

## Ways & Means Transcript—S3E4—How Sputnik Sent Women to College

Emily Hanford (EH): From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I'm Emily Hanford.

Hubertein Scott (HS): Okay, well, I was born the third of seven children in St. Paul Minnesota, I grew up during the Great Depression and the start of World War II.

EH: This is Hubertein Scott.

HS: And according to my dad, college was not even a remote possibility. I was not allowed to take any college prep courses. I was told to take shorthand and typing, marry the boss, and you're set. And, if there's any money for college, it will go to your brothers.

EH: Hubertein married

HS: Not the boss, as it turned out.

EH: And she had a child, but she really wanted to go to college. It kept nagging at her. She'd bring it up, her husband would say no. Years went by, and she had two more children. She kept talking about going to college. Her husband kept saying no. When she was 32, her husband finally agreed. She could go to college, but with a few conditions.

HS: He told me I had to be home when children left for school at 9 and be home when they got home at 3. Dinner on the table at 6 and in bed at 10.

EH: Hubertein started school. She took one literature class and she was hooked. But dealing with all those restrictions her husband put on her- it was hard.

HS: So, I was in class during the day and then as soon as he started snoring I would grab the typewriter, go into the bathroom, and sit on the toilet to write my papers.

EH: But she excelled. She did so well, she was nominated for a fellowship that would give her money to get an advanced degree. Hubertein went to the fellowship interview – she thought she aced it.

HS: And they came back, and they told me that what I had received was an honorable mention, that because I was a woman I was not awarded that fellowship.

EH: But Hubertein's destiny, along with the destinies of millions of other women, was about to change. The United States would pass a law that remains one of the most important pieces of legislation ever to help advance the number of women in higher education. Think you know what we're talking about? You might be thinking Title IX.... but that's not it. Coming up on Ways & Means: the little-known story of the National Defense Education Act. How this one piece of legislation championed by two male lawmakers from the south- a law that at first seemed like it could never pass- how this one law ended up inadvertently opening the doors to college for millions of American women.

Archival documentary sound: Ours is a rich and variant land. We have bounties beyond those known to the people of any other day, and as responsible as anyone else for the care of these bounties, is the women in the American home.

Deondra Rose (DR): Well, women could definitely be classified or characterized as second-class citizens, especially before the 1960s.

EH: This is political historian and Duke assistant professor Deondra Rose. She's the person who first wrote about how the National Defense Education Act opened up college to women. She wrote about it in a book about higher education policy and gender called "Citizens by Degree." The history she's uncovered when it comes to women and college- it isn't pretty.

DR: Colleges routinely used gender quotas to suppress the number of women admitted into their programs. Some colleges actually just outright excluded women entirely. It was not unusual for women to have to compete for a smaller number of spots. And so, women knew that, "If I wanted to go to college, I'm going to have to have higher grades than the men who were also applying for college at the same time. I'm going to have to have a stronger record of extracurriculars, and just an overall stronger application." And even then, you could get your application returned to you with just a note that says, "women need not apply."

Archival news sound: At the end of a five-day trip from England, the Queen Elizabeth, world's largest ocean liner pulls into NY Harbor. On board are nearly 15,000 happy GI's...  
These men fought from the beaches of Normandy to cross the Rhine...

EH: After World War II, the government began to use its vast resources to help people go to college. The G.I. Bill offered generous college scholarships to returning GI's- but they were mostly men.

DR: It was something like less than 2% or approximately 2% of all GIs who were even eligible for the G.I. Bill were women. But, even among those women, very few actually took advantage of the policy because they were so discouraged from doing so. So, after the war, women were encouraged to go back to their homes, to have children, to invest in their families, and to leave spaces- to remove themselves from public institutions - to make space for the returning GIs.

EH: And, if a woman of the "Greatest Generation" did make it to college, she often didn't feel very welcome once she got there.

DR: There are many women of you know more senior generations who will tell of being in law school or other graduate programs at that time and having faculty members ask, "Why are you taking up this seat that you know could go to a man who needs it to be a breadwinner for his family?" So, the G.I. Bill was remarkable because it really did help to democratize higher educational access by making college affordable. But for men.

EH: Enter our unlikely hero: the architect of the legislation that would end up helping millions of women go to college. Carl Elliot was a young lawyer in Alabama when he ran for Congress in 1948. He wanted the federal government to help make it easier for young people to get a college degree- especially young people with no money, like he'd once been. Carl was the oldest of 9 kids. His parents were tenant farmers; things were particularly tough because his father had a disability- one leg was half the size of the other. Carl's love of learning started early, with his grandmother.

Carl Elliot (CE): She read me every chapter in the Bible, and I've been so pleased about that, through all these years. She taught me a great deal about the love of reading because she read so beautifully, and she would sit us down and would read books to us, whole books, not in one sitting, but over a period of a few weeks. And she insisted that I read two books a week.

EH: Carl only went to school from November to March because he was working on the farm. And the family was barely squeaking by. But Carl didn't want to stay in farming. He had other dreams for himself. He decided there was nothing more noble than being a U.S. Congressman. Carl graduated from high school in 1930, the valedictorian of his class. It was the middle of the Depression and the outlook for the family farm had never been worse. There was no money for college. But he was determined to go anyway. A local businessman gave him a check to cover his tuition for a while and, with \$2 dollars and 36 cents in his pocket, 16-year-old Carl Elliot set off for college at the University of Alabama. With all of his stuff packed into a cardboard box, he went on foot.

Mary Allen Jolley (MAJ): He literally left home walking to get here. And it was 120 miles from where he lived in Franklin County.

EH: This is Mary Allen Jolley, a friend and former colleague of Carl's. She says he often told the story of how he wound up in college. Carl ended up hitching a ride from a preacher, made it to Tuscaloosa, and found his way to the office of the president of the University, George H. Denny. He told Dr. Denny about how much he wanted to go to college, and about his mother who'd been sick all summer, and the drought on the farm. Dr. Denny told him to go home. But Carl didn't.

MAJ: He spent two nights sleeping under a truck, because he had nowhere to live.

EH: When Carl showed up for registration, the registrar took his check from the local businessman as a down payment for tuition. Housing was another matter.

MAJ: Finally, he lived in an abandoned building, along with another friend of his.

EH: They cooked their meals over an open flame. A few weeks later Carl met with President Denny again.

CE: Dr. Denny said, "Aren't you the fella who was here about a month ago? I said "Yep, I'm the fella." But I said I decided to take a new attack at it, I said "I'm gonna get me a job here somewhere, and I'm gonna figure out a place to live, and do the various things that I have to do." And he said, "No, you can't do that!" He said, "Go home and get you a job."

EH: The president told him to come back after he'd saved up for tuition. But Carl didn't want to wait. He got jobs in Tuscaloosa to pay his way through school. He swept floors, shoveled coal, painted buildings. Here's his friend Mary again.

MAJ: He often told me, he said, "The greatest achievement I ever made in my life was to get a college education." He said it was nearly impossible.

EH: Carl Elliot eventually earned a law degree, and then- his childhood dream- he became a member of Congress. After his election in 1948, he decided to focus his attention on education. He thought to

himself, "Brains aren't only given to rich people. What about young people of limited means— people like he'd been- who wanted to go to college but didn't want to live in abandoned buildings in order to pay for it? Shouldn't the federal government help young people like that go to college? Wouldn't it help the country in the long run?" He started making plans. In 1957, he was appointed Chairman of the House Special Education subcommittee. He was determined to pass legislation that would open up higher education to anyone, no matter their family's financial situation. One of the first things he did was hire Mary Allen Jolley as his legislative aide. Mary was also from Alabama. She says there was just something about Carl.

MAJ: When he walked in the room you knew he was there. So, he had a presence about him that would always draw people to him. He was 6 feet 4 inches tall. There was nothing about him that was pretense at all. He was always who he was, and people seemed drawn to that. I think, always, when you're in the presence of somebody who's pretty authentic, you know, you treasure that meeting up with people like that.

EH: Carl drafted a proposal for the federal government to offer merit scholarships. The problem was, many states— southern states in particular- didn't want anything to do with federal government money because they didn't want the federal government telling them what to do. See, the fight for civil rights was heating up. Just a few years earlier, in 1954, the Supreme Court had ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional. And the federal government had ordered the south to desegregate its schools with "all deliberate speed."

DR: And, of course, they were putting a little more emphasis on deliberate than they were speed at this point.

EH: This is Duke professor Deondra Rose, again. Southern states were worried that if they allowed the federal government to provide funding for anything related to education, even scholarships for students, the feds might turn around and demand faster school integration.

DR: For many Southern Democrats, especially after Brown vs. Board of Education, there was a lot of discomfort with the idea that the federal government could come in and, by offering resources in the form of federal dollars, could somehow tell the states what to do, especially when it came to desegregation.

EH: And in the 1950's, it wasn't just southern states who were against federal funding for college scholarships. Opposition came from the very top.

Dwight D. Eisenhower: I, Dwight D. Eisenhower, do solemnly swear...

DR: Dwight Eisenhower's motto was "God helps those who help themselves." And so, he had, you know- for him, parents are in charge of paying for college. This is not the lane that the federal government should even attempt to enter.

EH: Carl Elliott's efforts to make college affordable for students like him seemed doomed on all fronts. But then-

Archival news sound: Today a new moon is in the sky: a 23-inch metal sphere placed in orbit by a Russian rocket.

DR: It wasn't until 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, that things began to change.

Archival news sound: You are hearing the actual signals transmitted by the earth circling satellite— one of the great scientific feats of the age!

DR: And so, with the stunning defeat in the space race, the United States panicked. People were really like freaking out. And so, they were asking, "What on earth do we do? Is it possible that the Soviet Union is launching satellites and they can see us, they're spying on us and they can see our military capabilities, you know, from on high?"

Archival news sound: The day Soviet scientists gaudily drop-kicked the first Sputnik around the world, the average American was shocked, bewildered, and resentful...

DR: And so, this event really dashed Americans' perceptions of our relative strength when it came to academics, when it came to science and technology.

EH: What Carl Eliot saw when the Soviets launched Sputnik was an opportunity. Here's Carl's legislative aide, Mary Allen Jolley.

MAJ: There was this urgency, a sense of urgency. A very clear feeling, yes, that this was the opportunity and we had to take advantage of it and get a bill ready because we thought we could pass it.

EH: Carl and one of his colleagues, a senator from Alabama named Lister Hill, decided the time was right to pitch the federal government scholarship proposal again, but, this time, they'd argue that federal support for helping needy kids get to college was crucial to ensuring the nation's security.

DR: And they decided to basically repackage their national scholarship proposal and to harness it to this politics of crisis. They gave it a fancy new title and they called it "The National Defense Education Act" and decided to frame it as a temporary measure that would address the US's poor showing in science and technology.

MAJ: So, we spent several days, the senator and the congressman- along with a couple of staff people- in Birmingham and we put down the programs and the principles that we wanted to observe and then turn it over to the lawyers let them give you the legal language.

EH: The legislation called for \$1.6 billion dollars over 5 years for 40,000 merit-based scholarships and student loans. And anyone could apply for these scholarships and loans. They were not just meant for men. Though not everyone voting on the bill realized this at the time. Here's what happened. It requires a bit of backstory. In the 1940's and 50's, Congressional liberals from the north would often include specific language in legislation that prohibited discrimination. In other words, this law being proposed cannot exclude people based on their race, color, religion, or national origin. Southern Democrats would object to the anti-discrimination language, and the bill would die. In order to pass the National Defense Education Act, the bill's sponsors, Southerners Carl Elliot and Lister Hill, knew to leave that language out. The bill just said in vague language that anyone could apply— no specifics about race, no anti-discrimination clause to fire up the opposition. And it worked. The bill passed. And that vague language that said anyone could apply— that's how women got their foot in the door, according to Duke professor Deondra Rose. It's how Hubertein Scott was able to pay her way through higher education.

HS: So, it changed my life in a whole bunch of ways.

EH: Remember Hubertein? The woman whose husband begrudgingly allowed her to go to college as long as dinner was on the table by 6:00? We left off in her story after she was denied that fellowship for graduate study because she was a woman. Well, thanks to the National Defense Education Act - known as the NDEA- Hubertein was eventually able to get financial support to pursue her doctorate. Today, she is Doctor Hubertein Scott. For many years she taught English for many years at Appalachian State in North Carolina. And, a few years ago when she retired, Hubertine moved in to a retirement community in Alabama. And who did she meet there? Mary Allen Jolley, the woman who had worked for Congressman Carl Elliott. Mary was writing her memoir and asked Hubertein to review her manuscript.

HS: So, I looked at the draft that she had written and there in big print was this experience she'd had with Carl Elliott writing the NDEA bill and I was so impressed with that that I went up to her apartment and fell at her feet and said, "Mary you've changed my life because I am an NDEA recipient." It had been, oh gosh, 50 years where I had nobody to thank for changing my life and suddenly here she is living in the same building with me. It's great.

EH: 2018 marks 60 years since the passage of the NDEA. Tens of thousands of women received financial aid under that legislation, and millions more have benefited from the federal student aid programs that followed, such as Perkins Loans, Stafford Loans, and Pell Grants. And, while Hubertein Scott had to fight the system— and her husband—, for the chance to pursue higher education, today women outnumber men on college campuses. They're more likely to finish college, and they're more likely to go to graduate school too. One more thought before we go. Political historian Deondra Rose says the story of how Carl Elliott's efforts with the NDEA opened up college for women— it points to something really important about politics and who we elect to represent us.

DR: One thing that I love about this is that it offers a really powerful case of how important it is to have people from all walks of life in political institutions. If somehow Carl Eliot, you know, had not experienced what it was like to go to college and not have financial support, if he didn't have the insight into what inequality means for average Americans, we never would have had that policy. And so, I think it really speaks to the significance of diversity in American governing institutions.

EH: Thanks to Mary Allen Jolley and Dr. Hubertein Scott. They joined us from their retirement community in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Stan Ingold of Alabama Public Radio did the recording for us. Carl Elliott represented Alabama's 7th district until 1963. In 1990, he was awarded the very first Profile in Courage Award from the Kennedy Center, in recognition of his work— particularly as a white southerner— in expanding access to college for women and minorities. Carl Elliott died in 1999. The audio you heard earlier was from a short film produced by the University of Alabama. Special thanks to Carl's daughter, Lenora Elliott Cannon, for helping us with background for this story. Deondra Rose's book is called "Citizens by Degree: Higher Education Policy and the Changing Gender Dynamics of American Citizenship". We'll have a link at our website, [waysandmeansshow.org](http://waysandmeansshow.org). Ways & Means Is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones, and Karen Kemp. Our assistant producers are Thamina Stoll and Cristina García Ayala. Johnny Vince Evans is our engineer. And, one more thing. If you like this episode you might be interested to know about another podcast I work on. It's called "Educate from APM Reports." We're interested in education, opportunity, and how people learn. We produce a podcast every other week; and, in the late summer, right around back-to-school time, we release a series of documentaries that

also air on public radio stations across the country. Again, the podcast is called "Educate from APM Reports." We'll have a link on the Ways and Means site. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.