolated from all of those city things that happen. They said, "You probably don't know about it, but the chief procurement officers get together once a month." I had no idea that all these guys from Exxon and Shell all got together. So they invited me to be a part of that.

I love it because we'll pick a topic. Some of it can be training the next generation that's coming in. Everybody comes in. This is what we're doing, these are some of the programs, and we're just taking notes and sharing. The thing that I bring to the table for them is that even though the city is there and the state is there, the federal is probably the most regulated place. The city to me is pretty close to commercial.

The state, they do have state regulations, but when you get to the federal, we're just regulation-bound. Some of the things that we're doing within our regulations though really help them, because they struggle with—the issue we have with procurement people is ethics. The contractor is always trying to figure out a way to get next to us to get some type of advantage.

Ours are very written, very vocal, we have to sign them, we train them every year. We have to get ethical training. So I've been able to share that with them.

Also how we treat our small businesses. They don't have SBA breathing down their neck to do goals, so the best that they can do is the best that they can do. They actually reward on best effort. I tried this year—I went to five conferences and I tried to find a woman-owned construction business, and I couldn't. Well they reward them for that effort, but SBA grades us on results. How many contracts did you sign? How much money did you put on that contract? So we've been sharing with them the differences and trying to make their small business programs more successful and how we do it.

Then we cross-pollinate. They tell me about how they write contracts that are not 600 pages but are 50 pages and how they get coverage. The thing is how do you get the protection and the coverage that I need for my customers. So we share a lot and we exchange a lot. That's been the most informative thing I've done.

WRIGHT: It sounds like it's a good information exchange.

JOHNSON: Yes.

WRIGHT: Let's talk about the money. How much money in dollars does your office basically issue in procurements on average?

JOHNSON: We obligate, we put money on contracts is what that measure is by. I have 600 contracts in place with trillions of dollars, but they measure us on how much money we put on

each contract. That averages about \$6 billion. Last year I did \$6.5 billion. I'm the most in all the agency, of course we're the biggest Center. I have the most contracts and I have the most dollars. So I've got the largest procurement organization; \$6.5 billion that we put on.

I have 15 Source Evaluation Boards that are over \$60 million that are going on right now. The closest to me would probably be [NASA] Marshall [Space Flight Center, Huntsville, Alabama]. They'll have three to five. So we do a lot of procurement activity here; a lot of contracting activity. Those things like the barters and the Space Act Agreements and those reimbursable agreements that we have at White Sands [Test Facility, White Sands, New Mexico], I have a procurement organization at White Sands also, and the reimbursable agreements that we do with DoD, those are not even counted.

So we do a lot of agreements. It helps to think outside the box. That's what we're teaching our people, to do both. I want people that can think federal governmentwise and outside the box.

WRIGHT: Then you do things like scholarship funds.

JOHNSON: I do. I do.

WRIGHT: Does it all fall under your realm because it has to do with money and then actually procuring it?

JOHNSON: No. I just wanted to do that. I'm actually on the Exchange, the Starport Council now. I've been on it representing procurement, because we actually do the procurement for their needs. That was one of the committees that was available to work on scholarships.

I love working with kids. I do that at my church. I teach a Sunday school class with kids. Then I do a lot of volunteering, teaching underprivileged kids about SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] and ACT [American College Testing]. You'd be surprised how many of them think they want to go to college but have no idea, because nobody in their family ever has.

I help that way. I do that on the outside. So that committee became a billet I was really interested in. How do you go about setting up a scholarship committee, getting the applications in, and going through the selection process? What do you actually look for? These kids that I help all the time always apply for scholarships. It helps to be on the inside to give them some cues. If you get 300 scholarship applications, which ones jump out at you? So I love doing that at JSC. The contractors apply as well as the civil servants. We get about 40 to 50 applications a year, and we give out maybe four scholarships out of all of those. I love doing that. Just reading the kids [essays] some of them will bring you to tears. We have them write an essay. Why should you get it? Why you, not somebody else? Just reading those is really heartwarming. We've got some great kids coming up.

WRIGHT: What type of lessons have you learned as you've come through your management career that you have applied? I guess there are some lessons maybe you've learned that you haven't applied. Can you share some of those?

JOHNSON: Lessons learned that I've applied, and the most ones I think that I'm going to take away with me are the ones about helping other people. When it comes down to it at the end, it's not about which contract I wrote or what the deal was or how much money we made or saved, it's about the people we touched. I want to be able to know that I helped somebody else, so I spend a lot of my time grooming. I groom all the managers that work for me. I spend time with them talking about the things that they need to do, the mistakes that I made, and the things that I would do differently. I talk to them about what happens at senior staff, what they're looking for. The little tidbits that would make a difference in somebody's career is what I really apply myself to right now, helping the next generation.

The new ones that come in, I meet with every single one of them and talk to them about it. We've hired some attorneys that are here. We've got some great young folks that are here. But I talk to them about getting connected. You have to know you cannot make it on your own. I don't care how smart you are, you're going to get to a point where you're going to need somebody else to help you. You need to start grooming yourself now to be attractive so that a senior leader can say, "You know what, that person has got something. I want to sponsor them. I want to see that they make it to the next level."

I talk to them a lot about doing things so that they can be seen, like going to the National Management Association lunch yesterday with Mr. Coats speaking. I send that out to all of my employees and say, "This is a good opportunity to hear what's happening at the Center but also for senior staff to see you." I encourage people to take advantage of the different team building activities we have, the Christmas lunch, and then the picnic. A lot of people in this generation like to go home. They love their time, but if you invest a little bit of it so that people will see you on the outside, it goes a long way. I do think when I came in the '70s one of the things that

helped me break the glass ceiling or the concrete ceiling or whatever you want to call it was the fact that people got to know me as a person. You have to put yourself out there for them to do that. You have to make yourself available outside of your particular office so that people can see that you're a real person.

You develop friendships that I have been able to take advantage of in this particular office that I developed when I was back buying pencils and paper. It's amazing that those people will always remember you. They'll remember how you treated them. It's nice to be able to go back and capitalize on some of those relationships.

One of the big things that I learned as a lesson growing up is that at one time I didn't value the people in the office, for instance the administrative officers or secretaries when I first got here. Then I learned, I woke up and learned that they're the most important people at the Center. They can block your way forward or they can help you. When that lightbulb came on, that's when I think my way became a lot easier to go. So I tell people that right up front in the beginning, don't underestimate your support in your organization. Learn to treat them well, because they will be the ones that will smooth your path or either close the door. Your telephone messages will never get delivered; you'll never be able to get on somebody's calendar, all because they talk among each other. So you treat everybody the way that you want to be treated, and it pays off.

Sometimes people hear that and say, "Oh, that's just a cliché." But I have learned that it's powerful.

WRIGHT: You've provided a lot of support and information for contracts to start up. In the last few years you've helped provide contracts to help close programs down.

JOHNSON: Yes.

WRIGHT: Can you talk some about Shuttle and Constellation and how that impacted you in your office?

JOHNSON: It's been bittersweet, and a lot of the people that were here for a long time to work on the contracts now to go through the last time for everything. As the [Space Shuttle] *Endeavour* comes through in the next couple weeks, we're going to get a chance to see that, but people that are now just in that contract closeout office struggle with that, going through closing that out. But it's giving us a different skill, because none of us had ever closed out a program. We close out regular contracts all the time, but closing out a program, you have to disposition all of the history. That is really painful, as we talk. They come up and talk to me weekly about some of the things that they're doing, and some of the hardware and the cameras that were on this flight and all that.

Regular closeout procedures, we don't have a lot of those, so we're making those up as we go. We're going to record those, because the Apollo Program before us, those people that closed it out didn't leave a record. So we're going to write the record for closing out major program contracts. Following behind, of course, will be Station. But we're going to write those records this time, how to close out a program contract. We're in the process of doing it. So along with the bittersweet of it is that we're being innovative. That's what I tell people. As you end, close one door, there's always an opportunity to open another one.

That's what we're looking at it as. Yes, we're closing the door to the Shuttle Program, that contract, but we're opening a door. We're writing the procedures for closing out any program contract that this agency will have. We're going to start that here.

WRIGHT: What do you think has been your greatest challenge as you've worked out here these last 40 years give or take?

JOHNSON: I think the biggest challenge that I've struggled with is being a part of the team. I think just in the last 8 to 10 years, I think that we saw procurement become a part of the team. I think that was the biggest struggle. When I first started in procurement, we were the roadblock, and everybody said, "Oh my God, I've got to go to procurement." They'd come in, and I know it's going to take you all forever was the attitude toward procurement. A lot of people really took it personally. They said, "It's not us." It's really the whole mission support, whether it's budget or procurement or HR, we stand in the technical guys' way. So when they have to come to us, they're screaming. Some of them were screaming and hollering. Get this, I need it now. I think that has been the biggest challenge, overcoming that and becoming a part of the team, and being valued as a part of the team. That really has made a difference in our success.

WRIGHT: Would you consider that to be your greatest contribution, or do you have some other? You've mentioned specifics of regulations and changes that you've made, but you have spent four decades out here, and there has been a great many changes. You have impacted a lot of people and programs and I'm curious about what you feel your greatest contribution was since you've been here.

JOHNSON: I think the greatest contribution is going to be the people. I think that's going to be the impact. The people that I've hired, the people that I've mentored, and the fact that I've been here in my position as a minority female hopefully will open the doors for others. It has been. Things are changing.

I think one of the best things that you can do in your position is to leave a good legacy. That's been my objective, to make sure that when I leave they don't have to remember my name. They'll remember I was here of course, but the fact that I helped somebody else. You don't have to remember what I have done. The fact that I've helped other people, my legacy will never end because it'll always be alive through them.

WRIGHT: That's a great idea. I was going to ask Sandra. Do you have any questions or thoughts you want to add before we close?

SANDRA JOHNSON: I was just thinking about being a female in the '70s, and coming to work, as you said, some of the buildings didn't even have restrooms for women. There were also things like no daycare center, dress codes. There were those kinds of issues being female. I was just wondering if you could just talk for a minute about some of your recollections of that time period and how things changed over the last 30 or so years.

JOHNSON: That's a big one. I tend to forget that until I'm sharing with my daughter. Some of the things, and I love the fact that the last two Center Directors—and probably others, but that's when I became a senior person, so I was more aware of it—the things that they won't tolerate

anymore. The things that used to happen, the comments that would be made toward women, how women are treated. The screaming and hollering and how women were treated will not be tolerated now. That was the most empowering thing that happened. When our Center Director and the Deputy Center Director, said, “You will not treat women that way. In fact, anybody that does that will be brought forward and dealt with.” I think that made a big difference in how women felt. We can bolster ourselves up and get qualified, but as long as men continue to treat us that way, we’re never going to advance. I think that was the biggest thing. When we saw that happening, that we were being taken seriously, that somebody stood up and said, “You won’t do it or you’ll come to answer to me,” that’s when we felt more empowered.

WRIGHT: Are there some other things that you would like to add? I know you jotted some notes down on your page. I just want to make sure we didn’t miss anything. I don’t want to keep you too much longer, because I know your schedule runneth over.

JOHNSON: No, I think I’ve hit everything. I do really feel that the most that I can leave the organization is not the new procurement procedures; it’s not the new developed way of dealing with the international partners. It really is about caring for the people. That’s what I’ve hopefully instilled in not just the managers but the team leads and the GS-13s. If you take care of the people they’ll take care of the procurements. So I spend most of my time on the people, developing training opportunities and going out and looking at things to bring back that help them get better.

WRIGHT: Thank you. Thanks for sharing so much wonderful information.

JOHNSON: Thank you for making it so easy.

[End of interview]