

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Carol Santaniello Spencer

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Carol Santaniello Spencer conducted by Michelle Patrick in February 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: Carol Santaniello Spencer

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Michelle Patrick

Date: February 2011

Spencer: My job is—I'm the director of curriculum assessment and professional development for the local school district. I live in the district where I work.

Q: Great. Now tell us something about your background, where you grew up, how many children in your family, what your parents were like, what they did, what their political affiliations were, if any.

Spencer: I grew up in Port Washington, New York, which is only fifteen miles from Barnard [College], although in the mid-sixties it was many worlds away. I am the younger of two children. My sister, who died five years ago, was six years older than I am. Our parents were working-class people. Both of them were first-generation Americans born here. Both were Italian—all four of my grandparents were Italian. So being raised in our own house that they built in 1952 with their own money was a big deal. We lived within walking distance of the train station to New York City and were at the end of the line which was a big influence in my eventually coming into the city to go to college.

Growing up there was pretty much handball, climbing trees, local parks, maybe going downtown for a Coke on a really hot summer day. I went to parochial school until sixth grade, and then

because of Sputnik, my parents pulled me out and sent me to the public school because they wanted me to have something called science, and science I got. I went to a great public junior high and a public high school, and that's how it all began on my way to Barnard.

Q: I forgot to tell you something.

Spencer: What?

Q: I will wait five seconds after you finish speaking to make sure that there's no postscript to what you said—

Spencer: Okay.

Q: —and we don't want a lot of me, so I'm going to be largely silent.

Spencer: Okay.

Q: You said your parents were working-class. What did they do?

Spencer: Well, my dad—after the war, my dad started in insurance and sales, and eventually he migrated into the finance business, and he was in transportation finance, so he actually helped the city of New York and the borough of Queens and Brooklyn to finance large vehicle purchases for snow removal or garbage or whatever. He was pretty traditional. He didn't want my mom to

work, but she went—once I went to kindergarten in 1955, she decided that she was going to work part-time in order to earn money for family vacations and such. So she went to work for an electric garage door company. It was the latest, hottest, greatest kind of appliance to have at your house, and eventually she became the business manager—the office manager for that business as it grew over the years. She went from a three-hour-a-day job to a full-time job and career as a business manager. She was born in Newburgh, New York, and in high school, she had been a business major, and she had also worked on a newspaper during the war when my dad was away, so she became a very competent businessperson. Not only did she take care of the finances and planning of the business, but she also took care of the finances for her boss's personal family. Both of my parents retired in the early '70s.

Q: What drew you to Barnard, of all schools?

Spencer: Well, I went to a convention when I was in ninth grade. My English/language arts teacher, who was also the adviser for the newspaper, of which I was the editor, took us to a competition at Columbia University, and I just—the music played, the angels sang, the—once I saw Columbia's campus, there was no not going there when it came time to pick colleges. I was in a very competitive high school with five tracks, and in the track I was in, everyone was applying all over the Ivy League and University of Michigan and [University of California] Berkeley. So, because my parents would not hear of my going away and in fact wanted me to commute, the best I could do was fifteen miles, that was the best I could do. But I was thrilled. I was—I applied early admission, and I got in, and I had another offer from a local college on

Long Island—Adelphi University—with a four-year full scholarship, and so it was—it was quite the battle between me and the parents.

Q: What finally convinced them?

Spencer: Nothing [laughs]. Until the day I went, they were hoping I would change my mind. Nothing convinced them. And then when the—when the protests broke out, they wanted me immediately to come home and transfer. So it was—they were rocky months, very rocky months. We didn't speak for a very long time after I went to college.

Q: After you went to college, you didn't speak?

Spencer: Correct. You might remember that at the time, Barnard didn't allow people like me to live there. They were short on housing, and so there was a ninety-mile radius—I may be making that up, it's what I remember, but I was nowhere near—whatever the radius was, fifteen miles wasn't it, and so I ended up my freshman year living on people's floors, because basically in order to go to Barnard, I ran away from home. That sounds a little more dramatic than it is, but I packed a suitcase, got on the subway, went up the wrong side of New York City, landed in East Harlem, got back on the subway with the help of a very nice gentleman who seemed to live there in that subway station—he said, “Honey, you need to get back on that train and go back down to 96th street”—and arrived at Barnard with a suitcase and sort of tried to make friends with people who would put me up.

Q: Wow, Carol, I remember you lived on my floor, but I didn't know you lived on everybody's floor.

Spencer: [Laughs] We newly immigrated families raised very resourceful children. [Laughs]

Q: So I guess what I want you to do is, I'd like you to describe yourself. That first day when you came to the Barnard gates with your suitcase after going to East Harlem by mistake, what kind of girl were you, what were you like, what were you wearing, what were you thinking, were you scared?

Spencer: We had met—Barnard did a great thing in August, I think it might have been, or maybe it was July even, I don't remember—and those of us from Long Island who had been accepted, were invited to meet each other at the home of a Barnard alum, and that's where I actually met Linda Balagur Peyster Zappulla, who—we became fast friends, and we decided to room together during the orientation, which was of course the only three days that we were allowed to live in the dorms. So I met Linda, and what I remember is being glad that I was going to meet her at the campus, because it wasn't like going to a place where I didn't know anybody. But in terms of who I was and what I expected, I was a pretty conventional student who had always gotten As, and what I expected was to settle in and enjoy it and learn stuff and do good work.

I don't think I had any idea—other than being away from home, I had no idea what was going to be expected of me, and I can only remember the end of orientation, leaving Linda, leaving this beautiful room with a fireplace and a high ceiling and thinking to myself, what am I going to do

now? I've got to go home. So I took my suitcase and I took the subway back down to the Long Island Railroad and went back home. My parents—at first they didn't want to hear of my staying in the city at all. Then we struck a bargain. So for the first six or eight weeks—I can't quite remember—but for the first six or eight weeks, I stayed on people's floors during the week and then I went home. They had made me keep my part-time job, of which I always had many, but I kept one of them, so that I had to be actually home from the city by five o'clock on Friday nights to work at Abraham & Strauss. I worked there and then all day Saturday and then Sunday hung out with the family, did the whole family Sunday dinner Italian thing. Then if I was lucky, they would drive me back to Barnard Sunday night. If I was not lucky, and they were not willing, then I would either take the train back Sunday night or I would come back Monday morning.

I was very sad, and so by Thanksgiving, I finally said to them, "I'm not coming back. I'm not coming this weekend." And so we had a major—it was because they had arranged a family dinner with first, second, third, fourth cousins in Brooklyn—so we had been to this wonderful family dinner, and I said to them, "I'm not going home with you tonight," and that was it. I didn't speak to my parents for four weeks until Christmas, literally nothing, and my father called just before Christmas and said, "I can't take this anymore, you need to come home." So I went home, and we talked it all out during Christmas. I told them that I was going to live at college but that I couldn't keep living on people's floors. I had saved enough money, so I rented an apartment on 105th Street. Now, inasmuch as Barnard didn't let us live in the dorm, they also didn't let us rent apartments freshman year.

So I lived with a lady who at the time seemed to be about a million years old. I bet she was my age now, a little lady who spoke fluent Yiddish and who was about four-foot-eight, and she rented me a beautiful, sunny bedroom in her apartment. Her name was Mrs. Sklar, and she was wonderful to me. She was—she was cranky, and she was strict, no boys. She was not crazy about me studying in the room because she wanted the bed to air out, but besides that, I had a great cultural—a great cultural experience until somebody found out that I was renting an apartment, and I don't remember the particulars of how the honors board, I think it was called—maybe there are proceedings in the historical record or something. But anyhow, I was called up before the honors board and censured for breaking that rule, and what I remember is that I then went on living at Mrs. Sklar's. So it didn't amount to much, I guess, but I felt really badly. I felt like a second-class citizen.

I don't know if you remember this, but there was a coffee bar on the end where the gym building is. So Barnard Hall, right on the end there was—a little on the north side, there was a little bar for ice cream and soda and such, and the commuters would go in there, and it felt like a—I'm not sure how to call it. When everybody else would be heading back to their dorm between classes, we would head in there because that was our little place, and it felt—it felt awful. I was so sad, just really sad. It definitely distracted me from all of the academics I should have been immersing myself in, but I did what I had to do.

So that was one reason why I made the decision to accelerate, because my family didn't have a lot of money, and even though it was only \$1,600 a year in tuition, that was still a lot more than I could earn in the summer. Eventually what happened was, I did get a partial scholarship from my

high school, and my parents did pay some of it, and I paid for all of my room, board, transportation, and part of my tuition expenses, and so that was how I made the decision to graduate in three years. It wasn't because I didn't love Barnard, and it wasn't because I didn't want to be there four years, but I needed to get out and get to graduate school and get a fellowship and support myself, so that's how the three-year thing—and if you remember, we only had to take four courses a year, and to a high school honor student who had been taking—juggling all those courses year after year after year, taking four courses at Barnard each semester wasn't—it wasn't overly taxing. So I took five, and that's how I got out, and a couple in the summer. That's where I first took Italian, was in the summer at Nassau Community College that summer, because I knew I needed some extra credits.

Q: Tell me, what were the circumstances of your living in my room for final exams in January of '68?

Spencer: I probably had run out of people who would take me in, but I'll tell you a side story that is probably related. Some of my closest friends on, I don't know, maybe it was the eighth or ninth floor, I don't know, I can't remember—but anyway, it turned out that they were having a lesbian relationship, and somebody in one of the other dorms or one of the other wings had spied on them and was spreading these rumors that they—they had been seen doing whatever. I had been sleeping on their floor for weeks and weeks and weeks. And I had some sense of it, but in—one of the many ways in which I was naïve was about anything to do with sexual relationships between anybody and anybody else. This particular set of relationships was just sort of an eye-opening experience for me. I ended up publicly—because people knew that I slept on their floor

—I ended up publicly defending them a lot, and I felt like I didn't know what I was talking about. I didn't want to get involved in the sense of hurting them, because I could possibly say whatever and whatever, so I needed another place to stay, and I'm guessing that's when I showed up on your floor.

Q: Tell me if you experienced—I know the commuter experience was very, very difficult. Was there—now, I'm talking about before the strike—did you experience any cultural shock during that fall and winter before—we're not at the strike yet? Were there any culture shocks?

Spencer: Oh [laughs], I like how you ask that with a straight face. Was there any culture shock? There was such a culture shock that I think I had something like a nervous breakdown. Leaving home, breaking all those rules—because my older sister had lived at home, so that was huge. Wearing jeans, wearing pants—I did not own pants. I certainly didn't own jeans. Buying my own clothes; I had never been allowed to do that. That's sort of on the—one end of the simplicity chart, and the other, way on the other end of the complexity scale is sex. Who knew? I mean, that whole idea that—I don't think I had much opinion at all. It wasn't—it wasn't that I had a strongly held opinion that sex waited until marriage. I didn't have any opinion about sex at all. It just sort of happened. I was very surprised. Marijuana; I—my generation, teachers from our high school will say that our class was the last naïve class, the last class where people didn't go into the city to buy drugs and didn't—just didn't. And so that was all very eye-opening, that whole idea that people didn't—didn't refrain from whatever there might be and however it came across your room or your door or your floor or whatever—that was a shock to me.

I—being raised in a European family, one of the things that was never prohibited at—in the evening or on weekends was alcohol. So I didn't see alcohol as a—as a stimulant or a—anything like that. Wine, cocktails, beverages—I was raised in a cosmopolitan Long Island, where—and the drinking age back then was eighteen, so watching people—going to a frat party and watching people consume that level of alcohol for the purpose of getting drunk was a shock to me, because in my world, people drank and had a good time, but they didn't drink to get drunk. I'd never seen anybody high before; that was a shock. As I said, I wish I could say I had all these strong opinions about not doing those things, and so I didn't—I had no opinions, so I tried it all. Anything that came my way, I was open to it, just sort of tried to keep my head, and the one rule I made with myself was a rule about—I never cut a class at Barnard, ever. And it's the same thing I told our son when he went—of course he didn't listen to me, but that's a different story. But I felt like my contract with myself, because I'd worked so hard to get there, was that I would never cut a class, and as long as I could do that, everything else was open season.

Q: Had you dated in high school?

Spencer: Oh, yes.

Q: Dating—

Spencer: Yes, I had three steady boyfriends—well, four, I guess, if you count the first one, four steady boyfriends, one for six months, one for a year, one for two years, and one for the balance, and—yes, but they weren't heavily sexual relationships.

Q: Did you fall in love your first semester at Barnard?

Spencer: No, but I fell in like with this guy from Ohio, and we spent a lot of time together.

Those are the [laughs]—those were the days when, even if I had a room, which I didn't, you had to have the door open on Sunday because there were parietals, but the boys didn't have parietals. You could go into the dorms as long as the door was open, and so open in the boys' dorms was a matchbook in the door. [Laughter]

Q: [Unclear]

Spencer: Yes, so I wasn't in love, but I was in like.

Q: Did you have career goals? Did you think that you would grow up to work like your mom?

Spencer: [Laughs] Well, yes, I did—did I have a career goal? Yes, I was told that I could be one of two things. I could be a teacher or a nurse. Those were my two choices. And actually, just rewinding, what that sparked for me was the memory of the first or second argument I had with my parents about leaving home at all to go sleep at Barnard, ever, and my father, in my face, said to me, "You will leave this house in one of two ways, in a bridal gown or in a casket." But in terms of the career, I wish I'd had a little more fortitude or stamina or intelligence to say, "Well, I might want to explore something else." But I was a good girl, and so a teacher I became, and I

always knew that that was—so in my six semesters, I also did student teaching and took the education degree and came out with a certification.

Q: Let's get to the strike. Did you have a stake in the strike? Did you have a position?

Spencer: —from high school who were in the—

[Interruption]

My first inkling of what was going on, was really going on, was the night that the square on Broadway and 116th Street was stormed by the troopers. I was inside the dorm—I don't know if you remember this, I had gone inside the dorm just to be on campus, and they had locked the dorm. They locked the gate, and they locked the dorm, and so I shimmied out the second-floor window on bed sheets. That's what I remember, and then going into the square, and the first participation I remember is looking at a policeman and saying, "Up against the wall, motherfucker," because he was—they were charging on horses from both ends to make the people—and they had closed the Columbia gate, I think, so there was no place for people to go. It was wild. That comes back to me every time I see something on the news, just like Egypt tonight.

Q: That night—

Spencer: I was terrified.

Q: Where did you end up, then?

Spencer: They opened the Barnard gate up again, and I went back in. But that's—

Q: How long were you out there?

Spencer: That's the first—boy, the next thing I remember is being up on the roof with half the dorm and watching the cleanup, watching them bring the ambulances and bring in the police cars and taking people away, and then my next memory is the following night, after it was on the evening news, my parents calling and demanding that I go home. So that was the first awareness I had that people cared deeply about something besides sex and studying and being in college, and that this wasn't going to be the thing that—like the movies with Sonja Henie that I had seen on TV, and Bing Crosby and all those guys, when they would go to college and they wore little white sweaters and I—it was just a sort of comeuppance. I think up until that point, I was waiting for it to get American and real and Midwestern and—yes, I think it was during the strike that I thought, “Aha, so the way you get into this school is not through white sweaters.” It was a shock to me all the way around. I certainly never could have led it.

Q: Well, we were freshmen—

Spencer: Yes, but some of my friends from high school were right in there, and you can see them right in the picture, Lincoln Perry and Nick Bogan. And I was proud of them. I didn't know why. I didn't know what they had done, but they had done it well, boy.

Q: I think your voice was fluctuating. Can you repeat what you said about your first inkling that people—

Spencer: It was my first—the strike and that night, which reminded me of the revolution at Red Square, that was my first inkling that people my age were supposed to care about something other than daily living, going to class, getting a job, having enough money, having fun, feeding myself, being independent—that was my first inkling that people might be a little more worried about bigger issues like the war. It—the growth for me politically from that time, that night, that specific night, probably until now, has been amazing. It just amazes me that before then I was so, so apolitical.

Q: Did you have any part to play in the whole political part at Barnard, like—?

Spencer: —which was much calmer. You mean, except for not taking finals, did I actually do something?

Q: Well, not taking finals, yes—

Spencer: I didn't have any. Yes, I never took a final again, I don't think, or basically never took a spring final in those three years. No, I didn't, because by that time, by '70 in the spring when I graduated, I was headed for Peru because I had gotten a Fulbright, and so my head was all full of plans and what I was going to do, and no, I never became politically active in the organized sense at all.

Q: Were you affected personally by the war, by being involved with somebody who was drafted or concerned about being drafted, having a family member or friend drafted or afraid of being drafted?

Spencer: Yes. I do remember—I do remember sitting with friends at Columbia the night the draft was read. The numbers—they—the lottery, they read the numbers, sort of like a Bingo game, only you hoped your ball didn't fall on the chart. Yes, I dated somebody who was killed in Vietnam.

Q: Oh, Carol, tell me about that.

Spencer: It was this guy who showed up, and he was a friend of a friend sort of thing, and I was not any longer in like with the boy from Ohio, although we were still friends, and I never really got serious again until my senior year, which was my third year. So I was in between and met this guy, and he was actually in New York because he was on his way to boot camp, and so dated I suppose is a—maybe it's a more fully blown word than what it really was, but yes, the next

thing I knew, he went, and he was killed. And then people from my graduating class in high school who hadn't gone to college but who had gone into the service were killed.

It was very real. The war was very real. Maybe it was real as well because of all the stories—my father didn't go overseas during the war, he was in the military police, but nevertheless, he was involved with quite a bit of—he was a police detective, so he was involved with trying to corral the men who—now we look back and probably would have called it post-traumatic stress disorder, but at the time, they just thought these guys came back, and they were wild kind of thing, and so my father had boxes and boxes and boxes of police pictures of things that happened when the men came back. So I think when my friends from high school and when this guy were killed, my biggest association was the framework of my father having been quote-unquote “in the war,” more than a political orientation that it was something I could do something about.

Q: And when you say something you could do, what did you do?

Spencer: No, I don't think I really—I don't think I really believed there was anything I could do.

Q: So did you demonstrate or did you just react?

Spencer: I didn't really demonstrate at all in my life until I was arrested at the nuclear power plant in New Hampshire years later. When I finished my doctorate, I went to be an administrator in a public school district, and I was—I felt compelled at that point, in a small state, to go and do

my part. And that was my first active participation, but that was many years later. I graduated in '70, so that was '77—'77, '78, I think.

Q: What—did you or anyone have to have an illegal abortion?

Spencer: Yes. I did. I had one.

Q: And tell me—

Spencer: I had an abortion at the end of my freshman year. The young man from Ohio. He paid for it. It was \$300. We took the train to Philadelphia—

Q: And you went—

Spencer: We walked from the train station to a doctor's office, so I can't really tell you what part of Philadelphia it was in. It couldn't have been north Philly. Yes, and so I remember going to my first professor that spring because I was not able to take my first exam, going to my first professor and—who was very kindly, and saying that I couldn't take my exam because I was just really not well, and he could probably see that in my face. But then there were no exams after that, so it all came good, but yes, that wasn't a really great time for me, those months.

Q: Was it a horrible experience, terrifying?

Spencer: I was raised a Catholic, and I was in the process of becoming a lapsed Catholic, and intellectually I think I always knew that that was going to happen when I grew up in some ways, but I think I was scared for my soul. I was not biologically liberated enough to think that this was just a bunch of cells. To me it was a child, and I was too selfish and too young and too scared to do anything different. I've made my peace with it, but it's one of the big regrets I have.

Q: Were you aware during your time at Barnard of the women's movement?

Spencer: Oh yes. [Laughs] That was—I had Kate Millett for freshman English, so even if you didn't want to know, you were going to know if you had Kate Millett. I was shocked. I was—again, it was just one of those many ways in which, I don't know, if the train had left the station in Port Washington, and I wasn't on it—but my entrance into anything in that regard was probably very concrete, so the first thing I mentioned to you earlier in this interview was, I bought pants. And in the Barnard handbook, I'll bet you it says—I don't think I'm misremembering this—that you're not supposed to wear pants on campus. So I went there with no pants. I went there with all dresses and skirts and had to actually—when I realized that that wasn't a rule that was being followed—so my first strike for liberty was to buy pants.

Then my second awareness was that whole business about the parietals, and how the girls had to be in at night at whatever it was, eight o'clock, and tell where you had been and where you were going to this woman who looked to be 2,060 years old, and the boys didn't have to do that. They could come and go as they chose. That—that was my second sort of, "Wait a minute, I get this!" [Laughs] So again, it wasn't on a deep political level, it was just sort of my own little

concrete, inductive way of looking at life. Then, of course, the third piece was around sexual liberty, and that women should be sexually as free to do what they wanted with their bodies, and so that all sort of sunk in. So it wasn't really political. It was more social, I guess you would say.

Q: Tell me about when you left Barnard and you took off, you were going to go to Peru and do your Fulbright, what did you think your adult life would be like?

Spencer: What did I think my adult life would be like when I left Barnard? Well, let's just start with this. Graduation day came, and I cried from early morning to late at night. I cried through dinner; I cried through the ceremony. I didn't want to leave. I realized I had made a mistake in doing it in three years, and it wasn't because I didn't want to go to Peru. It was just because I knew I was going to leave behind a life that had changed me so much, that there was nothing the same about me, and unfortunately I wasn't there long enough to really build myself back into a person. So I'd lost my virginity; I'd done drugs; I'd had an abortion; I'd lost my faith; I'd—I was still not on great terms with my family. I—intellectually, I think I disappointed myself with the work I had done or had chosen to do or not chosen to do—it felt way too early, and I felt like I had cheated myself out of the year of becoming—and so I was in deep mourning when I left.

I stayed—I taught school all summer, spring and summer. I got my first teaching job, I had my certification, and a variety of things came open in my high school. Someone got pregnant, and so I took the place of one of my own teachers and taught Spanish, and then in the summer I got a job teaching in the New York City public schools. They had a summer school for EL—at the time it was ESL, English as a Second Language kids.

And so by the time I went to Peru, I had pretty much decided, I think, that what I needed was to have adventures, because I couldn't imagine settling down yet. I could not imagine settling down. So there was—there was in my mind, I guess—not really an adult yet. What was in my mind was that I had to apply for graduate school soon, and I needed to do that somewhere far away from my parents and far away from New York. I needed to go have the college experience somewhere that I really hadn't had, and I don't mean the white sweaters and the loafers. I mean just the being away away, on my own, and Peru was certainly that, back in the day before computers and when telephone calls abroad were fifty dollars a minute. So it certainly was that, but it—I knew that the next step was graduate school, and so it was important to me to establish a life somewhere away from New York. I honestly thought I was never going back. I never did. So I knew that much. I knew I was never going back to live near my parents. It's only since last February that, when my mother moved in with us, that I'm living near my parents again. But I'm over it.

[Interruption]

Q: What you alluded to—

Spencer: Yes.

Q: —did you do many drugs at Barnard?

Spencer: I don't know, I don't remember. [Laughter] I think so, but I don't know what they were. I smoked some dope. I liked it; I didn't love it. It was interesting, the shift, because when I came back from Peru, I became a housemother at Tulane [University]—Sophie Newcomb [College], actually. In that short time that I had been away, that short twelve months that I had been away, I think there was a culture shift, because at Barnard—or maybe it was just the people I hung out with. At Barnard, we were so happy to sit down, smoke, share a joint and then sit and laugh and talk and eat and tell stories and whatever, but it was not the kind of—I didn't have the kind of life that I saw in New Orleans when I went there two years, or a year and a half later. It was, the girls would all smoke dope and then go out, so we'd smoke dope and then go skating, or smoke dope and then go to the movies, or smoke dope and then go out to do something on campus or go to a concert, and that was totally foreign to me, that you would want to smoke dope and then go out. I never did that. I never—and anything I did was always in a fairly sheltered environment, I have to say.

Q: So did you have any fun at Barnard?

Spencer: Not too much. Mostly I was screwed up. Fun—let me see. Wait, let me search my memory banks. Fun. Panty raids, which I thought were hysterically stupid—do you remember those?

Q: Possibly. When were they?

Spencer: Freshman year. Yikes.

Q: I had a great time [laughs].

Spencer: That was fun. That was—

Q: There was a fire drill at the same time.

Spencer: Oh my gosh, yes. This is—and this is a funny story. There was a fire drill—I don't think it was that one, but there was a fire drill our freshman year, and you remember that my roommate Linda—you referred to the fact that you remembered that she had gotten married early. Well, at the time, in the winter, she was living with her boyfriend off campus, and of course, needless to say, that was frowned upon. So they took attendance at fire drills, and so my instructions—I was actually, by that time in the spring or winter, I had come back from Mrs. Sklar's. It was right during the time of the investigation of my egregious living off campus without permission, and I was living in Linda's room, because by that time she had been admitted and—or had a room in the dorm. And so—because as they were freed up, commuters were invited to attend, and her alphabet letter was before my alphabet letter. So I was in her room, and so I called her, she put her coat over her pajamas and came toodling up from 110th Street, and—do you remember Mr. Kelly?

Q: Oh my goodness—

Spencer: Mr.—older Mr. Kelly. Nice, nice, nice man, looked to be about a million three years old. He always—I worked at night on campus and such, and so there were many nights when I would stay over, and he would let me in late because they locked the gate at something o'clock, I don't know what. And so I went to him, and I whispered in his ear that she was coming, and he opened the gate and let her in [laughs]. Now that did feel like something out of a '60s movie.

Man: You had power then.

Q: What is your life like now?

Spencer: What is my life like now? I have a great life. I have been married, happily married, for twenty-eight years. We got married at midnight on New Year's Eve, because my favorite movie of all time, or one of two of them, is *An Affair to Remember* with Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, the old one. In my child's mind, or my thirty-something mind, they had gotten married at—or they had been going to meet at midnight on New Year's Eve on the Empire State Building, and so I told Tom I could think of nothing more romantic than for us to get married at midnight, which we did. Years later, we saw the film once videos started coming out [laughs], and it was neither New Year's Eve nor midnight. It was five o'clock in the fall or something, but nevertheless—so we have a great partnership.

Tom has two children by his first marriage; both of them are married. So we have three grandchildren—I have two wonderful stepchildren, their two spouses, and three grandchildren, and then we had a son in 1988, whose name is Theodore Addison Spencer. Theodore just

graduated from Tulane University, where he went to major in economics and then in his senior year decided to become a linguistics major, and graduated cum laude with an honors degree— with an honors for his thesis. And now he is—we are proud to say, studying to be an aerialist, and he’s studying that in Argentina. So—

Q: That’s a wonderful story. Why don’t you expand on what an aerialist is?

Spencer: An aerialist, in his case, is someone who is studying silking, the art of vertical trapeze, where one does ballet vertically using these very long, forty-foot cloths strung over a bar or a tree or a—whatever the space provides. So he has taken a lot of—since he’s been in Argentina—he’s taken a lot of ballet, modern dance, acrobatics, floor acrobatics, traditional trapeze, couples trapeze, and of course his love, which is the tela, or silking. He also does yoga, because he was a runner in high school—he didn’t do much at all in college, but if he has any muscles, they were in his lower extremities, not in his core. So he’s really built a whole new physique and way of thinking of himself that he actually blames on us, because back in the day when he wanted to start violin lessons—which he did. He took Suzuki violin for six years—we also found a dance class for him, a boys’ dance class, and he loved it. He did that for three years as well. So he blames it on us, the love of performing and the love of the spotlight, and the idea that he can make an audience happy and that he can actually develop a talent from A to Z, and start with nothing and build it into something. He’s auditioning in March for a four-year program in Argentina that would make him into a professional aerialist. If he gets in, great; if he doesn’t, there are other schools in the world that he can apply to, but that’s his first choice.

So, what else about our lives?

Q: The only person in our reunion has a child who's an aerialist—

Spencer: I will be the only—

Q: Well, I hear really unique things—

Spencer: Oh, I'm sure there will. I'm sure there will.

Q: When—

Spencer: Go ahead.

Q: When in your life have you been happiest?

Spencer: Happiest. Let me think about that for a minute. I think right now is the best. Of course we used to—I used to say all the time Theodore was growing up, like he would get a year older, and never having raised a child before, I would say, “Oh, I love this age the best.” That lasted until he was fifteen and a half, and then we didn't speak much for two years, and now it's okay. Now it's all good, and I love every age the best again.

But I think we really have it made right now. We took our hits with the economy, so we're not—I don't think where we thought we were going to be at this point. But I love my job; I have a great job that's seven miles from home. I have a great husband whose primary occupation is taking care of me. He does taxes, he volunteers every winter and does taxes for AARP [American Association of Retired Persons]; he's on the board of the Boys and Girls Club and does great financial work for them, and he takes care of us—he takes care of this huge house and all the mechanicals and everything in it, and we like each other. We're friends.

And in our new—this house is only five years old. We have great neighborhood friends, very different all of them, one from the other, but it's one of the first times where we've actually lived—in Vermont, where we've actually lived in a neighborhood. That's been unique for me since I left Port Washington, where I had neighbors who actually talked to us. Vermont tends to be a place where houses are very far apart. So you don't necessarily know your neighbors, and this neighborhood is great. It's many, many different kinds of people who live here. We live on a lake. We have a beautiful view of New York State from here. If I were a swimmer, I could swim to it, but as it is, I just enjoy it from here, from the shore. And we have a family life that is enviable, I think. The kids come often and spend time with us, and we spend time with them, and we're part of their lives, and they're part of ours.

Q: So when you look five years ahead, what do you see? Do you see much the same thing?

Spencer: Five years ahead. It's hard, isn't it, to really think about what changes there could be. I'm really aware that from one day to the next, when you're our age, everything can be so

changeable. We've lost friends, we've had people in the hospital—we've had so many unexpected turns and twists in life that it's hard for me to really have faith that if I tell you, "Oh, I think we're going to do this, or I think we're going to do that." In my heart of hearts, I just try to look at every day and enjoy it, because I'm not sure. But if you want to know what we're planning for, I'll probably retire by then, and we will probably travel and—and that's—I say probably because we've done a fair amount of traveling over the past twenty years, and we live in a place that people go to when they are traveling, so it's pretty wonderful here, and there's not a lot to escape from in any immediate sense.

This year, I can tell you we're going to Argentina to see Theodore. My brother-in-law's niece is getting married in Spain, she is Spanish, and so we'll probably go to that wedding in July, and then we're going to go to Italy with friends in September. None of that was planned. If you said to me last year—if you had said to me, are you going to go to Europe or are you going to travel abroad next year, I would have said, "I'm sort of done with that right now. I need to work, and I want to work, and I don't really want to go back to Europe for now until things are more stable —" well, that's not true, because I'm going twice this year. I have family in Italy, so I suppose if I have a fond fantasy, it's actually renting or owning something in the small village that my family is from and spending more than just two or three weeks at a time with them—eventually, being able to spend part of the year every year with them, while they're all still alive.

Q: Tell me, if you could go back to that first Barnard girl walking through the gates with her suitcase and give her one word of wisdom, or one little pithy thing, what would it be?

Spencer: Open your mind—what advice would I give that little girl who came through those Barnard gates? I would say to her, “Open your mind, open your mind, girl. Look at what these professors have to offer, cuddle up with them and just get—suck it up. Get everything you can get. Don’t pick your major so early, just go to classes and learn and enjoy it.” That is the advice that we gave our son. That he did do. I’m proud to say that to this day, he goes into every learning situation to learn and not to get a grade.

Q: That’s great. Okay, is there a story you wanted to tell that I haven’t hit on?

Spencer: Let me think, is there a story that I want to tell? Well, I won’t tell you the story about my first frat party, because those are—those are such murky memories [laughs]. I suspect that’s not a good story to tell. Let me think about that for a second. Oh, yes, of course. The finest place in my—the place where I would go when I was really needing to study, and I wanted to feel like I was at the university to which I had applied, was that little place above the stacks at the Columbia library. So if you go in the door, and you turn right and you go into the stacks and you go into what is the card catalog room, there are little circular spiral staircases, and you can climb those staircases, and they used to have little desks, carrels with little lights in them. And I would go up there and just—that’s where I felt like I was the—I was at this grand college doing this important work and this important studying, and I could stay there for hours. I could spend hours in that place. The only other place I really felt that way was Casa Italiana. That was the only other place that really sort of met my standards for what I—the image of that little ninth-grade, fourteen-year-old girl who thought she was going to this ivy-covered building—university with

marble floors everywhere and—just the 1960s movie. So that's where I used to go to get into my own movie.

Q: That's lovely. Anything I haven't touched on?

Spencer: No, but if you—when you review this tape, and you think about it, if you think there are things that we should talk about, we can just try it again. I'm going to just hold onto the equipment until you get the tape.

Q: Okay, great. And you'll send me some visuals if you can?

Spencer: Sure, of that girl in pigtails? [Laughs]

Q: Pigtails—what a funny, sweet girl you were.

Spencer: Yes, I was. I still am fairly funny and fairly sweet [laughs]. Thank you for this opportunity.

Q: I'm so glad that you stepped up. And also, if there's a story that hits you that you want to tell, just put it on the tape.

Spencer: All right. Okay, yes, if this—let me see what I dream about tonight.

Q: Okay.

Spencer: [Laughs]

Q: You can give me a call and I'll ask you the question or prompt you or whatever, but this has been great. I mean, you're so buoyant and enthusiastic. It's really been a pleasure.

Spencer: I am so grateful that we've reconnected.

Q: So am I, darling. So am I. I can't wait to see you.

Spencer: I'll see you soon.

[END OF SESSION ONE]

Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Collection
Interviewee: Carol Santaniello Spencer
Interviewer: None

Session Two
Location: New York, New York
Date: February 2011

Spencer: So I told you I would sleep on it, and I have slept on it for about—

[Interruption]

There are a couple of other things that I wanted to say, because I thought about it overnight, and actually overnight turned into about ten days. Maybe it was because the questions sort of separated the experience into parts and pieces, and what I ended up thinking about when I was cogitating about whether or not to make the tape again, and you told me not to, was that it— taken as a whole, I think the experience of being at Barnard was different than taken in the parts and pieces. I feel like what I talked about was mostly the traumatic transition that I had from being a suburban, first-generation American, learning and shattering all the different parameters that I had been raised with. That was sort of the minus model, the takeaway model. But I—on balance, I wanted to talk a little bit about the plus model.

What did I get out of Barnard? What actually happened to me in those three years? And what happened to me was—because I left a world that was so prescribed and had so many clear rules and responsibilities, and went to a place where there were very few rules and there were almost

no responsibilities—so because I went from black to white or white to black in terms of my moral system, in terms of my experiences intellectually, it was not during those three years—there really wasn't time to rebuild. That said, when I went to Peru for the following year and looked at the shattered pieces of my—who am I? Where am I going?—life for twelve months by myself in Latin America during my Fulbright year. I went back to Tulane for my master's the year after that, and I think what happened for me was, that's when I became a scholar. That's when I wanted to read every single assignment that was given to me and write every single paper that was given to me ahead of time, so that I could ask the professor for help ahead of time. That's when I really became interested in the intellectual life of the mind, and that's a Barnard legacy. That was my legacy.

I was not an intellect or a scholar when I went to Barnard. I was school-smart and I knew how to get grades, but when I went to graduate school a year after I left Barnard, I understood what it was to learn. Finally, learning for its own sake, and I left my master's and my doctorate with a 4.0, and the reason for that was because what I learned at Barnard was that there was more to do in a classroom besides just pleasing the teacher. I know that may sound shallow for people who came from intellectually-oriented families, but my family read the Daily News every day, not The New York Times. I had to teach myself to read The New York Times. That's the legacy of Barnard. The legacy for me academically was that I became a scholar. It took me a year after I left to synthesize everything that I had learned there, and I—what I learned at Barnard was how to be a student.

I can't honestly say that I took advantage of all that there was academically at Barnard. My grades were fine, I think I ended with a 3.4, but one piece that was missing—and if I could do it over again, I would seek out an adviser at Barnard. I would seek out somebody who could've coached and advised me for who I was, and that was completely missing for me, that piece.

Whoever that person was—I believe I met with her once during my freshman year and never again, so whoever that was supposed to be at the time, I never made the connection, and I didn't really understand what an adviser was for. Since I went through high school and never saw my guidance counselor, I imagined that probably—that that's the role I was supposed to play; I was supposed to go out and do it on my own. Looking back, that's the one thing I would change.

And there is good karma in the world, what goes around comes around, because my son Theodore, our son Theodore, who just graduated from Tulane—oh, did I mention cum laude, and with honors? He found an adviser who cared deeply about him and who coached him through his last year in a royal way, so that not only did he write a phenomenal thesis, he also learned a huge amount writing it, and he inherited from his parents something that is a passion of mine, which is equity. He inherited a passion for working in the world to make the world a place where people have a chance who might not have had a chance. So he did his thesis on helping Latin American immigrants in New Orleans find health and medical services, and so he translated a lot both verbally and in writing. He did a lot of community service, and I'm very proud of that because—I think what I mentioned earlier in the tape was, what drives me intellectually and what drives me at work as a public school educator is equity.

I brought some of the stuff that I've written and some of the publications that I have because I felt like they are also a Barnard legacy. I began that journey at Barnard. That's what I learned

from the upheaval. What I learned from the upheaval and the revolution and the strikes was that there's a principle in the world, and you have to find that principle, and you have to live by it. For me, that principle was equity. Back in the day, when the middle school movement was first starting in the early '80s, I became one of the pioneer writers for that movement in New England, and I became the first editor and publisher of *The Journal of the New England League of Middle Schools* journal. Those are here in pretty interesting mimeographed, spiral-bound form, but that is today one of the best journals in New England for good practice and best practice ideas. It's not a research journal, but it's a best practice journal that blends research and best practice. So I'm very proud of those years of editing and starting the journal for the New England League of Middle Schools, of which I eventually became the president.

I also wrote for the state of Vermont with three of my colleagues a book called *The Middle Matters*, and then, ten years later, revised it to *The Middle Still Matters*. So this is sort of the—it is the pre-Turning Points, which I'll talk about in a second, Vermont edition of what constitutes good middle schooling, and it became the bible as middle schools—in Vermont, the middle grades, five, six, seven, and eight, were organized into thirty-three different school configurations. They were in K-6's and 5-9's, and they were in high schools and all of that, but this book became the bible for convincing school boards that there was a better way to do middle schooling, and in this day and age, almost every school district in Vermont has some form of middle schooling. So I'm very proud of that.

Finally, my other contribution in middle schooling was that, when the Carnegie Foundation funded a middle school study, which turned out to have dynamic impact all over the country, I

had an opportunity to work with the Turning Points people, who—the Turning Points were an organization of people funded by Carnegie [Corporation] to take the original research that said that middle schools do matter and that no—a middle school organization improves achievement and equity for all students. I had an opportunity to contribute to the early adolescent annual for Turning Points, because at that time I was also on the national middle school board and working in the field as a school principal in the middle—and had a lot of experience, and so was called on to help author that. I'm proud of that.

Later on, once I began to broaden my horizons—I was a middle school principal for almost twenty years, and so when I started to look beyond that and work in different ways, I opened my own consulting practice for ten years and coached principals all over New England and some other parts of the country. But one of my other side jobs and projects was that I did a yearlong study in a small rural town that had a small K-6 school, and I spent a year there helping with community service learning projects. Then those projects were gathered up and published in a book, and it's a fascinating study of the integration of public schooling and a public community—which is not always the case in Vermont or in New England in general. There's usually a pretty big division between schools and their citizens, not parents, so the purpose of this project was to help build those bridges in a solid way, in a sustainable way. That story is told in this book.

Later on I was invited to write a chapter for this book, called *Understanding Democratic Curriculum Leadership*. I did that in a way that helped to lay the path for teacher-leaders—so a different pathway to carving out curriculum through teachers' experiences with all children, and

what we call differentiation in the classroom, meaning that a teacher will work to help each child to access the curriculum. So I was able to write a chapter for that. My work—my seminal work, my legacy in the field, is that I was one of the first principals in the United States to de-track our school. I did that in both—in Wolfeboro—in my second principalship I did it in Middlebury, Vermont and in my first, Wolfboro, New Hampshire. I did it in Shelburne, Vermont, which was my third. So Jeannie Oakes, who wrote the seminal research on heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping and the detrimental effects of homogeneous grouping, came and spent a week with me and followed me and interviewed me, and I am the person whose case study is told in her book, *Becoming Good American Schools*. And all of my work in turn was based on her—her original work of keeping track or crossing the tracks, excuse me, from the '80s. And I'm very proud of this.

My last two publications that are not just articles in magazines or journals—because when I became a school principal in 1977, I was one of very few women. At the time, more than ninety-six percent of school administrators at the secondary level were men, and that change happened after the war. So from after World War II until the mid-eighties, that was true at the middle and secondary level. So I was invited to write a chapter for *Women as School Executives* and reflect back on those early days of what it was like to try to get a job, what it was like to keep a job, and what it was like to work in a predominantly male environment during those days. So that story is in here, *Women as School Executives*. And finally, when I had my own practice for ten years, I was invited to do a research study at one of the high schools in Vermont on trying to take high school curriculum—which at the time, in the mid-nineties or late '90s, still was in a very medieval stage of the classic disciplines, all separated—and track and follow a group of teachers

who were trying to actually convert their curriculum to a standard space. This was in the very early days of standard space curriculum, and so I actually was able to do some of that research and contribute as an author in this book as well.

I tell you this not because I—I read all the time about all the amazing, amazing poets and researchers and newspaper writers and brilliant surgeons and lawyers that came out of Barnard, and I tell you this not because I'm bragging or trying to be a big fish in a little pond—well, I guess that's what I am; I'm probably a little fish in a little pond of education—but I am telling you this for a reason, and that is because at Barnard, I learned that it can make a difference, that I could make a difference, that people could make a difference. That is a lesson that I had to learn firsthand, inductively, and that's what I learned from the Barnard revolution. It wasn't that I could leap in and do what other people were able to do at that time, but the legacy from the education that I received has lasted all of my life. I wanted to say that because I think that's still true. My sense of what girls—what women can get from Barnard now and what guys get from a great school, an intellectual school, a school that pushes on them, a school that has practicing principles, is that legacy of activism, and I think that's what I've been in my own field.

So thanks for listening and thanks for that opportunity to put this cap on the story. Now I'll send you the tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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