

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Beth Lief

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Beth Lief conducted by Frances Garrett Connell on July 29, 2015 and August 19, 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 College Class of 1971 Oral History Project Session: 1

Interviewee: Beth Lief

Location: New York City

Interviewer: Frances Garrett Connell

Date: July 29, 2015

00:03:30 Q: This is an interview taking place with Beth Lief, at her apartment in New York City, on July 29th, 2015. And the interviewer is Frances [Garrett] Connell. This is our second start, but it will be fine.

So, Beth, again thank you for being part of this, and for letting me come into your apartment today. We'll start then with wherever you would like to, maybe the beginnings of your life, and what you would like to share.

00:03:59 Lief: I was born and grew up in Huntington, Long Island. And my family—there were four of us, my father, my mother, my older sister was four years older, and myself. My father was a Rabbi, who didn't have a regular congregation. He was the Chaplain at the Northport Veterans Administration where he took care of disabled veterans. And in addition he had other responsibilities and was on many boards doing public service around the community, including he was the Chaplain for the police department, he was the Chaplain for Legal Aid Society, was the Chaplain for the sheriff's office. He just did such amazingly wonderful things.

My mother was a full-time mom, and she died when I was ten, which was way too young. My sister and I were not very close growing up, but now we're very, very close, and we've been close,

I would say, for about twenty years, maybe even longer, maybe thirty years, when we started to have children.

And one of the questions that you had asked me about who was the most important person for me before I went to Barnard [College]. By far, it was my father. And we lived together just the two of us for at least four years when my sister went off to college. She went to Simmons College in Boston. And there was one other person who pretty important, she was my AP [Advanced Placement] English teacher, English and Humanities teacher, Helen Flavia Wyatt. I loved her name too. She said, “Beth, you can do anything.” And she really believed it, and worked with me on my writing as if I could, and that was amazing. And she was very, very pleased that I was applying to Barnard, and she felt it was the right place for me.

I applied though—I knew it was the right place for me, but I wanted to go to the best school, closest to my father so I could see him once a week, which I did do, for three years. My fourth year I went to Yale [University], because I had gotten married between Junior and Senior year. Some people do things not the right way and I didn’t. Yale is an interesting counter-part to Barnard. There were these huge lecture classes, as well as very small seminars. And I missed being at Barnard, but I used to come in once a week, because my senior thesis at Barnard was about Community Organizing in New York City. And that was because I worked as a community organizer, sophomore and junior year. What happened was, in between freshman and sophomore year, I said to my father, “I think I’m going to be bored next year.” I don’t remember why it was triggered, because I was taking a course in between freshman and sophomore year, in the summertime, that was a terrific English course. But I read, um, the—

00:07:47 Q: But was that at Barnard, or Columbia [University]?

00:07:49 Lief: It was at Columbia. It was fabulous. It was Virginia Wolfe. And, was it James Joyce?

00:07:59 Q: Oh, my.

00:08:00 Lief: It was wonderful. And my father said to me, “Go out and find something to do that’s really important.” And he said he knew somebody who worked at HDA, which was the Federal Housing and Development Agency, why don’t I go down and speak to them, because he knew I wanted—I came to Barnard, I really wanted to work on making urban areas better, particularly for disadvantaged people, and people of color. And I got a job in the catchment area where Barnard is. And I worked on Broadway and 113th Street, on the second floor, as a community organizer. And I worked in Manhattan Valley. And I wrote a paper in one of my Political Science courses on that, and then I realized there was much more to write, and so I made it my thesis. And that was amazing, and a great experience.

00:09:11 Q: And who were you working with, on your thesis?

00:09:14 Lief: Professor Demetrios [J.] Caraley. And something else I worked with him about—he and I started together the urban studies major, because when I got to Barnard all I could major in was political science. And I said, I need to know political science, but I need to know about cities,

and that means more than that. And I worked—and I went, and I spoke to him about it, and he said, “If you’re serious about this, I will help you get this done.” And he got the professors together to talk about what should the requirements be, what should be the possible courses that can be considered as part of the major. You know I took Urban Anthropology, I took Urban Literature, Urban Sociology, it was fabulous, Urban Art, and it was just a great—and during that time I made two presentations to the Board of Directors. So it was a great learning experience to be a public speaker, and to be a leader, and that was great.

00:10:23 Q: That’s impressive, (laughs) I wish I had known about American Studies when I arrived, because that was my favorite subject in high school. So can you speak a little more about the research project that you ended up doing the thesis on, what you learned about the neighborhood, and how that led you to other things.

00:10:38 Lief: You know, I learned that the city was a city of neighborhoods, but one block made a huge difference. And in Manhattan Valley, which I basically live in now, was very different then. It was mostly Latino, Dominican and Puerto Rican, and a lot of the people were in tenements that were kept up horribly, horribly. We did a lot of work about that. I was in Landlord/Tenant Court a lot. And there weren’t enough places for them to meet. So one of the things I did was help create a park, on one lot. They were called lot parks, and I still have a picture of me on this big, you know, tractor, that we took for some magazine or something. And I worked with the block associations to try to make them stronger, to help each other and to advocate for themselves.

And there was one time, one of my co-workers and I wanted to really get a landlord, because there were a few landlords who were really awful—and we drove out to his home on Long Island. It was so stupid. (Laughs) We get there, and there are guard dogs and things, so I said, “I’m not going in there.” And he said, “Come on.” I said, “No,” and we turned around and we left (laughs).

00:12:16 Q: That’s a bit much, yeah.

00:12:19 Lief: And I came to the conclusion about it that community organizing is so not the way, the way.

00:12:35 Q: Not the way.

00:12:37 Lief: But you need to have neighborhoods that are organized, but they should be able to get paid to help themselves.

00:12:43 Q: You need to talk to [Barack H.] Obama. Isn’t that how he started?

00:12:48 Lief: Yes. And so was—my son-in-law worked for ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now] for four years, which is where for Obama worked. So that was that. And would you like me to go on to talk about first year?

00:13:08 Q: Yes, that would be great.

00:13:10 Lief: First year I lived in Reid [Hall], with Renee Russian.

00:13:14 Q: Oh, yeah!

00:13:15 Lief: I think it was Reid 570. And we have not kept up. I really liked her enormously, but we went different ways. And my best friend, who's still my best friend, is Marcia Paul who was two years ahead of us. She lived with Barbara Bailing. She was in our class and now lives in Maine.

00:13:44 Q: Marcia, from our class?

00:13:55 Lief: No, Barbara's daughter went to Barnard also. And, I loved my classes the first year, except for French, because I'm bad at French.

00:14:00 Q: Except what?

00:14:01 Lief: Except for French. I was bad in languages, but I took my Pass/Fail on that, so that was okay, so this way I could get my 3.8, (laughs) which I don't think I would have gotten.

But, then the second semester was turned upside-down. Not just the semester, the whole community. And, my position was in favor of getting a park for the community, and not having the gym, and I was furious at the President, Dick [Grayson Louis] Kirk's attitudes, and the way he was handling things. And I did try to support the folks who were in the buildings. I did not go into

the buildings to stay. I was on the negotiating committee, was part of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], was running it with Mark [W.] Rudd, and, I was a—they needed a young woman, you know a freshman, but they never gave me a chance, because it was very sexist, it was really sexist, and it took a lot of patience, which I'm not good at (laughs) to stick around, but I thought I had to sit there and do it. And the negotiations just were not done in good faith in my opinion.

00:15:36 Q: So identify, who were you negotiating with, the actual President of Columbia, or—?

00:15:39 Lief: I was not in the meetings with the President, I was in the pre-meetings.

00:15:43 Q: Okay.

00:15:44 Lief: And, but there were lots of meetings that Mark Rudd ran that we were all there to discuss what to do, and that was what I was doing. And one of the things that happened—and I told you I'm not good at remembering details, but this is one detail, it still sticks in my mind, I could paint it if I could paint well enough. One night when the police were there on their horses, somebody took marbles and rolled them under the horses' hooves, it was horrible, it was horrible, those horses just went nuts, they didn't know what to do, and the police were on them, and they were jumping off their horses, trying to—and I thought, Who's doing this? They're probably a student or two, and that's horrible. And this is—you know organizing, not for community organizing, but organizing for this, for the bust, didn't hit everybody appropriately. And that was too bad.

And now, I mean I'm comparing it—my daughter goes on lots of marches, and she's written things about cop-watching, and what happened in Staten Island, or what happened in Missouri. And she and her husband and her two-year-old went to the march in Staten Island, and that was done amazingly well. They trained the police on how to be with people who were furious, understandably, correctly, at police. They were—my daughter said they were wonderful. And that kind of training didn't exist. And you know, the night that the folks were all herded into those vans was just foolish. And more than foolish, it was awful.

00:18:12 Q: And where were you that night?

00:18:14 Lief: I was outside.

00:18:16 Q: So you're outside, you're watching the arrests going on or—?

00:18:19 Lief: Yeah.

00:18:19 Q: And that's where you saw the horses with the marbles.

00:18:21 Lief: It wasn't that night, it was another night before that. It just—I figured, if I wasn't in, I had to be a witness.

00:18:37 Q: So your daughter got that from you, the cop-watching (laughs).

00:18:39 Lief: Oh, yes, and she's now writing about bail, after Kalief [Browder]—there's a young man who had been in jail for three years, mostly in solitary, and never had—and then they realized they have no evidence against him. For three years because he didn't have a hundred dollars for bail. And he was starting at Bronx Community College, trying to do well, and then he committed suicide.

00:19:08 Q: Oh, yes, I read about this.

00:19:09 Lief: And that's why this town is now doing something about bail. You have to have a lovely young man who had been a very good student commit suicide to have something happen. But my daughter's been writing about that.

00:19:22 Q: Oh, good for her.

00:19:23 Lief: Yeah, I'm really proud of her.

00:19:24 Q: You should be.

00:19:25 Lief: And my son-in-law is in MFY Legal Services.

00:19:31 Q: I'm sorry, he's in what?

00:19:32 Lief: He's a Legal Services lawyer. So we're into hopefully doing good things, which is what I've always tried to do. When I went to Barnard, as I said, I wanted to help urban areas. And then after the end of the third year, when I'd been at HDA for two years, I decided I needed to be a lawyer because I needed power. I thought I was going become a social worker, but I thought in this town and society it doesn't have the power that lawyers have. So, I was lucky. I got a full scholarship to NYU [New York University]. It's called a Root-Tilden-Kern; it's for Public Interest. And after that I clerked for a fabulous judge, Judge [Morris E.] Lasker, who is the judge who is known as the person who knew how to prison cases. And I worked with him on dealing with Rikers Island. Now we're talking about 1976, and now it's now happening all over again, it doesn't end, but unfortunately he's not here with us now. After Judge Lasker—

00:20:53 Q : I'm sorry, so he was a—

00:20:55 Lief: A federal judge in the [United States District Court for the] Southern District of New York.

00:21:02 Q: Yeah, my—[Jack Bertrand] Weinstein. Weinstein? My ex, clerked for him, for a year.

00:21:08 Lief: Oh, I thought you said—oh, cause I know him, cause I know his son. His son Seth went to Columbia, and I dated him for a few years.

00:21:16 Q: Oh, no. It's a small world. Anyway. This is your interview. Anyway.

00:21:18 Lief: That's funny. And then I went to the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] Legal Defense Fund. I have had one spectacular job after another. I only had one, for eighteen months, that was not spectacular, but it was okay. But at the Legal Defense Fund I was in charge of Housing Discrimination, and Health Discrimination. And I had wonderful cases, hard ones. And I also worked on Employment Discrimination cases. And I was on the Kansas City School Desegregation case, I did all the housing on that one. And there I met fabulous people, and my clients were people I would never have met. I'll give you one little example. I had a case where I represented—it was an affirmative action case in New Orleans for police, sergeants going to lieutenants. Every time I flew down there a group of police, black police, would pick me up, and they'd always take me to these great restaurants that no white has ever been to. They were fabulous! And every time I went home they gave me a box of frozen shrimp. It was just, they were—I'm being silly, cause that was just the fun—but getting to know them, and getting to know the people that I've met in those cases was just amazing.

After that, while I was there—well I had gotten divorced first time while I was still in law school. And then Michael, my current husband of thirty-seven years, and I got married when I was at LDF. And Jocelyn was born in 1979. She's thirty-six, and our son, Charlie, was born three years later, and he was born two months premature. In those days that was a big warning. And he had a major cerebral hemorrhage when he was five days old. And so he has cerebral palsy, he has severe retardation, and then when he became adolescent he also got autistic. So the poor guy, but he now is in a fabulous group home. I can tell you about all the things we've done for him, but now he's a happy person. He doesn't talk, his toileting is iffy, and his expressive language is almost nothing. I mean you know if he's hungry he'll go to the kitchen as a way of expression. But his receptive

language, he can understand enough to be close to us, and he loves his little niece, and she loves him. And it's great. The two-year-old, Ramona who's my granddaughter, shares her toys with Uncle Charlie. So that's nice.

Anyway, I left LDF because I had read in the newspaper that Mayor [Edward Irving] Koch was setting up a Commission on special ed. And I knew I was going to have to know about special ed. I think Charlie was nine months old at that point. And I called the person who was going to be the Chair, who I actually knew, and I said, "Dick [Richard I. Beattie], is there anything I can do to help?" And he said, "Actually I need an Executive Director." And I went, "Okay, if you want me, I'm yours." And he hired me. And that was in 1983.

And from then I've been in public education reform work, because when you step into special ed you immediately step into regular education, because so many of the students are in special ed because regular ed doesn't do what it needs to do. And we wrote I think a very good commission report, and it was—and then I stayed on for a year in the mayor's office to try to get some of the things pushed through, and then I went—and then Dick Beattie, who was Chairman became a member of the Board of Education, and I went with him to the Board of Education for a year and a half.

00:26:26 Q: And is that an appointed position, or—?

00:26:27 Lief: It is, but it doesn't exist anymore because the Board of Education was eliminated and the mayor was given control of education, which I think is a very smart move. But because of

who I am I did a lot of things that were not my technical job. We got a lot done, we really did. We got a lot of changes in special ed that mattered, not nearly as much as we needed to do. And after that I went to—

00:27:01 Q: Now did this involve any legal suits, or things like that, as well?

00:27:04 Lief: Well a lot of what we did had to be because it had to do with what was called the Jose P. Case [*Jose P. v. Mills*]. It was a class action case, and that had a huge decree that the Board of Education was trying to work with. And sometimes they did it well, and sometimes they didn't, and we tried to help figure that out as well. But the title of the special ed report was called the "Call for Quality." And nobody thought we were going to write about the quality of the education, they thought we were going to write about how many IEPs [Individualized Education Plans] are done on time, and whether they're reviewed on time, you know all of the rigamarole and all. And we wanted to talk about getting a quality education for all children. And then after that, after a little stint at The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which was good, because it really taught me about philanthropy—

00:28:09 Q: At the where, I'm sorry.

00:28:10 Lief: The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. I then started—I became the Founding President of New Visions for Public Schools. It was then called the Fund for New York City Public Education. It is now the largest non-profit in New York City to improve the city's school system. And it was the largest one when I left. I was there for twelve years. And—

00:28:35 Q: Now this is—Janet worked with you there, didn't she?

00:28:39 Lief: Yes. And Janet Price, one of our classmates, I hired—I think like my third hire, and she was my Vice President. She was terrific. And I'm very proud of that organization. I'm still on the board and I'm still very active. We did—we created the small school movement, and we created, under me, thirty-six small schools, and my successor created about a hundred and seventy-five. And we had a lot of—we did a lot of commissions for certain—for chancellors that needed something to be looked at, things like they asked—Chancellor [Joseph A.] Fernandez asked us to look at the mathematics education. And what we found was it was completely segregated and tracked; business math, which was nothing, and then it was regular math and then there was college math. As a result of our commission that was abolished, and there was one set of curriculum for all students.

And you know those kinds of things really make a difference, and one of the things we did for special ed, when we started, the Board of Education was testing students from the first grade on, and if they got a bad mark on their standardized tests they would immediately be sent to special ed. And we said, No good. But we knew we had to have something else in place. So another Vice President and I took something from England, which was called, Reading—not reading recovery, um—Reading Records. And it taught teachers how to listen to students, how they read, and then they came up with a score. But it was reading, it wasn't taking a standardized test. And the then Chancellor, that was—it doesn't matter who—said we should do this.

00:31:06 Q: This was what, what year now?

00:31:08 Lief: I'd say it was 1983, '84, early '80's. We got McGraw Hill to publish a program that all the teachers could use, and then they stopped the standardized teaching for first graders and second graders. You know these are things I'm very proud of that. And I could tell you more and more.

And then I decided that it was becoming—the organization was started to be called Beth's and Dick's organization. I thought, that's no good. And I think there should be change in leadership, and so I left in 2000. And what I wanted to do was to set up a non-profit, or a for-profit, but a non-profit to do professional education through videoing and Web. But as I was thinking of doing it, the head of the union, Sandy [Sandra] Feldman told me she had just hooked up with an organization to do that. So they hired me, and I worked there for eighteen months. It wasn't great because I think we were too early with the idea. And now it's all over the place, but it was later when video and web was really used for professional development.

But then I went to work at The University of Pittsburgh, with a great, great educator. And I did the kind of work I had done in New York City in school districts around the country, but also in two of the districts here, in the Bronx.

00:32:59 Q: So this was a program through The University of Pittsburgh?

00:33:01 Lief: It's called Institute for Learning. Lauren Resnick is the head of it.

00:33:05 Q: Lauren Resnick, okay.

00:33:06 Lief: And she's—well she's internationally known. And then after seven or eight years of that, I just got tired of being on the plane a lot. And then four and a half years ago, I got a phone call—all this—I never applied for anything after Legal Defense Fund. These things just came into my lap.

00:33:36 Q: I'm not surprised (laughs).

00:33:37 Lief: And the last one is the one I'm doing now, I'm Executive Director of the Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation, and we work on grantmaking to improve public education in New York City. How perfect is that for me? And the board—the Executive Director was retiring and they needed somebody, and I'm the only one they interviewed. It was just—and there's no other staff. When I do a board book I first to Staples and I buy the books, and I do the typing, and I do the proof-reading. But that's okay, because I'm now in a stage of my life, and I guess a lot of our classmates are, to want to think about, and learn about, and go a little slower. Just a little.

And when I started with them they needed a lot of focus, which I've given to them, and now our focus is education, community colleges and CUNY [City University of New York] four-year colleges, which is so important. And I was excited because—although I'm still doing a little work in the high schools, but in the high schools we're making grants for improving their way to help students get to the right colleges, college access. And I didn't know anything about CUNY, and I

had no idea what a community college is. And so many people don't know, although most people in college in the United States are in community colleges. But their graduation rates are maybe twenty percent, and we have to make it better than that. And so much of that is that eighty percent of the students who go to the community colleges in New York City need remediation in mathematics. The teaching in math in the high schools, and the lower schools and elementary schools is not what it needs to be. And that's what I do, and that's my career. And it's a magical career I think.

00:35:50 Q: An important career as well.

00:35:51 Lief: Because I always was wanting to do the same thing but I've had so many different kinds of ways to figure out how to be able to be useful.

00:36:04 Q: And of all these different positions in leadership what are you most proud of? Or perhaps what was the most satisfying?

00:36:14 Lief: Oh, New Visions, for sure, after that Judge Lasker. But on the other hand what I'm most proud about are my children and my grandchild. I mean everybody told me when you get a grandchild the minute you see them you love them outrageously, and somebody said to me, "It's about the only thing that's not overblown." And it's true. You know. And Ramona is two-years-old, and three months, and she's a miracle. She's just a happy little girl, very smart, who loves to read, knows her alphabet, (laughs) and knows her numbers. I taught her numbers cause we have a beach house where she comes out to, she loves the beach house, and we have an upstairs, and we

count the steps, and that's how she knew up to fifteen, because there are fifteen steps. I always stopped at ten, and she said, "Eleven."

00:37:18 Q: (Laughing) Yes, a very bright little girl. That's wonderful, wow. You obviously were influenced very much with your father, as you began to speak of. Where do you think you got sort of the feistiness in the sense to be able to get a hold of things and learn to go forward?

00:37:41 Lief: I think I was born feisty. There are pictures of me with the family that everyone's sort of very staid, and I'm like this. And my husband calls me Scooter, because I run around a lot.

00:37:58 Q: Good name.

00:38:00 Lief: You know and I've had some tragedies, but—six years ago I had a stroke. Oh, I forgot to tell you that. But I was hit by two cars, when I was walking.

00:38:11 Q: (Gasps) Here, in the city?

00:38:15 Lief: On 107th and Amsterdam. And it dissected my carotid artery, and then a day and a half later I had a major stroke. But Michael, my husband, just called emergency and luckily Roosevelt Hospital has one of the best—Roosevelt Hospital in New York City has one of the best stroke units in the country.

00:38:38 Q: Oh, my goodness—

00:38:39 Lief: So I am so lucky, cause there's nothing—you can't possibly tell. The only thing that happened, that still happens, is my handwriting is awful, and I don't want to bike. I'm afraid. I'm just afraid to.

00:38:55 Q: I'm glad to hear about Roosevelt, that's where my older son is an ER doctor.

00:39:00 Lief: Oh, well I didn't go to the ER there. I went to St. Luke's, and they did a terrible job. But it's July. You're not supposed to get sick in July.

00:39:13 Q: I know that's when all the new Residents are coming in.

00:39:15 Lief: They admitted it.

00:39:19 Q: So that should not have happened. The stroke should not have happened.

00:39:21 Lief: No.

00:39:22 Q: Oh, my goodness. That is awful.

00:39:23 Lief: Yeah, a few months of rehab, and I was—I remember the first week when I was out of ICU, they were testing my cognition, and they asked me to name all the Supreme Court Justices, and I did. I'm not sure I can do it right now!

00:39:44 Q: Whoa, my goodness, I couldn't, actually (laughs).

00:39:46 Lief: But the first days I couldn't spell, cat. You know it went, boom, and I was fine.

00:39:55 Q: So you were aware that you were missing things at the very beginning, when the stroke? I mean cognitively you were confused, I guess.

00:40:00 Lief: No, people told me that.

00:40:03 Q: Oh, people told you that, yeah. Well, you look great, so thank god. Okay, and you said you didn't really want to talk about elementary school or high school, but were you in public school?

00:40:18 Lief: I can tell you. I went into public high school, and elementary school, middle school. Southdown Elementary, Simpson Middle School, and Huntington High School. And I was a very good student, and I love to learn, I really do. And I think most of all I had good teachers. You know one or two I didn't love. And I remember things—in ninth grade we had to write a composition on my most unforgettable character. I wrote it of my mother, I still have it. And that was—and the high school is very tracked. But I had good classes, but now I realize I'm angry about that. And I was not a big socialite. I was head of the newspaper. I was the Chairman of all the dances though, and I don't understand why, 'cause it wasn't—I guess cause they needed

somebody who could put it all together, I could do that. And I have, I guess, five people who I still sort of keep in contact with.

00:41:43 Q: From those days, uh-huh.

00:41:45 Lief: But very slightly. There's one woman who was with me since kindergarten. She lives out in Seattle. And we email at least once a year. And there's one who always invites four of us to his firm's Christmas party every year, and that's fun. And that's—

00:42:11 Q: Great, great. All right, so we're there—um, you obviously were always aware politically, socially of the world, are there things that you remember from before Barnard and then of course during the period you were at Barnard? I mean we were—

00:42:29 Lief: Yeah, the things that I assume other people remember too. I remember [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, and I remember seeing, "I Like Ike" signs, and—

00:42:38 Q: (Laughs) That's like 19—what, '56?

00:42:41 Lief: Yeah, we must have been seven. And I asked my father, "Do you like Ike?" And he said, "He's a very good man, but I don't think he should be President, because I don't think military people should be President." And I remember that, and I certainly remember the Sputnik. And I remember, certainly remember, [Richard M.] Nixon. And I was you know tear-gassed with

people as I marched in Washington. And I remember the night he resigned. I remember that speech, and I—

00:43:17 Q: Were you in New York at the time, or—?

00:43:19 Lief: Yes.

00:43:21 Q: Remember the speech.

00:43:22 Lief: Somebody's apartment, we were watching together. You know and since then, you know, I had to follow what was going on, because with the Legal Defense Fund, with what we were going to sue about, what we were not going to sue about, what had changed.

00:43:44 Q: So what was your sort of outlook on the whole Civil Rights Movement then, and the post-Civil Rights Movement, and now the returning to—? Taking it apart—

00:43:52 Lief: The taking apart—I'm not sure I'm going to say anything that's going to make—you know I think it did a lot of good, but not nearly as much as it needed to. We know that. But that whole agencies, like whole police departments, have not gotten better. I mean maybe a little in the south. I'll say that. They don't do quite the things they used to do, like go in and burn people's houses. I don't see the new efforts now, not nearly as bold, and as big as what the Civil Rights age did. And there aren't new laws because of the Congress. And I'm not—I'm not sure that the demonstrations have done anything. What has happened is people—but maybe they have, but I

think the police have so, excuse me, fucked up, all over the country, that that's—that made the difference. And I do think Eric [Himpton] Holder, as Attorney General, also did some things that were right. And I think—

00:45:36 Q: Some things that were not right—

00:45:37 Lief: No, did things that were very right.

00:45:39 Q: That were right, yeah.

00:45:41 Lief: And I do think Obama's speech after Charleston, maybe touched people. I don't know. Because you don't see a continuation of it. And that's why we can't stop, we have to keep on pushing, pushing, pushing until something more—

00:46:02 Q: And then I guess the issue also of the tracking, in terms of education, which you've seen from all directions, what—has there been improvement?

00:46:12 Lief: There is less tracking.

00:46:13 Q: There is less from what you've said, yeah.

00:46:16 Lief: But, the issue now, if you look at the educational level of the child's parents, and their income level, you can determine what's going to happen, And that shouldn't be. We were

brought up, in our life we were told, education is the way for everybody. Remember? We were told it works for everybody. And that's not true, yet. But it absolutely should be.

00:46:54 Q: It's unfortunate. How about, being in a position as a leader in a number of places, barring your experience with SDS back in (laughs) the '60s, the spring of '68. Have you ever felt discriminated against? Has the Women's Movement been particularly important in your life? Do you want to say something about that?

00:47:18 Lief: Yes, the Women's Movement has been very important to me. When I went to law school, a group of women had a feminist group, and that was really important. And I was discriminated against as a lawyer, not discriminated—I was treated differently. So I consider that was discrimination. Not by everybody, not by my colleagues, but opposing lawyers sometimes would—one of them said, “Would you like to go to a fashion show? There's one I know that's happening tonight.” You know that kind of stuff, which is just—um, and then some funny things happened, one of the judge's clerks asked me out, and I was already married. I was actually pregnant at the time, you know, but that's—it wasn't horrible, but I do remember men looking at me in ways that shouldn't be. And sometimes that made me feel uncomfortable.

And then—oh, I remember, I was giving a talk, I was on a panel, about single-sex schools. And I was in favor of them when they're done well. And the then head of NYCLU [New York Civil Liberties Union] got up and said, “You're just being a patsy for the union, your teachers' union, and—” no, not the teachers' union. Um, who was I patsy for? Oh, I know, it was for the Chancellor, because they wanted to set up a few all-girls schools. And I—and everyone went

(gasps). And I said, “You know what, everybody take a deep breath, ‘cause when somebody says that I think it means I’m making some points.” And afterwards he called, and he apologized personally, but he also got up and he apologized. But he would have never done that if it hadn’t been about single-sex schools, and I was a woman. He would never.

00:49:36 Q: Okay, let’s see. There were some other things.

00:49:46 Lief: Has my life been the way I anticipated?

00:49:48 Q: Yeah, we can go to that, sure.

00:49:52 Lief: I never anticipated that way. I did know I wanted to be married and have children.

00:49:57 Q: Married and what?

00:49:58 Lief: I wanted to be married and have children.

00:49:59 Q: Oh, married and have children, yes.

Lief: So that’s come out, you know great. But it didn’t happen the way I thought it was going to happen, you know, in terms of Charlie. But I never planned what jobs I was going to have, I knew what I wanted to do was to be useful in terms of urban issues, and so I guess that did work out exactly the way I wanted it to be. And I have lots and lots of good friends, and that’s important.

00:50:41 Q: Now where do you think the model came from, that you at a certain age you felt you wanted to have kids?

00:50:48 Lief: Oh, boy. I always knew, or thought I would be. And there were some years that I didn't have a boyfriend, and I'd occasionally get worried and I'd say, What are you worried about? You're nineteen or twenty or whatever or twenty-four. I didn't have like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm not going to get married and have children." I always thought I would.

00:51:24 Q: Now were there other—? You lost your mother quite early. Were there other women in your life who sort of nurtured you?

00:50:30 Lief: Yes. Two aunts. And a friend of my father's. And they were great to me, they were just great to me. I would go away and stay at their houses sometimes, and when I got married the first time one of them went with me to get my dress and all that. So, they were good. But it's different than having your parents. And you know when my children got born, and both of them weren't there, it really got me.

00:52:04 Q: Sure. So your father—

00:52:05 Lief: Died when I was twenty-one.

00:52:10 Q: Oh, my goodness.

00:52:12 Lief: It was right before my first exam in law school, at the end of the year.

00:52:17 Q: Your first exam in law school. Oh, whoa, whoa! And you struggled through somehow? Yeah, and that was a great loss, oh, sorry to hear that.

00:52:27 Lief: He was sixty-two, and my mother was forty-two.

00:52:30 Q: Oh, my goodness, yeah. That's way too young, way, way too young.

What was the most joyous day of your life? You've had so many and you've spoken with such warmth about colleagues, so I know that you had some good times.

00:52:45 Lief: I had great times, but when Jocelyn was born, having a baby, and when Ramona was born, having a grandchild. Those are my happiest days. I mean it's not even close.

00:53:04 Q: Are there other things that define you as a person? You've spoken about your career, you've spoken about your relationship with your children and your grandchild now.

00:53:12 Lief: I'm in two book groups. I love to read. One's an all-women's group, and the other's a couples group. And I like to stay in shape, so I exercise, and I play tennis, badly, and I play golf very badly (laughs). And I walk.

00:53:36 Q: Which is wonderful.

00:53:38 Lief: I do four miles outside by the river. And I try to do that four days a week.

00:53:48 Q: Sounds really good. So how about your writing? You, obviously in your jobs you've had a lot of writing.

00:53:53 Lief: I do, but now I just do—

00:53:57 Q: Now you just what?

00:53:58 Lief: I do, you know, work, memos to my board. I don't write.

00:54:04 Q: I do remember you writing at Barnard, and I remember—so your major was American History—

00:54:11 Lief: I don't remember that. No, it was Urban Studies, that was my first—yeah, we were the first year.

00:54:15 Q: Yeah, that's what you created, right, right, urban everything. Good, have you kept up at all with any of the professors—who, obviously many of them are gone now—at Barnard over the years then?

00:54:29 Lief: I did not.

00:54:28 Q: Right, and at NYU, did you have mentors there?

00:54:32 Lief: Yes, Burt Neuborne, who was a constitutional lawyer, and a fabulous professor, and yeah, I'm still close to him

00:54:45 Q: And you said your daughter had gone on to law school as well, and is doing amazing things now.

00:54:49 Lief: She is. She went to Yale undergraduate, and Harvard to law school. And then she became a lawyer at Bronx Defenders, where she did criminal law in the Bronx, which is tough work.

00:55:03 Q: Did she ever get to sleep? (Laughs)

00:55:05 Lief: And she kept on getting promoted so when she left after five years she was in charge of all the professional development for the other lawyers, plus she had a whole case-load. And after that she went to NYU in a fellowship, teaching. And that's when I thought, Oh, maybe she would get pregnant. And, yeah, she did. And that's where she wrote an article about the right of family members, journalists, and the public, to go into courtrooms for criminal cases other than during trial, all the motions, all the—because ninety-eight percent or ninety-five percent of all criminal cases never go to trial. So if you're not allowed to go into the courtroom you can't see

what's happening at all. And she's done a lot of work, continued to help others, you know similar causes and stuff. And now she gives lectures, and she has a big Twitter following.

00:56:21 Q: (Laughs) And they're in Brooklyn, you said. They're in Brooklyn?

00:56:24 Lief: Now she just got this tenure track job at Brooklyn Law School.

00:56:28 Q: Oh, fantastic, well congratulations. And you get to take care of your little—

00:56:33 Lief: I take care of her every other week.

00:56:34 Q: Ramona, once a week.

00:56:38 Lief: Ramona, and we have her overnight, at least once a month, without her parents once a month. And sometimes when they want to go away we get her more than that (laughs).

00:56:50 Q: (Laughs) That's a great relationship, that's just—it's unbeatable. So you were commuting during Barnard, or were you—I'm sorry you're were living in the dorms the whole four years, cause you're in Reid, okay, I got that. Were there other mentors at Barnard, besides working with Caraley, whatever his name was?

00:57:16 Lief: Not really, that I remember.

00:57:23 Q: Yeah, I mean a lot of people say they wish they had had a mentor. It just—we weren't into in those days, I think. Was there ever a time when you did something, or thought, Who am I? What have I turned into? What am I doing? Or do you feel you're true to yourself, whatever that means (laughs).

00:57:39 Lief: Oh, I'm sure I have, but I can't remember. But I'm sure I have, 'cause like I feel—I can understand what you're saying. But there's nothing I can tell you about.

00:57:59 Q: Okay. So when did you actually first hear of the '68 strike. We're going to skip around just a little bit. You said you were involved.

00:58:09 Lief: We all heard about it, it was all over—you had to close your ears not to—

00:58:15 Q: No, you'd be surprised. There were people who closed their ears (Laughs).

00:58:17 Lief: I think there were.

00:58:20 Q: Yeah, there were, there were a lot of commuters.

00:58:21 Lief: I don't think Renee—I don't think did anything. I can't remember, but, and a lot of commuters.

00:58:27 Q: A lot of commuters who were straggling two worlds, and basically went home and had to forget about it, yeah, but if you were in the dorm—

00:58:36 Lief: My brother-in-law was pretty conservative, he was head of the Young Ripons at Columbia.

00:58:39 Q: Oh, that's what they were called, I was trying to remember, Young Ripons.

00:58:43 Lief: It was a Young Republican—

00:58:44 Q: Young Republicans, yeah.

00:58:46 Lief: And he didn't approve of what my roles were, and that I was doing things. But he was so excited I wasn't in the building, so I didn't get—he was at Columbia Law School then.

00:59:04 Q: Oh, okay, this was your brother-in-law, okay. I don't remember the law school being all that involved.

00:59:08 Lief: It wasn't.

00:59:08 Q: No, (laughs) they know—(laughs)

00:59:11 Lief: Well there was a business school, and there was journalism, I mean, you know.

00:59:14 Q: Architecture was though, 'cause Avery [Architectural and Fine Arts Library], there were people in Avery. Interesting, I always liked architects (laughs).

00:59:23 Lief: Me too. And then two years later we didn't have exams, either.

00:59:35 Q: No, no, we had another one, a strike.

00:59:38 Lief: There was another—I can't remember, what happened?

00:59:41 Q: It was that Kent State [University]?

00:59:42 Lief: Yes.

00:59:46 Q: In solidarity. I think our senior year was probably the most regular, but you were gone at that point.

00:59:50 Lief: I was gone.

00:59:51 Q: Now did you come back and actually—or you weren't part of the ceremony.

00:59:55 Lief: Yes.

00:59:56 Q: Oh, you were, you were in the graduation, okay.

00:59:58 Lief: I was in graduation. Remember President [Martha] Peterson? She called me in to say, we were going to give you an award that had a scholarship, but once you got the Root-Tilden that gives you all the money, I'm going to give it to somebody else, but I want you to know that you would have gotten it.

01:00:14 Q: Now why was that?

01:00:15 Lief: Because I'd already gotten a scholarship that was going to pay for my entire law school.

01:00:21 Q: Oh, okay, okay, but you would have been the one that got it. So would you have been the Valedictorian?

01:00:24 Lief: No, oh, no, no, no. No, it was one of the millions of awards that were given out.

01:00:30 Q: Now did you know her very well, or had you had much to do with her?

01:00:34 Lief: No, but I spoke before the Board remember.

01:00:34 Q: Of course, again, yes. So she would remember you.

01:00:42 Lief: I knew Ellen [V.] Futter. I know Ellen Futter a lot, but she was not active when we were there.

01:00:47 Q: No, no she wasn't. No, but I do remember, pregnant with my first child and hearing that Ellen Futter was President now of Barnard, and—(Laughs)

01:00:56 Lief: I know, we were all surprised, weren't we?

01:00:55 Q: I was like, Wait. How did I get off the train here? (Laughs) But she's—are you still friends with her, or—?

01:01:03 Lief: Yes.

01:01:04 Q: Yeah, I don't know her at all. She's been at The Natural History [Museum] for quite a while now.

01:01:11 Lief: Yes, she's a real leader.

01:01:14 Q: Yeah, I know, that's fantastic. Well, so are you. Okay, that's all important stuff.

If you could go back to the first day at Barnard, and whisper wisdom into the ear of that young lady, what might it be?

01:01:31 Lief: You know, I think most of us don't take enough advantage of the opportunities in college cause we're too young. And I didn't take all the opportunities I would have liked to, intellectually, as well as extra curricular. And I would have said, "Pay attention to that, even though it's not what's going to be your focus forever, right now pay attention to that." I can't tell you a mistake I made, but I know—I know I could have gotten more, I just know it. My husband now takes two courses every semester at Columbia. He retired real early, and he loves it. And takes them often at Barnard as well as at Columbia.

01:02:45 Q: Oh, through Columbia and Barnard. Now, how did you meet him?

01:02:52 Lief: He was married to a classmate of mine in law school, but they had separated before anything, and there was no hanky-panky. But that's how I met him, the first year, no, second year. And then we got married in '77.

01:03:15 Q: So did he also do the same kind of law as you, or different?

01:03:18 Lief: No, he was a corporate tax lawyer.

01:03:22 Q: Okay, so you represented both—

01:03:24 Lief: And he—and he should've—and he was not, he didn't like it, and I always said to him, "You'd love public service, go into public interest law," but he wouldn't. He needed stability and he needed—he came from a very crazy family.

01:03:38 Q: Oh, okay (laughs). I'll have to interview him sometime too. Okay, so would you say that's the relationship that has changed the trajectory of your life, having this stable marriage all those years, or—?

01:03:57 Lief: Has changed my life?

01:04:02 Q: Or maybe it was fated—

01:04:04 Lief: It was a major part of my life, yes.

01:04:05 Q: Right, right, so he's always been supportive of each of the positions you've done and your directions, or—?

01:04:11 Lief: He's been so supportive, and he was amazing during my stroke. He did emails to everybody, to keep everybody involved, and he was terrific.

01:04:22 Q: Yeah, but what a shock to everybody, my goodness.

01:04:25 Lief: It was a shock. My poor daughter collapsed in the hospital. And then Mike had not—and Jocelyn were living together, and had talked about getting married, and when she collapsed he apparently, in the waiting room, jumped up and flew to her. And two of my girlfriends who were there said, This is it. They're for good (laughs).

01:04:46 Q: Yeah, yeah, sometimes you need a little bit of a prod. And then her baby, I mean then she got pregnant soon after, right?

01:04:53 Lief: No.

01:04:54 Q: A couple years later.

01:04:56 Lief: A couple years.

01:04:58 Q: Yeah. But—okay, so how do you consider yourself as a woman? And how has that—again, this kind of goes back to that generic question. How do you think that's changed since you were, I don't know, eighteen?

01:05:11 Lief: I'm sixty-six! Of course I've changed. I've got—excuse me, it's not a meaningful question to me.

01:05:23 Q: No, no, I agree. I agree, that's fine, of course you've changed.

01:05:26 Lief: You know the difference between eighteen and sixty-six—sixty-six doesn't seem real though, and eighteen does. I was a kid!

01:05:35 Q: Yeah, we all were.

01:05:37 Lief: We all were kids, we thought we were grown-ups, but we were kids. And you know I'm not kid anymore.

01:05:48 Q: So do you feel that you probably were a model for your own daughter—?

01:05:52 Lief: Yes.

01:05:53 Q: —even though we're dealing with a totally different generation—to take chances and to go into her field?

01:05:54 Lief: Yes.

01:05:55 Q: What about law itself though, and law school—?

01:06:00 Lief: Law school too.

01:06:01 Q: You were one of the pacesetters in that class at NYU, I am assuming. I mean pacesetters in terms of being one of the first classes that had a significant number of women, right, or was that already starting to change?

01:06:15 Lief: We were twenty-five percent, which was a lot.

01:06:17 Q: Okay, that's still—yeah—

01:06:19 Lief: Well, it was a lot. Yeah, I'd say we were one of the first but not the first. Because NYU was way ahead of lots of others. Columbia, I think, had eleven percent.

01:06:35 Q: Oh, dear, good thing you avoided Columbia (laughs).

01:06:37 Lief: I got in but I didn't want to go.

01:06:41 Q: Yeah. Yeah, um your year at Yale, you said it was very different obviously than Barnard, were there—it was just beginning to be coed.

01:06:54 Lief: It was the first year that they had graduation of—

01:06:56 Q: Oh, okay, it was the first graduation for a coed class, okay. And at that point like how many women were there out of—?

01:07:06 Lief: There were quite a few. And I was impressed by how the women were integrated into the colleges. I thought it was going quite well.

01:07:19 Q: Good. And you were all in separate dorms or where were you living at that point?

01:07:21 Lief: No, I was living in an apartment.

Q 01:07:22 : You were in an apartment of course, because you were married. Okay, sometimes I ask questions without remembering what I just asked, sorry (laughs). Okay, I guess another area is—

01:07:32 Lief: A whole other area you're going into?

01:07:35 Q: One other area here, or maybe two more, and that is religion or spirituality. You know you started with your statement about your father, and obviously involved as a rabbi with all sorts of social causes.

01:07:46 Lief: Yeah, I went to Hebrew school, and after my mother died he started a minyan in Huntington, and I went with him every morning to that. That became a social club for the senior citizens, and he would bring cake and cookies, and schnapps, you know, (laughing) the old men's club. And at Barnard I did not go to Hillel, and that's one of my things I wish I had done. And now, we go out to the beach to see my son every week, so I'm not here to go to services, I belong to B'nai Jeshurun, which is a great progressive, fabulous synagogue.

01:08:43 Q: And that's right around here?

01:07:45 Lief: Yes, it's right around the corner. And I go, you know, on the High Holy Days, and that's about it. But I do make the Seders and I do—you know it's a little bit of stuff. And my daughter does less than that.

01:09:08 Q: Do you think your granddaughter will be raised with the Jewish faith?

01:09:15 Lief: I don't know, I mean they're both Jewish, so I would assume so. I mean they come to the Seders, they light candles for Hanukah, and we bought her books for Passover and Hanukah, and she really knows a lot of the words and stuff. And I'm going to take her on Yom Kipper to services, because they have not joined anywhere, and we used to have them come up here, but they don't want to.

01:09:42 Q: Good, okay. All right. We talked about meeting your spouse, so you met your first husband through—?

01:09:53 Lief: When I was in high school, one of those aunts in my family who was like a surrogate mother, her husband was a doctor at a camp, a very religious camp. And I came to take care of their youngest daughter. And he was there as a camp counselor.

01:10:18 Q: Okay, so it went from there. So you knew him all through college, I mean undergraduate.

01:10:22 Lief: Yeah, we dated the first year, and then we broke up sophomore year, until the middle of junior year, and he wrote me, and we saw each other again.

01:10:31 Q: Ah, and then moved quickly after that, apparently (laughs).

01:10:33 Lief: Way too quickly.

01:10:39 Q: Oh, goodness, I don't know why we all married so young. I mean mine lasted a long time, but it was never quite right.

01:10:45 Lief: How long was yours?

01:10:46 Q: Thirty years.

01:10:48 Lief: And it was never quite right, and it lasted thirty years? Wow!

01:10:50 Q: Well, yeah. (Laughs) We won't go through that. Okay, and when did you know it was time to leave him?

01:10:59 Lief: Oh yes.

01:11:00 Q: It was obvious? So you then went to—

01:11:02 Lief: No, I was in law school.

01:11:05 Q: You were already in law school, okay.

01:11:07 Lief: I was in the third year. But he was great when my father died.

01:11:11 Q: So he's not the father of these children.

01:11:11 Lief: Oh, no.

01:11:13 Q: No, no, of course not.

01:11:14 Lief: I haven't seen him, in, I don't know, thirty years. He was great when my father died. He was fabulous, and if I hadn't had him there it would have been much harder.

01:11:29 Q: So what are you looking forward to in the future? What are you hoping will happen?

01:11:33 Lief: I stay healthy. Michael stays healthy. My daughter has another child (laughs).

01:11:42 Q: Oh, my!

01:11:44 Lief: Well, you were asking me. I don't know. I mean I want my kids to be happy. And you know I want things to change politically, but we'll see. And I don't know how long I'm going to continue to work, but I'm not thinking of leaving now. So I don't know. But I work twenty hours a week, is what my contract says, so it gives me lots of flexibility to take care of my granddaughter, or to go out to the beach, or to go to a movie or to go to a museum, or read a book.

01:12:22 Q: Yeah, well—you should also write your book. I tell everyone I interview, “Write your book! You all have interesting lives” (Laughs)

01:12:29 Lief: I know.

01:12:31 Q: Seriously. So is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't included here? We've skipped around quite a bit, you gave a very good fluent introduction here.

01:12:43 Lief: I find that the way this project started was fascinating. Katherine, who started it, was only at Barnard for one year. Talk about being influenced by Barnard. And so I didn't—I'm still not sure if there's anything that I could have said that's going to add anything to this documentary, but I couldn't say no to her.

01:13:11 Q: Yeah. Yeah, I think we're all in that boat. She's very persuasive. In fact, I have to share that when she interviewed me I had nothing to say, and it lasted over four hours. (Laughs) It was like, “Wait what did you do?” (Laughs) She's very persuasive. So there was much that didn't need to be said in that case. Okay, um, let me think if there's anything else. So anything that you want to say specifically, going back to '68, about your involvement in that particular strike? Because the original documentary did focus on that and people's experience. So you've sort of gone around and told me a little bit about it.

01:13:54 Lief: You know I don't remember a lot of the details. And I feel old about that, but you know that's the way I am. But it certainly touched me deeply.

01:14:16 Q: And you said also you were involved in the marches on Washington.

01:14:18 Lief: Yes.

01:14:19 Q: So you were part of the social movement when it was the whole anti-war thing. Were you ever arrested there, or—?

01:14:26 Lief: No. Had I been at a different part of the march I probably would have been arrested. [John N.] Mitchell, Nixon's Attorney General, but one of the times he just started arresting everybody. But I was in back, so. I'm not—I'm quite glad I didn't have to deal with that.

01:14:48 Q: You're quite what?

01:14:50 Lief: Glad I didn't have to deal with being arrested.

01:14:52 Q: Oh, no, yeah. It was probably smart. Although Barnard took pretty good care of everybody.

01:14:58 Lief: Yes, they did.

01:14:59 Q: Okay, well, I know that you can go in more detail about almost any part of your life, so if you want to—if there's something else on your mind we'd love to have you tell it.

01:15:14 Lief: I think we're done.

01:15:15 Q: Yeah, I think we covered quite a bit. You were very good. Okay, thanks.

[END OF SESSION]

Barnard College Class of 1971 Oral History Project Session: 2

Interviewee: Beth Lief

Location: New York City

Interviewer: Frances Garrett Connell

Date: August 19, 2015

01:15:26 Q: This is an interview, taking place with Beth Lief. This is our second part. We forgot a few things previously. This is for the Barnard College Voices Oral History Project. Again, it's Frances Connell, in New York City and the date is August 19, 2015. Okay. Beth, thanks for letting me come back. And we'll start with just a couple things we missed last time. You were going to tell me a little bit about your travels, which I think has been a part of your life as well.

01:15:54 Lief: It has been. Actually, when I was a sophomore at Barnard I did ten weeks in Europe with someone who was in our class, Mimi Haines. Then, didn't do a lot of travel until I got married. We started with Machu Picchu and Galapagos. It was fabulous. And then we've been all over, three times to South America, Patagonia and the desert in Chile, and the Machu Picchu trip, and we went to Argentina, also. And we've also done a lot of traveling in Asia—China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and India. They're just fabulous trips. We just came back from Spain. We did southern Spain. And really focused on the architecture and the history there. And I find once you have been to a place you can really understand when you are reading about it, and when you meet people who come from that country. I feel I understand it more. We just love to travel.

01:17:27 Q: What would you say some of your highlights have been when you travel? Do you usually go with a tour, or just the two of you figure out—?

01:17:33 Lief: We don't usually do just the two of us. We've done just four of us. Or we've gone on tours that have—like Cuba. I forgot Cuba. Cuba was phenomenal. We went with a Dartmouth College tour and we had lectures every single morning, and I just felt like, I knew nothing about Cuba, except, you know. And that was just four months before the change. So we're one of the ones who saw it before. That was a highlight. That was a highlight. Cambodia was. Michael and I, my husband and I really read a lot about the Khmer Rouge, and to see the devastation was horrific, but it was important to witness. And then going to Angkor What was phenomenal, also. That was another one that was fabulous. Machu Picchu.

01:18:49 Q: Now when you went to—how did you feel traveling as an American in some of these places, particularly in Cambodia (laughs), especially Southeast Asia?

01:18:55 Lief: I thought I'd feel odd, but the people in Vietnam treated us wonderfully. Wonderfully. And we could ask questions. There was only one museum in Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, that was very anti-American. That was the one place. And that was it. And I've never—have I ever felt any anti-American—? Oh, we've been to Egypt too. I forgot about that.

01:19:33 Q: Egypt as well, okay.

01:19:35 Lief: I know I've left out—because we travel once a year and sometimes two. I don't remember really—

01:19:52 Q: I was in Vietnam a couple years back and I do remember that museum. It was petty devastating. Cambodia I didn't make it to. But, I would be interested—

01:20:03 Lief: Do you feel the same way about the Vietnamese people?

01:20:06 Q: Oh, they were incredibly lovely.

01:20:08 Lief: I thought they were so entrepreneurial.

01:20:11 Q: Yes, there was something going on everywhere.

01:20:14 Lief: Everywhere.

01:20:15 Q: Definitely. I remember our tour guide—he was this orphaned son of—well, he was the son of a Viet Cong. I would have thought he would have been embittered, but he said, “No, one of my favorite this was leading tours of [U.S.] service men who come back, who want to have that closure.” So, it was great.

01:20:42 Q: South America, Patagonia. That's almost legendary. What did you do there? Were you hiking? I'm trying to think Patagonia.

01:20:45 Lief: Yes. We love to go hiking. And we also go out to Sedona, Arizona two or three times a year. We play golf and we hike. We really love to hike. We're pretty good at it. Now,

everyday—well, five days a week, about, I walk four miles. So I love to be out there and do the hiking. A little break. And there was hiking in the desert as well.

01:21:24 Q: So hiking in the desert, you have to do different things for than in the mountains. Do you have a preference for one or the other as a hiker?

01:21:28 Lief: I guess the mountains, thing that have variation in height.

01:21:27 Q: Yeah, because you have the vistas, obviously. Right, okay. Then you also mentioned that you go with a foursome. Is this with your daughter and husband?

01:21:38 Lief: No, we just have a few sets of friends that we love to travel with.

01:21:44 Q: That's important too. Very good. Okay. And did you say where you would like to go next, having come from the south of Spain?

01:21:54 Lief: We're pretty planned on it. Next May we're going to Norway, and then on a cruise to Copenhagen, Helsinki, St. Petersburg, and the Ukraine.

01:22:05 Q: That's quite a lot of territory to cover.

01:22:09 Lief: I know but it's a cruise. We were going to stay in Russia, but we decided, given the way Russia is right now, it was not a good thing to do.

01:22:18 Q: Now Ukraine, as well. That sounds a bit daring.

01:22:24 Lief: There's one town—they're sort of like the Provence, old cities on hills, and that's where we're going to go.

01:22:32 Q: Hopefully, it'll be safe and you'll get to see what you want to.

01:22:37 Lief: If it's not, I assume that we won't go there.

01:22:40 Q: Exactly.

01:22:41 Lief: I mean, I've never felt unsafe. There were times in Myanmar when you really saw the army there, and in Egypt we were there after what happened in the Valley of the Kings when all of the—but just I didn't think it would happen to us.

01:23:17 Q: I was in Burma, Myanmar, way back in the late '70s. I'm sure there is no comparison.

I hear a lot about the military. Was the—?

01:23:20 Lief: No, we were there, I want say twelve years ago, fifteen years ago.

01:23:26 Q: Before—

01:23:27 Lief: Before The Lady [Aung San Suu Kyi] was—the Lady was under house arrest when we were there.

01:23:32 Q: That's another country that has turned strange, in terms of persecuting its minorities.

01:23:39 Lief: Oh, it's awful.

01:23:46 Q: Okay. Good. So another area that you had mentioned was some of the many boards which you have served on. Would you like to share a little about that?

01:23:52 Lief: Sure. They've all been education oriented. Or disability oriented. I was on the board of United Cerebral Palsy, New York City. And then after that my husband came on he board with me, and then he became the National President. And I think some boards really work well together, and other boards don't, some boards have a lot of say in what happens, others don't. I don't—I mean, I don't think I did anything phenomenal there, but I supported the CEO, which is the most important thing to do ad a board member. I was on the Bank Street School of Education Board for sixteen years. And that was—I think I actually thought it was important to be on that board. The then president wanted me to get on the board because of my then expertise in special education. But I did do a lot of work with what they were doing to train teachers and principals. And I left because I think it's—people should not stay on Boards forever.

And also, at that point, I was asked by two young, um, graduates at Bank Street, who were just about to start a, uh, charter school, wanted me to be on the board. And I said to myself, I think I

could really be helpful there in a way that you can't in a large, established institution. And that's the Community Roots Charter School. And I've been on that board, starting now on the eleventh, ten years, because it's celebrating its tenth anniversary. And I head the education committee there. So I do work hard there, but I love it.

01:25:59 Q: And that, you said, was in Brooklyn.

01:26:00 Lief: Yes. It's in Fort Greene. And it wanted to be progressive but also, importantly, to be diverse, because the schools in the city are by and large segregated. Mostly all white, mostly Latino, or mostly all black. This school gives—it's sitting on a street that's surrounded by projects and then very pretty homes right beyond that. We give forty percent of the, uh, kindergarten seats to students in the projects.

01:26:40 Q: Forty percent, okay.

01:26:41 Lief: And so, at a minimum, forty percent of the class is African American. It's more than that, because the rest—they can also get in. Um, but there's a nice mix of other students. Um, and the education they can get in that kind of a situation is unlike the education I had, or the education my daughter had. Um, and it's fabulous. They really get to—and, uh, they do, um—I should not talk too long about Community Roots, but I'm very proud of it. Um, in the fifth grade, they do a project in groups of four children where they interview four of the adults in the class, and the stories are amazing, you know.

01:27:40 Q: These are their own family, or—?

01:27:42 Lief: They're other people's families.

01:27:44 Q: Oh, other people families. Okay.

01:27:45 Lief: And they're from all over the world, and it's really an amazing project to watch.

01:27:53 Q: Now, is there a large bi-lingual component there as well, or no?

01:27:56 Lief: No. No. Um, we'd want it if we could get it, but there aren't many Latinos who live nearby.

01:28:03 Q: So, the kids are entering speaking relatively good English, even though they're from all over the world, or—?

01:28:09 Lief: Um, most are.

01:28:13 Q: Yeah.

01:28:14 Lief: We have a high—we have about twenty percent special education.

01:28:18 Q: And it's a—oh, okay. That as well, yes. Okay. Um, and that is, uh—yeah, I'm just

trying to picture where you said it was. Right. In terms of the curriculum, is it—everyone has—I mean, everyone is able to try to do a fairly high level curriculum? Or is it—?

01:28:38 Lief: Yes.

01:28:39 Q: ‘Cause I know your standards have always been high, and that’s something you’ve pushed across the classes, across the ages.

01:28:42 Lief: Yes.

01:28:43 Q: Yeah.

01:28:44 Lief: Um, and when they started the middle school—it’s hard to start a middle school, and it had some bumps. But now it’s doing pretty well.

01:28:55 Q: And the school goes up to which grade?

01:28:56 Lief: Eight.

01:28:57 Q: Okay.

01:28:58 Lief: K [kindergarten] through eight.

01:28:59 Q: K through eight. Okay. So, it's the old fashioned (laugh)—all right. And, um, that's pretty significant. And you'll stay with that, I take it, for a while?

01:29:10 Lief: I think so. But again, I've been there for ten years, and that's a long time. Um, but my granddaughter lives in the neighborhood. I would love her to go there (laugh). But there's nothing I can do for that, because you have to get in by lottery.

01:29:26 Q: Yeah. That was my next question. How do the kids actually get admitted?

01:29:30 Lief: They get admitted by lottery. The only exceptions are siblings, and now, we can get fifteen percent to be children of the teachers, which is great. That was not allowed until this year. There had to be a change in the law.

01:29:46 Q: Now, the teachers don't actually live there, though, do they?

01:29:49 Lief: No, but that's—but they have little kids, and for them to teach and run back to deal with their children—

01:29:54 Q: Perfect.

01:29:55 Lief: —so you—it really helps to keep teachers in the school. Um, so—and that'll be good. And those are two of the boards. And then, um, I'm still on the board of New Visions and—
New Visions for Public Schools, which I had started. I was president for eleven years. And then,

I've been on other boards but—

01:30:23 Q: I'm sure they've (laugh) tried to get you as many places as they could. Um, I'm particularly—I also noticed there was something called the Bard [High School] Early College?

01:30:31 Lief: Oh, yes.

01:30:32 Q: Is that something you've been involved with this whole—?

01:30:33 Lief: Yes. I'm on the advisory board of Bard Early College. Early college high schools have a, um—a mandate in their charter to—junior and senior year, to start doing college courses. And some of them, like Bard, tries to get them to get an associate's degree at the end of four years. Some don't. I mean, some other types of early college schools don't have that as the goal. They just have to get them a number of courses. But Bard really does want to get the kids to have, um, A.A.s or A.S.s. And they're now—

01:31:22 Q: And that's in lieu of a high school diploma. So, they go directly—

01:31:24 Lief: It's with a high school diploma.

01:31:26 Q: They get the diploma plus the A.A. Okay. And so they—essentially, then, two years of college in the course of what would have been four years of high school?

01:31:33 Lief: Correct.

01:31:34 Q: Okay. And you started to say, the Bard was—?

01:31:36 Lief: And there are only two of them in the city. One's in Newark, another one's in Newark. One's in Baltimore, and one's in, uh, Cleveland. And that's where we are at the moment. And then, we're also in New Orleans and in Harlem with—not whole school—not the kind of school that we know that a student comes in, but where students come to take these kinds of college courses.

And what they do is—it really is about infusing writing into all the subjects. And they have a Socratic method—a Socratic course where the kids sit there and really go at it, and start—they really get to be verbal about intellectual, um, subjects. And they do wonderful work. I forgot about that one.

01:32:37 Q: Exciting. Um, I mean, what do you generally feel about the high school curriculum? I know there's been a lot of criticism over the years that maybe there's too much playing around, and that maybe they don't really—a really able student doesn't need four years. That he or she is ready to move on by age sixteen, or something.

01:33:00 Lief: I don't think there's any need to rush people through, 'cause I don't know about how you felt. I was too young to really take advantage the way I could take it now. And so, I don't think to start at sixteen is not a goal. The goal is to give them four years rich learning.

01:33:24 Q: Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Um, I know that one of the—a couple of other little random questions here. And one is that I know you've done a lot of work with leadership, with training of teachers and principals and everyone across the board. Do you have anything you can say about that in terms of, um, techniques that have been successful, or areas where you know that you've really made a difference?

01:33:47 Lief: I don't know whether I made a difference.

01:33:50 Q: Or that take—about educating. Yeah.

01:33:52 Lief: But I do think—take people who want to become leaders, you should put them in—they should learn to be a leader in the context.

01:33:59 Q: Okay.

01:34:00 Lief: And so, an AP, an assistant principal, is an important role for somebody who's going to become a principal. And they should be with a great principal, and then—they work together to teach the AP, so that they can learn it. And that's—and then, the other thing is to bring people together to learn together—community as practice is a really important way to learn.

01:34:34 Q: Community as practice.

01:34:35 Lief: Yeah.

01:34:36 Q: Now, is this something that you feel is embedded within the school system at this point?

01:34:37 Lief: No.

01:34:38 Q: Or, not at all. That's something you're obviously working on. Or, your groups have worked on.

01:34:42 Lief: No, I mean, there are groups out there that are doing that, and they—there is a principal's institute that's affiliated with the school system. Um, no. When they're, um, vacancies in schools, there's not always a lot of great principals, candidates, to be there. It's also an extremely hard job. Extremely hard. And it gets harder and harder, because they don't have enough support, and people around them to help them do the gazillion things they have to do. So, that's—and now, also, presidents of colleges. It's the same issue.

01:35:41 Q: Have the what? Same issues?

01:35:42 Lief: Same issues about, we have to find somebody who's really good. It's a very hard job, particularly the public ones.

01:35:51Q: Because of the politics or the finances of it?

01:35:54 Lief: Politics, finance, and how hard it is in community colleges to get the students to be retained and to graduate.

01:36:03 Q: Oh. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You mentioned before that the statistic was—

01:36:06 Lief: And you have to continually be up in the research on what looks like what's possible to work. And then, try it. And lots of folks don't do that.

01:36:23 Q: Right. Right. Okay. Um, I know you're also an advocate, obviously, of the small scale school and the, uh—how successful have you been in moving that model forward in your various boards and other—?

01:36:41 Lief: It's not about me doing it.

01:36:43 Q: Well, no. I'm sorry. When I say "you," I'm talking about your projects. Yeah.

01:36:46 Lief: What has happened? Sure. Well, we had started with thirty-six schools and when, um, [Michael R.] Bloomberg came in, they said they wanted two hundred. And we did it.

01:36:55 Q: You did it. Yeah. So, it's just—

01:36:57 Lief: But now, the current chancellor doesn't like small schools. And I don't think she

doesn't like them. I think she doesn't like them because her predecessor did. And, you know, they do much better for most of the kids. And there's lots of research out there about that.

01:37:15 Q: Good. Good. Yeah. Okay. Um, anything else you would like to add about, uh, your work on a personal and a professional level on special education?

01:37:27 Lief: Not about my work. I didn't, you know—was maybe four years, it was really my focus, and then it wasn't after that. There's so much needs to be done. It's like, you can talk about community colleges. It's, like, the same thing. Um, and the current, um, chancellor said the right thing. You can't just get a degree in special ed. The difference between an emotional handicap and autism is enormous. I'm just taking two. I could give you two of many others. Um, you know, there was just an article yesterday, I guess, about selective mutism.

01:38:24 Q: I'm sorry. What?

01:38:25 Lief: Selective mutism in children who don't talk. And you need to get specialized. And we've got to create incentives for teachers to get those kinds of specialties.

01:38:40 Q: Incentives meaning better pay for that kind of work?

01:38:43 Lief: Better paying or—

01:38:44 Q: More support.

01:38:45 Lief: —or more support.

01:38:47 Q: Yeah. So, I mean, I haven't been in public education in a long time. So, when you say more support, are you saying that you might put a novice teacher in a position like that with a special ed class?

01:39:04 Lief: Without somebody who comes in all the time to help them out.

01:39:07 Q: Without a mentor.

01:39:08 Lief: Whether they have a mentor, have an aide. You know, have access to the right books or the right materials.

01:39:17 Q: Now, are special kids mainstream now? Or are they in special classes?

01:39:20 Lief: Yes.

01:39:21 Q: That's pretty much universal everywhere?

01:39:22 Lief: Not universal, because some kids can't.

01:39:24 Q: Well, yeah.

01:39:25 Lief: But it's—yes, it's pretty much ninety plus percent.

01:39:30 Q: And what is your feeling on that? Is that the right thing to be doing, or—?

01:39:32 Lief: If the teachers are trained to take those kids and teach them.

01:39:42 Q: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I wonder it is.

01:39:45 Lief: Our charter school, Community Roots, we have two teachers in every classroom. One of them is certified as special ed. So, they work together.

01:40:01 Q: And then, a child with extreme needs would also have someone with him correct who's his own personal—?

01:40:06 Lief: Yes a paraprofessional.

01:40:08 Q: Yeah. Um, it's challenging. Challenging. Okay. Um, I know you have, uh, things to do, and I'm not going to keep you much longer, but, um—

01:40:19 Lief: I'm not that interesting. It's okay (laugh).

01:40:22 Q: No. No. No. You are. You are. No, I actually—I ran across another interview

someone had done, and I realized, “Oh my gosh—” Um, just, I know you had several mentors that you’ve mentioned before. Um, what was it like working with someone like [Jack] Greenberg in the NAACP and—

01:40:40 Lief: I don’t know how to answer—like I said, it was fabulous.

01:40:42 Q: But I mean, you were really at the grassroots there. It’s just amazing. Things were just beginning. Yeah.

01:40:46 Lief: I was just beginning. I was two years out of law school, and he treated me—he gave me assignments as if I had been there for ten years and I was, you know, astonishingly successful. He assumed everyone would be successful, and I think that’s an important assumption one should have in all work places. Um, and he was a great raconteur, which was a wonderful way he used to teach on how to litigate. And a great sense of humor. And a great leader. He was fabulous to work with and for.

01:41:31 Q: Yeah. Yeah. And then, you went on to do—you had mentioned previously the work with, uh, Kansas City integration.

01:41:39 Lief: That was while I was there.

01:41:41 Q: That was while you were there. Right.

01:41:42 Lief: I litigated the Kansas City school desegregation case. What do you want to know?

01:41:47 Q: No. I mean, I'm not an expert on laws. So, I couldn't really even ask the right question, but, uh—I did notice you had also done something with the Koch administration in terms of closing the city hospitals. What was the eventual outcome of that? Sounds like every hospital I know of has been closed (laughs).

01:42:01 Lief: Sydenham [Hospital] was closed. And then we settled, and they did not close all the others. They were going to close half of the hospitals.

01:42:10 Q: Okay. And these, of course, serving in poor neighborhoods mostly, or—?

01:42:12 Lief: Yeah. Metropolitan yeah. I mean they're all—

01:42:16 Q: Well, consolidation is the word (laugh). I heard they were just closing Beth Israel.

01:42:24 Lief: That was a long time ago. That was thirty-five years ago.

01:42:28 Q: But yeah, you saved some. That's good. Okay, um, could we go back just a second to your father? Um, and you had the—I just, I feel this is a nice way to, kind of, end, is that—you spoke so much about him and his influence and his work going around with people who were so needy, as a rabbi, and working with the legal aide. Um, do you have any specific memories of—as you were a young child or later—of places you went with him, and things you observed and

thought?

01:43:03 Lief: I used to go to the hospital with him to the veteran's administration. And if it was a Jewish holiday, we were going to, um, decorate the chapel. I did that with him, and there were also some of the patients who did it with us. And a number of the patients used to come over to our house. And I got to know quite a few of them, and I also got to know the other chaplains. Um, in fact, it was a—it was a church synagogue that was one building, and it had a platform that was on a rotation that had three—there was Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. There was no Muslims at that point (laugh).

01:43:45 Q: At that point. Yeah.

01:43:46 Lief: And, um—and that was—I wouldn't have ever met a priest other than that. And I really got to know the priest, and that was—

01:43:56 Q: I hope he was a good one.

01:43:58 Lief: Yeah. Yeah, he was. Um, dad treated everybody with such respect.

01:44:09 Q: Yeah. Which you incorporated in your life as well.

01:44:11 Lief: I try.

01:44:12 Q: You try. Good. Well, good. Okay. Um, I mean, I'd love to hear more stories, but I don't want to, you know, put you on the spot if you don't want to say any more, but—this is helpful (laughs).

01:44:25 Lief: I'm glad.

01:44:27 Q: Yeah. Good. Okay. Well, thank you, Beth.

01:44:29 Lief: Okay. Thank you.

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