

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Basha Yonis

2015

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Basha Yonis conducted by Janet Price on August 11, 2015. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

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

Barnard Alumni Class of 1971 Oral History Project

Interviewee: Basha Yonis

Location: Lakewood, California

Interviewer: Janet Price

Date: August 11, 2015

00:00:53 [setting up recording equipment]

00:02:26 [they turn off the recorder]

00:02:50 [they turn the audio recorder back on]

00:03:39 Q: So, for the record, this is Janis Price, and I'm interviewing Basha Yonis, who was known in college as Beverly Johnson, Class of Barnard '71, on Tuesday, August 11th, in her home in Lakewood, California.

00:03:55 Videographer: In the year 2015.

00:03:56 Q: Thank you. 2015. So, Basha, thank you for agreeing to be part of the oral history project. Let's start from the very beginning and tell us a little bit about your family and your childhood, where you grew up and so forth, and then I'll do some follow-up questions.

00:04:17 Yonis: We were local; we lived in Queens, opposite Forest Park, kind of an area where nothing much ever happened, a strictly residential area. I am the middle child; I have an older

sister and a younger sister. All three of us went to Barnard [College], that's how I heard of it because my older sister went there. And that's the only apartment I really remember, because my parents moved into it the summer before I turned four. And my mother still lives there; she'll be ninety-seven in September.

00:05:03: Q: Wow!

00:05:05 Yonis: Went to public high schools, or public schools, public high school. Went to Barnard as a commuter for three years and then decided I wanted to be a little closer to the action and got a room my senior year.

00:05:22 Q: So let's go back to the early days. Were your parents born in the US?

00:05:27 Yonis: Yes, both my parents were born here, both youngest children of immigrants.

00:05:35 Q: From where?

00:05:35 Yonis: Three of my grandparents, as I understand, were from shtetlach somewhere near Bialystok and then my—

00:05:47 Q: Where is Bialystok?

00:05:47 Yonis: It was in the Pale of Settlement so it depends upon, you know, what year, whether it was Poland or Russia. And my father's mother, so I understand, was from White Russia. My mother's parents—I do know more of the story—they met in England first; they went to work I guess in the garment industry there, I don't know, the mills or whatever, and then a bunch of young people had gotten together, and some had paired off and they came over to the US. And that's how my grandparents met, and my mother and her older brothers were all born here. My father and his older siblings were all born here.

00:06:40 Q: And they always lived in New York?

00:06:42 Yonis: Yes, they never lived any place else except within the city limits.

00:06:48 Q: So what was your childhood like? Where did you go to school? What did you do for fun?

00:06:52 Yonis: We were a very quiet and introverted family, and I didn't feel like I had a lot of friends, didn't play outside a lot. Because the housing development that my parents bought into—which is a co-op, which if you're from New York you understand what co-op is—overwhelmed the school population so much, which were a bunch of single family and two-family houses, that we actually got a school bus to go to the local elementary school, because there were a bunch of young families, it was built post-war, my parents got in on a fluke that there was an apartment available, because it was primarily for ex-military. And my father was 4-F; he served in a necessary industry, he was a chemical engineer, but was not military. And so

we went to that local elementary school, PS [Public School] 119, and then for some reason they renumbered the schools and we ended up at PS 113, and our junior high school was PS 119. I don't understand how that went, but —

00:08:25 Q: Did you like school?

00:08:26 Yonis: Yes, I always did. I always felt at home there. I did well there. That was the one thing that I always prided myself on was my brains.

00:08:41 Q: And what did you love to do when you were a child?

00:08:42 Yonis: Um, read. Read like crazy, and I remember playing with dolls and paper dolls, which one never sees anymore.

00:08:53 Q: I remember those too. So what were your favorite books from childhood?

00:08:56 Yonis: Um, I really don't remember. I have a terrible memory; I know there were some books that my parents owned that we went through, and one was some compilation of stories and poetry, and I have absolutely no idea the title, any of the authors, but I did remember—all these years later I still remember one poem from it that I just memorized.

00:09:24 Q: Let's hear the poem.

00:09:26 Yonis: It's a humorous poem. "Once there was an elephant who tried to use the telephant. No! No! I mean an elephone who tried to use the telephone—Dear me, I am not certain quite that even now I have it right. Howe'er it was, he got his trunk entangled in the telephunk; the more he tried to get it free, the louder buzzed the telephee—I fear I better drop this song of elephunk and telethong." (applause) Thank you.

00:09:55 Q: I should mention for the record that we are accompanied by Linda Rzesniowiecki, who is serving under protest as videographer. And that was her clapping. So, yeah, I remember that one too. Did your parents read to you?

00:10:12 Yonis: I do not remember that. There are family stories that I taught myself to read at an early age before I started school, and I suspect that it was just a need to keep up with the family, since my older sister had started school and since my parents were big readers, that meant everybody else in the family was reading. So I think that probably was my motivation.

00:10:40 Q: So how much older was your older sister?

00:10:43 Yonis: Three and a half years.

00:10:44 Q: Ah, and your younger sister?

00:10:45 Yonis: She's eight years younger than I am.

00:10:47 Q: Oh, wow. So did your older sister play with you, bully you, teach you the ropes? What was the relationship?

00:10:56 Yonis: In our neighborhood there was a really strange belief that one played with children only exactly one's age and in one's grade, possibly because there were so many kids available in that size co-op; there were three different sections. So, no, I don't ever remember playing together, we must have in the house at some point in time, and done some things together. I know when I tried to tag along after her and her friends I was not welcome. (laughing) And my mother never did one of those:, “You have to take your sister with you,” so I was not forced on her.

00:11:46 Q: Did your mother work or did she stay home?

00:11:48 Yonis: She always assumed that she would [work] until she married my father. My father had had the experience of his mother having to work to support the family, and so he insisted that his children's mother would stay home. When my younger sister was school age and gone during the day—we called it threatening—my mother would threaten that she would go out and get a job, and we felt like we were calling her bluff, and she realized that any part-time job that she might have gotten in the neighborhood, working for a local business, was not exactly going to be mentally challenging. Both my parents had college degrees, and my father had a masters.

00:12:34 Q: Where did they go to school?



00:12:36 Yonis: My mother graduated from Hunter College, at night school, back in those days. My father went to Cooper Union [The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art], and I believe that's where he did his masters also.

00:12:50 Q: How did they meet?

00:12:51 Yonis: Um, my father had worked in the Board of Education, civil service, and he had already left, and was coming back to visit some people when my mother was working there, and that's how they first met.

00:13:08 Q: Did your mother mind not working?

00:13:12 Yonis: I don't think so. She—as she says now, when we discuss whether she will ever go into assisted living, and under what circumstances—she does not make friends easily, she's rather shy, and I don't know, as I said, I don't know that that kind of routine job—because we're talking about the fifties into the sixties, and she wasn't talking about going back to be a career woman—that any job she might have in the neighborhood that would be part time would not be challenging. She would rather stay home and read something she'd picked up from the library --, that was much more interesting.

00:14:02 Q: So she was there when you got home every day.

00:14:06 Yonis: Yes, she was.

00:14:06 Q: Was there milk and cookies?

00:14:08 Yonis: (laughs) No, I do not remember us being treated to milk and cookies in the afternoon, because it would spoil dinner. (Price laughs)

00:14:18 Q: So, your other sisters must have been very good students as well, since they both went to Barnard.

00:14:25 Yonis: Yes.

00:14:25 Q: Were you guys competitive?

0:14:28 Yonis: Um, not really. My older sister was much quieter in school, and I was much more outgoing as a kid; I would get on my report cards that I talked too much in school. So that Cynthia was not as well known, even though her grades were just as good. When I had to follow her I was not at a disadvantage, because she was not this, Oh, everybody remembered her; she was very bright and very good, but quiet. And Eleanor did not follow me through high school; she applied for and got into—they were starting to decentralize the New York City schools, and my mother wasn't happy with which high school she would end up going to, which would be different than the one that my older sister and I went to, and she got into Hunter College High

School. And at that time they started at junior high level, so she went there on her own and didn't have to follow either of us.

00:15:51 Q: So where did you go to high school?

00:15:53 Yonis: Franklin K. Lane [High School], on the border between Queens and Brooklyn. It was rumored that the borough dividing line actually ran through the principal's office, but I don't know if that was true. (laughs)

00:16:07 Q: I've heard that rumor. (laughs) And what was that high school like back then?

00:16:14 Yonis: Um, there was a lot of tension; we're talking about midsixties. It was a racial tension. Not so much between black students—I don't remember that large a black population—but Italian versus Hispanic, and I had an older sister who had gone through ahead of me, and I don't know whether I can say I profited, but I followed her advice, which was find a teacher and work for that teacher through your lunch hour, and stay out of the lunch room. Because the lunchroom was generally where fights started. And that's what I did; I worked for the college advisor, and ate lunch in her office. Also, I am—some of my friends who were more the nerdy types worked between semesters helping the teachers to set up the program cards for the next semester, which at the time was all manually done. The teachers, at that point in time, would have already worked out who was teaching what classes in what classroom, and at the time that they allowed us in to help we would try and see what each student was set up for and if they could get into the class that they wanted, and if they wanted something else like band that

conflicted with their honors English, sometimes we would help manipulate that: Well, they can get into this other section of honors English, but it's full right now, so if we can find somebody in that honor's English class who can take it at a different time, because they have study hall then, then we'll swap them out. And all done in pencil and eraser, by hand—

00:18:15 Q: For several thousand kids.

00:18:16 Yonis: Uh-huh.

00:18:16 Q: Wow!

00:18:17 Yonis: Well, we just helped. We weren't the primary responsibility, but we were allowed to come in and help.

00:18:24 Q: And no wonder you got interested in software engineering. (laughs)

00:18:27 Yonis: Well, the thing that I remember most about that—other than the fact that it was fun, so yes, in the sense of software engineering of trying to solve that kind of a logistics problem—was because of the dress codes, we got special permission to come in between semesters over winter break wearing pants if we agreed to go immediately into the restroom and take the pants off under our dresses, because the principal wasn't going to allow us to wear pants to school even though school was not in session. Times have changed. (both laugh)

00:19:12 Q: And we also had to wear skirts, no pants. Yes. So were you tracked for honors classes?

00:19:21 Yonis: It depended upon your grades, so they didn't necessarily have a track, but yes I was in mostly honors classes. They did not really have AP [Advanced Placement] classes. They could have but they didn't, not at that high school.

00:19:40 Q: And did you notice that different kids were in the honors class than in the regular classes?

00:19:47 Yonis: Um, I ended up taking very few regular classes so that I didn't have much of a comparison. But I did know one statistic: New York City High Schools—New York State High Schools at that time had Regents state exams, and you had to pass so many exams in so many subjects in order to get an academic diploma, and there was another level for commercial diploma, which was back in the days when the girls would take stenography and typing, and the boys would take shop. And then if you couldn't pass the Regents exam—and we had not only regular classes and honors classes, we also in some subjects had classes that were specifically review for the Regents, to get you to pass the Regents. And if you couldn't pass the Regents you got a general diploma, which was twelve years of attendance. And I do know from the college advisor that we graduated more general diplomas than academic and commercial combined. So I was aware that in honors classes I was pretty much in an elite group that this was not where the rest of the school was.

00:21:10 Q: And in terms of the ethnicity of your classmates, did it look different than the school as a whole?

00:21:15 Yonis: Um, we certainly had few black students in those tracks at that time. I do know we had some Asian students.

00:21:29 Q: How about Latino and Italian students?

00:21:32 Yonis: Um, I'm sure we had some, and not being good on remembering names, I can't.

00:21:41 Q: And who were you friends with in high school? What crowd did you hang out with? What activities did you do?

00:21:46 Yonis: I didn't do any extracurricular activities. I didn't feel at home in any crowd. I made some friends with some kids who had gone to a K-8 school, and were kind of nerdy outsiders like me. So, no group at all. Did not take music in high school, so didn't get in with the orchestra people either.

00:22:20 Q: And were you particularly interested in math back then? I know you went on to major in math.

00:22:27 Yonis: Um, I always enjoyed it. It made sense to me. And I felt that it came rather easily to me, it was—I felt at the time that I got to Barnard that being a math major was, for me,

one of the easiest things that I could do because it had so few requirements in terms of required courses, and no papers! One doesn't do papers, you know, twelve-page term papers in math classes.

00:23:09 Q: So we'll get on to that experience very shortly, but I'm curious, in high school or even before, were there teachers that you particularly latched onto who really cared about little Beverly Johnson, and really nurtured you? Teachers that, you know, you would write thank you notes to if you wrote a book?

00:23:27 Yonis: I really don't have memories of specific teachers that I felt really promoted me; there was one who was the sister-in-law of a friend of my mother's, and I had her for first grade, and she had heard through her sister-in-law, Oh, she's so bright and she reads, and her attitude was, Yeah, I've seen kids come into my classroom who supposedly can read; we'll see what happens when I get her. And I do not remember it but I am told that she was very impressed with me. And they changed things around in the elementary school so that I had her again in fourth grade, and I thought she was my great champion, and so I told her what I felt was in confidence that I wrote the best poetry in the class, which was a pretty gusty thing to announce, but, and so she decided we would have a contest, and I lost. So, I felt that I didn't really have a champion in her.

00:24:47 Q: And in high school?

00:24:48 Yonis: Again, I don't remember specific teachers as doing anything to champion me. I know that, again, through my older sister's recommendation, I took a semester of journalism, even though I had no intention of working on the paper or the yearbook, because the journalism teacher, according to my older sister, was the only one who actually taught you English principles of syntax and usage, and as opposed to just reading literature, knowing how to write. And I know that there was an American history teacher who was feared for being impossible to get a good grade with, and he liked all essay questions, and so the very first time—and this was a year class—and the very first time in the first semester that he gave a test I tried very hard to write a really good essay, and wrote myself out a little outline, and really tried to make an essay out of it. And he gave it back to me and it wasn't as high a grade as I wanted on it—I don't remember what the exact grade was—so I took it back to him to ask him how I could improve it. And he was rather vague about what was in the essay compared to what he was looking for. And there was one thing that got me through high school and college, which was somehow I used to be able to figure out what it was that the teacher was looking for and give it back to them. And so somewhere I glommed on to the fact that he was not interested in the structure or whether I had made a pretty essay out of it, that he really did want to know what you had learned about the subject, and so every other test that I had from him, it was free association. I would dump onto that paper as fast as I could write everything that I remembered about that unit in American history, and scribbled in margins, and extra thoughts in between lines, and I always did well because that was what he was looking for.

00:27:26 Q: You could be a great coach for high school kids, (laughs) to help them figure out what it is that their teachers want from them. So when it came to applying to Barnard did you



really want to go there? What was your thinking, where else were you thinking about going, what did your counselor say, what did your parents say, how was the decision made?

00:27:52 Yonis: I was very young when I went to college. My birthday is at the end of the year, and at that time in New York City if you were born before December 31st, you started kindergarten in the fall. And so being born all the way at the end of October, I was one of the youngest kids in the class. And then New York City had a gifted program that they called Special Progress. And in seventh grade they took an entire class of us, which would be equivalent to an honors class, and skipped us from seventh to ninth grade; we had our own—well, we had our own classes, and so what it was supposed to be was accelerated, that we did three years of junior high school in two. So we did that altogether as a class, but that meant instead of graduating high school at seventeen and a half—because I wouldn't have turned eighteen yet—I actually graduated at sixteen and a half. I was interested in avoiding New York City City Colleges, because they were so big, and I had already known about Barnard from my older sister, and it was small and I liked that idea. And I seem to have picked up somewhere the idea of a women's college, because one of the other places I was thinking of was Radcliffe [College], which doesn't exist anymore. And when I was going through a sophomore slump, and thinking, Oh, I shouldn't be at Barnard, I should have gone to Radcliff, I found out from my father that he never intended to let me go away to college, not at that age. He wasn't going to let me go live in a dorm, and use my own judgment. I also knew that if—I had won a small Regents scholarship, and if I went to any college outside of the state of New York I would lose it, so that was a financial consideration as far as I was concerned.

00:30:10 Q: So you decided to stay at Barnard, and you graduated from Barnard?

00:30:13 Yonis: Well, I applied to Barnard early decision. I had committed that much, and so I ended up not applying any place else because I did get in early decision. And, yes, I stayed, and graduated on time, four years.

00:30:31 Q: And you were a commuter until almost the very end.

00:30:34 Yonis: Yes, for three years I commuted.

00:30:38 Q: So, just shut your eyes for a sec, but not really, (laughter) and think about what your Barnard experience was like; your first semester of classes, the first day of classes, what were your impressions of your fellow students and of the professors? Were you nervous? Did you feel confident that you were prepared? What was it like those first weeks and months?

00:31:02 Yonis: Um—again, I have not got a good memory; I remember bits and pieces. I remember that when I started college I wanted to be more preppy, I wanted a new wardrobe, I wanted to fit in with the girls who had grown up in Manhattan. And luckily for me, the end of the sixties and the hippie movement came along, because jeans and T-shirts were much more my style than little pleated skirts and sweater sets. I remember that when I went to go register for calculus, um, I think it was Professor [Ellis R.] Kolchin himself, who was the chairman of the math department, said that they had too many students for this level of calculus, and that they were going to split the class, but instead of just making two equal sections he was going to try an

experiment to see if he had enough students who had had calculus in high school that we could skip the first college semester and take the sequence of calculus classes starting with the second semester. So that became very interesting because we were a smaller section than would have been in calculus, so I remember that.

00:32:35 Q: Because you'd had it in high school?

00:32:37 Yonis: Because I had had it in high school, even though it wasn't an AP class by any means, I had had calculus.

00:32:43 Q: So was it hard?

00:32:45 Yonis: Um, no I didn't find it hard, until the next year when we got an Asian professor with a very heavy accent, and a friend of mine once said that mentally she would run through her vocabulary of what his pronunciation was, and if she couldn't come up with a word for it she knew we were on a new topic. It just made—that made it a little more difficult because he was trying to introduce new concepts and we didn't know whether it was his accent because we didn't have anything to compare it to it being a new topic. But he couldn't help it and I'm sure he was brilliant, but it made it difficult. I do know that somewhere along the line, whether it was the first year or some other year I really could not tell you, that I finally felt compared to high school that I belonged, that I was now in the company of intelligent women. I had seen some intelligent girls in high school who did all the best they could to hide that, because they didn't want to show anybody up, they didn't want to—particularly any boys, so they would downplay any time they

had an honors class or did something well. It was very refreshing to be at Barnard where the students, the young women were in charge of everything; if it needed to be done, if it was the newspaper or the yearbook, or class president, women were going to do it.

00:34:34 Q: And there were lots of women in your math classes.

00:34:37 Yonis: Um, not as many as one might think. I think the year I graduated maybe there were twelve math majors. But there were a few of us, and we didn't have a problem in math.

00:34:54 Q: So did you take courses at Columbia [College]?

00:34:56 Yonis: Most of my courses were at Columbia, yes. There were a couple of math classes that were given only at Barnard, but most were at Columbia. One of the best things that happened was Barnard had—now there's a whole department, but they had a sequence of two classes in computer science. And that's when I fell in love with computer science.

00:35:22 Q: Wow, that was early on.

00:35:24 Yonis: Yes.

00:35:28 Q: And they were at Barnard.

00:35:29 Yonis: Yes, those were Barnard classes, not Columbia classes, or engineering classes.

00:35:35 Q: And what was it about computer science that won your heart?

00:35:39 Yonis: Um, there was something about being asked to write a program to get a sequence of steps that would get a result that in my mind reminded me of doing puzzles, and my reaction was, This isn't work, this is fun. I had gotten a job one summer in an actuarial firm, because I didn't know what else one did with a math major, except teach it or become an actuary. And I thought that if I had to do that for a living I'd go out and shoot myself; I didn't see that being an actuary had anything fun about it at all. It was certainly more statistics and statistical analysis than pure math, but computer science was fun.

00:36:40 Q: So were your friends at Barnard the other math majors?

00:36:45 Yonis: Um, not so much. My best friend was a government major who went on to law school. And we were friends with some physics majors who had to take a lot of math.

00:37:01 Q: And were they other commuters?

00:37:04 Yonis: Um, in the beginning, yes. There just seemed to be more of an affinity with people who had to—with other women who had to get up and face the grind of getting on a bus or subway, and trudging home in the evenings, and not having the kind of freedom to just run up to your room, or go over to the library when you felt like it, but having a beginning and an end to the day that felt more alike.

00:37:40 Q: Who was your best friend?

00:37:42 Yonis: Donna Krone. She's since passed away.

00:37:44 Q: Oh, I'm sorry. And let's talk about the spring of '68. How did you feel about what was going on? What was it like to go home every night? Did your parents ask questions about it?

00:38:02 Yonis: Um—I felt as I did in so many other things that I was just on the outside; it never occurred to me that I could go participate in this. I was very much against the Vietnam War. I didn't quite understand the—what's the word I'm looking for—the intended outcome of holding a strike. But I wasn't opposed to it, I wasn't going to oppose it, but I certainly was not the kind of person who would participate. I'd just feel it inside but not really join the lines. And I was lucky because I was still a freshman so most of my classes were over at Barnard and there was no interruption, but I was still taking calculus, and the math building was one of the occupied buildings, and Dr. [Ellis] Kolchin chose to—the weather was good; he continued his lectures on the lawn in front of the math building, he got a portable rolling blackboard, and he would not cross the picket lines and go into the occupied building, and so we were able to finish the semester without having any conflict there.

00:39:42 Q: Well that was even after the arrests, there was a picket line, and so he had classes outside of the building? Okay, yeah. So were you on campus when the arrests happened or were you snug at home in bed?

00:40:01 Yonis: No, I must have been home. I would not have remembered if it wasn't for the previous interviews and the video that they had shut the campus, but I'm sure I did not bother to come in when it was announced that it was shut. It's a long trudge by bus and subway to just look at the outside (laughs) of something.

00:40:30 Q: And what about your family and your neighbors back in Queens? Do you remember the conversation?

00:40:36 Yonis: I didn't really have to have much interaction with the neighbors, and I don't think they realized where I was. In those days almost nobody knew what Barnard was or where Barnard was, and if they knew I was going there they probably had no idea that it had anything to do with Columbia. And my parents just—didn't talk about it, didn't ask me about it, I would have gone through life assuming that they trusted me to not get into trouble, whatever that meant. But, no, we didn't really discuss it.

00:41:24 Q: And what about your sisters, were they interested?

00:41:28 Yonis: Um—I don't remember having any conversations with either of my sisters about it. My older sister would have also been still at school and still commuting, and I don't remember what the impact was on her, or even discussing it.

00:41:49 Q: Wouldn't have that been her senior year?

00:41:51 Yonis: Yes. But to this day we've never had a conversation about the spring of '68.

00:42:00 Q: Wow! And then again in—I was away so I know less about it, but in the spring of '70—

00:42:09 Yonis: Yes, um—

00:42:12 Q: Same thing?

00:42:16 Yonis: The spring of '70 seemed even more remote and removed; I didn't quite understand, again, why students would find it necessary to shut down Columbia. I know that there were always talks about research done for the military-industrial complex and therefore that was the connection, but I didn't see how protesting that at Columbia was going to stop the bombing of Laos. So I felt much less involved, and I remember feeling slightly guilty that I took advantage; because of the turmoil, students were given the option of taking classes pass/fail. And I used that to (phone rings)—on one math class that I was having a great deal of difficulty with that year, the instructor was rather junior, and— [she mentions phone call coming in and they discuss it]

00:43:45 Yonis: —and I knew that I was taking advantage of it because certainly my own personal activities had no reason why I needed to only take it Pass/Fail, but I decided to do that



to keep my GPA [grade point average] from going down, because it was a problem class for a lot of us.

00:44:08 Q: So this is an area where you're going to have to help me out, because what I know about higher—about math at the college level you could put in your eye and still see pretty well. But what kind of courses did you as a math major take, and what kind of math was particularly enjoyable to you, or useful to you later on when you became a computer engineer?

00:44:32 Yonis: Well, as I said, at the time math was one of the easiest majors to graduate with if you understood math because it only required eight courses in your major. And there was advanced algebra, and things like differential equations, which I could not manipulate now if my life depended on it. I have forgotten what I knew, because I never had to use it. But as I said I did run into computer science through the Barnard math department, and just fell in love with the whole idea of programming. And also one class that I took was through a graduate department of—oh, I can't even remember the name of the department, whether it was statistics or something like that, and it was Theory of Computability, and it got into very abstract notions of whether something could be computed. And it was there that I learned of the Turing Test, named after the infamous Alan Turing, where he imagined a very simplistic computer that was just some endless tape that could go forward or back, and his test was if you could imagine some number of steps at which eventually the computation would stop, or whether it would have to keep going back and forth and back and forth and essentially not come to an end, in which case it was not computable by this abstraction of this mental machine. And I do know that I had had enough trouble with Advanced Algebra—the instructor was reputed to be brilliant, but he was more

entertaining than instructive, and I had never been one to learn from the book; I needed to hear the lecture, and so I ended up dropping that because I didn't need it to graduate. And the theory of computability fascinated me because it was the first truly, in my mind, very abstract concept where it was all just mental problems of how to think about something [so] that I really sweated for the grade. So I remember that one—that class very much because I worked harder on that than I did in most of the other classes [where] there was some kind of technique that you had to learn and you had to apply and be tested on, but that one, umm. But yeah, there were computer classes that one could take at the [Columbia] School of Engineering, there were the two through the Barnard math department, and then there was this in the Graduate School.

00:48:03 Q: So when you graduated from Barnard you knew what your career was going to be?

00:48:08 Yonis: Yes, I knew I was going to go forward in computer science; I didn't know what, and in fact I went on to graduate school.

00:48:14 Q: And where did you go to graduate school?

00:48:16 Yonis: UC Irvine [University of California, Irvine], which is how I ended up in California.

00:48:19 Q: Ah! And you went straight from Barnard?

00:48:23 Yonis: Yes.

00:48:24 Q: And what was that like?

00:48:26 Yonis: It was a—the department was tiny at the time, and the feeling was that there was so little to learn in computer science that they were prejudiced against people who had an undergraduate degree in computer science, because (laughs) they felt they already knew everything. It was strange. (laughs)

00:48:53 Q: Well, you were lucky; your degree was in math.

00:48:56 Yonis: Yes.

00:49:00 Q: And so really you're one of the pioneers; you were studying the field as it was developing.

00:49:06 Yonis: Um, to some extent, but I didn't understand how I was going to research something new, and it was a PhD program, so I ended up not staying.

00:49:19 Q: So you got your masters there?

00:49:21 Yonis: No, at that time they didn't even grant a masters, so I just left with a handshake.

00:49:29 Q: Was it a culture clash? A born and bred New Yorker replanted in California?

00:49:36 Yonis: No, I don't think so. I know that initially I had a great deal of trouble dealing with Orange County, which was nowhere near developed as it is now, and the whole idea of bedroom communities, and housing developments, and then you had to get in your car and drive no matter what it was you wanted, whether it was a supermarket or a movie theatre, sidewalks were deserted. But I've since gotten used to that. I still have trouble with it being a closed community with a fence around it, and these are all the houses, and then all the commercial stuff is somewhere else, but—but it was interesting. And I did not get into graduate student housing, and I ended up sharing an apartment with somebody down in Newport Beach, actually down on the beach, it was very different. It was a winter rental, and so that's why it was affordable.

00:50:51 Q: So you became a beach girl.

00:50:54 Yonis: No, not at all! In fact I found out that it gets foggy over the winter, and quite damp, and it hurt my ears. (Price laughs) That sea wind blowing by, it actually—

00:51:13 Q: It's funny; you've helped me out with something; I think it's a Cole Porter song, "The Lady is a Tramp," and there's a line that says, "She hates California; it's cold and it's damp—"

00:51:24 Yonis: Actually, I'm sure that he's singing about San Francisco. Absolutely.

00:51:29 Q: Oh, okay. But it sounds like your experience. So what happened after you shook hands with the professors at Irvine?

00:51:38 Yonis: I went to look for a job, back in the days when one actually opened a newspaper and looked through the help-wanted ads. And I got a job with a company that was—I was on the software side of it but the entrepreneur who had founded it was also trying to develop something on the edge of personal computers, the idea of a microprocessor, a computer that would fit on your desk. At that time that was really revolutionary; computers meant, you know, IBMs that had their own room and their own air conditioning system. And I wrote software manuals for them for a year and a half. He had gotten a contract from General Dynamics, which was also building microprocessors, and that we were going to do all their technical writing.

00:52:44 Q: And what was the software back then that you were writing about?

00:52:49 Yonis: I was writing about user manuals for their operating system and their compilers, user manuals for other developers who were going to use this General Dynamic product. So it was way before the days when you thought of something like buying a Windows computer that has all these applications available for you; it was really for businesses that were going to then have to have their applications specially made for them.

00:53:23 Q: Wow, so it was really for the people—you were writing for the people who were then going to design tailor-made, bespoke applications.

00:53:32 Yonis: Yes. Yes. And it was—since there was no other manual we were just supposed to test the thing and figure out how it worked and then describe it. (both laugh) That's what we were, was their tech writers.

00:53:50 Q: And who was the “we” back then?

00:53:53 Yonis: It was called Osborne and Associates, Adam Osborne.

00:53:57 Q: But who were the people you were working alongside?

00:54:00 Yonis: Um, we were a very small office out in Anaheim someplace. And again, don't remember too many names.

00:54:09 Q: But were there women among you or was it mostly guys?

00:54:12 Yonis: Yes, yes there were.

00:54:21 Q: And were women generally accepted in this field?

00:54:25 Yonis: Yes, computer programming felt more open than any of the other sciences at that point in time because it was so young. I think the people who wanted to go into physics and chemistry had a much harder row to hoe than computer science.

00:54:44 Q: So at the time you didn't experience—and in many of the interviews that I've seen and the ones that I've done there was a lot of—this was—you know, we were like riding the second wave of feminism, and we were breaking into fields that had been mostly male, and I interviewed both a psychologist who was in academia, and a doctor, in neurology, and both of them had nice, big, gory stories about combating sexism. That wasn't your experience?

00:55:19 Yonis: Um, no, it wasn't. I think it was a little more subtle. When I got fired from Osborne and Associates, I found my way into the defense industry, and defense programming, and spent the rest of my career there working for defense contractors.

00:55:50 Q: Stop, and let's talk about the experience of getting fired. What happened?

00:55:54 Yonis: Um—I believe that it was planned that they were going to let me go, and whether they thought they were being kind to me or not, they smiled at me, and the managers and Mr. Osborne himself, and his wife threw the Christmas party, and then let me go on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. (laughs) Called me in, and fired me, and I went down to file for unemployment, and they said, Well, were you told that your work was not any good? And I said no. And I was never given any deadlines, I was never given any time—and any reviews, so I just worked on these things and had no idea when I was supposed to be done or even what done looked like. And so when the manager of that Anaheim office called me in and he said, “Well, didn't you understand when we kept giving you different things to do?” I said I thought the priorities had shifted. And so I went down, filed for unemployment, they called the manager and he had the courtesy to not

lie when they asked him whether I had been given any review in writing or orally that my work was not acceptable, and he had the grace to say no, I had not, because I hadn't. So.

00:57:20 Q: Wow!

00:57:21 I did get into my first auto accident on the way home of that day though, because I was a little upset. (laughs)

00:57:27 Q: I can imagine. And you just didn't see it coming?

00:57:29 Yonis: No, I had no idea. The accident luckily was very, very minor; at a light I wasn't paying enough attention, and I rolled into the back of a telephone truck, and they would have had to fill out so much paperwork, they were so glad that I wasn't going to report anything. (both laugh)

00:57:50 Q: But you didn't see the firing coming?

00:57:52 Yonis: No. No, I had no idea.

00:57:53 Q: Did they let other people go as well?

00:57:55 Yonis: Not to my knowledge. I didn't stay in touch with people in that office, and I—  
no.



00:58:03 Q: Bad experience!

00:58:06 Yonis: Um, it was certainly, um, a shock. I thought I was doing a good job, but evidently they needed people who were much more self-starters than I was, certainly at the time.

00:58:28 Q: So then you went (laughs)—do you think it had anything to do with your gender?

00:58:33 Yonis: No. No. I don't. I really think it had to do with the fact that I just didn't know when I was done, and I didn't know how to ask for guidance, so I just muddled along.

00:58:49 Q: It was a managing-up issue in a way.

00:58:53 Yonis: Well, I think that the office was just too small and they didn't have any experience; they didn't know how to manage me or what to do with somebody as fresh out of school as me.

00:59:05 Q: Uh huh, the other people weren't fresh out of school?

00:59:08 Yonis: I don't think so. One guy I know had been in the military, so he was considerably older. One of the women had come down from the Berkley office and she was older; I think she may have started as his secretary, I don't know, but—

00:59:27 Q: So you got into the defense industry.

00:59:29 Yonis: Yes.

00:59:29 Q: And how did that happen?

00:59:32 Yonis: Um, I went back to—through the unemployment office I was looking at jobs, and there had been a big downturn in aerospace and defense, and so they sent me over, since I had a technical background, to some volunteers who had been given space in the unemployment office, and were helping each other because these were guys who had had twenty years in some really minute area of, you know, radio something or other, and were now out of work. So they looked at my resume and said, Well, you're straight of school; you'll have no problem whatsoever. And I ended up going back to Irvine, and looking at people who had come to recruit on campus and people who said they had openings, and ended up finding an opening and working for Logicon [was merged into Northrop Grumman], where I had a manager who was kind of the opposite; he was wonderful at taking new graduates and bringing them on board, and not necessarily mentoring them, but giving them clear guidelines of what they needed to do and when they needed it done. And those were the days before desktop computers, and so if you wrote a memo or something like that the secretary had to type it, and he was so protective of her work that you had to submit it to him in longhand first so that he could edit it before you could give it to her to type. (Price laughs) He didn't want her wasting her time.

01:01:14 Q: That's so funny, that—a picture of people in the computer industry writing things out in longhand. I love it.

01:01:23 Yonis: But that's how long ago it was.

01:01:28 Q: So what was the work like, who did you work alongside, what was enjoyable, what challenges did you encounter?

01:01:36 Yonis: That was my second revelation; my first at Barnard was working with intelligent women, my second was working with engineers, who thought like I did, and that was also nice; I felt much more at home there than at the small office. We were doing—in our particular department that I'd been hired into we were doing analysis; it was a requirement by the Department of Defense that if one contractor had developed the software and tested it, that anything that controlled nuclear warheads had to have a completely independent contract to check that software. And I tried to explain to people—well, at that time it was TRW [TRW Inc.] who was developing the software, and I was working for Logicon—I said, "They are running tests to prove that it will do what it says it does; we are running tests to prove that it will not do anything else." So it's a different focus of the tests; we weren't going to repeat what they had tested, that you know, yes if you type in this command it will do the right thing. Our job was to make sure that there was no way to get into that logic through hacking, or accident that you had had to type that command in in order to get to that logic.

01:03:09 Price: Wow, so you—

01:03:11 It was called nuclear cross-check, yes.

01:03:13 Q: So you had to think of what people might want to get it to do other than what it was designed to do, and try—you had to try to be a hacker?

01:03:23 Yonis: Um, well, we didn't have those kinds of resources; it was actually mostly mental. We would actually read the code and to figure out what it did, and not trust the comments, and not trust the documentation, and then figure out in what ways you could enter that section of code.

01:03:45 Q: To get it to do something else?

01:03:47 Yonis: To get into that logic that might arm the missile or that might fire the missile, certainly, yes, or—

01:03:58 Q: Wow. So in this work did you discover problems that the developer missed?

01:04:05 Yonis: We normally found things that were very, very low level, and they went into a priority list at a very low priority. We did find some things but the important thing was that we had checked it. You didn't really want us to find anything major. I did, in fact, find one serious flaw but even that required somebody to hack into the system; it was not going to happen

accidentally. And of course we're not talking about Internet days when anybody can get onto the Internet and hack into these systems; they were closed computer systems.

01:04:49 Q: So what years are we talking about now?

01:04:53 Yonis: I worked at Logicon from 1974 to 1979. They were times of high inflation, and your salary raises were not keeping up with inflation, and so it was kind of well understood at that time that if you needed a big bump in salary you were going to have to change companies, and that's what I did in '79; I went over to TRW, and stayed there for thirty years.

01:05:24 Q: Oh, that's interesting, the very folks whose work you were checking you went and worked for them.

01:05:29 Yonis: Uh huh.

01:05:29 Q: And what did you do for them?

01:05:31 Yonis: Um, a lot of software analysis. Interestingly, what appealed to me about computers and the idea of solving problems, I was never paid to write deliverable code. I did a lot of testing, and I did a lot of requirements analysis, working with the customer, trying to find out what it is that the customer really needed because sometimes they wrote two different types of requirements; they thought they were telling you what to do and instead they were telling you

how to do it, because they were confused in their minds. And so in some cases they were overly constraining the software, because it wasn't really what they wanted.

01:06:35 Q: Right, so you had to help them clarify their goals.

01:06:38 Yonis: Yes. And almost all the time that I ever worked, it was always a question—since I worked in the software side we were always developing future systems. And so there was always a budget crunch because you support your current soldiers with whatever they're doing and whatever they need, whether it's new boots or new bullets, but future software systems are a pile of money that can be stolen from in times of tight budgets; things can be stretched out, things can be cancelled. So we would very often get to go back to the customer and negotiate, Okay, this is the budget that you have, we can't build everything you've specified, so let's figure out what's most important to you.

01:07:41 Q: Well, it's interesting, it sounds like you had a whole lot more interpersonal action going on, a whole lot more care of customers than people who might have been sitting and developing code.

01:07:55 Yonis: Yes. Yes, it did turn out that way. I found out that, just as I in high school and college felt that I could figure out what it was the teacher was looking for in order to give it back in an exam, um, I think that ended up being my forte, was being able to see the big picture of what the customer was trying to accomplish and also see how the pieces fit in so that I could talk to the developers, the coders, and sometimes they would have their blinders on just a little too

tight because they were given these requirements and their code was going to do that, and my question was, Well, which other piece of code is going to call you, and are they going to pass you what you think you're getting? You know, who's checking it for you, and making sure all the pieces snapped together.

01:09:01 Q: This is interesting because you've depicted yourself as a bit of an introvert, from a long line of introverts—

01:09:10 Yonis: Yes.

01:09:10 Q: —but yet you had this intellectual empathy with your customer. And I think the two might be even connected somehow.

01:09:20 Yonis: Well, like an engineer, if we can focus on what the problem is then I can have a great meeting with you. I have trouble with organizations and boards when I sit back and I go, “This is a power struggle; I don't want to be here. You know, if you want to talk about what the problem is, and we'll all focus like engineers on getting it solved that's fine, but you seem to like to hear yourself talk.”

01:09:49 Q: Was that a problem for you in your career, the office politics that—?

01:09:57 Yonis: No, I don't think I ever ranked high enough to have to deal with that. And that was another thing: at one point in time I actually got interviewed by the Equal Opportunity

Office [Office of Equal Opportunity], because they said that the number of years I had been in the same level stuck out like a sore thumb and did I think I was being discriminated against? And at that time I had small children, and I said, “No, I think it's been a change in my focus; I don't want right now to move up the ladder, I want to stay in a job that I know so that I can focus at home.” But I think over the years when it came a lot closer to retiring I do believe that it showed up in raises, and that there was discrimination, because money was not something that people readily talked about, so I really didn't know what my colleagues made.

01:10:58 Q: So you think people at the same level were making more than you?

01:11:01 Yonis: Yes. Once, by accident, my boss gave—close to when I did retire—my boss gave me his raise slip instead of mine, so I got to find out how much he was making. And I said that I thought that I was a little underpaid, and that I understood that he had taken on the responsibility to be boss and that I didn't want to, but I was still disappointed to find out that he was already making more than me. And he said, “Well, you and I have about the same amount of experience,” and I said, “No, I've got ten years on you.” So I think it was there and I think it was subtle. I did know women who had risen to higher levels, and don't know whether they were compensated equally with their male equivalents.

01:12:04 Q: So it sounds like the picture you're painting is in a field where the opportunities for women were there, and women were welcome but, like in many industries, they were automatically—they might have automatically been offered less money than men to do the same work. That's what you suspect was going on?



01:12:29 Yonis: Yes. But again I have no proof; I don't know what other people made, and I was not ever privy to being in the room where I was being reviewed compared to other people. At one point in time I was a supervisor, and so I was in the process of reviewing people who were under me, but—

01:12:55 Q: Well, so then you knew what their salaries were.

01:12:57 Yonis: Yes.

01:12:57 Q: Uh-huh. And did you see any pattern in that?

01:13:02 Yonis: No, not at that level, because I was never more than first-line, and those were just straight employees, not managers and not supervisors, and I did not see a pattern like that. I did see a very strange engineering bias, which was they wanted to do a set of raises based on a curve fit, so they plotted all the current salaries and then they plotted where a set raise would take it. And because of their seniority with the company we had a couple of people who were not good performers but who had been with the company a long time and who were down at the bottom of the rankings, so the curve kind of went out again from the middle, and they were trying real hard to curve fit that and giving the guys at the bottom bigger raises. (laughs) And I said, “Wait a minute. You're now giving him a bigger raise than my person here in the middle who is doing so much better, just because—” So, I did see that, which I saw as an engineering bias: we just want the mathematical solution, we don't want to think about people. (laughs)

01:14:29 Q: That's an interesting bias. We have been talking about your career, and now let's talk about your personal life. (both laugh)

01:14:43 Howe: Her lazy lout of a husband?

01:14:44 Q: We've been joined by Basha's husband. And what's your name?

01:14:49 Howe: Fritz, it's a nickname. Daniel Howe.

01:14:53 Q: So let's go back to puberty. When did you have your first boyfriend?

01:15:02 Yonis: I didn't have a boyfriend until I was in college. Never even went to my high school prom, never had a date in high school.

01:15:11 Q: And so you started dating when you were at Barnard.

01:15:14 Yonis: Yes.

01:15:15 Q: Uh huh, and who did you date?

01:15:17 Yonis: I met one guy at freshman orientation and I went to a mixer with him, and then I went to a football game with him the following week. When I went down to meet him for the

mixer I was afraid I wouldn't recognize (laughs) him, it was terrible, but he recognized me, I guess. And my mother told me that I couldn't go out with him because he wasn't Jewish and since we got along so well together and since this was the beginning of college we'd just date for four years and then get married, so I actually broke it off. So I figure I wasn't mature enough to be going out (laughs) if I could take my mother's reasoning like that.

01:16:04 Q: And did you see other guys at Barnard?

01:16:07 Yonis: Um, yeah, I remember the ending of one argument and one relationship with one of the guys who was in engineering school, same year I was, who told me, "You're a beautiful girl, and they're the best kind," and I said, "Thank you for the first part, but about the second—" (both laugh) And I went into my feminist rant, and he decided that he couldn't stand the idea of thinking of women as his competitors, it's like, "That's how you think of every man you walk into, you know, run into in school?" So that ended that relationship. My longest relationship was with someone I met through summer work; there was a very indirect family connection with a lawyer service, which is interesting that I should end up looking into paralegal all those years later. And we stayed together for a long time; he moved out to California.

01:17:18 Howe: I'm hearing more than I want to know.

01:17:21 Q: Oh, okay. (laughter) Let the record reflect that Fritz is out of here. Oh, good, now we can talk. Now we can get down. So he actually moved out to California with you?

01:17:35 Yonis: To be with me. I moved out first, and then I had decided that I had had enough of New York winters; I was staying for the weather, so he moved out to be with me, yes.

01:17:48 Q: And he was a Columbia student?

01:57:51 Yonis: No, not at all. He was a New Yorker but he had worked at United Lawyers Service, and that's how I had met him.

01:17:57 Q: Ah, that's how you met him. So how long did you stay together with him?

01:18:06 Yonis: Um, some number of years; something like seven years.

01:18:13 Q: So when you were breaking into the computer software field you were with this guy.

01:18:19 Yonis: Yes.

01:18:21 Q: And when did you get married and have children?

01:18:24 Yonis: Um, well when I broke up with Harvey I didn't really have dates; there were some guys that I worked with that I kind of sort of hung around with, but I wasn't really dating. And someone from the Barnard Club, from a much earlier year, set me up with this young man, who was a New Yorker, out in California, who was a doctor. And we didn't go out for very long, but I got pregnant. And I had—most of my Barnard friends all through college had thought about

“What I would do if I got pregnant?”. And I was amazed that males didn't have that same whole thought process. (laughs) And I had decided at that age, because I was already in my early thirties, that I would just have the baby by myself, and so I had my daughter, and I was—I dated a guy I knew through TRW for a while, and that's how I met Fritz; they were very good friends. And we got married when my daughter was three and had another daughter together.

01:19:54 Q: And what about your first daughter's dad? Is he in the picture at all?

01:19:58 Yonis: No, I told him that I was pregnant, and his response was that he felt that it was either all or nothing, and he even doubted that he was necessarily the father. And I thought about it and I decided that it was his loss, and that if, for whatever happened in his life over the next few years, if he suddenly decided to pop in because he needed a daughter, his wife couldn't have children, whatever it was, that he was going to have to fight his way in, so I didn't even name him on her birth certificate. I found out that in California when you register the birth in the hospital, or certainly then, that there were two answers, which one was Unknown, and the other one was Declined to State, and so I declined to state who her father was.

01:20:89 Q: And has she ever asked about him?

01:21:01 Yonis: Um, at one point. It was kind of a pre-adolescent, tween rebellion about, you know, if she knew her father that she would get treated better than by us, but not really, no. She has known Fritz since she was born and he's been her father, the only one she remembers, so—

01:21:37 Q: So how did you tell her about that?

01:21:44 Yonis: Uh, I don't even remember making it a specific conversation. Somehow we always knew that Fritz was her stepfather I married later.

01:22:08 Q: So she knew that—

01:22:09 Yonis: Oh, yes.

01:22:10 Q: It wasn't a surprise to her—

01:22:10 Yonis: No

01:22:11 Q: —when she was older?

01:22:11 Yonis: No.

01:22:15 Q: And Fritz adopted her?

01:22:18 Yonis: Um, he was going through the process, and the attorney wanted all kinds of information that was difficult for him to get because it was in archives, like he wanted proof of Fritz's divorce from his first wife which had happened many, many years before that, and the files had gone to the archives. So Fritz retired early to be with the kids so that we didn't have to

have childcare and babysitting, and Social Security [the Social Security Administration] didn't require that he had formerly adopted her because he was living in that position and had been for a certain amount of time, and so we just let the formal adoption drop.

01:23:10 Q: So Fritz is older than you?

01:23:12 Yonis: Considerably, yes.

01:23:15 Q: And what was his work?

01:23:17 Yonis: He is California licensed in pest control, termite inspection and fumigation.

01:23:28 Q: And you met him through a mutual friend.

01:23:31 Yonis: Yes.

01:23:31 Q: Somebody that you were dating, actually.

01:23:34 Yonis: Yes, and he didn't even ask me out until he was sure that everything between me and Dave was over.

01:23:43 Q: How long did you date before you got married?

01:23:46 Yonis: About a year, I think. That's all.

01:23:54 Q: And so your daughter knew him from a very early age.

01:23:59 Yonis: Yes.

01:24:02 Q: So let's talk about what it was like to be working and raising small children, although Fritz helped you make that work.

01:24:10 Yonis: Yes.

01:24:10 Q: But how did you parse that out? Who was responsible for what?

01:24:15 Yonis: Um, in my long-term relationships I have always been the primary breadwinner. And I always made more money than he did. And I guess I'm the control freak so I made most of the decisions, and still do. He was available for after school, things like that, get the girls to Girl Scouts or piano lessons, or whatever they needed, but he generally did not do a lot of cooking, cleaning; neither did I. And I was very, very fortunate that TRW had an official flex-time policy, and also we were treated as professionals and I had a lot of freedom, so if I thought it was necessary to take off an afternoon and watch my kid in a school play, my bosses had no problems with my making it up some other time in the week. And I was never an early riser, so—I generally got up with the kids, dropped one at school and then went on to work.



01:25:44 Q: So earlier on when we were talking about the Equal Opportunity Office coming to you, you had said that you preferred to stay at a non-managerial level.

01:25:57 Yonis: Oh, no, it was managerial, but it was just I was in that same position; my grade had not gone up in a long time.

01:26:07 Q: And how did that help you as a mother? What difference did it make to you in your parenting role to be in that position as opposed to a higher position?

01:26:19 Yonis: Well, I felt that I already knew how to do everything that I was doing. It was a question of where my mental energy was going rather than how much time I spent. I always found that work would absorb all the time you wanted to give it, and it was never an eight to five, or a nine to six job; talk about culture shock, I grew up in New York City, I thought the work day was nine to five, and I came out here and found that it was eight to five or nine to six; lunch hour didn't count. Wow, that was a culture shock!

01:27:01 Q: So people worked harder out in California than they did in New York?

01:27:04 Yonis: Um-hm. Extra hour a day.

01:27:06 Q: Who knew? Hmm, that's funny because I think of New Yorkers as being the most work-obsessed people in the world. Who knew? So your goal was to give your best mental energy to your kids?

01:27:32 Yonis: Um-hm. Yes, to be aware of what was going on with them, what they needed emotionally, psychologically at this point.

01:27:35 Q: Okay, so let's hear about your children.

01:27:40 Yonis: The oldest, Shifra, is now thirty. The younger one, Naomi, is twenty-six. Neither of them wanted to go to Barnard but they both went to women's colleges, and I'm very proud of that.

01:27:54 Q: Where'd they go?

01:27:55 Q: Shifra went to Mount Holyoke [College]. She was not at all daunted by the weather back East; she enjoyed it, and in fact my older sister, Cynthia, and her husband live there. She did not live with them at all but it made it convenient to store her stuff over the summer. My brother-in-law is a retired professor at Mount Holyoke. And the younger one went to Scripps College of the Claremont [University] Consortium; she didn't want to go that far from home, so up to the foothills was far enough for her.

01:28:34 Q: And what are they doing now?

01:28:35 Yonis: They both ended up in the sciences. Shifra ended up in chemistry and got a masters in oceanography, and she's working for an environmental consulting firm. Naomi went

on in biochemistry and got a masters, and she is working—I don't even know what it is she is doing right now; she was working as a kind of liaison person between suppliers and Genentech. That was a contract position and the contract was extended a little but was phased out. She got a new position and I really don't even understand what it is that she does from day to day. But I believe it is—it's still not lab work, it's still more deskwork and consulting or interfacing.

01:29:33 Q: Any grandchildren yet?

01:29:33 Yonis: No, no. The younger one is engaged, and they have a date for 2016.

01:29:44 Q: Congratulations, I guess.

01:29:45 Yonis: Thank you. (Price laughs) I know. When people congratulated me my first thought was, What did I have to do with it? (both laugh) I was three thousand miles away from my parents and planned all my own wedding, so I didn't think that I had to do anything for her, but—and the older one is wishing and hoping; she'd like to be in a different job, she'd like to be in a different position, but this is where it is now.

01:30:14 Q: Yeah, it's tough for the young'uns these days.

01:30:17 Yonis: Yeah, well she has the dog. (both laugh)

01:30:22 Q: (videographer whispers) Oh, right. So tell us about your pets. You have a dog of your own, you have a dog you're babysitting for, you have cats.

01:30:31 Yonis: I have had cats since I moved out to California, and I still consider myself a cat person. We, at one time, were up to three; the cat we have now has always been very shy of people, and for a while I used to joke that we were running an assisted living facility for animals, because the cat is now nineteen. The dog found us; I had been running errands with the girls over a weekend, and Shifra had a babysitting job—she was in high school—and we still had more errands to run, so I pulled up in front of the house to drop her off so she could go to her babysitting job, and this little white dog comes running up to her like, Where have you been? And she wanted a dog, and so I said, "Okay, you're old enough to be responsible; it's your dog." The next-door neighbors have told us that they know where the dog came from but they never told us because they knew we would be better dog owners than the people who had her. She came to us so matted that we thought she must be a stray wandering the street for weeks. We believe that they just let her stay out in the yard; she had foxtails into her skin, and ticks and fleas, and ugh. But was never abused, she was always very friendly, but now she's about sixteen years old, and she's lost both eyes to canine glaucoma, and she's gotten a little crotchety in her old age, so she's on prescription dog food, and the cat is on thyroid medicine, and then for a while we were dog-sitting my daughter's dog, who just died this February at fourteen, and he had heart problems, (laughs) took more heart medicines than my husband. (both laugh) So he lasted as long as he could, but he passed away, and then she went several months and then decided she needed another dog in her life, so she went down to the shelter, and got our friend over there.

Again, very, very loving, playful, and we think they used to just leave him out in the yard, which is a terrible thing to do to a little five-pound lap dog. (both laugh)

01:33:14 Q: So back to your work life. You retired from TRW after thirty years.

01:33:22 Yonis: And by that time it was Northrop Grumman, yes.

01:33:26 Q: And then what?

01:33:27 Yonis: What had happened was the recession had hit, and it had not yet hit defense spending, and I had been working army contracts, and I predicted that it would, that it would lag the rest of the recession, but that it was going to hit. And we were going to have real competition for projects, projects were going to be stretched out, and then the project that we were working on got cancelled. And because we were working as a subordinate to Boeing, I still to this day do not know whether all of the Boeing contract got cancelled or whether Boeing just cancelled our part. But I had seen it coming because of other things the army had said about not being happy with the whole umbrella contract, the way it was signed with Boeing, and they were going to keep parts of it going and cancel other parts, and restructure it, and I said, “Somebody's going to figure out that there is no place for what we're doing. That when they restructure it we're on the logistics side; we work with the people who supply the fuel, and the meal trucks, and the medical trucks, and we're going to be cut out because now they're talking about new combat vehicles, so we won't be part of that.” And I was getting burned out on the demands of the army customers; every time we went back and said, You didn't give us enough budget to do all of these

requirements; tell us which are your priorities, they would end up saying that basically 90 percent of those were priority, *and* they had another, you know, fifty to add. It was very frustrating. And I said, “If I have to get out of army logistics where I have actually spent a good twenty years, I’ve got to learn something else, I may as well get out of the industry.” And I am old enough under the Northrop Grumman rules that I can take early retirement, and that will get me out of the way for some of these people who are in their forties and early fifties who need the job, because I had seen the handwriting on the wall. So I went to the local junior college and took classes to get a paralegal certificate, which is something in California, and paralegals in California may not work directly with the public; you must work for an attorney. And so I did a little freelance with an attorney that I had interned for, but that didn’t last for very long, and I was lucky enough in the meantime to find out that my retirement has been covering us, that my expenses in retirement are much, much less than I thought they were going to be. So just hanging around, dog sitting, playing games on Facebook. (both laugh) Planning for improvements in the house.

01:37:05 Q: So you live in Lakewood.

01:37:06 Yonis: Yes.

01:27:08 Q: And how long have you lived here?

01:27:09 Yonis: We bought this particular house before my younger daughter was born, so that’s twenty-six and a half years ago. Twenty-seven years this fall.

01:37:20 Q: So you say “we” bought it; if it was before your younger daughter was born it was before you were with Fritz?

01:37:28 Yonis: No. No, we were already married. But—

01:37:31 Q: Oh, your younger daughter. My bad; I see, okay.

01:37:34 Yonis: Yes. But as I said, I've always made more money, and so when we got married I had him sign a prenup, and basically we decided that nothing was joint property unless we took it as joint property, so it turns out the house is mine, because I had a previous house to sell that gave me the down payment for the bigger one. So I do say “we” because we moved in as a family, but legally it's my house.

01:38:04 Q: And why did you pick Lakewood? What attracted you to this community?

01:38:08 Yonis: Actually, we didn't specifically. At the time Fritz owned a power boat, and the overriding concern was a long enough and wide enough driveway to park the boat. (laughter) And this house qualified. So we weren't really paying attention, whether we were in Lakewood or Long Beach. I did luck out because I hadn't been paying attention—at the time that the kids were little I liked the Long Beach Unified School District, I liked some of the changes that they had put in, and Lakewood, as we started talking about earlier, it incorporated itself to keep from being absorbed by Long Beach City, and then they decided—they're very proud of this; they're a

new model of city—instead of creating a police force they contracted with the county sheriff. Instead of creating their own fire department they contracted with unincorporated county fire services. Libraries are part of the county library system; they call themselves a contract model. Well, it turns out that they are part of several school districts, and I'm just lucky that my kids ended up in the Long Beach [Unified] School District because of where we bought in Lakewood.

01:39:39 Q: What was it that you liked about the innovations in the Long Beach School District?

01:39:45 Yonis: Well, the first thing that the kids hated, but I liked, was they instituted uniforms. So that it was not a fashion contest and, you know, it was to remove logos, and it was also to cut down on any gang affiliation, which would be more downtown Long Beach. But also I liked the idea since there were fewer and fewer dress codes I certainly didn't want to see the dress codes that I had as a girl that, you know, you wear a dress to school or else, but I did like the idea that you had a certain standard of clothes that you wore to school, you took school seriously, you had something that you put on to wear to school, it wasn't just the same old jeans and t-shirts that you wore anywhere, there were clothes that you wore to school. And they also instituted that—I'm speaking of [Christopher] Steinhauser who was the—what's his title?

01:40:52 Q: Superintendent?

01:40:53 Yonis: Yes, thank you. He also instituted grade level, at third grade, and I guess it's sixth or seventh that if you were not reading at third-grade level then you went into summer school, and if you still were not then they had special programs to get you up to reading level;



you didn't just keep getting promoted while it got swept under the rug. They instituted an extra year before you went into high school that was kind of sort of like repeating freshman year, for anybody who got more than two Fs in junior high school. So not that my kids had problems with that—my kids were bright, they went through gifted programs, they didn't get Fs—but like I said, the idea that you show up to school dressed for school, not for hanging with your friends.

01:42:05 Q: So were the schools in Long Beach district were they ethnically, racially diverse?

01:42:13 Yonis: Some of them are. It depends on the school and it depends on what neighborhood it's in, although there's a lot of school choice in Long Beach. Both my kids went to one of the oldest high schools in the Long Beach area, Poly High School [Longbeach Polytechnic High School], and it's in a very dense neighborhood, it's called impacted; sometimes the kids have to go to other schools even though this is the closest to their neighborhood because they just can't take that many kids. And I know from my older daughter, it was very disconcerting to start applying to small liberal arts colleges and seeing the percentages that minorities were in each of these schools compared to what she had been used to in high school. And I try and explain to people that—um, Shifra had been in marching band and so I would occasionally go to football games—also Poly was known to have a really good football team; there are people who come back to Poly for years and watch the football games—and I remember in particular one game where they were playing another high school in Long Beach District, Wilson [Woodrow Wilson Classical High School], and I looked over at the Wilson cheerleaders, and in my mind's eye they were 80 percent white and 20 percent black, and you looked at the Poly cheerleaders and they were a mass of every shade of skin color you could

imagine, from the kids who looked like they needed sunscreen under the football field lights to girls who were very dark, brownish-black, and everything in between; [there's] a large Polynesian population at Poly, large Cambodian population in parts of Long Beach that go to Poly. And so I was pleased that there was that much integration, but it's less so in the gifted programs that my kids went into.

01:44:25 Q: It's ever less. And did your kids have a variety of friends from different backgrounds and cultures?

01:44:39 Yonis: Yes. Yes. Naomi has not really kept track of her high school friends, but she is still very close to her college roommates from her senior apartment, four of them. Shifra had a much wider variety, but certainly kids she knew from band, and kids she knew from this, that, the other. For a while it was a standing joke that anywhere she went in Long Beach she would run into somebody that she knew.

01:45:22 Q: (laughs) So Shifra is the more extroverted person in the family?

01:45:30 Yonis: Yes, sometimes. Sometimes she gets tired of people. (laughs)

01:45:37 Q: (laughs) Don't we all? You know, I realize that I didn't ask you about your name on tape. So let's talk about that. When you went to college you were Beverly Johnson, and today you're Basha Yonis. How did that come about?

01:45:51 Yonis: When I was in my early thirties, and not in a relationship, I was starting to feel my biological clock ticking and was wondering if I would ever raise a child by myself. And whether I was prepared to and at what point I might decide to, and how that might come about, and along with all those much deeper thoughts a thought flitted across my mind that said that if I had a child by myself he or she would be named Johnson, which was not my ethnic heritage, because that's a very Anglo-Saxon kind of name, and we're European Jews. So I asked my parents what the name had been in Europe, and they told me that it was Yonis, and probably in the English alphabet spelled J-o-n-a-s. And in fact, there is one branch of my father's family that is Jonas, while the rest of them are Johnsons. And I was in group therapy at the time, and when I mentioned to my group that I was thinking of changing my name to Jonas, somebody went ahead and asked me what my first name was in Yiddish, and I knew that I had been named after my grandmother, and her Yiddish name was Basha, and they said, "Oh, that's pretty!" And I remember going into the bathroom after the session was over, and looking in the mirror, and trying to decide if I looked like a Basha, and deciding that I did. And so luckily for me I went to court and changed my name. In 1983 in California it wasn't necessary; all you had to do was go down to the DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles] and surrender your old license and you could get one in your new name. And it's a really good thing that I went to court because I couldn't get a copy of my birth certificate. Because by the time I decided to get another passport in my new name, and get a copy of my birth certificate, Homeland Security had taken effect. (Price laughs) And I could not get my birth certificate out of New York City, and I finally, in frustration—the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in New York City, and the Mayor's office had websites, and I left comments, and because of the time difference when I came in—I did this over a weekend—when I came in Monday morning I had two phone messages on my phone at

work, because they had gotten my comments, and one guy explained to me that I could not get my birth certificate because I wasn't that anymore; I had to request an amended birth certificate. I had to get my birth certificate amended because I had changed my name, and that I had to give them certified copies of the court order. And so that was an interesting exercise because I didn't have a copy of the entire court order, and then I sent in all the paperwork and they sent it back one more time, and said that I hadn't given them certified copies because it didn't have the embossed stamp, and I said, "I'm not in charge of the California courts; this little stamp on the back that they signed in black ink is what makes it a certified copy. I can't make them emboss it." So, we fought it one more time, and I finally—and the funny thing is, out of all of that, when I finally got my birth certificate back my amended birth certificate consists of a typed-up version, which is certainly not a photostat of what my original was, which was handwritten. Everything typed up, and a line drawn through Beverly Johnson, (laughing) and handwritten above it is Basha Yonis—so all that work for somebody to (laughs) handwrite what my name is. (Price laughs) So, yes, I changed it, and shortly after I had changed it, I went to a Barnard Club meeting, and at the time I was one of the youngest alums, and there were alums from all kinds of years, and I explained what I had gone through, and there were alums who came up to me, who had been English majors and wanted to get into the publishing industry, and they told me with tears in their eyes that they thought it was wonderful that times had changed so much that I could have work as an engineer and not be afraid of changing my name to a Jewish-sounding name because they had all changed their names when they graduated Barnard so they could work in a publishing industry to something American, generic, not Jewish.

01:51:11 Q: Wow! Wow.

01:51:16 Videographer: And you were also very, very brave to have a child without being married yet; that was a really great thing at the time you did it. Now it's more common.

01:51:29 Q: Although I know many women in our generation who ultimately had children without a second parent, one way or the other.

01:51:39 Yonis: Oddly enough, I had a gynecologist that I went to and I said something to him about not wanting to have a child by myself, and I really never got a chance to ask him what his experience had been as a father or a brother or something, but he snapped at me and said, "You always have them by yourself," and I never forgot that; I thought what a strange thing for a man to say. But as I said I haven't forgotten it. And I also at the time worked with a woman who was a secretary down at Logicon who had been widowed, and I realized there never is a guarantee, is there?

01:52:34 Q: So did you think about abortion at the time? Was that even an option for you?

01:52:37 Yonis: No, I had decided that I wanted a child, so when I became pregnant it was, you know, Okay, I know what I'm going to do. The only times—well, when we were back at school, and we were much younger, if we became pregnant it was, you know, this is, I don't feel like I can take care of myself; I can't believe I could be responsible for somebody completely helpless.

01:53:03 Q: But you were ready to be responsible.

01:53:05 Yonis: Yes, by that time I was ready.

01:53:10 Q: So I want to talk a little bit more about your changing your name. Because it seems like a big deal to change your name from Beverly Johnson to Basha Yonis. Did you feel differently about yourself with your new name? What practical effect or emotional effect did it have?

01:53:33 Yonis: It just felt that I was projecting a better picture of who I am because it felt that it fit better. An interesting side effect was that since I wanted it pronounced Yonis, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life explaining that J-o-n-a-s would be pronounced Yonis if we were back in Eastern Europe. I changed the spelling. I invented the spelling or thought I invented it, and found out that a name that's spelled like Y-o-n-i-s comes up on some phone calls and a lot of mailing as Arabic, so I end up usually getting a mailing somewhere around Ramadan reminding me that it's time to tithe. (laughter) I also found that there are an awful lot of people who have no concept whether Basha is male or female and address me as Mr. Yonis.

01:54:46 Q: Right, because Sasha can be male or female.

01:54:50 Yonis: And you also find out something very interesting which is that people that you know feel absolutely no compunction to weigh in on something as personal as your name, that people will actually come up to you and say, I liked your old name better, you know. Thank you for sharing; it's my name.

01:55:12 Q: You learn a lot about people at times like that.

01:55:18 Yonis: I also learned that there seems to be something in the number of times that people have to hear it and be introduced to it before it sticks when they know you as one name and you change it, because all the people at work were well used to it and calling me Basha, and then I had a lot of trouble with my dentist because he would only see me every six months. It took him several years to finally catch up with, yes, that really is my name and he wouldn't make mistakes anymore.

01:55:52 Q: Did you give your children a Jewish education? Was that something that was important to you?

01:55:57 Yonis: Yes. Yes, I did. When we got married, my husband said, "I don't suppose you want to change your name?" And I said, "It's taken me too long to figure out what my name is; I'm not changing it." And my husband had not been raised Jewish but he converted, and both the girls went through a religious school.

01:56:24 Q: Did they get bat mitzvahed?

01:56:25 Yonis: Yes, they did.

01:56:28 Q: What kind of synagogue did you go to?

01:56:30 Yonis: Reform. When I first moved out here, I felt some kind of strange prejudice of being a non-religious New York Jew that if I were really Jewish I'd have to be observant, and I'd have to know Hebrew, and after I'd been out here for a few years I realized that there was really nothing wrong with going into a service and actually understanding what the prayers were. So we're members of a reform synagogue.

01:57:03 Q: So when you were a kid, did your parents take you to synagogue, did you have a—?

01:57:10 Yonis: No. My father and his family were never particularly religious. My mother's family, they were freethinkers; they were members of the good old socialist Workmen's Circle. And in fact my grandparents were so adamant about that that they never had my uncles bar mitzvahed, which is quite something for those times, because we're really talking about the very early 1900s, the aughts, but—

01:57:56 Q: So what do you think motivated you to get in touch with your Judaism?

01:58:03 Yonis: Um, in the Long Beach and Lakewood area it's not possible to just be secular Jewish and run into other people and have people understand you. To me, in New York—it felt growing up that it was a Jewish city, even though I know that it is not, that Jews are a minority, and yet it was well understood, you know, when the city suspends alternate side of the street parking for High Holidays—Out here it's not part of the mainstream, and I felt that if my child



and later children is going to have a Jewish identity they need to be taught it, they need to be brought in contact with it.

01:58:57 Q: So, you think your name change as well was tied up with—well, actually you said that it was.

01:59:05 Yonis: Um-hm.

01:59:05 Q: So your name change and joining a synagogue and raising your kids as Jews, it was all tied up with raising kids?

01:59:15 Yonis: Yes.

01:59:19 Q: So you decided that your identity as a mother needed to be more definitively Jewish.

01:59:25 Yonis: Yes.

01:59:27 Q: Very interesting. And is there a large Jewish population in Lakewood?

01:59:35 Yonis: I wouldn't say there's a large population anywhere because, as I said, it's not prominent anywhere. There is a Jewish Community Center [Alpert Jewish Community Center] in Long Beach; there are several synagogues. (beeping sound) That's my husband's alarm that goes off at this time for no discernible reason. (laughter) And the Southern California-culture

people are willing to drive, so it doesn't necessarily have to be within Long Beach; there are other synagogues, reform and conservative, throughout Orange County, and in fact there's [Congregation] Lubavitch over in Long Beach also.

02:00:35 Q: (whispers, then laughs) Anyway, what did your parents think, and your sisters, about you changing your name?

02:00:42 Yonis: I don't recall my sisters saying anything. My parents accepted it I think because I was not doing anything to distance myself from the family but in fact was embracing it. So they accepted it.

02:01:09 Q: I think you mentioned before we started taping that your mom is still alive.

02:01:13 Yonis: Yes, she is.

02:01:15 Q: And where does she live?

02:01:15 Yonis: She lives in the same apartment they moved into the summer before I turned four; it's a co-op, it's in Queens, and she'll be ninety-seven in September and she still lives there alone.

02:01:30 Q: And she's able to take care of herself?

02:01:33 Yonis: She needs a walker. She has a doctor, gerontologist, who comes and sees her in her home. She has somebody come in and clean for her now. She has a laundry that picks up and delivers. She doesn't go down and do her own laundry anymore. And she has the cell phone numbers of her favorite drivers when she has to go anywhere. And she gets done what she needs to get done. And she still gets the *New York Times* and reads it every day.

02:02:16 Q: God bless her. So are your sisters closer?

02:02:20 Yonis: Clos-er. The one whose husband retired as a Mt. Holyoke professor are still in the same house in walking distance of the Mt. Holyoke college, so that's a good four hours from her. And my younger sister is over in New Jersey, so that's not particularly close either.

02:02:44 Q: No, so do you worry?

02:02:46 Yonis: Um—to some extent I do. But I also have a very strange philosophy and that is she's not going to live forever, she certainly never expected to make it this far, she didn't think that she'd outlive my father by very much, and she has outlived him by twenty-five years. And I know that she is kind of tired; she gets occasional aches and pains from nowhere, she'll wake up one morning with it and she has no idea why, and then in a couple of days it fades and she doesn't have that particular pain anymore. So I realize that something might happen to her living alone, but something might happen to her anywhere, and I know that any major change, such as moving her right now or moving somebody in with her, is liable to lead to her dying within two years anyway, so if something happens while she's alone, well, then it did, but—

02:04:07 Q: And what are your plans and Fritz's plans for the future?

02:04:11 Yonis: (sighs) Well, we keep saying we're going to get organized. I retired a long time ago and I still haven't cleaned out my den. (Price laughs) That's not enjoyable work. We really don't have plans to travel much; it's not easy to do, neither of us can stand or walk for very long so, you know, long trips to visit museums aren't really in the cards. Don't quite know. I've been on a few elder hostels, enjoyed those.

02:04:51 Q: Where did you go?

02:04:52 Yonis: We went together up to Healdsburg, which is in the wine country in Northern California. That was very nice. I went to one near my younger daughter in San Francisco, which was about music and film and opera. I enjoyed that. (phone rings) And I don't remember what other one. Oh, we went up to Oregon for a music festival. Saw one of his sons who lives up near there. (answering machine) I apologize for that noise. That has happened ever since I went to digital phone service. I don't know why it has to make that noise for my answering machine to recognize that it's hung up, but—

02:05:58 Q: Technology. We can't live with it, and we can't live without it. So you two are music lovers?

02:06:07 Yonis: Um, yes. Like to—we don't get out to live concerts much, but—

02:06:18 Q: What do you like to listen to?

02:06:20 Yonis: I usually have classical on all the time. There was a period of time when my older daughter was transitioning from high school to college that I used to have public radio on and listen to the news all afternoon just when we were invading Iraq, and I decided that it was counterproductive to be taking antidepressants and listen to the news and I quit. (both laugh)

02:06:51 Q: You quit the news rather than the anti-depressants.

02:06:53 Yonis: You bet. So I usually have classical on in the background. He's much more of a jazz fan than I am. Like a lot of the old musicals, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter—beautiful, beautiful songs.

02:07:15 Q: You listen to The Jonathan Schwartz [Show] and things like that? You know, the— Oh, maybe he's not on out here—he's on Sirius Satellite [Radio]; he's like the expert on the [Great] American Songbook.

02:07:26 Yonis: Ah, okay.

02:07:27 Cabaret—So you mentioned anti-depressants. Is depression something that you've been dealing with for a while?

02:07:37 Yonis: Depression is something that I feel I've been dealing with since I was a child. And I spent a lot of my adult life in talk therapy, and then finally decided that the chemistry could help.

02:07:56 Q: And does it?

02:07:58 Yonis: Yes.

02:08:03 Q: And how did you cope with it as a child and a teenager?

02:08:06 Yonis: Uh, as a child I cried a lot. (laughs)

02:08:16 Q: And your parents didn't pick up on it?

02:08:18 Yonis: I thought I was hiding it. I would go to bed and before my older sister's bedtime when I had the room to myself and cried. And I thought they didn't know. They have had their own challenges. My mother had a mental health crisis at one point in time when I was fairly young and, according to my older sister, I think I was pretty good at blocking things out, also because I was younger. The therapist wanted my father to go also to talk therapy and he simply refused. So an engineer fit his personality; he was not an emotional person at all. And my mother doesn't understand why I should be depressed. I don't understand either. (laughs) But her mother was, the one for whom I am named, ended up committing suicide. And she had, according to my

mother, threatened and attempted it before she succeeded. So she was clearly unhappy with something and, you know—

02:09:53 Q: Well that must have affected your mother as well.

02:09:56 Yonis: It led, in part, to the crises that I talked about. It very deeply affected my mother, along with other things such as being told that she was not planned and not wanted, which was deeply affecting to her. But she was supposed to be watching her, and that was a terrible burden, because my grandmother had more opportunity—she waited for a day when my mother was preoccupied; my older sister had been ill with some childhood fever, and in those days doctors made house calls, and my mother was waiting for the doctor, and my grandmother said she was going to take a walk and so my mother didn't instantly clue into anything until after she seemed to have been gone too long. And she called one of her brothers and—

02:10:59 Q: Wow.

02:11:00 Yonis: Yeah, it was very, very difficult, and I also understand that for the times—I mean, I was born in 1950—you didn't take people to psychiatrists or psychologists for depression; you took them if they were crazy. And my grandmother was lucid, she was just very unhappy.

02:11:30 Q: I wonder if you felt your need to hide that you were sad from your parents, because you said that you thought they didn't know—if you were protecting your mother in some way?

02:11:41 Yonis: I really do not know. I know certainly since I was named after her, and in Ashkenazi tradition that was after she had died. I did not know that she had committed suicide until I was in my thirties. Because I never asked. We're just not a very communicative, emotional family. And my mother had a twin philosophy—still does— that was if somebody else wanted me to know, they'd tell me, but if somebody wants to know something from me, they'll ask. So, um—

02:12:19 Q: (laughs) There is an internal contradiction there.

02:12:22 Yonis: Yeah, not a lot of information gets shared. So it got to the point that I finally asked, and that's when I found out.

02:12:31 Q: Asked how she died?

02:12:32 Yonis: Um-hm.

02:12:34 Q: Did you have your suspicions?

02:12:36 Yonis: No, not at all. Not at all. I thought I was asking after some medical history.

02:12:42 Q: Ah. Do your sisters have the problems with depression as well?



02:12:49 Yonis: Not that I'm aware of, no.

02:12:51 Q: But you might not talk about it.

02:12:53 Yonis: Right.

02:12:57 Q: But thank goodness for better living through chemistry, huh?

02:13:00 Yonis: Yes, yes.

02:13:01 Q: It's gotten so much better.

02:13:03 Yonis: I remember when my mother had her problems, what they had to offer her in the way of—were basically just sedatives, and not very subtle either. So—yeah, new drugs are a big step forward.

02:13:27 Q: Well, I read an article that said that depressives tended to be more intelligent, and much more realistic; so it's a curse, but it's also a blessing.

02:13:40 Yonis: Oh, okay. (both laugh)

02:13:48 Q: So what should I have asked that I didn't ask? Or what have you thought of to tell me that you hadn't thought of before?

02:14:03 Yonis: Um—just that there's something about Barnard that made me feel empowered to be more confrontational as a feminist than in other aspects of my life, that I remember going to a reunion and feeling that since I was back at Barnard that it was okay to walk down the street to Starbucks or wherever it was that I was going without a bra, even though I was no longer young and firm—that, you know, it was just, Fuck everybody else. And I certainly lost that attitude the longer I was out of school at work, because I had to work with a lot of different people who came from a lot of different backgrounds, so I became less and less brash and more and more conforming because, again, it wasn't about me, and it wasn't about feminism, it was about whatever we were working on. And just kind of life here in suburban California, I just don't feel like I make an issue of things, but somehow being in New York, being associated with Barnard, it's different. I feel almost permission; I feel empowered to be an obnoxious feminist.

02:15:46 Q: (laughs) Well, you've made a lot of feminist choices in your life.

02:15:49 Yonis: Yes.

02:15:50 Q: Choices that our mothers' generation—well, they may not have—it would have been much harder for them to make, but they wouldn't have felt empowered to make them. I mean, the life you're describing to me is the life of a feminist. (noise in the background) And so you think Barnard has something to do with that?

02:16:13 Yonis: Um, I really couldn't tell you whether it was simply because of the age that I was and, you know, where I was in my emotional state when feminism was coming to the fore, or whether it was simply the empowerment of, like I said earlier, knowing that whatever needed to be done at school, whatever offices, whatever was happening at school was being done by women. It just fits together that that was a very powerful message for me to be at a woman's school, and that's why I was really happy that both my daughters ended up at women's colleges.

02:17:03 Q: So you've been a very helpful supporter to this project; I know you made a generous donation, and you've spoken to Katherine about it, and I'm very grateful that you agreed to be interviewed. What about this oral history project appealed to you, to give both time and money?

02:17:20 Yonis: Well, seeing the film as it was produced by Michelle [Patrick] and her husband [Robert Solomon], just because my experience at Barnard was so important to me, and because we were such a transitional class; we really were the ones who went from, you know, in loco parentis, nobody visits without the door being open the width of a book, sign-ins, all the way to coed dorms, within four years. And the idea that there's nothing about us in the archives. I really think it's important that our experience and our voices be there as part of Barnard's history.

02:18:16 Q: One thing that I should have asked you about when we were talking about Barnard is you finally became a resident in your senior year when you lived at—what was it called? 420?

02:18:31 Yonis: 620 [620 West 116th Street Residence Hall].

02:18:31 Q: 620, right. So how did that change your experience at Barnard? Why did you make the switch? How did that change your experience? And looking back on it do you think—do you wish you had become a resident sooner?

02:18:478 Yonis: Um—Those are difficult questions for me. Because it was 620, which was not completely turned into a dorm at that time—it was on a suite-by-suite basis; part of the building was still public—it was much more independent. And as I said having gotten in with three English majors that I didn't remember ever having run across in my previous three years, so I was closer to campus but it still didn't feel like I was integrated into campus, because it was, as I said, a public building and not the whole building belonging, from the entry in. And because I could feel very isolated in the apartment, because in general two of the women were out a lot and very social and had boyfriends, and the other one was very quiet and shy and in her room with the door closed a lot. So that's what we both did. And it was a very strange layout for a college apartment. There was a room beyond the kitchen that looks like it might have once been a maid's room; it's not quite clear what it was over there, and that's where they put the dining table, so we didn't really have a living room or any place to gather, because that was kind of out of the way and not used, so it was not a very social arrangement. So I don't know that it changed that much except that it gave me more privacy than living at home with my parents and my younger sister, because I had my own room.

02:20:56 Q: Right, it was more like being out on your own—

02:20:58 Yonis: Yes.

02:20:59 Q: —than being part of a college life.

02:21:03 Yonis: Um, I don't know. I don't know that I was ready any earlier to deal with the socialness of being in a dorm and sharing a room, communal bathroom and showering, and the whole idea of living in the old-style dorms that weren't suite style at all. I don't know how I would have dealt with it.

02:21:43 Q: So did you sometimes feel that you were missing out on something, or did you really have a preference for living at home?

02:21:52 Yonis: No, I rarely felt that I was missing something, and that commuting was a different experience, because you didn't have late-night get-togethers or whatever it was; there was always an end to the day when you got back on the subway. But looking back after all these years, I certainly don't blame the college or the circumstances; it's me. I'm not good at that kind of bonding small talk. So I might have been exactly the same way in a dorm setting, except more unhappy about it because I didn't have privacy; I only had half a room, and therefore no place to go for privacy. My younger daughter had an intense need for a certain amount of alone time. I know it's not true scientifically, but I have said that if she was not as self-aware as a child she might have been autistic, because the world might have been too much for her. She did a Summer School for the Arts, which required an application; it was four weeks, and they crammed them in, they had a dorm room that had—it was up at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts], in Valencia—they had a dorm room that was obviously originally designed for two

that had been converted to three, and they had crammed four in for summer school. And she needed to find a place that she could go to when she needed her alone time and downtime, and she was lucky to find one right off-campus that was a neighborhood playground, that actually belonged to the housing development, but they never kicked her out because she was generally there in the heat of the day when the kids weren't anyway. And she wasn't coming with a whole bunch of other teenagers and being rowdy; she was just being by herself and thinking. And she had some of the same problems when she was a freshman at college, because she had a roommate, feeling that she had no place to go to get by herself. I can imagine that I would have had a lot of the same problems. So, yeah, I don't know if I had—I just don't think I was ready for it any sooner than—

02:24:33 Q: And you were so young.

02:24:35 Yonis: Well, nobody was offering it; I had to make up my mind enough to go discuss it with my parents, and say, “This is what I want to do.”

02:24:52 Q: Anything else?

02:24:54 Yonis: No.

02:24:55 Q: This was really a great experience for me; I hope it was for you.

02:24:59 Yonis: Yes.

02:25:00 Q: Thank you so much for being so open.

02:25:02 Videographer: Thank you very much.

02:25:03 Yonis: My pleasure.

02:25:03 Q: Thank you, Fritz.

02:25:04: Howe: Are you still recording?

02:25:05 Q: Um, yes we are. We should turn it off. (laughter) Let's turn off the mic.

*end of interview*

## INDEX

Brewster, Katherine .....	75
Cynthia, Older sister of Basha Yonis.....	7, 8, 10–11, 16, 17, 23–24, 50, 67, 70, 71
Dave .....	47
Eleanor, Younger sister of Basha Yonis .....	7, 8, 10–11, 67
Father of Basha Yonis.....	5, 8, 17, 64, 67, 70
Harvey.....	43–44
Howe, Daniel "Fritz" .....	42, 43, 45–48, 52, 55, 63, 68–69, 79
Johnson, Beverly "Basha Yonis" .....	3, 15, 58, 60, 62
Kolchin, Dr. Ellis R. ....	18, 22
Krone, Donna.....	21–22
Maternal grandmother of Basha Yonis .....	70–72
Mother of Basha Yonis .....	4, 5, 8, 10, 43, 66, 70–72, 73
Naomi, Younger daughter of Basha Yonis .....	50–51, 54–55, 58, 68, 77
Osborne, Adam .....	30, 31
Paternal grandmother of Basha Yonis .....	5
Patrick, Michelle.....	75
Porter, Cole .....	28
Rzesniowiecki, Linda.....	7
Shifra, Older daughter of Basha Yonis .....	45–46, 50–51, 52–53, 57
Solomon, Robert .....	75
Steinhauser, Christopher.....	56
Turing, Alan.....	25