

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Mary J. Major

2014

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Mary J. Major conducted by Michelle Patrick and Robert Solomon on March 6, 2011. 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 Class of 1971 Oral History Collection

Session One

Interviewee: Mary J. Major

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Michelle Patrick and Robert  
Solomon

Date: March 6, 2011

Q: I'm Michelle Patrick, Barnard College '71, and I'm sitting with Mary [Mitzi] J. Major, class of '71. And the first thing I want to know—This is March 6, 2011. Could you just describe your parents, your upbringing, your family background.

Major: I grew up in Connecticut; Scotland, Connecticut, which is very rural. Went to a small grade school. We had twelve kids in my graduating class. Had two brothers. My dad was a surgeon. I went off to private school at Abbot Academy and came to Barnard.

Q: Why did you go to boarding school?

Major: There weren't too many good schools in the area, and my parents thought it would be better. So all of us went to boarding school. One brother went to [Phillips Academy] Andover. One brother went to The Governor's Academy [formerly Governor Dummer Academy].

Q: How many siblings?

Major: Two brothers.

Q: And where do you fall, ordinarily?

Major: I'm the youngest. We're all about a year apart.

Q: Your father was a country doctor?

Major: He was a surgeon. He trained at Yale [University], and then just gravitated to Scotland because that's not far from Yale. It's a beautiful place, we lived on a farm, had an old house. New England.

Q: I'm imagining it wasn't much in the way of racial or ethnic diversity in your background.

Major: No, there was not.

Q: And not at Abbot either?

Major: No, there wasn't.

Q: Were you happy about going to boarding school?

Major: I never thought about anything else. It was pretty much, my brothers had gone the years before me, so I expected to go. And yes, I was happy. I looked at all the schools and sort of picked one. Was I happy the first year there? No, no one's happy at thirteen leaving home.

Q: So you were homesick there?

Major: Yes, very.

Q: And you made friends?

Major: I made great friends, and that was a wonderful experience. It really opened my eyes. I liked being in an all-girls school. I think it made it a lot easier—and a lot—

Q: And the friends that you made?

Major: The friends I made, I have kept up with a number of them, and some of them went to Barnard with me.

Q: Why Barnard?

Major: I wanted a big city after growing up in the country, and Abbot, of course, is in the country as well, although we got to Boston. So I applied to NYU [New York University] and Barnard, and of course preferred Barnard.

Q: Your parents. Did they have political leanings?

Major: Oh yes. My dad was a Republican. He was a surgeon, so, most doctors at that time—

[Interruption]

Q: So, your parents were republicans.

Major: My parents were republicans. They were southern, as well. Both my parents were. My mom was from Tennessee, and my dad was from Alabama.

Q: How did they manage to find themselves—

Major: He had trained at Vanderbilt, done his medical school at Vanderbilt, so then he went to do his residency up at Yale.

Q: Now, at that time, the Republican party was a little more diverse than it is now; they were either your Rockefeller republicans or your Goldwater republicans—

Major: I don't know that they were Goldwater republicans. They were Nixon republicans.

Q: A lot of people were Nixon supporters.

Major: I actually had a letter from Nixon. I wrote him. When I was young, I thought, “Oh, my parents like this guy.” I don’t know where the letter is.

Q: What did you write, do you remember?

Major: I just wrote and told him I was happy he got elected.

Q: As vice president?

Major: Imagine. Yes.

Q: I would imagine you were somewhat less happy the second—[laughs]. So, that first September day at Barnard when you were going through the Barnard gates with your suitcases and your parents, who were you, and what did you bring with you? And I mean that by your expectations, academically, socially, romantically, mementos, teddy bears, clothes—what was your whole—what did you pack?



Major: I'll tell you what I packed. I was pregnant when I walked into Barnard. I don't think I knew it quite yet. So, the first thing I had to do was take care of that. So, that was my first three months, gone. So, I didn't do too well at first. I was sick. I remember, I had to leave the first class. It was philosophy. I had to leave it because I was nauseated.

Q: So that takes care of a question that's way down on the list, which is, did you or anyone you knew have to endure an illegal abortion? First of all, at what point did you realize you were pregnant?

Major: You know, to tell you the truth, I can't remember, but it must have been within a short period of time, probably within a month. I realized I was pregnant, and yes, I had to—we had met some Columbia guys who were a little bit older, and one of them helped me financially to pay for the abortion. Which we had, and I can't even remember who it was, another girl that I was friends with was pregnant, or thought she was pregnant, and we both went and had these abortions together at a hotel. It turned out she wasn't pregnant, that's what the physician told her.

Q: It was a physician?

Major: Yes, it was a physician. I was. So that was that. And then, that was just sort of a depressing start.

Q: How scary was the cloak and dagger involved in finding—

Major: It wasn't because I knew an upperclassman, and she helped me. I think that was kind of passed down. That was the usual situation.

Q: If you'd had your druthers, would you have preferred to marry the person and have the baby?

Major: Absolutely not. This was the absolute right thing for me, and in fact, after that, I made a point of—remember Bill Baird? He was one of the first pro-abortion people out there, and I found him and marched with him on his marches. It was one of the biggest things I did, probably in my freshman year.

Q: Were you in love?

Major: No.

Q: So, it was a casual relationship?

Major: No, this was a relationship that had started when I was in high school obviously. It was with an older person, he was older. He was three years older than I was, and he was obviously much more advanced than I was. He was from my home town, but it was over when I went to Barnard.

Q: So I can imagine it must have been rather difficult to concentrate on getting acclimated, getting—

Major: Well, there was all sorts of drama. My drama wasn't the least. Everybody was dramatic.

Q: Well, give me an example.

Major: Maybe I shouldn't name names.

Q: You don't have to name names.

Major: Okay. A close friend tried to commit suicide. It was a very immature—

Q: In the first few months?

Major: Yes, in the first few months. I think it was breaking up with somebody or something like that, or just depression being a part of it. I can't even remember—just depression.

Q: Despair.

Major: And she came into my—I remember she came into my bedroom. I was on the top bunk. She had taken all sorts of aspirin and that—and then had made an attempt to slit her wrists, which was a very minor attempt, but we ended up in the emergency room at St Luke's [-Roosevelt Hospital Center] and that whole dramatic time. Everyone was acting out—

Q: Other dramas?

Major: Well, there was drugs and things like that.

Q: Even in the first three months?

Major: Probably, yes. When you take a bunch of girls from boarding school and put them in New York City, and it's a pretty—people are going to explore the limits, I think.

Q: Do you want to expand on that? Do you want to talk about what kind of drugs people took and—

Major: I think we were just smoking pot and hash at that point. I never did anything more exciting. Well, we dropped acid, I guess. But nobody ever shot anything up, and I never snorted anything. But we were doing the best we possibly could to be as wild as we possibly could.

Q: From the start.

Major: Yes, I think so.

Q: Would you say that you were, in terms of the boarding school girls, a kind of leader of the pack?

Major: No.

Q: No?

Major: No, I was not the leader of the pack.

Q: No, not your yourself, but the boarding school girls who had been away from home for already four years. Would you say that that contingent was sort of the leader of the pack in terms of experimenting?

Major: Yes, I think that we probably felt we'd already been independent. Of course, we weren't independent at Abbot, but we thought we were. We'd been away from our home at least for four years. So we were a little bit ahead of kids coming straight out of high school and living with their parents, of course.

Q: Did you feel that you were maybe hipper than most?

Major: Well, you always hope you're hipper.

Q: But did you? There are times when you feel—

Major: No, there were some very sophisticated girls. I call them girls still. But there were some very sophisticated people at Barnard. I don't think we thought we were better than anybody. I know I didn't.

Q: No, I don't mean better. I mean a little bit more advanced.

Major: I think so. There certainly were others who were more advanced than me.

Q: Do you remember the first friend that you made?

Major: Yes, my roommate. Who was a fascinating person. Her name was Lacey Edwards, and she was the daughter of an Episcopal priest. Lacey and I got on really well. Even though I'd come sort of with an entourage of three or four other people from Abbot, she was—it was great living with her because I wasn't just in my old group.

Q: What was she like?

Major: Lacey turned out to be an artist. She was a very sensitive person. She had another woman who was a very close friend, and I'm not sure whether they had a lesbian relationship, but I think it quite possible. Lacey, I think, was a very sensitive and brilliant artist. Unfortunately developed eczema on her hands from all the materials she worked with in art, and she was sort of tortured. I don't know—after that first year we sort of went our own ways.

Q: So you don't know whether the situation was ever solved.

Major: No, I don't. I don't know whether it was because of anxiety, which it may have been. To try to start to be an artist. But Lacey was a lovely person.

Q: You're mentioning that she may have been gay. Down on my list is, at what point did you become aware of a gay/lesbian community at Barnard/Columbia?

Major: Well, with that probably early on. I'm trying to remember—I'm probably off on this—but something tells me that her other friend was a little bit older and probably was a part of the gay community, but I'm not 100% on that.



Q: Do you remember—

Major: They may just have been very close friends, but my sense is there was a relationship forming.

Q: Your instinct. And you felt that was fine.

Major: Oh, sure.

Q: Despite your very conservative background?

Major: Yes.

Q: When you—I was going to ask you, if you'd been influenced by the sexual revolution, but I suppose the answer to that would have to be yes. You had your first sexual experience in boarding school?

Major: It wasn't in boarding school actually, it was at home in Scotland, Connecticut, but—

Q: The summer before Barnard?

Major: Yes.

Q: Something you wanted to do, or—?

Major: Oh, yes. It was something I was very eager to do. Scotland is right next to [unclear], which is a university. So whenever you're in a small town right attached to a university, you advance rather quickly. Even if you don't live there. We had a lot of friends, and somebody's house would be—the parents would leave for the summer, and all the kids would move into the house. So it was that kind of environment. We were drinking and living wildly. For the time.

Q: When you entered Barnard, what sort of adult life did you envision for yourself? When you thought, "I'll go to Barnard for four years and then—" What was the "and then"?

Major: You know, I don't think I did any of that. The only time I did that was when I was graduating. I was in my fourth year, and that's when I realized, "What are you going to do with art history?" And that's when I decided to be a doctor. I was talking to my father and I said, "You've been happy in your life, I think I'll go into medicine." He said, "Oh hell." [Laughter.]

Q: What did he mean by "Oh hell"?

Major: The tuition.

Q: More tuition.

Major: He didn't really think that, but he was very kind, and he did pay my way. Because I had to do two more years, between Barnard and—I did it at Barnard and Columbia.

Q: So, you had had some success with the sciences? It wasn't just starting from scratch?

Major: No, actually I flunked Biology at Barnard. That was my freshman year, and so that really wreaked havoc on my GPA for sciences. But I was good at science. I was good at math. I wouldn't say I was great.

Q: Well, good enough to get into pre-med program?

Major: Well, the pre-med program was nothing. You just had to tell them that you wanted to do it, and there wasn't anything special about that. You know, at Barnard, you can take classes when you graduate, no matter. At that time anyway, it was—as long as you paid for it, they didn't care. So, it wasn't really a pre-med program. They told me what I needed to do, and I did it.

Q: And apparently you did it quite well?

Major: Well, once you're motivated, I don't think it's very hard to do well. I had nothing else—I had already lived through all my stuff. So it was a lot easier for me to do organic and inorganic and whatever else we needed.

Q: Do you remember what your first big romance was, at Barnard?

Major: Oh, yes. My first big romance was a guy named Lee Eddy who went to Princeton. He'd gone to Andover and he'd been a friend of friends. For some reason these Princeton boys contacted us, and we got an apartment outside of Barnard, and we all shared it. Do you remember that?

Q: I remember an apartment that everybody seemed to go to—

Major: On West 110th.

Q: Yeah, and you had these big dinners.

Major: Well, maybe. We all paid in money, and we just—I don't know how a landlord let us rent this apartment, but we did, and that's where we'd all hang out all the time.

Q: I remember I had my first artichoke there [laughter]. Because somebody cooked a lot. Bruce.

Kaplan. No, he wasn't—

Major: Oh, Bruce Kaplan. Yes. Who dated Candy. Yes, sure.

Q: Yes. So you just had this sort of hang-out place.

Major: Yes. And there were—you know—a few mattresses on the floor. There was a hookah on the floor. And they'd come in from Princeton. It was about three or four guys. Maybe there was three or four of us, I can't remember. We'd just go and sit there and do whatever. Listen to music, get stoned, and have a great time. One of the boys was Lee Eddy. Actually it was when I was pregnant that we developed a relationship, and he was very sweet and very supportive. We were together until I finished Barnard. He was a year ahead of me though, so he left Princeton.

Q: I remember Lee. Was that a big heartbreak, or was it—

Major: Big time. He left, and that was the draft, and all of that. He was a CO [conscientious objector]. And he worked in a hospital in Chicago, which was where he was from, but the relationship just died.

Q: From the distance.

Major: Yes.

Q: That was, again, further down. Did you know anyone who was either drafted or lived in the constant fear of being drafted?

Major: Oh yes. I mean, the person that I became pregnant with, he declared that he was homosexual.

Q: Was that the case?

Major: No. In those days, that was a way to get out of the draft.

Q: And others? Did others not get out of the draft?

Major: I'm trying to think what happened with my brothers. I mean, I remember everybody knew everybody's number. That was a big deal.

Q: Because of the lottery.

Major: Right. I think Lee's was [unclear]. So he became a CO. And I don't know anybody who went to Vietnam. Except my first husband, but I didn't know him then.

Q: Did he come home?

Major: He did.

Q: Was he altered?

Major: I would guess, yes. He was a Lieutenant in the army. Plus, he got—I think—a brain tumor from Agent Orange.

Q: Oh, is he alive?

Major: Yes. Actually, he had great treatment here in New York. He did very well. He's still alive.

Q: Now, when you're at Barnard, did you find that your sphere of people, racially, ethnically, religiously, does it expand, or is it pretty much the same as Abbot?



Major: No, it expanded—well, let me see. I think it expanded. Not as much as—I don't think I made an effort to expand it. So, it wasn't conscious, but it did. I think Barnard was a great place to have a lot of diversity.

Q: You think you just naturally, by osmosis, expand it. Do you remember anybody in particular that had any influence on you?

Major: The person who had the greatest influence was Barbara Novak, but of course she was my professor.

Q: Talk about Barbara Novak.

Major: Well, she was just great. Do you remember her marching back and forth on stage?

Q: I'll never forget. Prowling like a panther.

Major: She was just a commanding presence, a brilliant woman, very outspoken. She pioneered, or at least I thought she did, I still think she did, investigating American art. Early American art. She gave a whole—her interest in the object and how the whole American sensibility was based on the object was fascinating.

Q: She was really very riveting.

Major: I think she was very dynamic.

Q: And of course, she was Jewish from New York City, so that was different for you.

Major: It was, although I did have friends at Abbot who were Jewish so—

Q: Let's see. First, any fabulous, wonderful time that you had at Barnard?

Major: Well, I'd have to say, all those times in that apartment were fabulous and wonderful.

Barnard itself—

Q: I mean, during the whole experience. You can include that.

Major: I found it, well, I found art history just a wonderful thing to do. I mean, you can't sit in classrooms, look at incredible works of art, and analyze them—and going to museums! Which I did all the time. By myself. I developed a whole—I became much more confident and—

Q: At navigating the city by yourself?

Major: Navigating the city, and I met a lot of people just in the city by going. I used to walk. I'd go to the zoo, which was not a very pleasant zoo, but the Central Park Zoo, all the time. I'd go to the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] all the time, the [Museum of] Modern [Art] and walk around and meet people. It was a very free time. I liked that. I would go to the village and just walk around.

Q: During those first few months, and I'm talking about pre-the strike, did you ever experience any culture shock?

Major: Probably. I think the two—Lacey and I got to know two men. One who helped me with the abortion—financed the abortion. We were with those two people. They were older. Maybe

they were third year, fourth year at Columbia. They were very different. It's going to be hard for me to say how, but they were just very different.

Q: Take your time and say how. There's no—

Major: Well, I think they were adults. I certainly didn't think of myself as an adult, and I don't think Lacey thought of herself as an adult. Their worlds were just much more. They knew a lot more than we did. They'd been in New York for three or four years. So, I think we were just sort of kids brought along, and it felt like that.

Q: What adult things did they do that you had never done?

Major: Well, one was a poet. I think he was—I don't want to say his name. I probably shouldn't say it, but I probably don't remember his name. He wrote poetry. He wrote through some publication, and they just seemed connected—

Q: Connected to the adult world?

Major: Yes. And we went to the West End. Which, I don't know, as freshmen did a lot of people go to the West End? And they were sort of carrying on that, did—

Q: It was doing something grown up though. It was, you went, and it was like—

Major: As opposed to—[laughter] So, it was a little different. I think they carried us along. And they were very nice. As I say, it was very helpful. I did pay them back.

Q: Could you characterize the West End?

Major: Well, as anybody—number one, we smoked at that point. Everybody smoked, so it was real smoky, and we'd sit at those big round tables, and somebody would talk.

Q: Sounds kind of—

Major: Philosophical. There was a lot of bullshit.

Q: Sixties coffee-house sensibility.

Major: It felt very grown-up.

Q: Plus the drinks.

Major: And then there were the drinks. True. True.

Q: Do you remember the posture test?

Major: No, but you're making me sit up. [Laughs]

Q: Do you remember the dress code?

Major: You know, I remember the dress code at Abbot, but I don't remember the dress code at Barnard?

Q: Do you remember the teas?

Major: No, I remember those at Abbot but not at Barnard. We had teas?

Q: Well, the first year.

Major: I remember a panty raid.

Q: Oh, tell me about your recollection of the night of the panty raid.

Major: The night of the panty raid, didn't they climb up the walls? They literally climbed up the walls, I thought so, and some guy jumped in the room and got a pair of panties. [Laughs]

Q: And what was your attitude?

Major: Well, I thought it was—I think we thought it was fun. We were a bastion of women over there, and those guys just sort of rammed the gates. Those were the days when you had to sign men in.

Q: Yes, that's just what I was going to ask next. Do you remember the curfews and the parietals?

Major: I sure do. I remember what happened at Plimpton when we all signed guys in protest, and we kept them signed in. They called our parents.

Q: Oh, I don't remember this.

Major: Oh, yes.

Q: Well, first of all, say what you remember of the curfews our first year. And then the difference between that and the second year.

Major: Well, you would never have a guy in your room. But of course, we were in—what was the name of that dorm.

Q: There were three. There was Brooks, Hewitt, Reid.

Major: Brooks, I guess, it was. I don't think we had men in our rooms, did we?



Q: I think we might have been able to have them on Sunday, but the door was open, and it was maybe two to four.

Major: And then you just had to sign them in, so—

Q: It was curfew weekdays, ten o'clock.

Major: It was—coming from Abbott it didn't seem strange, but we were ready to have that lifted.

Q: Did you have an attitude toward the strike? First of all, did you have an understanding of what the strike was about?

Major: Yes, I had some understanding of what the strike was about?

Q: In your words, what would you say it was about?

Major: It did sort of get confused with Vietnam. But the strike was about Columbia taking over the neighborhood and properties. But it did get involved with—and then I remember John Lindsay. Remember John Lindsay? Sitting at his feet with this very handsome guy standing up there? And he was anti-Vietnam, as I recall. What was that called—?

Q: He was very liberal.

Major:—and that was right around that time, or maybe just before. And I think the riots—they were anti-Columbia. Anti-establishment. Anti-taking over the neighborhood and kicking out the poor. And that's what I remember, of course. There was Mark Rudd and all the other stuff.

Q: Did you occupy a building?

Major: I did not.

Q: Did you—what did you do during the strike?

Major: That's what I was referring to earlier. What I did during the strike is I went to Princeton. I stayed with my boyfriend. I would come back, and I would sort of pick up the atmosphere of the strike, but I was not a significant participant.

Q: You got out of there.

Major: I got out of there. I didn't go to classes, and I certainly took advantage of the fact that nobody went to classes. That's probably why I didn't flunk every course freshman year. Because we were given some kind of—

Q: Pass/fails.

Major: Pass/fails.

Q: Did the strike change you in any way?

Major: Again, I think there was a lot of drama, and we all sort of got a little excited about it. We felt very important. And when I was around and in New York, you'd feel very important. But truthfully, I wasn't a very significant participant. I was a spectator I would say.

Q: But you were in sympathy.

Major: Oh, I was in sympathy, yes.

Q: So, by now this is spring of '68, your politics have changed dramatically, yes?

Major: Yes, they probably changed before that. I was rebelling against my parents for quite a while.

Q: When you say quite a while, how long?

Major: Probably since I left home—probably in ninth grade.

Q: What was the first incident or issue?

Major: We had in our house—we had put up a sign in the room where we all sat that said what topics we weren't going to discuss. Politics was on the top. You just couldn't discuss it. So my brothers and I had pretty much left and moved on from their viewpoints from the time we all left home.

Q: Do you remember the first issue upon which you were different from your parents?

Major: It certainly could have been Vietnam. Strongly disagreed. Although I can't remember my parents talking about it much. Racial issues we had separated earlier than that.

Q: So they were not in favor of the Civil Rights Movement?

Major: Well, no, I think they would have said they were in favor of the Civil Rights Movement, but both of my parents were raised in the south, and I think that they were significantly prejudiced. My brothers and I knew that. It was a long story, but they actually bought a family—we had a farm, a family farm, and they brought a family to Pinehurst, North Carolina, where they would go on golfing trips with friends. They brought a family up to Connecticut, an African-

American family. They lived on the house on the property, and he took care of the property. I grew up with African-American kids. That's who I played with.

Q: The children of your servants?

Major: Right, well, yes, but we didn't really think of them as servants, we thought of them as people who lived in the house and took care of the place. But we had two families. So, that was a horrible part of my life. Not a horrible part of my life growing up with those children. What my parents did has always been terrible.

Q: What did they do?

Major: They brought people out of their element and put them somewhere where they couldn't possibly be happy. They had no social life. There were no other African Americans in Scotland, Connecticut. It was just devastating to them. Yet, financially it was helpful to them, so they came; they brought their children, and they had children. The first couple had twelve children. They lived in this very small house, and they left. Their lives—it was awful. Then my parents hired another couple, and they came, and we were very close to these people. My brothers and I would spend most of our time in their home with their kid. But the shame was ours. That our parents would be this insensitive.

Q: There was no—is that—I know Karla [Spurlock Evans] grew up not too far from you.  
Willamantic.

Major: She did?

Q: She was one of the only—like one of two, black families in the area.

Major: Sure.

Q: So, how did they manifest their unhappiness?

Major: Alcoholism. And the kids—they just, there was—it's not something—my brothers and I  
don't discuss it today.

Q: Is there a worst juncture? Is there a day or a period of time that is most painful to remember?

Major: I think when the first family left. It was because they had talked to us, and it was not manageable. And to think that then they would just go home, and another family was brought in. These kids—well the boys, the twins, were my age. So I grew up with them. They were born there when I was born there. They were my best friends, and then they were gone. Their family just left and I don't know what happened to them.

Q: Your parents never told you, or you never asked?

Major: I don't think my parents knew. I think that the final—my recollection was that my father said to Henry, "Henry, there's not enough room for these kids. You have to stop having children, or you'll have to leave." They had their twelfth child and they left.

Q: So they were proud—

Major: What were they going to do? How are these poor people—why did my parents think they had twelve kids?

Q: Why did they have twelve kids?



Major: I think because they had nobody else, nothing else, and they were stuck in this small house in New England where they didn't belong. Not because they didn't belong. But there was nobody there that they could relate to in a way that could make them happy.

Q: As far as you know, were they tenant farmers?

Major: No, they were—

Q: Not on your property, but—

Major: Oh, down in North Carolina? I don't know what they were. Maybe it was South Carolina.

Q: I mention that because in that context, economically, the more children you have, the more workers you have.

Major: Perhaps, but the children never worked on our property.

Q: On your property, right.

Major: And they were all born there. They came maybe, they came [unclear].

Q: Worked fast.

Major: Yes, they did. No, they might have, they must have had two or three kids when they came.

Q: So, did I ask you this? When you got to Barnard, did you have any idea whether you'd have a career or be a stay-at-home mom?

Major: You know, I never thought about it. I certainly didn't think about being a stay-at-home mom, but I don't think I thought about having a career, and it's hard for me to explain that.

Q: No, I understand completely.

Major: It's just a little strange. But it occurred to me in my senior year that I was about to finish college and needed to do something else, and I should either do something with—the strange thing was, that I hadn't even taken German. Well, you can't go to graduate school in Art History without German.

Q: I didn't know that.

Major: Now, nobody had told me that, either, but [unclear]. Yes, German was the language that a lot of art history had been written in. A lot of the scholars knew German, and that was a given at that time. I'm sure that's no longer the case. So I really hadn't prepared. I was just enjoying myself. Four years of sitting in a dark room looking at beautiful paintings.

Q: So, it gets to be the middle of senior year, and it hits you: what am I going to do?

Major: Well, that's not fair. It probably was, I'm ashamed to admit this, my husband—the person who I was dating at that time who became my husband—I think he asked that question: “What are you thinking about doing?”

Q: And you said?

Major: His mother was a very independent thinker. I had been at their home a lot. It was most likely her, since my mom was a volunteer. So I think that probably his influence and his parents' influence is what got me thinking.

Q: So, by the time you got to medical school, you were prepared to handle the pressures.

Major: Yes, I think so.

Q: So, you handled them well?

Major: Well, no. The first year of medical school was pretty horrible. But after that it was fine. The first year was the year where you question, "What is this program."

Q: I was going to ask you what your most horrible time at Barnard was, but I'm assuming it was those first three months?

Major: Yes, I would say so.

Q: Do you remember the night—were you there the night of the bust?

Major: Yes.

Q: What is your recollection of that night?

Major: Well, I remember the horses. I remember the police on the horses. Screaming.

Q: You were screaming because—

Major: No, I wasn't; I heard screaming. No, actually, I did not get involved. I was not about to get involved. I think I was much too afraid to be a part of it.

Q: Well, some people got beaten on who were just bystanders—

Major: Well, yes, but not if you were Barnard.

Q: Now, talk about that.

Major: Well, if you were across the street—

Q: If you were across the street. So you didn't go over. You just—

Major: I did, but I didn't stay very long. I think that was a scary place to be.

Q: Did you take part in any political activity after the strike? Like there was the strike of '70 that coincided with that, what was that, the Tet Offensive?

Solomon: No, that was Cambodia.

Q: Cambodia.

Major: Cambodia. Let's see. I did march on Washington. When was that?

Q: '70? The march on Washington?

Solomon: Was that '68?

Q: No.

Solomon: Or '69. Was that the one that Norman Mailer wrote about? That big march?

Q: I think it was '70.

Major: I think so. So, I did that. I did a few things—I didn't do much, to be honest. I was, I think, still resolving myself and probably wasn't [trails off].

Q: We all were. Remember the first Earth Day?

Major: I do.

Q: What did you experience it as?

Major: Well, it's funny because I went to dinner with Jeff, and his father, who was a *New York Times* reporter. It was a very stimulating discussion. It was wonderful. That was very warm and exciting time, I thought.

Q: And what did you think of Earth Day? What did you think it was?

Major: I probably, this is obvious and superficial, but I probably thought it was just a day to celebrate the earth and try to protect it and talk about it.

Q: Do you remember it as a happy time?

Major: Oh, yes, that was wonderful.

Q: Remember that [unclear] they had?



Major: Yes, yes, I do.

Q: Let's see what else I've got here.

[Crosstalk]

At what point did you become aware of the Women's Movement, and at what point did you see any reflections of your life in the Women's Movement?

Major: It was probably not until my senior year, when I started reading. I remember I went on a camping trip with Jeff, my husband, and I was reading Betty Friedan and I hated him.

Q: You hated Jeff? After reading the book? Expand on that a little bit.

Major: Well, here we were in a tent, and I'm reading *The Feminine Mystique*, and you just get so upset. So I started getting angry at that point.

Q: Tell me what in particular you were angry about.

Major: Well, you had to know Jeff, but he fit into the controlling male role. He was perfect. It's too bad I didn't think a little deeper about it. All I did was get mad, superficially, for a period of time. Had I thought deeper, I might have thought better, but I didn't. But it was late. It was my senior year.

Q: What in particular did he do that drove you crazy?

Major: He was very insensitive and very controlling. It took me twenty years to finally put him out to pasture. I was very far gone. I knew to be angry but that was it.

Q: You knew. I remember that. But there's no, "Now Mitzi, you'll prepare the dinner, and I'll go for a walk."

Major: You mean while we were camping? Well probably while we were camping it was, you know, "You clean up the camp site, and I'm going to go do what I want to do." He was—

Q: But you married him anyway [laughs]. Upon leaving Barnard, you anticipated that you'd become a doctor and you did. In what—did, in any major way, your expectations of your adult life vary from what actually your adult life became, in any principle way?

Major: Well, I don't think you can ever quite know what it's going to be like to do that. You don't know what it is until you're doing. So that certainly was different, and the struggle to finally feel competent took years.

Q: As a doctor.

Major: Yes. I didn't [unclear]. And I love what I do. Every day I walk in, and I know I'm good at what I do. Which is great. Which is a good reason, you know, not to retire. For a long period of time. I'm bringing things to it that are very important. So that, and that's just been a progression over many years. So that's been wonderful. But painful.

Q: You mean—

Major: Just doubting yourself. It's very hard to assume that role if you're not sure.

Q: How long do you think it took you to really hit your stride as a doctor?

Major: Residency, internship, you feel very smart. So there was a—there are different strides. But real comfort with it, self-comfort, is only within the last five years.

Q: In any regard, in your life post-Barnard, has your life been shatteringly disappointing? And in what regard, if any, has it been surprisingly wonderful?

Major: Well, the medical field I think has been surprisingly wonderful. I have a partner. The two of us opened a practice twenty-seven years ago. That relationship has been sensational. She's just a wonderful person, and I really appreciate that. I'd say the failure of my marriage was very upsetting. What it did to my children and the length of time it took me and the fact that I spent so many years pretending that things were good.

Q: How long were you married?

Major: Twenty.

Q: Twenty years.

Major: And we had dated for seven before that. So it was twenty-seven years of my life. That's a long time.

Q: Your children were how old when you divorced?

Major: Well, I divorced in '96 and, let's see, Jeff was born in '83 so he was thirteen, and Lindsay was eleven.

Q: Did they take it very hard?

Major: I think they did take it hard, but they're very wonderful people. So, they didn't take it out on us.

Q: What are your children like?

Major: Lindsay, she went to Columbia, and she just did TFA. And she's finishing that in a few weeks. Teach for America. She's finishing that in Phoenix, and then she's moving to LA [Los Angeles]. She's wonderful. She's athletic, she's very well-rounded, and she's exploring all sorts of things. She's a real open, happy—well, not always happy but a really terrific person. My son is also terrific. He's twenty-seven. He went to Columbia but made a point of flunking out quickly. He hated it. His father went to Columbia, so he just sort of pushed that. He is a very sensitive, very sweet person. He doesn't live too far from me now. He's working at a restaurant and doing art classes, and hopefully at some point he'll find something he really can attach himself to, but he's terrific person. So, when I look back at the marriage I can honestly say thank God that I had the marriage because I had these two.

Q: In any way was your parenting style different from your parents?

Major: I would hope it was almost totally different.

Q: Well, expand on that. [Laughs]

Major: It was very open. I tried to be open, but my regret is I was developing a career at the time, and I didn't realize that I should have said, "Stop. I'm going to stop right now and take care

of my children for the three or four or five years, whatever they need.” I would do that now. And I’m sorry I didn’t.

Q: Is that something that can be done?

Major: Could have been done. I could have done it. It would have taken an incredible leap, but it was the same kind of leap as when I realized what was I doing in this ridiculous relationship. But, yes, it would have required consciousness that I didn’t have. I didn’t have the freedom to think that I might stop working and stay home with my children and that would have been, I think, better for them. So I regret that. It’s hard when you’re working long hours, and you’re carrying a beeper. We carried a beeper—it was just two of us, so we carried a beeper every day and night. We admitted patients all the time. So I was constantly up and about, and I was very anxious. So the demands that they were making, which were perfectly reasonable and demands that children should have been making, I was not as patient as I should have been. I regret that.

Q: How did you meet your second husband?

Major: My best friend introduced us. He’s a lobbyist, he’s a wonderful person.

Q: Want to talk about him and what he's like and how he's different from your first.

Major: Well, he's just—he's very open, he's very friendly, and he is a lobbyist, and he talks. He just loves people, yes. He's very giving. My first husband, and I wouldn't say that—I think we both were at fault in that relationship—but he was a much, is a much, more selfish person.

Q: Lucky.

Major: Very lucky.

Q: Your current political leanings?

Major: Tom is a democratic lobbyist, so my current leanings are pretty far left.

Q: Does religion play any factor in your life?



Major: It did for a while. But it no longer does. I am now interested in mediation and Buddhism. I'm studying—doing as much of that as I can. Studying is an inflated word, but I'm reading as much as I can about it, and I find a lot of peace in that.

Q: You're able to mediate?

Major: No, I have yet to be able to meditate, but I find a lot of peace in reading the books, and I hope someday to be able to meditate. I can't shut my head off yet [laughter].

Q: Now, post-Barnard—stop me if I've asked you this—what was the most wonderful time in your life? Did I ask her that?

Solomon: Yes.

Q: And she said? What did she say?

Solomon: Becoming—confidence, yes.

Major: Yes, I'd say.

Q: Last question, unless you can think of something I forgot. If you could go back to that first day at Barnard and give a word of advice to that little Mitzi with the long hair and pregnant, what would it be?

Major: I think it would be to stop and be in the present. And be quiet. I never listened.

Q: To yourself?

Major: To anything. I never just quieted down. It was all running, from one thing to the next.

Q: Could you expand on that, just a bit?

Major: Being in the present is kind of a Buddhist philosophy, but to just be at peace and allow things to really come in, and people to come in. Thoughts. Emotions. Allow nothing to happen and be with that.

Q: Stillness.

Major: Yes, stillness.

Q: What is your greatest hope for the future.

Major: For the world or personally?

Q: Either. Both.

Major: I think at this moment, my daughter is on her way to a spot. My hope for the future is that my son finds that. For the world, I would say that the more people that understand that love and kindness is important, the world could change.

Q: Is there anything I haven't covered that you want to address.

Major: No, I think you covered a lot. I very much appreciate you doing this. This has been an incredible experience for me.

Q: It's a great experience for me too. I mean, it's just what I like to do, so it's not a sacrifice at all. It's a gift.

Major: It's nice to have someone take kind of interest.

Q: I'm riveted by the whole thing. So I guess we're wrapping up now, Bob, if you—

Solomon: The only question I have, and I haven't come up with a good way of asking it yet, but lets try this: the sixties. Even though it lasted into the seventies. There's a mythical thing about it. I'd just like you to give your assessment of that. What were the sixties to you. Looking back at it.

Major: The sixties were freedom, and exploring, and feeling intensely about a lot of things. That that was respected and accepted. And everybody was encouraging. I think it was a wonderful time. Really rich. I'm thrilled that that time was at a time when I could appreciate it.

Q: That's a pretty great answer. Thanks Mitzi.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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