

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Ellen Falek Leonard

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ellen Falek Leonard conducted by Frances Garrett Connell on May 1, 2015. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Barnard Alumni Class of 1971 Oral History Project

Interviewee: Ellen Falek Leonard

Location: Newington, CT

Interviewer: Frances Garrett Connell

Date: May 1, 2015

00:00:00 Q: So this is an interview, uh, for the Barnard College Voice, Inc. Oral History Collection. It is being done with Ellen Falek Leonard in her home in Newington, Connecticut. Today is May 1st, 2015 and the interviewee—interviewer—is Frances Connell. Okay, Ellen, let's begin.

00:00:29 Falek: Okay.

00:00:30 Q: Can you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born, and a little about your early life?

00:35:00 Falek: Okay, well, I was born in Staten Island [New York] in 1951. Yeah, I'm probably, if not the youngest from the class, I'm one of the youngest.

00:00:46 Q: Easily, yeah.

00:00:47 Falek: Because I graduated high school the day before my sixteenth birthday, and I graduated college a month before my twentieth birthday. So, I was really young, and I think that's gonna have some bearing on my experience in college. But I was born in Staten Island, and

my father died when I was about a year old, and so we moved to the Bronx. My mother was a single mom at that point. She was a widow; she had two children—me, and my brother who's a year and a half older than I am. And, I grew up in a low income, um, New York City housing project in the East Bronx because my mother basically had her widow's pension from Social Security and that was it. My grandmother was a big influence. My grandmother would schlep across the Bronx on three buses to cook for us, and she would spend a day and cook and freeze everything, or put it in the refrigerator, so we had a lot of good food.

And when I got to be about seven or eight, I was in grade school in second or third grade—my mother decided that she wanted to fulfill a life-long dream of being a teacher. When my mother was in high school, her mother said, “No, you're not going to be a teacher. It's not a good job for a Jewish girl.” I don't know what her problem was. “You're going to be a secretary.” So my mother took a commercial high school diploma. She flunked all her commercial subjects because she, you know, she hated it and that was her form of rebellion. But she ended up getting her commercial high school diploma, and working as a secretary until she got married and it was like, “Hot dog! I don't have to do this anymore. I can be home and be a housewife and raise my kids.” And then my father passed away so—

And when my mother decided to back to school, first she had to go to high school and get her academic credits. Then she went to college part-time, she worked part-time doing clerical work, which is, you know, what she had gone to high school for. But it paid the bills. And, so, uh, she

actually graduated from college the year I graduated from junior high, which I felt like, you know, “This is taking away my thunder” because my mother was the first person in our family to go to college. Um, and we lived in the Bronx until 1970, so when I started Barnard [College] I lived in the East Bronx in this New York City low-income housing project. But then my mother was teaching and she was making too much for us to continue living there so we moved to Co-op City. And we actually moved to Co-op City on May 4th of 1970, which was Kent State [University] day. And because we didn’t have the TV hooked up and we didn’t have radio and whatever, I had no idea that any of that was going on until I went back to school a couple of days later after the move was complete, and it was like, “What’s going on?” So I kind of slept through that whole hoo-hah in 1970. Um—

00:03:57 Q: So where was your family from?

00:03:58 Falek: My family—my grandmother was actually born here. We were originally from Eastern Europe—from Hungary and, uh, Czechoslovakia and that kind of area, but both my grandmothers were born in this country, both my mother’s mother and my father’s mother. And, um, and we pretty much, you know, all the family lived in New York until we—the kids—all grew up and now everybody’s scattered. My brother’s in Massachusetts, I’m here. My mother passed away just about a year ago, and, um, and so—

00:04:38 Q: Did she teach all those years?

00:04:39 Falek: She actually taught or retired early because she remarried, and the man that she married was a lot older than she was, so when he retired, she retired. So she was fifty-five when she retired, but she taught for twenty years.

00:04:59 Q: That's very impressive.

00:05:00 Falek: Yeah, yeah. In fact, she taught first grade, and eventually, probably after about fifteen years, they said, "How would you like to teach second grade?" And I thought, "Wow, it only took you fifteen years to get promoted from first grade to second." But, she loved it, and you know, it was one of those life-long dreams that you have, and she was able to fulfill it, and, um, do what she wanted to do. And my stepfather and my mom did a lot of traveling. They went all over the world; they went to Asia; they went to South America; they had a home in Florida. And they moved to a senior community in New Jersey, so they had a really good life for many, many years until my stepfather passed away.

00:05:48 Q: Growing up in Staten Island and moving to a housing project, did you ever feel different than your—others in your area there?

00:05:55 Falek: Oh, yeah! Uh—I, you know, when I look at—I was actually looking for my pictures from grade school, which are somewhere around, but there were very few white faces in

my class, so the majority of kids in my class were either Black or Puerto Rican, and, um, I belonged to a Girl Scout troop where the leader was black. By the time we got to the upper levels, there were only a few girls, and, um—

00:06:28 Q: Upper levels in Girl Scouts?

00:06:30 Falek: In Girl Scouts, yeah. Girls start out and they're in Brownies and they love it, and then they get to be teenagers and they're like, "Nah, this isn't cool anymore." So the few of us who stayed were—you know it was the leader's daughter and a couple others. And by the time—I went all the way through Senior Scouts. I was in Barnard and I was still in Scouts because I was only sixteen. And, um—

00:06:54 Q: That's gotta be unique. I can't imagine anyone else—

00:06:66 Falek: Right, right! And, oh, and they had a big Scout to-do in Mill Pond Park, which was one of the parks in town a couple years ago. And they said, "All past, present, and future Girl Scouts are welcome, and wear your uniforms." And I wore my Senior Scout hat, and everybody said, "Oh, how quaint!" But, you know, the other girl who shared the duties of being a patrol leader, we kind of alternated because we were the two leaders in the Senior Troop, and she was black, so, you know, I'm sure I had a different experience, and when I applied for Barnard,

my guidance counselor at the high school said, “You know, you’re the first person in our school who’s ever applied there.”

00:07:43 Q: I can imagine.

00:07:45 Falek: So, it was a different experience.

00:07:49 Q: Now, did you—were you accepted, or were you—you were Jewish or white or primarily in a Black and Puerto Rican area, did you ever feel uncomfortable? Like “I can’t be friends?”

00:07:59 Falek: Um, you know, I had one other Jewish friend who was in Hebrew school with me. I—my mother played mahjong with the four other Jewish women, and so their daughters were all my age, and so we all kind of hung around together. There were a couple of really tough girls in my neighborhood. There was one girl, her name was Lillibel, and she had scars all over the place. She would come up to me, and we had this kind of love-hate relationship, because I think there was something about me that she respected, but she’d come up and say, “My mother did this to me.” She’d say, “Here’s a scar—” and “My mother put a scissor through my chin when I was, you know five years old.” I was really afraid that she was going to beat the crap out of me, and she never did. She would just sort of say these things to me to tell me that she was tough, but she left me alone. But, I think she did get into fights with other kids, and part of it was

that I just kind of said, “Uh huh, that’s nice,” you know, and I didn’t—I never really acted like I was afraid when she was there.

And I did have some kids come up to me one time and say some sort of—you know, Black kids—say some racist things to me, but by and large, I, you know, we all got along. We lived in the projects, we went to the same school, um—It was interesting that there were two city housing projects managed by the same management company. The wife of the manager of our project was somebody my mother had gone to high school with, so we knew them very well, they were friends of ours.

Um, but, I lived in a place called Clason Point Gardens, and it was garden apartments, so we had an upstairs and a downstairs, and a front yard and a backyard, you know, parks and things. And right across the street were Soundview Houses, and they were your typical seven, six-story red brick housing project with elevators and everything, and uh, Clason Point Gardens had one of the lowest crime rates of any New York City housing projects, and Soundview Houses had one of the highest crime rates, so it was interesting because the tenants were selected from a single list, so it was just by chance that you went to one or the other.

Uh, but I really enjoyed growing up there because it was kind of like living in the country. You had your backyard; you had a garden. My brother and I made money shoveling snow and mowing lawns because the projects would give you a lawnmower to borrow. So borrowing it for

a day, we could go around to the neighbors and say, “We’ll mow your lawn for a quarter.” And, um, so we were quite the entrepreneurs.

00:10:54 Q: Very good. Uh, can you tell me something about the most influential person in your life at that time? Prior to Barnard, actually.

00:11:02 Falek: Well, you know, my mother has always been a big influence in my life. Like I said, she went back to school and, uh, I’m getting a little teary because she just passed away—but, you know, she went back to school to follow her dream, and while she was following that dream, she had another dream, which was to learn to play the piano. And, so, she was working as a—in a synagogue, and one of the parishioners came in, and—this woman was a piano teacher—and she said, “Joyce, do you know anybody who wants to buy a piano?” And my mother was like, “Yo! Here!” Basically, her student was giving up lessons, and her student’s mother said, “If you’re giving up lessons, you don’t need this piano.” So for twenty-five dollars, we got an upright piano. We went to the Salvation Army and got a piano bench and both my mother and I took piano lessons, and somehow my brother escaped. And my mother—she’s very musical, she sang in choirs, she always listened to all kinds of music, and she had a good voice—she could not get it with the piano. She just could not do it. Maybe because at that time she was already in her thirties or whatever, and, um, I loved taking these piano lessons, and even if I wouldn’t practice, I would get good at it somehow.

So it was very frustrating to my mother to not actually become an accomplished pianist, even good enough to, you know, be able to play a couple of songs for her kids in her thirties, but it's something else she had wanted to do, but to me, what that meant is you don't have to be stuck in what you're doing if you don't want to do it. You can do something else.

00:12:55 Q: Yeah. Now, did you—are you good at the piano? Did you continue with it?

00:12:56 Falek: I was okay.

00:12:59 Q: Yeah, but enough to be able to play and—?

00:13:00 Falek: You know, I could play a couple of songs. But after a while, I gave it up, and I moved out of the house and everything else, but it was good to have learned how to do it.

00:13:14 Q: How about your teen years? Uh, in high school, again sort of the same demographics—did you have boyfriends? Did you date? Were you—?

00:13:23 Falek: Well, I was young. For one thing, I was very young. And that was always a big thing because all my friends were two years older than me or at least a year older than me, because I was in a—New York has a two-year SP [Special Progress] class.

00:13:40 Q: SP?

00:13:41 Falek: It's like Special Progress. You go from seventh to ninth, so I skipped eighth grade.

00:13:46 Q: Wow, that's a hard year. [Laughs]

00:13:29 Q: Laughs I know. And, uh, I had a couple of really good friends, and in fact, there's one friend that I'm still friends with, so, um—So, we hung around, and then I had another friend who I'd known since I was three who was the daughter of one of my mother's mahjong players, and, um, she actually moved to Connecticut before I did. She lives down in Fairfield. So, the interesting thing was that Lesli my friend from school, didn't get along with Gail, my friend from childhood, and they could tolerate each other, but we usually didn't do things together unless it was like, "Oh, I'm having a birthday party" or something, so you invite all your friends.

But, we—so I had these different social circles because I had my school friends and I had my friends from the neighborhood, and I, uh, I didn't do a lot of dating. I met a guy—a boy, I forget what year it was. I think I was probably a senior in high school, and they asked the people in the honors class to be ushers in a special assembly for the rest of the school, and what they were doing is talking about Junior Achievement. So, I'm handing out forms for Junior Achievement and listening to this program and I thought, "Gee, I wonder why they don't give this to the

honors class. Sounds like a good program.” So I took a form for myself and I joined, and my mother had to drive me, because where we lived there was no good transportation. The group met at the Grand Concourse, which was on the other side of the Bronx, and would have had to go all the way to Manhattan back then to get there, so my mother would just drive me and pick me up and go shopping in the hour or two that I was at Junior Achievement.

So I was in this group that—we would make junk jewelry and you had to sell stock and sell product, and I actually ended up in the one hundred dollar sales club, which taught me that there was nothing that I wanted to less than sales. But, one of the boys that was in my group asked me out, and we went out a couple of times, so he was my first boyfriend, and it really didn’t go anywhere, and I don’t remember what happened to him, but we broke up—and there was a boy in high school, I think even from—in New York, you went to seventh and ninth grade in junior high, so I started high school in tenth grade, so he was in my class in biology in tenth grade, and he gave me a little keychain and I thought, “Oh, he likes me!” you know, but we never really dated, I just had a huge crush on him.

00:16:42 Q: Okay, okay. Um, anything else you want to say about a best friend?

00:16:26 Falek: Well my best friend—when we were in high school, we had these heart-to-heart talks all the time about “How do you know who you like?” and “How do you know who you’re in love with?” And I have zip “gay-dar.” Absolutely somebody who will never pick up that

somebody's gay, so we stayed friends through all our moves and all our years, and when I was about thirty, she said, "I have something really important I have to tell you." And she was really worried to tell me, that I wouldn't want to be her friend. And I thought, you know, how stupid is that? First of all, if there were ever anybody I would want to have a same-sex relationship with, you're my best friend, you would be the one, but we're not interested in each other in that way. But it does explain a lot about those heart-to-heart talks we had about "How do you know who you like?" and whatever, and um, and so, it's been a lot better since she came out to me, and she's been pretty open about it. Whether people pick up on it or not, she doesn't go broadcasting, "Hey, everybody, I'm a lesbian!" But, um, if, you know, if somebody picks up on it, she's open about it.

00:17:58 Q: Good. Uh, did you ever do any experimentation with drugs?

00:18:05 Falek: Oh, no. I was such a good girl. My brother was the druggie.

00:18:11 Q: Oh, and what happened to him? He survived?

00:18:12 Falek: Oh, he survived. He's married; he's had the same job for, you know, he works for a computer company. But he was growing marijuana plants in the bedroom and my mother caught him, and there was a big to-do, and she said, "Look, I can't control what you do, but you can't do it in the house." And he was like, "Okay, that's fine." And they still talked to each other,

and one time at home, he accused me of being chicken, and I said, “I’m not chicken!” So I smoked a joint with him, and another time I was at a party in graduate school and somebody passed a joint, and I smoked just to be part of it, but that’s about it. I didn’t do anything else. I never once smoked a cigarette.

00:18:59 Q: Okay. I’m not sure why that has to do with—why that has to be a question, but—

00:19:02 Falek: It’s part of the sixties culture.

00:19:06 Q: Absolutely. Next question is about your mother, but I think you already answered that, so I’ll ask you—what about the most memorable political or world event that occurred when you were growing up. If you remember what happened and how you felt.

00:19:18 Falek: I think it was, um, [John F.] Kennedy’s assassination. I was in junior high, and I was in science class, and we had a teacher who was quite the clown. And he came in and said, you know, “The President’s just been shot.” And it was like, “Mr. Breenburg, that’s not funny” and he was like, “No, no, the President’s just been shot.” And for a lot of us in our generation, me included, that was just kinda like everything in the world changed. For kids now, it’s like 9/11 [September 11th, 2001]. Everything in your world—all of a sudden, everything wasn’t safe anymore. If somebody could shoot the president—and, of course, following that, there were so

many other assassinations that, you know, political figures, even Jack [L.] Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald, it's like the world isn't safe anymore. That made a big difference.

00:20:16 Q: And able to watch it on television.

00:20:17 Falek: Oh, yeah! I remember watching hours and hours, and I probably still have somewhere have a New York Times magazine or something like that.

00:20:27 Q: Um, were you aware of the Civil Rights movement?

00:20:31 Falek: Oh, yeah. I was aware of it, but I was kind of like, "Well, I live with these people, so what's the issue?" I understood that there were issues and that it always seemed to me like that was down south. It didn't occur to me that that might occur up north.

00:20:53 Q: Okay. Can you name a moment or a day that specifically changed your life and who you eventually became?

00:21:03 Falek: A day—I don't know. There are so many moments and so many days. I don't know if there's a specific moment.

00:21:14 Q: Okay, we're going to come back to that, so don't fret about it.

00:21:15 Falek: I'm not going to fret about it.

00:21:17 Q: Would you say you're the same person, the same core that is Ellen, that walked through the gates of Barnard at sixteen? If no, how have you changed?

00:21:24 Falek: Oh, definitely. When I was young, I was very shy, and you know, I probably would not be doing this interview if you did it in 1968 or 1971, and any time because I was very shy. And, I, you know, it was one of those things where if I had bought a blouse, and I got home and found out that it didn't fit me or that there was something wrong with it and I had to return it to the store, I would just bring it in and cry, you know. I was very shy. And, gradually, I came out of my shell, and what really changed me was going to graduate school in West Virginia. It was the first time I'd gone away from home.

And West Virginia was a whole different world. Even Morgantown, which was fairly—well, it was a college town, so it was fairly open, but I had to fend for myself. I had to go to the grocery store, and I had to get car insurance, and I had to do all the things that grownup people do, and I ended up moving to Charleston, West Virginia, and working down there for a year, and that was a whole—way different place because that was no longer a college town, and so, um, it was a—you know, a state capital, it was—in quotes—a big city. But it was in no way a big city. The

thing to do was see what was playing in the local high school and go down to the local Kroger store and see what's happening. It was just a whole different world.

00:23:03 Q: Good. Okay. Um, what about an obstacle? Can you tell me about an obstacle that was place in your path and how you dealt with it? Some major challenge.

00:23:13 Falek: Well, after college, um, the big obstacle was—I graduated cum laude, so I thought, you know, here I am. I got my Barnard degree, I got my degree with honors, and I applied to a couple of graduate schools. All rejected. So—

00:23:31 Q: You had majored in biology?

00:23:32 Falek: Psychology.

00:23:32 Q: Psychology.

00:23:33 Falek: So, I was applying for psychology. And, so, I convinced my mother that I should be allowed to have a year off, because I was so young, and if I had gone to school like everybody else and not skipped a grade in grade school and a grade in junior high, she would still be paying for me to live at home. And, so she said, “That’s okay as long as you keep the house neat.” And so I stayed home for a year, and I applied into more graduate schools. I did all kinds of fun

things. I took a course in—I had never taken any history courses at Barnard, but I took a course at The New School in History of the World from the Renaissance to the Present Day, and I read—I kept a list of all the books that I read because I wanted to be able to prove that I was doing something, and I read something like fifty-five books that year. And when I was in kindergarten, we made kites, and the dog next door ate my kite, so I went out and bought a kite and flew my kite. And it was like, all these things that you say, “If I had time I would do this.” I went to every museum in New York, and it was a wonderful year. It was the best year of my life. And I applied to fifteen graduate schools, and I got rejected by all of them.

00:24:54 Q: Again?

00:24:54 Falek: Two years running. And, you know, now, looking now—

00:24:58 Q: It makes you wonder what’s a Barnard degree worth.

00:25:00 Falek: Well, no. The Barnard degree is fine, you know. They ask you, you know, “What do you see yourself doing in five years?” And I was like, “Five years. I don’t know what I’ll be doing in five minutes.” And, so I really needed that time to grow up and to figure out where I was going. I couldn’t just say I was going to be a psychologist, you know. And so the third year in a row, the contract with my mother for a year off is done, so she said, “Now you have to get a job.” So I got a job doing clerical work at Finch College, which was another women’s college,

and I was amazed—I went to an employment agency to help me find this job, and they paid like eight hundred some dollars for the privilege of placing me, and I was amazed that somebody thought I was worth that much, because I could type about twenty words a minute. And I had a great title. I was Secretary to the Director of Development and Information Services.

I had work-study students under me, and my boss was a woman, and we had a blast. We had a really good time. She's not your typical boss who says, "Okay, go make the coffee." She got in first; she'd make the coffee. And I was in an academic atmosphere and people were saying, "Why aren't you in graduate school, you're so bright?" It was like I went through my little song and dance about it. And I was like well, you know, I might as well apply again. But by then I had a little more handle on what I wanted to do. And I actually decided that maybe psychology wasn't what I wanted to do. And I had been funded for my education at Barnard through vocational rehabilitation services because I'm diabetic, so I researched being a rehabilitation counselor, which is counseling handicapped people. It was kind of related to psychology.

So I applied to a few places in rehab counseling and I also applied for a program in psychology and I got into every place I had applied, but by then I had decided I was going to go down to West Virginia for rehab counseling, and it was great program. It was really what I needed because we walk in the first day and they say, "We want you—the students—to design your educational program. So, we want you to identify what you need to know and how you're going to go about getting it." And we all kind of looked at each other and said, "If we knew what we needed to know we wouldn't be in school." And it was like, "No, we're going to teach you what

you need to know, but you're going to identify how you figure out what to, you know, what you need to know." And it was big on teaching people how to make reasoned decisions, and uh, and they had an amazing model which they called Guided Design, which started out with defining your problem and then state your objective, and then state your obstacles to reaching your objective and, you know, the limitations and generate solutions and analyze your solutions based on what you've done beforehand, and pick a solution that implemented that and then reevaluate. [Laughs]

00:28:30 Q: That covers everything. [Laughs]

00:28:31 Falek: Yeah, and so with a year we were working with that model, and it was actually stolen from the engineering department, which they said started out on Day One at engineering school with a paper that said, "Bridge Freezes Before Roadway." I can't believe I remember this so well—this is 1972, you know, but "Bridge Freezes Before Roadway" and they said to these students, "This sign was put there to solve a problem. What is the problem that it was meant to solve?" And if you said, "Well, the bridge freezes" you would generate one set of solutions. If you said, "Frozen, and we don't want the bridge to freeze" it would generate another set of solutions however you did it. And then they would guide you through the solutions. And then engineering students learned all these materials and bridge construction and things like that, but it ended up as if you made a bridge that didn't freeze before the roadway, it would be prohibitively expensive, so the best solution would be to post the sign. But in learning that, you

had learned all about engineering, so they did all the same thing with disabilities and rehabilitation. Fascinating how you go about—if you get a client who had—they called it “X-itis”—how do you get information to know what X-itis is—what the limitations are gonna be, and what they can do, and what you should do for them? It was a fascinating program.

00:30:03 Q: Was this a one-year a program?

00:30:03 Falek: A two-year program.

00:30:04 Q: And you end up with a masters or—?

00:30:05 Falek: A masters, yeah. Actually, almost everybody did it in four semesters in a row, so we didn’t take a summer vacation, so I graduated in January of ’74. Well, you know, by then I had caught up with everybody else because I had had those two years off.

00:30:28 Q: Yeah, that sounds like that was quite important. Um, what about the most joyful day of your life?

00:30:31 Falek: Oh! [Laughs] There’s a lot of those, too.

00:30:37 Q: Or a moment when you were most proud.

00:30:38 Falek: Most proud, I mean there's a couple. My marriage to my first husband, Harry, was a joyful day. He passed away when he was only forty-five. And, my graduation from medical school was a very joyful day. So, you know, there's a lot of—I've had a lot of joy in my life.

00:30:59 Q: Yeah, and where did you go to medical school?

00:31:00 Falek: I went to Stony Brook [University]. So, what happened was, I worked in rehab counseling for two years, and then it was—I had moved back to New York by then, and I was working on a program on 14th Street called Federation of Handicapped, and, uh, it was on a grant, so every June you had nothing to do because the grant money had run out and you had to see if you were going to get another grant. And I ended up tearing my lateral meniscus on my knee skiing, and so it was one of these, "I'm bored, I'm anxious, I'm in pain, why is this fun?" And I realized it was fun because it was really interesting—it would be really interesting if I were on the other side.

So, I quit my job, I went back to school—I actually went to Columbia [University] General Studies to get my science courses, which I hadn't taken at Barnard, and um, I actually even had to do a semester of English because I didn't have enough English. And, so English Lit [Literature] was kind of fun in all those science courses. And, um, being at General Studies was

like being back home. I moved back up to 110th Street and Broadway, and I did a lot of my study on the grounds of St. John the Divine. I was the only premed with a tan. I was the only medical student with a tan when I went to Stony Brook because I lived in Port Jefferson, and they have a beach, and I would take my books and my lawn chair and my sun tan lotion, and I would sit at the beach. And everybody else is in the library and it was really good to be on the beach because nobody was there. It was quiet, I had no distractions.

But when I decided to go back to school, to medical school, my mother—who had two kids and was a widow—had said, “I’m going back to school” and just didn’t look back, she said to me, “Are you crazy? At your age?” And I was like, “Mom, I’m a lot younger than you were when you did this.” But she made me a big party for my medical school graduation, and she said, “I was just afraid that you wouldn’t get through it, and that you would be disappointed that you wouldn’t get through it.” And I was like, “Oh, Mom!” So, uh, so I’ve had a lot of career changes in my life, and one of the things I say is that I went to medical school because now I can’t change careers anymore.

00:33:22 Q: Good response. Can you tell me anything else that describes yourself as a person, or describes your years at Barnard? Any sense that you would like to share.

00:33:31 Falek: Okay, well, um, you know, me as a person—I got diabetes when I was eleven. And I think—

00:33:46 Q: Does it run in the family or was it just you?

00:33:47 Falek: No, it's Type 1, which is not hereditary. There are other auto-immune disorders that run in the family with thyroid and other things that are related, but I'm the only one with insulin-dependent diabetes, and that probably affected how my mother saw letting go of me. As far as I was concerned, this wasn't a big deal. You just go about your business, and you do it, and my friend Lesli—my gay friend who I knew from high school—she was always afraid that, like, if we went out somewhere and I ate something with sugar that I was going to die. So it affected how people saw me, but it didn't stop me from—in 1971, after graduating college and not having any prospects in September and not knowing what I was going to do in September—I picked up and went with a friend that I'd met at a camp the summer before, and we went to Europe for eighty-one days. You know, I just stuck my syringes in the backpack and went, but I think that's a big defining thing for me. While we were in Europe, we were in Greece, and somebody at the youth hostel said to my friend, "Are you a drug addict?" and she said, "No that's just Ellen." They'd obviously seen me take the insulin, and there were signs all over the place, "Don't use drugs. You'll be arrested. Nobody's going to ever see you again." It's like thank you—I do still talk to this woman. But that was probably a big defining moment for me. And, in fact, it may have determined the fact that I was going to go on to medical school later on because I was in the hospital, and I thought that this was just so interesting to be there.

00:35:34 Q: You mean as an eleven-year-old?

00:35:35 Falek: Yeah, an eleven-year-old. You know, I realized, for example, that all the needles were color coded for size, and I thought, you know, I wanted to maybe go in to nursing, but I got talked out of that. But I thought I'd be ahead of everybody because I knew how to give shots. And, later on, rather than going into nursing, I went into medicine, but it may have had some influence on me with that. And tearing my cartilage and making me go to medical school. That was a big moment.

00:36:10 Q: Those are both very large things. So is there anything that you've done or not done in your life that you would change?

00:36:16 Falek: I think I had to go through it the way I did. I—I would be a very different person if I hadn't skipped those two grades, and if I hadn't, you know, gone to Barnard. And one of the reasons I went to Barnard was because I was being funded for college by Vocational Rehabilitation. And my brother went to [The] City College [of New York] because it was free, and I was going to go to a city college as well, probably to Hunter [College], and my mother said, "Oh, they're gonna pay for you. You should go somewhere good."

00:36:53 Q: Well, Hunter's good!

00:36:54 Falek: Well, there's nothing wrong with it. [Laughs] You know, but she was like, "You should go someplace with a name, not just CCNY [The City College of New York] or Lehman [College] or Hunter, or one of those schools. You know, go to private school if somebody's going to pay for you." And, that was the main reason I picked Barnard, was because I could go someplace that wasn't a city school, but all my friends from school were going to pretty much—all my friends went to city colleges.

00:37:19 Q: So, when you were in school, what did you most want out of life, and how did that change?

00:37:23 Falek: I just kind of drifted through college.

00:37:27 Q: You were so young!

00:37:28 Falek: Well, you know, there were a lot of things that people in my class could do that I couldn't do, you know, include drive and drink. I mean, the drinking age in New York was eighteen, and I couldn't do that until I was a junior, although I found out that I could go to the Golden Rail [Ale House] and show my college ID and nobody questioned my age, so I was an underage drinker.

00:37:52 Q: The confessions come out!

00:37:53 Falek: Right. Not a lot, and um, and you know, I had a group of friends and we, you know, we hung out. But I had a job also, so I couldn't hang out a lot because I had to go home and work and make some money.

00:38:11 Q: But you were living in the dorms or commuting?

00:38:12 Falek: No, I was a commuter. Oh, I commuted a long distance.

00:38:16 Q: All four years?

00:38:17 Falek: All four years. I, um, I lived in the East Bronx, and I lived—the closest subway line was the Pelham Bay line, the No. 6 train, which goes down the east side, and Barnard's on the west side. So I either had to walk close to a mile to get to the subway and then go all the way down to Grand Central and then take the shuttle up or—I had some other cockamamie way which was to go up to 125th street, then take the No. 4 train up to 149th street, then catch the No. 2 down, then take the No. 1, um, or my mother would drive me to Simpson Street, which was already on the No. 2 train, you know, so it depended on my class schedule or hers, and she could take me there and I could take that down to 96th street, and just take the No. 1 up, so the transportation was a huge thing.

And when I was eighteen, I was finally able to get a driver's license, and my mother gave my brother and me her old car, and so I was able to drive to school, and I knew when everybody on Claremont street left to go to work. You'd sit there and you'd wait for people to leave because if you didn't park there, you were up by Grant's Tomb, and um, it's like, "I know this guy leaves at 10 [o'clock] too, so I can just sit here and wait 'til he comes out." And everybody else did the same thing.

00:39:47 Q: See, that's a part of Barnard life that I knew nothing about. I had no idea that, you know, some of my classmates drove or had to park or anything. But, anyway, that's very good to know. And I'm sure it wasn't easy. [Laughs]

00:40:01 Falek: I got to be a good driver because getting back onto Riverside Drive, you went over the, you know, meatpacking things by the river and there were all these trucks and vans and things parked there and you would go in and out and around, and I had a boat of a car—it was a '65 Chevy Bel Air—it was a huge car, so it wasn't, you know, a little VW [Volkswagon] or a Toyota Corolla or something, you know, to make it through these little spaces.

00:40:35 Q: So, when did you—can you tell me about the moment when you thought, "Hey, this is where I'm supposed to be" when you were at Barnard. Or was there ever such a moment?

00:40:44 Falek: Um, I don't know that there was, I mean—I remember in freshman year, in English, they gave us a list, I guess before we even started, they gave us a list, you know “Have you read these books?” and there were maybe two books on that list that I'd read, and um, and talking with the, uh, the instructor at the, you know, at whatever meeting we had, I said, “I feel like I'm really one down here because I haven't read any of these, and it seems like everybody else has.” And she says, “No, they haven't. They just lie.” And that made me feel a little better.
[Laughs]

00:41:24 Q: Do you know who that was? I'd be curious.

00:41:25 Falek: I think it was—I can look in the yearbook.

00:41:27 Q: That's okay.

00:41:33 Falek: Elizabeth Prescott, maybe?

00:41:34 Q: Oh, [Anne] Prescott. Yeah. I think you were actually in my English class.

00:41:37 Falek: I might have, yeah. Were you one of those people who lied? [Laughs]

00:41:42 Q: I was one of those people who never said a word for the first year of college. I just sat there.

00:41:46 Falek: I was kind of like that, too. I just prayed that they didn't call on me.

00:41:50 Q: Yeah, anyway, because I had Prescott. She was wonderful, but I think I was just a bit intimidated by her culture and her perfect appearance and her soft whimsical—anyway, yeah, she knew her students her—[Laughs]. I read.

00:42:11 Falek: My mother, when she was in college, she majored in English, and she actually read us [Geoffrey] Chaucer and [William] Shakespeare and all kinds of great poetry as bedtime stories, so I was familiar with the Canterbury Tales from the time I was in fourth grade, and, um, but you know, had I read it? No. I'd had it read to me, and my mother knew of everything that was free in New York, so we'd done Shakespeare in the Park and we had all this culture that most people in my neighborhood didn't, but, uh, I hadn't actually read a lot of these books, and so I was like, "What did I read when I was in high school?" I mean, I was in Honors English in high school—I was in honors everything in high school—but, uh, you know, I hadn't read any of those books.

00:43:02 Q: I'm sure you were fine.

00:43:07 Falek: I got straight B's for my first two years there.

00:43:13 Q: Oh, well. That's quite good. Um, all right, let's go back to the first moment that you stepped foot on campus. What did you think? What did you see? What did you smell? Who did you meet?

00:43:25 Falek: I don't remember. I remember that we had a Big Sister, and, um, mine had an unpronounceable name—her name was Xenia Srebrianski or something like that. And, um, she kind of took me by the hand and showed me around, and that kind of cushioned it for me to be coming in. But, for me, it was just another day in school, because I was still commuting, I wasn't living in a dorm. And my friends were all commuters. And at some point, I think it might have been Linda, said, "Let's get an apartment together" and I had originally, was going to do it, and then I pulled out because I was too chicken, and then she got mad at me for that, but she didn't stay mad at me.

00:44:20 Q: So was there any sort of place for commuters to sort of gather? Or did you just have to hide out in the library, or—?

00:44:22 Falek: We, no, well, when the Annex was built, we hung out in the Annex.

00:44:28 Q: That was Jake; I remember the name. But I don't remember what it was.

00:44:30 Falek: And, it was on the—if you look at Barnard Hall, it was off to the right. It was a little tiny building. And then when they built [The] McIntosh [Center], we gathered there, so we hung out there. We would kind of wait for each other after class. My friend Elyse—one time we—we both had our senior physicals, I think it was, and we met because we were back-to-back, and I was getting finished and she was just starting, and she said, “Oh, they draw your blood. I always faint when they draw your blood.” And I said, “You know, this is not a big deal. They take a teaspoon of blood; it’s not a big deal. And I’ll meet you down in McIntosh when you’re done.” And, so I’m waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and this doesn’t take this long. And she comes in and she’s white as a ghost, and I’m like, “What happened?” And she’s like, “Well, they drew my blood and it felt right like this wasn’t a big deal and I stood up and fainted. And then they wouldn’t let me go. I’m fine, I’m fine.”

00:45:40 Q: Yeah, we’re not all as tough. Okay, uh, so yeah, as a commuter you were not—so, socially, were you involved in anything at Barnard besides the academics?

00:45:48 Falek: Oh, yeah. I mean, I did go to mixers. I helped plan some mixers sometime, and I remember one of them we got some guys from—I don’t remember if it was Dartmouth [College] or Harvard [University]—but some school that wasn’t Columbia, and they came down, this group of boys, and at the end of doing this, we went to a supermarket on 125th Street to buy refreshments, so we, you know, we did this on the cheap. And at the end, we had twenty five

dollars left. And my friend, Winnie, said, “We should buy them a thank you gift. Let’s go to Tiffany’s.” And I said, “What?!” [Laughs]

00:46:33 Q: A thank you for coming to your mixer?

00:46:34 Falek: A thank you for boys to come to our mixer, and I was like, “What are you going to buy in Tiffany’s?” There were five guys who had helped organize it. “What are you going to buy five of in Tiffany’s for twenty five dollars?” Winnie was my exact opposite. She had no shame for anything, and so we walk in to Tiffany’s, she walks up to the guard and says, “What’s the cheapest thing in the store?” And they say, second floor, silver bookmark. And they were five dollars each. So we bought five of them, they put them in the nice Tiffany wrapping. We sent them off, and that was that. And it was like, “I can’t believe she did that.” Um, but it did teach me that you don’t have to spend millions of dollars to buy things in Tiffany’s. When one of my friends graduated from medical school, she’d just had her ears pierced, and I thought it would be nice to buy her something from Tiffany’s as a medical school graduation present. So I went to Tiffany’s, and I went up to the second floor where they had silver stuff and, you know, not a million dollars, I bought her earrings from Tiffany’s and they put them in the nice bag, and they looked good. And, uh, you know, she got her gift.

00:47:46 Q: That’s amazing. I’m really overwhelmed by the notion that you would thank, you know, these guys. I don’t think that happens anymore. Even a thank you note is like—

00:47:57 Falek: We did, and bookmarks were so appropriate. And, so I did that. I was involved in Holly House. So, we did a lot of whatever that committee was. We actually broke in there one time because we got up—a group of us—for the weekend, and we discovered that none of us had a key.

00:48:16 Q: What did you do for Holly House because I think I went there twice and I loved it?

00:48:23 Falek: Oh I loved it. I guess we no longer own it.

00:48:25 Q: No, I guess it was sold.

00:48:26 Falek: But we would go there always in the winter because in the summer it was buggy. And you had to get a fire going because it was freezing. And you had to go pump water. And then you'd put your water on the stove so you'd have hot water to wash in. You'd hate going to the bathroom because it was an outhouse, but we had a ball up there in and I would bring my guitar, we would sing. I was once told, "If you must sing, please go outside."

00:49:01 Q: So you played guitar all through college? Just for fun? Do you still play?

00:49:06 Falek: Yeah, um, I haven't for a while, but theoretically I do.

00:49:13 Q: And you were self-taught, or?

00:49:14 Falek: I was at camp, and my friend Donna, who actually—that's another long story about how I met my husband, but, my friend Donna introduced my current husband to me—she had watched on public broadcast on Channel 13; they had Laura Weber Teaches Guitar and I had always wanted to learn guitar, so I said, "Teach me how to play." And I started writing to my mother about how I wanted a guitar and I was learning to play. I had been saving up for one, so now I had a reason to buy one. I had about two dollars in my guitar fund, but, uh, she bought me a guitar when I got home. And having gone through this with my friend Donna, the first semester of Laura Weber Teaches Guitar, in the fall it was Session Two. So I would tune up with Laura Weber on the TV, and she would teach you chords and strums and all kinds of things like that, and that's how I learned to play guitar, from TV. And the interesting thing is, there's a folk singer called Christine Lavin who I loved, and she also learned to play from Laura Weber. But she's doing this professionally and I'm not. [Laughs]

00:50:39 Q: Still, that's a gift. Uh, you can tell me now how you met your husband. I was going to get to that later, but it doesn't matter.

00:50:45 Falek: Well, my second husband and I were introduced by my friend Donna as a blind date. Something like 1970. And we dated for two years, and then I dumped him. I dumped him

because he was being selfish. And a couple years later, when I was in grad school, he called me. He had actually called my mother, who still had the same phone number, and she was like, “Oh, Ellen’s down in West Virginia” and gave him my phone number.

00:51:15 Q: You were okay with that?

00:51:17 Ellen: Oh, yeah. I never really hated him. It’s just that, he was selfish and that wasn’t going to go anywhere. But when I came back to New York, we went out once or twice, and then we wrote for a while, and then we lost touch. And I next ran into him and I was in residency, and his wife delivered twins at my hospital.

00:51:39 Q: [Gasp] Oh, my.

00:51:40 Falek: And he has a very unusual last name. His last name is Matthaey.

00:51:42 Q: Matthaey?

00:51:43 Falek: M-a-t-t-h-a-e-y. And I said, “There can’t be anybody named Matthaey who’s not related to Greg.” So, I looked in the chart, and sure enough it said “Parents: Margaret and Gregory,” and, um, I walked into her room in my little intern white coat, and I said, “Hi. I used to know your husband in a past life.”

And she said, “Oh, did you go to NYU [New York University]?” Because that’s where Greg went to college, and I said no. And she said, “How did you know him?”

And I said, “Well, we dated but it was like twenty million years ago.”

And she asked me my name, and I told her, and she said, “He still talks about you.”

And I was like, “Holy cow! I haven’t seen this man in a decade, and I’m the other woman in their relationship.”

But she said, “I know he would love to see you. He’s going to be here at such and such time. I won’t tell him you’re coming in case you chicken out because I know he’d be really disappointed.”

So I went back out, I bought her a gift, because everybody buys baby gifts, but the wife is welcoming, so I bought her a gift, and I walked in, and his story, her story, and my story about how this went down differs, because he says, “Oh, I was Mr. Cool. Oh, Ellen, how nice to see you.”

She says, “He was looking in a drawer, he turned around, and he just went ‘woah.’” And I said he was standing there with a baby in each arm and he looked at me and his jaw dropped down to his knees. [Laughs] Didn’t drop the babies.

But I became a family friend, because at that point I was living at the hospital doing my residency, and I was in Manhasset, and they were in Bayside, so it was like a fifteen-minute drive, and I managed to talk to one of the formula company representatives and get them to give six cases of baby formula a month for a year. And so every month, either they would make a trip to New York or I would make a trip out to them with the six cases of baby formula, so I fed those boys. And, uh, so I became a friend, and then I finished my residency and I moved up here. And we kept in touch. They even came to my wedding.

I met my first husband playing Scrabble, which is one of the things I started doing when I moved up here. I went to a Mensa new member party because I was new to the area, and one of the women who was there said, “Oh, do you play Scrabble?” and I joined the Scrabble club, and I’ve been going ever since. And my first husband was the, um, head of that club, and he was a very sweet man, very shy. And we just—like a lot of the other Scrabble people—we’d get together outside of club times and play Scrabble, we met like “Oh, okay, let’s go out to dinner, and—” And we were going to go out to a picnic one Saturday and it rained, so we said, “Let’s go to the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport.” We had an hour-drive each way, so we told each other our life story, and little by little, you know, I said, “You know, I really like this guy.”

00:55:01 Q: And what was he doing?

00:55:02 Falek: What?

00:55:03 Q: What was he doing?

00:55:05 Falek: He was a computer programmer. So, around Christmas time, I agonized over how to sign my Christmas card to him, and I finally said, “No guts, no glory” and signed it “Love, Ellen.” And he got it and said, “Does she mean that?” And so, we had a dinner with his family and his sister said, “How long have you and my brother been dating?” and we said “Hmm, we don’t date—we just play Scrabble.” So, I said, “Well, we’ve known each other for about two years.”

And a couple of days later, we were, uh, driving around, and we went to the mall, and he bought me this necklace. And I thought, “Nobody’s ever bought me a diamond before.” And, so, we came home and we were talking, and he said, “If we were to get married, how would we handle religion?” because he’s Catholic. And “If we were to get married, how would we handle kids?”

And, I said, “You know, this sounds like—when.”

And he said, “I’m pretty sure we’ll get married.”

And I said, “Well, why don’t you ask me?” And he got down on his knees. I’ve never seen a man sweat so much, and then I said yes.

And then I thought, “What am I doing?”

You know? But we married, and we were definite soul mates. We used to play Scrabble in a synagogue, so I can always say I met my Catholic husband in a synagogue, and we got married by a miracle because we had a Justice of the Peace named Marianne Miracle. So, we had a wonderful time being married, but he was diagnosed with colon cancer, and it was metastatic at diagnosis, so he died when he was forty-five. And, so, we were married for six years, and around that time, Greg and his wife had issues, and we both needed a shoulder to cry on. And being long-time friends, we were each other’s shoulder to cry on.

And then, you know, he had to get out of the city, he would come up here, and after a while, he said, “Look, I let you go twice before. There’s not gonna be a third time. Will you marry me?”

And I said, “Oh, Greg. You have so much baggage in your life.” And he was like crestfallen that I didn’t say yes. And I said, “Please give me some time to think about it.” But I thought about it,

and I thought, “Baggage or not, you marry people with their baggage. I know what I’m getting into. I’ve known this man for like thirty years.” So I said yes.

But then there were a couple of complications. One was they were still married, and his wife was not happy about granting a divorce, so we were engaged for something like five years. And, finally, she granted him the divorce, and we got married. We were like, “How are we going to handle this? You’re in New York; I’m up here. How are we going to handle this long-term relationship?” And eventually I said, “This is just silly. We should just get married. We’ve been commuting every week back-and-forth, what’s the difference if we get married? We’re just engaged, we might as well get married, and it’s a lot easier then.” We somehow managed to make it work. Text messages, cell phones, and—

00:58:18 Q: Yeah. Those are amazing stories.

00:58:21 Falek: As I said, I have a good life here. And, um, you know, he had his twins that brought us together the third time around. And he had another son. So his twins are now thirty, and the baby is now twenty-seven, and of the twins, one of them is a pilot who just recently got a job with Alaska Air, and the other one is a Marine, and got a disability discharge. Be careful what you pray for. We prayed he wouldn’t get sent overseas and get killed, and he didn’t get sent overseas because he hurt his back in training, but he got married, and they have a son and

another one on the way. And the baby is going to be going to graduate school at [The] Wharton [of the University of Pennsylvania] come the fall. So they all did okay.

00:59:22 Q: I should say so. So, let's go back again to Barnard. Were there expectations that you had not satisfied?

00:59:28 Falek: I had, like, no expectations. I was, you know, everything was just over my head at that point. I was so young.

00:59:37 Q: Okay. And did you anticipate—what sort of adult life did you anticipate for yourself?

00:59:44 Falek: Probably not being a doctor. You know, I really thought—I was a psych major, I would be a psychologist.

00:59:48 Q: Why did you rule out being a doctor at that young age?

00:59:51 Falek: Oh, I had no idea that I was ever going to be a doctor until I hurt my knee. So, I wasn't like, you know, a lot of doctors come out of the womb and are like—you know, my friend Phyllis, who's a doctor, who I met her as camp counselors in 1969, she's like, "I'm going to go to medical school." And, she became a doctor, and that was it. And I had really—you know, I was a

psych major and thought that I was going to be a psychologist, and I really didn't know what that meant.

01:00:23 Q: Yeah, okay. Did you have any mentors in the faculty at Barnard or outside of Barnard during those years?

01:00:31 Falek: Not really. Um, and you know, one of the things that I didn't know—how to go about doing that kind of stuff, and I was so, you know, I was shy, so I was afraid to ask. And Dr. Cobb was my advisor.

01:00:51 Q: Dr. Cobb was in—?

01:00:53 Falek: Psych. My advisor.

01:00:57 Q: Oh, Cobb, yeah. I think I may have taken rat science with him. Didn't do much to me.

01:00:58 Falek: Oh, yes. My partner, my partner was Winnie Montuori and we had this rat that we named Dudley, because you know how there's one that they always throw out the data because it doesn't match anything else? That was always Dudley because he's such a dud. It happened the first day when we had the rats in their box and they'd been trained by the teaching

assistants to respond to the bar press. Our water bottle was empty, and, you know, we went up to the TA [Teaching Assistant] and said, “Our rat is extinguishing, and I don’t think there’s any water in there.”

And they said, “Oh, impossible. Can’t be.”

And, so then he just kind of went in the corner and went to sleep, and we said, “Our rat is sleeping in the corner of the box; this isn’t right.”

And they checked and, “Oh, we forgot to fill the water bottle.”

So they filled it up and, you know, they did a press and he went back to the—eventually figured it out. But there was this big whole—so he was not the brightest light on the planet, but maybe he was because he followed what he was supposed to do which was if you’re not getting water, you would stay.

01:02:13 Q: I don’t know how judgmental I can be about those poor rats, but yeah.

01:02:17 Falek: Well, Winnie took him home at the end of the—because she didn’t want him to be killed. And the whole time that we were in this class, she never handled him because she was too afraid, and I was the one that picked him up and stuffed him in the box, so we—I said, “I’ll

go out with you.” She lived in Brooklyn. It’s like, “I’ll go out with you on the subway to make sure everything’s okay.” And I remember riding in the subway and he would stick his nose through the hole. You get a seat next to a rat in a box on the New York subway. [Laughs] So, she’s sitting there with the cage on her lap and he’s sticking his nose through the hole and she’s like “oooh!” But she made him her pet for some time.

01:02:58 Q: That’s funny. Uh, okay, well was there any person who particularly influenced you while at Barnard, and—?

01:03:08 Falek: Well, um, I mean—I—my best friend while at Barnard was Elyse von Egloffstein, and she—I just thought she had the most incredible sense of humor. We’ve lost touch, and part of it—I did find out why—we did keep in touch for a long time, and at some point I said something flippant that was hurtful to her and I didn’t realize it, and it really drove a wedge. But, she really influenced me a lot because she was really outgoing.

01:03:41 Q: Yeah, we all need one of those. So who inspires or influences you most now, would you say?

01:03:45 Falek: Now?—hmm, gee that’s a good question. I mean, I belong to a synagogue, and the rabbi in this synagogue was in the first graduating class at Jewish Theological Seminary that graduated woman—she’s female. And, she’s very bright, and she is, uh, not afraid of anything.

She got arrested last year with Women of the Wall for praying out loud. So she's a good advisor and mentor and a big influence in my life at this point.

01:04:39 Q: I'm sorry—I don't know what Women of the Wall is.

01:04:40 Falek: Women of the Wall is—at the Western Wall in Jerusalem—um, which is owned by the ultra-Orthodox, so the women have this little tiny corner that they can pray in, and they go and, uh, essentially do what women aren't supposed to do according to these men—pray out loud, you know, and sing. They regularly get chairs thrown at them and get arrested and lots of things for, you know, doing what I can do in my synagogue any day of the week if I wanted to.

01:05:15 Q: And have you been there as well?

01:05:17 Falek: No. I've been to Israel, but I haven't had chairs thrown at me or—I'm not that brave.

01:05:24 Q: All right. Now we're going to go back to 1967, 1971 and the famous Columbia strike. So, can you tell me about the moment when you first learned about it? About the '68 strike, and where you were, what you thought?

01:05:37 Falek: I don't remember the moment when I learned about it. Um, I, you know, I went to class during the strike, and class was canceled, and I basically said, "I'm not traveling an hour and a half each way to have my, you know, to find out that there's no classes." And I would call and say, "Are classes in session?" And they'd say, "Well, theoretically yes, but no, not really." Um, and I kind of felt like my education was being robbed from me. I had a very different perspective. And, there may have been other people who felt that way, too, but, you know, I was worried that my grant was going to be taken away from me, and I was going to end up having to transfer out of Barnard.

01:06:28 Q: Sure.

01:06:30 Falek: So, mostly what I heard about it was in, you know, on TV and in the news, whatever. But I didn't come to campus. I had a job, so I wasn't going to come for nothing. Spend all the money on commuting all the time and then have to go to work at, you know, three o'clock in the afternoon or whatever my job was.

01:06:48 Q: What kind of work were you doing?

01:06:49 Falek: I inherited my position from my mother. My mother, while she was in college, she worked as a, you know, as a clerk-typist at a synagogue, and when she started teaching she left that job and one day, the rabbi of that synagogue called up and asked her a question about,

you know, where is something and I said, “She’s not home. I’ll give her the message.” And she told me where it was and said, “I’m not going to have the chance to talk to the rabbi. Can you call him back?” So I called him back and he said, “Hey, you’re a good secretary.” And he said, “I might need a secretary. You want to work for me?” And I said, “Sure.” And he said, “I was kidding, but, you know what? I could use somebody else.” So, I worked for most of the four years that I was in college doing, you know, mass mailings and just really clerical stuff. Mass mailings, mimeographing, writing newsletters, sometimes answering the phones.

01:07:50 Q: Wow, you were balancing a lot.

01:07:53 Falek: You know, for two dollars or whatever they were paying at that time.

01:07:57 Q: Okay. Um, so there was really never a time during that strike when you thought, “Is this something I should explore?” It sounds to me like you had way too much going on—

01:08:09 Falek: Well, I had a lot of things on my plate. And, you know, I was very—I was a good girl. Whatever the people in charge said to do, I was doing. I wasn’t going to—I was afraid that if you get involved with something like that, you’re stuck in something you can’t control, and so, I had no thought that I should be there, although in a way I envied people who felt strongly enough to fight for what they believe in. You know, to strike. But on the other hand, I said, “I should be able to get my education. I want my finals.”

01:08:54 Q: So describe how the politically—it was a very politically, racially-charged period, those four years you were there. How did that particularly impact the memories you have and how you kind of went up against that? Again, coming from where you did, you were supposed to —

01:09:12 Falek: And I felt like, who are these people to—first of all, I just recently looked up Wikipedia’s view of this because I don’t remember a whole lot of this on my own. And, um—but I remember thinking if there were white students saying this is racist, then it’s like who are they to say? When they go home, they’re living in Scarsdale [New York] or some nice neighborhood, and I’m going back to the South Bronx and I live with these people every day, and they’re my Girl Scout leader, and they’re my patrol leaders, and they’re my classmates, you know? Um, so I thought that there was a certain—I don’t know—naiveté involved with people and saying “Oh, this gym is wrong.” And I said, “I don’t know, paying my money to belong, to go to this school, and I’m not sure that it is wrong to say if you belong to a certain organization, that you can make other people come in by another entrance, whether its racist or not.” I would think that if I joined the Y [Young Men’s Christian Association], and I was a member of the Y and they were saying people who were non-members could not come in whether they were white, black, or green. You know, I would expect that there would be certain differences in what you could do.

And I took a class at one point in psychology of racism, and I remember that—I think it was Day One of the class—and they said, “Here’s a scenario. We’re going to discuss this.” The doorbell rings and your child answers the door, and he says, “Mommy, there’s a man at the door.” And you say, “What does he look like?” And she says, “He’s black.” Is that a racist statement? And, you know, the discussion—there were a lot of people in the class who felt like it was, and I thought it really depends what you do with it. If you say he’s black and you say, “Pretend we’re not home,” that’s a racist statement because you wouldn’t say he’s tall and “Oh, pretend we’re not home.” If he’s black and you say, “Find out what he wants,” or “Oh, yeah that’s my neighbor across the street. Let him in,” then it may not be a racist statement. But I was kind of in the minority in that view. There were a lot of people that the actual thought of recognizing a physical characteristic was racist, and I didn’t think it was. I didn’t think it would be—maybe it’s different from saying he’s tall or he’s got red hair because that’s the most salient thing you’re recognizing, but on the other hand if you have an obvious physical characteristics, then why is that racist? Um, I think it really depends on what you do with it.

And the interesting continuation of this is I bought a car in 2001. I bought a Saturn, and the salesman was black. And, um, but he was a good salesman—he dealt with me as if I had a brain. And I was telling my mother-in-law that I bought this car, and blah blah blah, and I took her for a ride in it and she said, “Oh, um, maybe I’ll get one.” So she goes to the same dealership and just by chance gets the same salesman. And he goes, “Oh, Chris Leonard. I sold a car to a Leonard a couple of weeks ago.” And she goes, “Yeah, that was my daughter-in-law.” And he goes—you

know, so we're talking the next time we go back to the dealership and he goes, "How come you didn't tell your mother-in-law that I was black?" And I was like, "What does that have to do with anything?" And he said, "Well, it is my most obvious physical characteristic in this dealership." And I said, "What did that have to do with you being a good salesman?" You know?

01:13:35 Q: Interesting story. Okay, so is there an example of the time in which the sexual revolution seemed real to you, and if so, what happened?

01:13:43 Falek: Um, I remember getting out of the, uh, subway, you know, on the No. 1 train and seeing there was a, you know, Levy's Rye Bread ad, and it said, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's," and somebody had written, "You don't have to go to Barnard to be bad in bed." [Laughs]

01:14:08 Q: [Laughs] Wow, I never saw that one.

01:14:09 Falek: Yeah. And, you know—and, um, you know, it was—I was a virgin until I was thirty, so I missed that whole sexual revolution.

01:14:19 Q: You didn't miss much.

01:14:21 Falek: [Laughs] I didn't get AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome]; I didn't get herpes, so I was lucky on that.

01:14:27 Q: [Laughs] I love it, love it. Okay, um, is there a moment when you did something and thought, "Who am I? Who have I turned into? What am I doing? I would never have done this before."

01:14:45 Falek: There were probably many moments like that. Uh, I mean I can't really think of a moment—I don't know. I mean, I remember meeting this guy Rich Gudaitis at a mixer at Columbia, and he was six foot seven. [Laughs] And I just kept saying, "How tall?" But I don't know if that's a kind of defining moment. I was such a good girl. I wasn't doing drugs; I wasn't having sex. The most wild thing I did was when my friends got an apartment and we went and we had a sangria party, but I think by then I was probably over eighteen. Maybe going to one of the bars and making them think I was over eighteen and that I could drink, that may be something.

01:15:49 Q: I think you did fine. Do you remember an especially impactful event during that era? The assassinations of—we had Kent State [University], the draft, the assassination of [John F.] Kennedy?

01:16:03 Falek: Well, I remember when they had the, um, draft lottery, because my brother was a year and a half older than me, and up until then he'd had a student deferment, and all of a sudden they had the lottery, and he got number thirty six. So that was—and all his friends were like three hundred, and I was like, “Why are you so lucky?” And, so, that was quite a bit of worry in my and my mother's mind. It was that my brother was going to get drafted. And my brother's a little weird. My brother's nothing like me. [Laughs]

01:16:44 Q: What? You're not weird, Ellen?

01:16:44 Falek: I'm weird in different ways.

01:16:46 Q: You're weird in interesting ways.

01:16:47 Falek: My brother is weird in different ways. My brother is like the easiest person to buy gifts for because all you have to do is buy something weird and he's fine. But my brother would come with me sometimes—my brother would come with me to a movie at Columbia, and he would bring a bag of chocolate and just pass it up and down the row. And my brother became the hippie, and I'd get—my brother was the one who did all the drugs and I didn't. Whatever my brother was doing, I had to do otherwise. So my brother started seeing a psychiatrist to prove that he was mentally ill so that he couldn't be drafted. And he told me—and I don't know how much of this is fake and how much of this is real—but he told me that he claimed to have faked

schizophrenia so that he had the psychiatrist write a letter saying that it would not be in the best interest of the U.S. [United States] Army for Mr. Falek to serve. So he got, you know, he got a deferment for that. Which, you know, I was not happy that my brother was doing this, but I was very happy that he was not going to be in the Army.

01:18:05 Q: Absolutely. My future husband had, uh, broken his leg when he was nine, and he had a low number, too. It was never—or not his leg, his arm. It was never set properly so he couldn't fully extend it, so—

01:18:21 Falek: Yeah, every little thing. My brother was like, “Oh, you're lucky you're diabetic. If they start drafting women, they won't draft you.” I don't know.

01:18:32 Q: Yeah, wow. That's huge. Okay, so now we're beyond Barnard more or less. And just talk a little bit more about your adult life. How has your adult life been what you anticipated when you were at Barnard, and how was it different?

01:18:47 Falek: Well, way different, because like I said, I thought I was going to be a psychologist and I ended up doing everything but. Although, having gone to graduate school for counseling really helped me in medicine. Um, and probably helped me more than all the physics and chemistry did because, you know, I used my counseling skills every day, and I can't say I used a lot of the premed science that I took.

01:19:24 Q: If you could go back to the first day, I think I know this answer to this—But, if you could go back to the Barnard version of you and whisper words of wisdom into the ear of that young Ellen, what would they be?

01:19:33 Falek: Don't be afraid.

01:19:38 Q: How about the most memorable day of your life in terms of your career or volunteer work or community involvement, anything?

01:19:49 Falek: Oh, there are so many memorable days.

01:19:49 Q: Well, tell me a few, yeah. We're not limited to one.

01:19:54 Falek: Well, like I said, graduating from medical school was one. Actually, one of the coolest things in my life I've done was I wrote a class play in medical school. The class play, we called it "Physician on the Roof." And my class in medical school had like forty-something people and I needed a quarter of them to be in this, and we staged it. Because every year at Stony Brook we had a potluck supper, and everybody who had ever been there we invited because we were the biggest class that they'd had to date because it used to be ten or twenty. So we'd have

all the alumni, all the staff, all the faculty and you'd sit in one big area. So they always had a talent show, and they'd have people doing skits, and they'd be reading from the paper.

I said, "We're doing this, and we're going to stage it, and we're going to have music, and we're going to not be holding scripts." We're going to have props and costumes, and so we did. And I was doing a summer work-study. I wrote this little play that was based on "Fiddler on the Roof" and it had a lot of songs from "Fiddler" and a lot of parodies.

01:21:14 Q: You wrote the entire thing?

01:21:14 Falek: Yeah. It started from, you know, getting admitted to medical school and going through all the different classes and things that go on, and the scene in anatomy class, there was a, one guy playing the cadaver—black shorts, laying on the table as a the slab—and people were talking about him. And in the middle of the scene he scratches his nose. And that just brought down the house. It wasn't written in; that wasn't supposed to happen, but one woman played the piano, we had one person being the narrator. We had a ball doing this. But, being in in medical school, this wasn't people's top priority. So, we started rehearsing or April, and March 31st people still didn't know what part they were supposed to have and I got down and said, "Listen, guys. My mother is coming, my grandparents are coming, my best friend is driving down from Boston to come. Don't embarrass me." And they said, "We're medical students. We can memorize anything overnight." And they did great. It was just so much fun.

01:22:27 Q: That must have taken a long time. I mean, how did you manage to be studying—?

01:22:30 Falek: I was doing a work-study class, or a work-study and a project on sexuality and multiple sclerosis or something like that, and um, you know, I didn't have a lot of time that I had to spend doing it. It wasn't like classwork; it wasn't like I had to study. And this whole summer, they said, "Oh, we have a softball league. How would you like to be in our softball league?" And I said sure. I had a good time, but I had a great time in medical school. I did all kinds of things that medical students don't do. I went down to a local bakery café and I played backgammon once a week, and I did folk dancing once a week, and my rationale was that I might be a better doctor if I take, you know, an hour or two to play backgammon or if I studied those two other hours, and you know, our classes got done at three, and this backgammon thing was at seven, so you'd go home, you'd have something to eat, whatever. You could study for two or three hours, and you'd take a two-hour break. You were done by nine and you could study for two hours. How much more than five hours can you put in?

And part of it was, I'd lived a life. I hadn't just been a student because I'd had all those years where I had been spending my time trying to fill in all the time I had in the year I had off. And I had the year when I was working, I had four semesters of graduate school, and then I worked for two years. So, you know, it's like, I know I can have a life besides just being in school. And, you know, when I went folk dancing, it was straight from my clinical days, so I had my little white

coat and my stethoscope and people in the folk dancing group were like, “What’s that all about?” And I was like, “Let me practice looking in your eyes.” And they let me practice everything but rectal exams.

And, um, you know, I really had a life, and most of the time when I was studying, when we’d be getting ready to study for exams, I’d study with the nurse practitioner students because they were a lot less intense than the medical students. The medical students were like, “Let’s get together for breakfast.” And they’d take a clear glass plate and they’d put it on top of their books so they could read while they were eating, and the nursing students were like, “You know, let’s get together for breakfast. Okay, now we’re done. Let’s go study.” And we’d study for hours, and then we’d have a coffee break, and then we’d study for a couple more hours, and then we’d have lunch. They were, you know, a lot less intense about it, and we were doing the same work.

01:25:13 Q: But you said you were a member of Mensa? So clearly you’re extremely intelligent, so maybe this is where—

01:25:21 Falek: I’m losing IQ [Intelligence Quotient] points every day. But, you know, everyone in medical school is intelligent. They could all probably be members of Mensa. You know, we all felt like we didn’t belong here. And that was part of my “Physician on the Roof.” You made a mistake. That was the dream sequence—the guy waking up in the middle of the night saying, “The dean came to me saying she made an error accepting you.” But, in reality, I had worked

with doctors when I was a rehab counselor and I realized, you know, they're not that smart. They know what they know, they're no smarter than I am or anybody else. And it actually helped me in my career because I've always had nurses say to me, "Gee, you're not like the other doctors. We can talk to you."

And it's like I've worked with people who aren't doctors for a lot of my life, and I've realized—one of the things I've realized as a rehabilitation counseling student is every occupation has its set of skills, and my skills as a doctor were not the same as the nurses, and I didn't have the skills that they had. And they were a lot better doing the nursing skills than I was, and it was a little bit humbling to realize that. I worked one summer at a camp for kids with diabetes. I had gone there as a child. And I worked—I was in medical school as a work-study—and they said, "We have doctors, we have nurses, and we call everybody else a student nurse, but it doesn't matter what you do. That's just your job title."

So the very first day that I went in, one of the doctors said we're going to be doing physicals on these kids as they enter camp and she said, "Make the bed." And I thought, "Who's she telling to make the bed?" And I realized that—we actually ended up being good friends. And they asked one of the nursing students, this like nineteen-year-old nursing student to do some nursing procedure, and I had no idea how to do that, so it gave me some kind of humility as a doctor that we all have our skill sets, and it doesn't mean, you know—it wasn't "I'm a doctor, I'm God, and

you guys are my, you know, my levels of angels below me.” It was, “we all have things we have to do and we all have to be the best that we can and give the best care to the patients.”

01:28:06 Q: Good. Uh, so this is kind of going back—I said I wasn’t going to ask any more about Barnard but I’m going to, and that is—were you ever aware of any class differences at Barnard? Girls who went to prep schools as opposed to—? And how did impact your experience there?

01:28:23 Falek: Oh, yeah. Well, I didn’t hang out with those girls, but it was always, we’d get back from spring break and people would be talking about what they did, and people would say, “I went to Aruba, I went to Europe—” And, “I went to South Bronx.” And, um, you know, in some ways it was hard, and in other ways, it was like, “I don’t hang out with you anyways, so what’s the difference? You’re not my friends.”

01:28:54 Q: And over the years, have you ever felt that again? The notion that you weren’t quite in the class?

01:29:04 Falek: Well, now the problem is the other way around because I have, you know—a lot of times, you start out poor and you become a poor person with money, you don’t become a rich person. But when I graduated from Barnard, I worked in the development office at Finch

College. And I decided right then and there that I wanted to become a philanthropist when I grew up. And people would say, “Why?” and I’d say, “Well, it means you have a lot of money.”

And, so I, you know, I do my best to give money, and my tax preparer says, “Wow, you give a lot of charity.” And I’m glad I’m able to do it. And when my first husband passed away, he left me a big chunk of life insurance, which has grown, and so my net worth right now is a lot higher than most of the people that I hang out with—my friends from the old days. I don’t have a lot of doctor friends; I’m still friends with the people I was friends with after college and when I first moved up here. And they all—my friend Lesli is a social worker. She’s not worth a lot in terms of money. She’s worth a lot in terms of my esteem of her, and what she does, but, you know, she’s never going to have the kind of money I’m going to have.

And even my husband, um, you know, he’s got a pretty good salary. He teaches electronics and technical subjects for New York Transit and, but he worries a lot about what we’re going to do when we retire and we don’t have a paycheck. And I say you don’t need to worry about that. You know, trust me, we have plenty saved up. But he always worries about money. So he’s a poor person with money, and I’ve somehow managed to not worry about that anymore, and so, my worry now is that I’m in a different social class from a lot of people I hang out with because we’re going to England next month, and the month after that we’re going to Alaska and most of them can’t afford to do two big trips like that in a year, let alone in a month.

01:31:23 Q: How about as a woman? Do you ever feel you were discriminated against because you were a woman? If so, can you describe the situation?

01:31:32 Falek: Um, when I was in medical school, my class was interesting because we had more women than men—

01:31:42 Q: And this was which year?

01:31:44 Falek: Class of '83. So, it was 1979 whenever when it started, and it was a class of, I think forty-seven, and we were twenty-six women and twenty-one men, and the men were very threatened, but—because they said, “No, you’re not a minority group anymore.” And we said, “Yes we are because this is just one small place.” And so we immediately started a Women in Medicine support group, and the men got very threatened so we invited them to come along and see that we weren’t just male bashing.

But they built this brand new hospital in Stony Brook that was in the process of opening like my third year of medical school, which is when you start doing clinical rotations. So for some of our second-year rotations, we were able to go in there and stuff—and at one point, we were doing something with obstetrics, and there was a doctors on-call room, and a women’s on-call room, and I went up to the most sexist guy in the class, and said, “Gee, Scott, if we were doing OB [obstetrics] together, and I got to sleep first, you would have nowhere to sleep.” And he looked at

me and said, “What are you talking about?” And the interesting thing with him, he was the most male chauvinist pig in the class, and I ran into him a couple years later when my husband was at [Memorial] Sloan Kettering [Cancer Center] and I happened to run into somebody who was like a medical student who had had him as a preceptor and she said, “Oh, he’s wonderful. He’s so sweet. He’s such a good teacher.” And it was like—I guess—she was a woman—he must not be sexist anymore, put in his place when he got his residency, you know, so there was that.

Um, but by and large, I never really, you know, I never really thought about it so much. We had a lot of really vocal women in my medical school class, so we made sure that any professor who said anything in the least bit sexist got put in his place. Um, but, you know, I never asked people their salary, so I don’t know if any male people in my position get paid more than I do, um. I’ve pretty much only had women bosses. When I started working in my job at the Hospital of Central Connecticut, which is called the New Britain General Hospital, the chief of pediatrics was a woman, and um, and it was kind of interesting because she was the cousin of one of the nurses I knew during my residency, and my references were all people that she had trained with. So I got my job, you know. But she was a woman, and she wasn’t going to stand for anything. Oh, and by the way, she was gay and everybody knew it, you know. Except for me because I have no “gay-dar.” [Laughs] My friends Lesli met her once and she said, “You know your boss is gay?” And I was like, “She is?” And, but—uh, therefore, I wasn’t going to be treated any differently than a man was because she was a woman, and by the way, all the male chiefs respected her like crazy because she was very outspoken and an advocate for childhood health, and you know, and so,

you know, it didn't really affect me as much as it might have affected other people. Like I said, when I worked at Finch College, my boss was a woman.

01:35:36 Q: Good. Uh, can you tell me about a time when you decided to become involved in a cause? How about a social movement? A particular social movement that you identified with.

01:35:41 Falek: In a cause—I don't do a lot of causes. I don't see myself—I don't do a lot of that kind of stuff. I give to causes, but, you know, I'm not a big one to sign petitions. I guess I was involved—when I was working—I was involved in child health. I was on the, um, Head Start Health Advisory Board. I was actually the chief of the Head Start Health Advisory Board, the chief physician. So we did a lot about pediatric nutrition and working with the WIC [Women, Infants and Children] program—

01:36:35 Q: That's a huge cause, Ellen!

01:36:36 Falek: It's huge, but I don't think of it as a cause, you know? I think of causes as people in involved who are marching and you know, the Civil Rights movement in 1964 and—

01:36:51 Q: How did you find that work? That work for WIC and child health.

01:36:64 Falek: You know, I do what I can. That's just, to me, it's part of my job. But I guess it's not a part of everybody's job because the other doctor in the clinic doesn't do any of that.

01:37:05 Q: Is it a source of frustration, though? In terms of funding, getting funding for these things?

01:37:11 Falek: Nobody's ever going to have enough money. Of course it's a source of frustration. That's why I wanted to be a philanthropist, you know? No, I do give money. I donated a piano to the cancer center at the hospital, and this is supposed to be a five-year commitment, and one year into it, they said, "We're sorry, you've been a very loyal employee, but you know, funding is down everywhere, so we're eliminating your position after twenty-seven years. We can help you find another job—" And it's like, "I'm not finding another job at age sixty-three. I have enough money to retire." And I thought, "What do I do about this commitment." [Mentions bird talking in background] Uh, what do I do about this commitment that I made to donate this piano when—I'm not going to dishonor my husband, so I called the development office, and I said, "I honor my commitments." And, um, I said, "I'm going to pay you half of it now and half of it next year" for tax purposes, and it's a beautiful piano.

But, they just recently had a—the chairman of the board invited everybody to an event for the donors and I went to that, and the photographer looked at me and said, "You're brave to come

here.” I said, “No, I’m just gutsy. I can look these guys in the eye and say ‘you’re not getting another cent from me after this.’ I have other places I can give my money to.”

01:38:47 Q: Okay, so how do you consider yourself as a woman, and how has that changed over time? Was there an experience where you changed and changed your consideration of yourself as a woman?

01:39:00 Falek: You know, I just am, you know? I, you know, I think you are who you are, and you change over time, and you get older, and you have a different perspective. Like I said, I was always shy. People now don’t believe I was ever shy. “How could you have been shy?” I can show you my report cards from grade school talking about how I needed to speak up in class and things like that. But, I guess I’m not afraid of anything or anybody anymore. I have this enforced retirement because I lost my job last July, and it was a bad year, you know, because I lost my mother in April, and in July they cut my position and then, in August, my mother-in-law passed away, so it’s been a tough year, and you just go on. And my husband is trying to decide if he should retire because he’s the same age as I am, and he’s sort of afraid to do it because, like I said, he’s worried about money. And it’s like, don’t worry because we have plenty of money.

And, um, and so when you retire, you have to find ways to fill your time, because they don’t interview you every day, and so, um, what I find is, well I’m taking a course at my synagogue, and am now on the Hunger Action team in my town, and I got recruited by a ninety-seven year-

old man to join Kiwanis [International]. [Laughs] They asked at the last meeting, “How many of you were recruited by Al and everybody in the room raised their hand. This man is ninety-seven and incredible. His wife just passed away at age ninety and she had been a member of the town council. She was still a member of the town council at age ninety. So, she, you know, they were quite the couple. But, you know, I mean, I don’t get into this, “Oh, I’m a woman, and I’m in this box as a woman.” Yeah, that’s a part of me, but it’s not my main identity.

01:41:15 Q: Okay, um, we’re going to go back to your career in just a second, but I wanted to ask about—you already talked about your husbands—um, do you want to say anything more about a relationship that’s really changed you in a chapter of your life? You’ve already said—but do you want to add anything at this point? Or even something—romance or sex, or anything?

01:41:43 Falek: Like I said, I was a virgin until I was thirty. I didn’t have a lot of sexual partners after that. Um, there were a few of them other than my husbands, I have to admit, but not a lot. You know, it was just, the last couple of years, my mother developed Lewy Body Dementia, and that was very difficult to see this woman who had been a teacher go to not knowing what day of the week it was.

01:42:14 Q: It was really sudden?

01:42:15 Falek: Well, for her it was in the sense that she woke up one day and was just uncontrollably shaking, and it took a while for the diagnosis. The first neurologist she went to said she just had a central tremor and she said, “I don’t think so.” And, um, and then in the beginning it was “Oh, you have Parkinson’s [disease]” and then she got more and more demented, and she was having word retrieval problems first, you know, and she really fought to know about her diagnosis. But that kind of changed how things went because my brother and I had things for four or five years when she went downhill to try and figure out—and he did most of it, God bless him and my sister-in-law for doing that—because they took on that responsibility, um, but you know, but that made it difficult because you never knew what was going to happen with mom. And my mother once went running naked from her room in an assisted living facility because one of the things you do with Lewy Body is hallucinate, and she was having hallucinations, and she was running naked and then, when she went into a more restricted facility, the doctor called me one day and said, “Your mother is attacking the staff with a walker.”

I could not imagine my mother, who had lost something like ninety pounds, picking up her walker and dashing the nurse’s aides over the heads. Then my mother would feel very bad. So that really changed my life temporarily.

And the other thing is my mother-in-law passed away very suddenly. She was ninety-one, but it was still sudden because she was in the middle of a conversation with my husband, and we were

at her house, and they were having their usual talk about, “Why can’t you make the grandchildren call me more?” and the youngest grandchild’s twenty-seven, so we don’t have any control over them, and we tell them, “Call your grandmother” and then it’s on them. I was in the other room taking a call from the hospital, and all of a sudden it was like, “Ellen, get in here!” you know, and she’s gone. I actually did CPR [Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation] on her, because as far as we knew, she wanted everything done. But that was a big thing for my husband, and he still feels bad about it, you know, “I killed my mom.” That same argument, every day of your life with her—but going through all her things was a real archaeological dig. She was always somebody—

01:44:59 Q: Where did they live?

01:45:00 Falek: They lived—she lived up here, we got her up here, so she lived about five miles down the road, but going through all that stuff made me understand her more because she was somebody who was very private and “Oh, if you only knew what I’ve been through,” and I’d say, “Well, tell me” and she’d say, “Oh, you don’t want to know.” So, it’s like, okay, now I know. And, uh, I kept finding letters from somebody named Annabelle, and I said, “Greg, who’s Annabelle?” And he said, “I don’t know.” And I managed to track down Annabelle, well not Annabelle, but her daughter, whose name is Melinda Hemelgarn, and she has a show on PRX [Public Radio Exchange] called “Food Sleuth.” So, I found her, and we corresponded back-and-

forth for a while, and she still lets me know her broadcast schedule. So that was kind of, you know, my mission, was to figure out who Annabelle was as I was going through these things.

01:45:56 Q: So, she was a good friend of hers?

01:45:57 Falek: Amazing friends. They wrote like every week, and all of a sudden the letters stopped, and we found a letter saying she had passed away, and I knew Melinda's name, and it's a big breast cancer family—all the women in that family had breast cancer. Um, but what I did was, I packed up whatever letters I hadn't thrown away, because after a while, I started keeping them thinking maybe I could find her, you know. And I packed up a picture of Annabelle with her grandson, which is Melinda's child, and I mailed them out to Melinda. I asked her if she wanted them, and she said, "This is the best Thanksgiving gift ever." It was an emotional thing.

01:46:41 Q: Oh, that was wonderful that you were able to do that. Yeah. Wow. Okay, let's look a little bit at your career. What choices have you made around family and career?

01:46:52 Falek: Well, I didn't get married until I was thirty-nine for the first time. So, I'm not sure that that was a choice, or if it just was, but I think men sometimes feel very threatened by intelligent women. And I remember when I was in medical school, I heard about some guy, you know, who called me for a date, and it was going to be a blind date or something. And he sounded very nice on the phone, you know, he said he was an auto mechanic, and, "What do you

do?” And I said, “I’m a medical student.” And he said, “I don’t know if this is going to work.” And I was like, “Why not? If you like somebody it doesn’t matter what your career is.” And we went out once and that was it. Um, but my—my first husband had a Bachelor’s degree. He actually had a degree in history, and uh, and then went to computer processing institute because with a Bachelor’s in history you can’t do much, and became a computer programmer and never looked back.

And Greg right now has a Bachelor’s degree, and he feels very one-down that he doesn’t have a more advanced degree compared to me, and I’m like, “Greg, you’re the person that introduced me to Mensa. I know you’re smart. You don’t need alphabet soup to prove it.”

But I think some of it is that, if you’re an intelligent woman, and if you’re a woman who’s five-foot-ten and your choices in partners are limited, and um, I was never somebody who felt like I needed a man at my side to be complete. You know, I had my interests, and I had my friends, and if I meet men, that’s fine, and if I don’t, that’s fine, too. And, um, you know, I married two of my best friends, so that’s why it worked so well, because we didn’t just meet on a date and fall in love, you have to figure what to talk about when you’re out of the bedroom. It’s like, we met out of the bedroom and we took a while until the bedroom figured into it, but we knew what we had in common. We knew what our interests were, and we knew what we were like without putting on makeup and getting dressed up.

01:49:12 Q: Exactly. So you have children, who are grown up?

01:49:16 Falek: Three step-children, but no kids of my own.

01:49:18 Q: No kids of your own. Has that ever been an issue for you?

01:49:24 Falek: Um, Harry and I really wanted kids when we were talking about getting married.

Um, and he said, “Do you want kids?” And I said yes. And remember I’m thirty-nine. Or actually, it was thirty-eight at the time.

And he said, “How many would you want?”

And I said “Two.” And I said, “How many would you want?”

And he said “Four”—he was one of four kids.

And I said, “You know what, I’ll have the first two, you have the other two any way you want.”

But it didn’t work out that we had any for whatever reason. And when it looked like I wasn’t going to get pregnant, I said, “Why don’t we adopt?”

And he said, “Oh, I don’t really know if I want to adopt.”

And I said, “Oh, I’ll work on him.”

And he got diagnosed with cancer and that got off the table. But, you know, my step-kids—I’ve known them since the day after they were born. They were a day-old when I first met them, so—and it’s funny because they call me Dr. Ellen. That’s how they know me from the time they were babies. That’s my email, it’s Dr. Ellen. I was at the Hunger Action meeting, and one of the people there just called me Dr. Ellen out of the blue, and I was like, “That’s what my kids call me.” [Laughs] Well, it just fits, you know?

01:50:55 Q: So let’s go back a bit to your early family life. Um, you were Jewish. Were you raised with Jewish traditions, and were there particular occasions you remember?

01:51:04 Falek: My grandmother, um, kept kosher. My mother didn’t. So, you know, we did Jewish holidays pretty much. We didn’t go to the synagogue on Saturday or anything like that. We went to the services on the high holidays. We went to her house for Passover, for Hanukah. We lit candles that was, you know, our biggest traditions. When my brother got to be old enough that were planning his bar mitzvah, my mother enrolled him in Hebrew school. There was the philosophy that anything my brother gets, I need to get. Evidently, but I don’t remember this, but

my mother said, “Oh, you begged to go, too.” I was like, “I did?” So, I went to Hebrew School, I got a little Jewish education.

01:51:57 Q: Did you go faster than the rest of the kids, too?

01:51:57 Falek: My class was very small. It was an Orthodox synagogue. So there were like five kids in the Hebrew School class. It was me, my brother, my friend and her brother Joey, and you know, somebody else. Maybe there were a couple more. But it was all of us in one room, and if you were in the advanced class, you were these two students, and beginner class, you’re these two students. And the rabbi just went from student to student to student and taught you at your level. And then you did whatever you had to do in between. And, uh, so my brother had his bar mitzvah and has probably never been back to a synagogue since.

And, but I was always interested in languages, so I thought learning Hebrew was like a secret code. And my friend Gail and I always used to make up secret codes all the time when we were little, and Hebrew was like a secret code, because you could write in a language that nobody else understood. And, so then what happened was I moved to West Virginia, and just by chance, my landlord was Jewish, and just by chance there was a synagogue like two blocks from my house. And, in West Virginia, it was a little more difficult to be Jewish because you just didn’t walk into the grocery store at Passover and buy matzo. Uh, you know, I asked my landlord, “Where do you get matzo?” and he was like, “You buy it at the synagogue, but they’re all out. Maybe you can go

up to Pittsburgh or something.” And it turned out there was something called Katz’ Jewish Grocery in Unionville, Pennsylvania, and it was like, you know forty miles away, and I had to make a reasoned decision—do I actually want to observe this holiday? So I did. And I went up to this grocery, and I bought, you know, a box of matzo. That was about the extent of my observance. And I went with my landlords for the Seder.

Then when I moved to Charleston, West Virginia I remember I went home before Passover, and I bought all my Passover goods, and I had a Seder where I was the only Jewish person, and I had friends who were Seventh Day Adventist, and they didn’t drink wine, you know, they didn’t drink alcohol, so I had grape juice for them. I suddenly had to become the expert, and, so that helped me a little bit to understand that.

So, I moved up here, and when I moved up here, I knew nobody. And, I said, “You don’t meet friends”—I wasn’t looking for a husband—“You don’t meet friends sitting in your house.” Nobody walks up to the door, knocks on your door, and says, “Hey, you want to play with me?” when you’re, you know thirty-five. So you have to do things in order to meet friends. So I went to this Mensa new member party. I’m still friends with the woman who introduced me to Harry. Scrabble is where I met Harry. And I thought if I joined a synagogue, I’ll have people at least something in common with. Everybody who’s Jewish has something a little different like anybody who’s Christian is a little different. So I looked up synagogues—there are actually two in Newington [Connecticut]—and so I went to the conservative synagogue because I thought the

reform wasn't Jewish enough for me. I grew up going to an Orthodox Hebrew school, so I walked into the conservative synagogue one day and said, "Hi, I'm new in town. Um, I'm single. I'm not particularly religious. What have you got for me?" And, you know, whoever I talked to talked to the rabbi, and the rabbi said, "Well, if you're single, and you're not particularly religious, we don't have a singles group, we don't really have anything for you." And I said, "Why should I join? If you have nothing for me, why should I join?" And he said, "You can only come to the high holiday services for three years if you're not a member." And I thought, "I'm going to test them with that." [Laughs]

But then it turns out that I met one of the doctors who was on staff at New Britain General was Jewish, you know, he said, "Come with me. I'll be glad to get you a high holiday ticket." So I was like, "Ha ha! I'm the guest of a member. You can't even enforce that rule." But by then they had a new rabbi, and so I wrote him a letter, and said, "Your predecessor—here was the conversation, he said you have nothing for me. Now I'm asking you, what have you got?" And he said, "Well, we don't have any particular singles group. We have adult education, and this and that and the other thing." And I thought just the fact that he reached out, so I ended up joining. And then I made a friend who I was involved with the sisterhood with when I went to the sisterhood new member event. They said, "Do you think you're going to join?" And I said, "I don't know. Maybe." And, you know, P.S. [postscript] three years later, I was president of that sisterhood, and I saw the results of that new member thing, and there were all sorts of people

who had been there saying, “Yes, I’m joining. Yes, I’m joining. Ellen Falek, maybe.” I was the only one who was still involved.

So I got involved in the synagogue. And at some point when my husband became ill, the rabbi said, “Would you like me to make a mi chebeirach [Hebrew word]?” which is a prayer for healing. And I never knew that you could say that prayer for somebody who wasn’t Jewish, and I —so then I had nothing to do because he was in the hospital, and I was home alone on Friday nights. So I started going to services on Friday night, Saturday morning, and then I got really involved, and before I knew, I was synagogue president. [Laughs] And, um, at some point the group of the women said, “None of us ever had a bat mitzvah.”

And so the rabbi had a bat mitzvah class, and we had a dozen of us who got together who had a bat mitzvah class, and uh, we’re sitting there in the classroom. The rabbi said basically that you don’t need a ceremony to be bat mitzvahed, by virtue of your age, you can be called to the Torah, so how do you plan to commemorate this? And we said, “We’re going to do a year of study.” And I piped up with, “Why don’t we do a service from start to finish?” And everybody said okay. And then, the rabbi came in the next class with different divisions that we could have, and who wants to do this, and we need a couple of people to read Torah and Haftarah and who wants to do it? And I said, “Me.” And so, uh, so I learned to read Torah for this, and that’s been a big thing in my life because I became a Torah junkie. [Laughs]

And I actually read Torah—one of the big times I did it, there was a convention of like five Jewish organizations, so it was like Rabbinical Assembly and Jewish Educators Assembly and a bunch of other things, and I wanted to be able to read Torah there, and I asked my rabbi, “How do you get to be picked?”

And he’s like, “I don’t know, I can research it.”

And then I promptly broke my shoulder, and I was like, “I’m not going to be worried about learning Torah.”

And a week before the convention, the, um, woman who was coordinating it called me and said, “Can you read Torah next Monday?”

And I was like, “Sure. What do I have to do?” A weekday reading is not that long, so I said sure. But then I said, “How did you pick me?” After I had already done this, “How did you pick me?”

And she said, “Well, I had a list of people who were qualified, and nobody wanted to do it, so I asked for another list and none of them wanted to do it, so I tried to think of who I knew who wanted to read Torah, and your name came up.”

And I said, “So, I wasn’t the A list or the B list.”

And she said, “You are now.”

And my friends were like, “Weren’t you scared getting up in front of all these rabbis and cantors?”

And I was like, “Well, first of all, none of them wanted to do it. Second of all, what’s the worst that can happen?”

I’m beyond thinking the ground is going to open up and I’m going to be, you know, consumed in a wall of flame. The worst that can happen is that I make a mistake and they correct me, it’s not a big deal. So I did that. I went to Maui [Hawaii] for a conference, and I called the rabbi there, and I said, “Do you have Torah readings?” And I read Torah there. It’s like, any time at all. And now I’m involved in a project called Torah Stitch By Stitch, which is a woman in Canada who is looking for people all over the world to teach and embroider four verses of Torah, and then they’re going to counted cross stitch and put it together and hopefully exhibit it. And so, I did actually two pieces from that.

02:01:13 Q: Is that cross-stitching or—?

02:01:13 Falek: It's, uh, now I'm doing an illumination panel. But it was across. [Shows Frances/Interviewer the canvas] I actually have to redo this because I did it with the wrong orientation. It's supposed to go the other way around, so she's going to send me another canvas and I'm going to keep this one, but I did, um, two panels from Genesis, and, uh, and right now, there's like over nine hundred people in sixteen countries involved in this. So that's a fun project that I'm doing, involved with.

02:01:50 Q: How did you learn cross-stitching?

02:01:51 Falek: Um, we were a big craft family.

02:01:56 Q: Oh, okay. That, too!

02:01:57 Falek: So, my, you know, my mother was always doing some kind of needlework. My grandmother was always doing something. I was, you know, I grew up doing needlework, so I'd knit, I'd do crochet, you know, I'd do—I mean, I did little cross stitches, I never did anything big like this, so it's sort of natural to me if I'm watching TV or sitting around waiting for the subway or whatever that I'd be doing some kind of stitchery. When I was on the subway—I guess it was after graduation from graduate school—one of my friends from school said, "Would you crochet me a table cloth?" And so I had this huge fifty-inch round table cloth that I was crocheting on the subway, and I would throw it over my shoulder and I would just crochet. People would come up

to me, and one woman said, “I haven’t seen anybody work like that since I was in Hungary in the forties.” But I just find it very relaxing. But I never saw my life taking that direction, to be so involved in Judaism.

02:03:04 Q: But it sounds like it’s been very satisfying.

02:03:07 Falek: Oh, yeah. I, uh, I read Torah every Yom Kippur in my synagogue and I’m sort of the substitute rabbi. When my rabbi is away on Friday nights, I lead the services. They don’t pay me. [Laughs]

02:03:30 Q: What do you look forward to happening in the future? What are your hopes and dreams and your fears?

02:03:35 Falek: Um, I would love to do just loads of traveling all over the place. I love to travel. I love cruises. I’ve been on something like twenty-some odd cruises, and the first one, I was—I went by myself, I was in my twenties. Again, if you wait for somebody to go with you, you don’t go anywhere, so you just go on your own, and as my first husband used to say, “You pay the small fine.” You pay the single supplement and you go. You make your own fun. You talk to people. And, so, I would love to do one of these round-the-world cruises. I don’t know if that’s going to happen. Actually, when Harry, my first husband, developed cancer, I said, “You know, hon. Right now you’re pretty healthy and what would it be that you would say on your deathbed

‘I really regret not having done blank’ because we should do that while you’re still able to do it.” And, you know, I thought he was going to say, “I want to go all over the world” or “I want to go skydiving” or whatever, but no. Shy, retiring, Harry said, “Well, I’ve always wanted to learn to juggle.”

02:04:54 Q: I love it!

02:04:54 Q: And I said, “Learn to juggle?! What are you talking about? Where’s my around-the-world cruise?” So he went out and bought the Klutz book of juggling, and he learned to juggle. And he was even shyer than I ever was, and we went to a cancer support group mostly because of me, and for one of our Halloween parties, he got up—dressed up as a pumpkin, which is so unlike him—and juggled in front of the group. And, you know, people talk about how having terminal disease is sometimes liberating—that was definitely the most liberating moment of his life. And so he learned to juggles. I tried; it wasn’t my thing. I never had a desire to spend my life learning to juggle, so once I got three balls in the air, and that was good enough for me.

02:05:44 Q: So, you said you’d like to travel. Are there particular parts of the world you’d like to see?

02:05:49 Falek: All of them. All of them. I haven’t been to South America. Well, except for Turkey, I haven’t been to Asia. You know, diabetes is always a consideration because if I get sick

I have to think about where I would get medical care. But, um, but I've had some pretty good adventures traveling. I actually broke my foot in Turkey and had it set in Russia. And on the next stop, on the cruise, and uh—last year, we took a cruise—it was a North Sea cruise—so we were going from Southampton to Copenhagen. And we originally booked a veranda state room, and the cruise line said, “How would you like to upgrade?” and we upgraded twice and ended up in a thousand-square-foot cabin with a butler and an outdoor veranda with a hot tub and it was the most amazing thing. It was like, “This is like being in Love Boat.” We had two bathrooms—one for number one, one for number two. So, this was the second cruise that we had taken on this cruise line, and one day we had lunch in our state room, and the assistant butler comes in and sets the table, and he looks at me and he goes, “Were you on the Nautica a couple years ago? I recognize you.” And I thought, “What did I do on the Nautica?” And then I realized that was when I had broke my foot, and everybody knew me because I was being wheeled around and I had crutches, but I guess I made a splash.

02:07:27 Q: Yeah, literally. Wow. Okay, let's see. These are kind of repetitive, but reflecting back on your experience at Barnard, is there one decision or event you would have done differently?

02:07:40 Falek: Um, I might have gotten more involved, but I had to be not so shy to be involved. But, you know, it's like I volunteered to do publicity for Greek Games and then they got canceled because of the strike, so I didn't get to do that. They had a spring kind of bash in

the, you know, after the Greek Games got canceled, and I made cotton candy. That was fun. That was like one of my “strike it off your bucket list” kind of things, make cotton candy.

02:08:14 Q: How about a moment in your past that you’d like to go back—if there was a moment in your past that you’d like to go back—what would you whisper in terms of advice to yourself?

02:08:23 Falek: You know, just go for it. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be so shy.

02:08:34 Q: And you haven’t really said a lot about your amazing career as a doctor. Could you just tell me a little bit about what you did?

02:08:43 Falek: I became a pediatrician—I decided to go into pediatrics when I was doing my third year OB rotation, and I delivered a baby, and uh, I looked at this baby, and I said, “It’s a baby! Look, it’s got fingernails, and toenails, and you know, it’s perfect.”

The resident is going, “Okay, cut the cord. Deliver the placenta. Sew up the episiotomy.”

And I was like, “It’s a baby. I want to be over there so I can—”

That was the moment I knew I had to do pediatrics. And, um, and I did my three-year pediatric residency, and I did a year of endocrine fellowship, and I really got jerked around by the people who were running my fellowship, and I decided that I didn't need to be an endocrinologist, and I was just going to take my year of endocrine under my belt and become a pediatrician. So I started looking for jobs. And I knew I didn't want to work in New York City, so I was looking on Long Island, but most of the people from the year that I'd finished my residency had been hired by the groups and so there weren't a lot of jobs, and I'd had a couple interviews with practices I didn't like, and it was one of these "Oh, if I don't have a job by such and such a date, I'm going to look outside of New York," and so the day before that date came along and the New York Times had a position for a pediatrician in New Jersey through Robert Wood Johnson, which is where my mother had moved to, and another one for a pediatrician in central Connecticut. And, so I write this cover letter, and I said—this is such a lie, cover letters are always such a lie!

02:10:28 Q: Said Anne [L.] Prescott!

02:10:30 Falek: "Central Connecticut is ideally located because I have family in New York and Boston"—which is true, I did have family there, but central Connecticut is hardly ideally located. It's not ideally located—it's not by anybody. But then I went for the interview at New Britain General [Hospital] and the hospital had just been renovated, and they put a brand new green house of a lobby, which was beautiful, and I went in on this day that was pouring rain, and the garage was adjacent to this beautiful lobby, and I thought, "I could work here." I left my drippy

coat and umbrella in the garage, and I had an interview with the woman who was going to be my boss, and it turns out she was the cousin of the head nurse at the adolescent where I did my residency, so she had already checked me out. Um, the two references that I listed were people who had been her senior, you know, interns and residents when she was in training, so she knew them, and I was able to check her out, and um, she said, “This is Connecticut. We don’t pay like they do in New York,” and she proceeded to offer me ten thousand dollars a year more than the highest offer I had been given for any practice in Long Island.

So it sounded good, and I said, “You’re right—you don’t pay like they do in New York.”

At the time, there was like one other—she was a woman—there was one woman pediatrician in a group in town, and that was it, so I had four interviews, and then I had lunch with this woman in pediatrician, and I said, “How is it?”

And she’s like, “It’s fine. You know, the boss is a woman. It’s no big deal.”

And, so I, um, at the end of the day, I said, “I’m really interested in this job, and I’m going on vacation, so if you can’t reach me, don’t give up. I’ll be back on such and such a day.”

And so I got hired, and I never heard from the other job, which sounded similar, until a month after I had accepted the position. They called me and said, “We’d like to interview you,” and it was like, “Suckers, too late!” I didn’t quite say it that way, but you know.

So I moved up to Connecticut. I was a really big fish in a really little pool, because I was the only doctor in this clinic. Most hospital-based clinics, you have the attending physician and you have residents, but we didn’t have a residency program in pediatrics, so it was just me. So I was essentially in a solo practice, and in a hospital, so I had a lot of resources. Like if I needed to call social work, I could just call them. If I needed an x-ray, it was right there. So it was very nice, and over time, the practice got busier, and so we ended up hiring—well first we started a walk-in, just come in without an appointment if you’re sick because we wanted our patients to not go to the emergency room. So we started that, and that really took off with no publicity. And then, we hired somebody to do that, and we ended up doing more and more, and ultimately, we hired—originally we hired a PA [Physician Assistant], and eventually we hired a second—it was me and another physician, and, um, the second physician changed a couple of times over the years.

And the last time around, my latest partner was a Malaysian woman who spent a couple of years agonizing over the fact that she was there on a green card—I mean, didn’t have a green card—and that they might at any minute deport her, or not let her back in the country if she went on vacation. And she was the brightest person, bar none that I have ever met, and the best doctor that I have ever met. So I kept saying to her, “Noelle just tell me what I need to write, and I’ll

write to the president. You just tell me who I need to talk to to tell them that there is no more qualified American than you.” So, she finally got her green card and that made her happy. And once again, no gay-dar. She was there about a year and she said, “Oh, didn’t you realize that I’m gay?” And I was like, “Why would I ever think about that?” And then she got her green card and she got married, so I was very happy for her. And, um—

02:15:08 Q: Did she continue at the hospital?

02:15:09 Falek: She’s still there. So what happened was, the numbers went up in the clinic, and then they started going down. And they started going down probably because there’s twice as many pediatricians and there’s another large clinic in town, and then financing was if you’re a federally qualified health center, you get a lot more money, and because we were a hospital, we couldn’t qualify for those funds, so they were talking about moving the clinic off site and blah blah blah. And, you know, but ultimately, we lost a lot of patients because there were so many other pediatricians in town, I think, and for whatever reason. And for whatever reason, I’m the one that got chopped. Whether it was for one reason or another, but—

02:15:58 Q: Could it have been age discrimination?

02:16:00 Falek: Uh, I don’t think so. I think it’s the fact that I made twice than what the other doctor made. That’s economics.

02:16:06 Q: That is a kind of age discrimination.

02:16:09 Falek: But, it was like, a couple years before that, I was one of Best Doctors in Connecticut, and then they chop you. And there was an orthopedic physician who had just gotten the prestigious award, and right after I got let go, he was also let go. And he was like, “Well, here we are. We can commiserate together.”

02:16:30 Q: Almost incomprehensible. I just—you dealt with it.

02:15:35 Falek: So, it was just one of these things where I said, “You know, I’m just going to retire.”

And people are like, “Aren’t you going to get another job?”

And it’s like, “No. I’ll be a Wal-Mart greeter.”

I read a book by Michael Gates Gill called *How Starbucks Saved My Life*, and I was a very good book and I thought, “Maybe I’ll be a barista. Who knows? But I’m not starting another practice at this age.” I did start temporarily for a couple of weeks, I filled in for the woman who I’d had lunch with on the day of my interview twenty-seven years before, because one of their doctors

got sick, so I filled in for him for a while. But I'm really not looking to start another job, but I, you know, I worked with a practice that was largely, um, Puerto Rican. Well, actually, largely Puerto Rican, but other Spanish-speaking groups also, so we had people from Mexico and South America, and I started out—I said in my resume—"I speak some Spanish." And, um, I'm convinced that's why they hired me. It's like we don't care if she doesn't know any pediatrics, but she speaks Spanish.

And, um, you know, I could talk to the patients fairly decently, and then, all of a sudden we started having an influx of people from Yemen. So I started trying to teach myself Arabic. And I got enough Arabic from Rosetta Stone [Language Learning] that I could introduce myself in Arabic, and you know, when the translator was translating, I could sort of understand what they were saying, but I never got fluent enough to actually have conversation. But it was fun to sort of learn a language. Because like I said, I was always interested in languages. And Arabic and Hebrew were very much alike.

02:18:27 Q: Semitic languages, yeah.

02:18:28 Falek: Yeah, and one of the interesting things is one day, one of the men, um, from the, you know, from the clinic, from the families came up and said, "You're Jewish, right?" And I was like "Who wants to know and why?" you know, but I said yes, and he said, "Were you born in Israel?" And I said no. And he said, "Oh, that's a shame. Because if you were born in Israel,

then you would know Hebrew, and Hebrew-Arabic, you would know half the words already.”

And I thought, this is so sweet that this man is reaching out to me to, you know—look how alike we are, and why is it that we can be so cordial to each other and the rest of the world over there is, you know, killing each other? And, um, so demographically, it was a very interesting practice. So we had our Spanish-speaking group, we had our Arabic-speaking group. We had patients—I used to say I was going to hang a huge world map and put a push pin in every country that we had represented because we had people from Somalia and Morocco and Russia and New Britain [Connecticut] was always traditionally a Polish town, but there was a Polish-speaking pediatrician that had most of the Polish patients, but we had a few.

We had people from every South American country—from all over the place. And, um, so it was a very interesting group. And then I got to do some teaching because we had medical students and physician assistant students, and we were a very desirable site, and in fact, when I was let go, we lost all our teaching ability because we only had one doctor and too many patients and not enough time. So that was a shame. But we had several PA [Physician Assistant] schools in several states who sent students here, and University of Connecticut Medical School.

02:20:24 Q: Wow. That’s fantastic. Okay, is there anything—I guess we’ll end, but let me ask if there’s anything you’d like to speak about that we haven’t cleared in this interview. Any stories—I mean, you’re a great storyteller—

02:20:38 Falek: My next life, you know. Um, no I mean, you know, I was a commuter and I did a lot of my reading on the subway. A lot of my assignments were done on the subway so I had time—like I said, I worked. If I had a two-hour or hour and a half subway ride, and it wasn't really crowded, I could get a fair amount of my schoolwork done while I was commuting, and in fact, when I stopped commuting, it seemed odd. I worked in a job that was only a couple of minutes away from me, and it was like, "I don't have time to do anything." At the time I was living in Brooklyn Heights, and I was working on 14th street at Federation of Handicapped so I started walking to work across the Brooklyn Bridge because I needed that hour in the morning to just de-stress and get going and whatever. And, so giving me a commuter gave me a lot of built-in time to do my assignments.

02:21:43 Q Okay, well this has been delightful. Thank you so much.

02:21:45 Falek: Thank you. It has been delightful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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