

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN DINER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Donald Koger: This begins an interview with Dr. Steven Diner for the Rutgers Oral History Archives. This interview is being conducted with Shaun Illingworth and Don Koger in Newark, New Jersey.

SI: All right, and the date?

DK: Today's date is April 9, 2019.

SI: All right, great. Well, thank you very much for having us in today. We appreciate it. To begin, can you tell us when and where you were born?

Steven Diner: I was born in the Bronx, [on] December 14, 1944 ...

SI: Okay, for the record ...

SD: ... At a place called Bronx Maternity Hospital. [Editor's Note: Bronx Maternity Hospital was located at 1072 Grand Concourse Street at 166th Street. It opened in 1931. It is now closed.]

SI: Okay.

SD: I don't think it's around anymore.

SI: For the record, can you tell us your parents' names?

SD: Yes, my mother's name was Helen. Her maiden name was Fenster, but she went by Diner. My father's name was David, David Diner.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, what do you know about the family history? Was there an immigration story there?

SD: Yes, my father immigrated to the United States in the early 1920s. The story he told was that he got really involved with the Bolshevik Revolution and was managing some housing project, something or the other, and didn't want to come to America, but he had two sisters. He had a brother who stayed, the younger brother, and then two younger sisters. He said his sisters really wanted to come to the United States where their father was already here. So, he said he decided to come to the United States to accompany them because these two women shouldn't travel alone. So, that's his account. Now, why he wouldn't have gone back to Russia is hard to say, but anyhow, that was his account. He remained pro-communist all his life. [Editor's Note: The Bolshevik Revolution, or October Revolution, occurred in 1917, after the Russian Empire's monarchy was overthrown in the February Revolution. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, seized control of the government; not until 1922 would they have full power over Russia and turn it into the Soviet Union.]

SI: Did he talk about any difficulties in the journey?

SD: No.

SI: Okay, all right.

SD: No. He had a lot of tensions with his father. He very, very briefly lived with his father, who had remarried, and they were living in Harlem. He said he very soon got his own place.

SI: How many members of the family ended up immigrating to the United States?

SD: Well, four; the father, my father, and his two sisters.

SI: Okay. Did he tell any stories about what it was like being in Russia during the revolution?

SD: Not a lot, no.

DK: Did you maintain contact with your uncle who remained in Russia?

SD: No.

DK: Okay.

SD: No.

SI: Now, what about your mother's side of the family?

SD: Okay, so my mother came to America also in the early 1920s, from Poland. Well, her father ran a bakery in Poland. The town in Poland they came from was Rypin. But they decided to come to the United States because of anti-Semitism. So, the father came first, and then he called for the two oldest children, which was my mother and her sister. He later bought over the next two and then after that, the last two, and his wife. Now, the wife was not my mother's mother. She was a stepmother, and they didn't get along particularly well.

SI: On that side of the family, were there any stories about what life had been like for them in Poland?

SD: Only of a very general nature. They always said it was terrible. There was enormous anti-Semitism and hostility everywhere but nothing terribly specific. [Editor's Note: Poland was part of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to anti-Semitism, Jews who lived in the empire were forced to live in an area known as the Pale of Settlement. Jews also experienced frequent organized attacks from military forces and mobs, which are known as pogroms.]

SI: Okay, nothing about pogroms earlier?

SD: No.

SI: Would they ever tell you stories about settling in the United States? Did they ever tell you about anything specific there, such as problems adjusting?

SD: No, not really.

SI: Okay. Do you know if any other family members came over later on that side?

SD: I don't think so, no.

SI: Your father came and settled in the Bronx eventually, or did he go somewhere else first?

SD: Well, initially in Harlem.

SI: Okay, yes, you mentioned that already.

SD: And then in Brooklyn.

SI: Okay.

SD: In fact, he lived very close to the beach there.

SI: Coney Island? [Editor's Note: Coney Island is a neighborhood in Brooklyn that lies on the coast with a beach and boardwalk.]

SD: No, the other one.

SI: Jones Beach? [Editor's Note: Jones Beach Island is a barrier island off of southern Long Island.]

SD: No.

DK: Brighton Beach? [Editor's Note: Brighton Beach is a neighborhood east of Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York.]

SD: Brighton Beach, thank you.

SI: Okay, yes.

SD: Yes, they lived near Brighton Beach, and when I was a kid, we would often go to Brighton Beach. Orchard Beach was much closer to where we lived. We lived in the North Bronx, and Brighton Beach was a long ride because we were the last stop on the D train. So, you had to go deep into Manhattan and then switch for a train to Brooklyn, and you went to the last stop or next to the last stop on that train. But my father always said, "No, no, Brighton Beach is much better." In fact, it was a much nicer beach. But, anyhow, we always went to Brighton Beach, not to--occasionally, but very rarely--to the beach in the Bronx. [Editor's Note: Orchard Beach is a beach in the eastern Bronx.]

SI: Do you know how your parents met?

SD: No, I don't.

SI: Okay.

SD: I think I did once. I'm not remembering.

DK: Did your father ever talk about experiencing any anti-Semitism? You mentioned on your mother's side, there was some in Poland, but did your father ever tell any stories along the same lines?

SD: No.

SI: You said that he had obviously been in the communist government there.

SD: Yes.

SI: When he came here, did he get involved in any groups, any organizing groups?

SD: Yes. He was involved with--what's the name of the organization? I'm forgetting. I could look it up.

SI: Okay, sure.

SD: But, yes, he got involved, not with a communist group as such, but with a leftist entity. Of course, he worked in the garment industry, so he was always a union member.

SI: Do you know if he had a specific talent or trade within the garment industry?

SD: Yes, he would sew ladies' coats, women's coats, and he was a very good sewer, very, very good. Yes, so, that's what he did.

SI: Do you know if he had done that in Russia, or did he pick that up here?

SD: No, he picked that up here.

SI: Okay.

SD: No, that wasn't in Russia.

SI: Did he work for different companies or pretty much the same company?

SD: He worked for the same company, at least since I was a kid, and he probably had one or two other jobs before that. Mostly he worked for this one company. But he also, on the side, worked

in a cleaning store as a tailor. So, he was, yes, people would come in and want tailoring work done and he would do that, and he also had some private, so to speak, customers who would just come to our house. He would sew their things.

SI: Was he particularly active in the union or just a member?

SD: Just a member when I was a child. I don't know about earlier than that.

SI: He never talked about labor struggles in the 1930s or so?

SD: No.

SI: What about your mother? Did she work outside of the home?

SD: Yes, she also worked in the garment industry. She sewed basically ladies' blouses, yes. But what I remember, and this is sort of unusual, the place that she worked, the factory, was around the corner from where we lived. I said we lived in the North Bronx, but there was a sort of building with odds and ends and things in it. Up on the second floor of that building was this garment factory. The owner was a man, but he hired all kinds of women and no men to [sew] blouses. So, my mother did that, and of course, I was there, not infrequently because it was a block from where we lived, and she said she liked that because she could come home and give me lunch. I went to school across the street, so we could come home from lunch, so that was very important to her to be there to give me lunch.

SI: Okay.

SD: Yes, so very much a Jewish mother. [laughter]

SI: Was that part of the reason they settled on the Bronx, because they could work nearby?

SD: I don't think so because I think that she got that job later on. No, I think they just settled in the Bronx, because it seemed like a place where you could get a reasonable apartment at a reasonable price.

SI: Was your father's job far away?

SD: Yes, it was in the garment district in Manhattan, sort of lower Manhattan.

SI: You were born during World War II.

SD: Yes.

SI: They had your brother just before.

SD: My brother was born 1938. He's six-and-a-half years older than me.

SI: Okay.

SD: Yes.

SI: Did they ever talk about the draft? I would imagine that your father was exempt from the draft as he was a little bit older.

SD: Yes, he was exempt. But they did not talk about the draft.

SI: Did they ever talk about if the war had any impact on their lives?

SD: No, not really.

SI: Tell us a little bit about your earliest memories of your neighborhood. Were you in the same area for a while?

SD: Yes. They had moved there before I was born, and they moved out when I was finishing graduate work.

SI: Okay, so pretty much the same neighborhood.

SD: Yes, they spent all those years in the same apartment, and it was a residential neighborhood in the Bronx, very few private houses, all apartments, and it was overwhelmingly Jewish. In fact, I believe the only non-Jewish person in our building was the janitor, who I think was Irish. So, it was an overwhelmingly Jewish neighborhood.

By the time I got into junior high, I found the neighborhood kind of boring. I do remember the women in the building, for much of the year, would bring chairs out in front of the building and sit and talk. They commented on whoever walked by. I hated walking by and having these women there staring at me or looking at me and whatever, but that's the way it was.

So, it was a decent neighborhood. There were two parks, each within two blocks of where we lived, which was nice. One was called Reservoir Oval and the other was Mosholu Parkway. So, it was nice to have that, but, as I said, by the time I was in high school, I desperately wanted to escape, which is probably true of most people, no matter where they grow up. [Editor's Note: Reservoir Oval refers to Williamsbridge Reservoir Park, located on the former site of the Williamsbridge Reservoir.]

SI: Was religion important to your family when you were growing up?

SD: No.

SI: Okay.

SD: Not at all, not at all. My father thought religion was the tool of the capitalist to exploit the workers. [He] had no use for it. My mother did not ever seem [religious]. We didn't belong to a

synagogue. The only times we went to synagogues were when relatives, mostly my cousins, were having a bar mitzvah, or bat mitzvah. My father's sisters had no connection to religion, but in my mother's family, there were a number of people who were very much connected to Jewish religious practices. Her sister, who was two years younger than her, married a rabbi. It was a very interesting situation. She was very academically oriented. My mother didn't graduate high school, but her sister worked on, although she didn't finish, a Ph.D. in German. She married this rabbi who was the Hillel Director at City College. So, once in a rare while, we would get invited to them for the Seder, which was pretty much my exposure to Seders at the time. I had one other relative who would invite me but not my parents; they just figured Steve should see what Jewish life is supposed to be. [Editor's Note: City College of the City University of New York is located in Hamilton Heights, Manhattan. It was founded in 1847. The City University of New York, CUNY, is a public university system within New York City that was formed in 1961.]

SI: Tell us a little bit about your early education. Where did you go to school up through high school? What was your schooling like?

SD: There was a public elementary school literally across the street from our building. I could see the school just looking out of our window, and it was called, at the time, P.S. 80, although it also had a junior high and so, later on, they started calling it Junior High School 80. The student body was almost entirely Jewish. There were Irish and Italian kids in the neighborhood, but they all went to the parochial schools. So, I remember saying to my mother once, when I was in elementary school, "You keep telling me that Jews are a minority, but everybody I know is Jewish." The teachers in the school, I'd say at least half of them were Jewish. The principal was Jewish. The assistant principal was Jewish, and at the time I didn't even think about it. There were, a limited number of mostly Catholic kids in my school, and one day a week, they would be dismissed from school an hour early in order to go to religious education, not at the school but at a church. But the school closed--well, no, the school, for all intents and purposes, closed on every Jewish holiday, not just the big ones, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. Every religious Jewish holiday, there would be almost no one at school. My parents let me stay home as well because there was not a whole lot of point in going.

When I was in high school, I decided I would go to school on these holidays because I didn't believe in all this. But, anyhow, the school, for all intents and purposes, they put all the students who weren't out for all the Jewish holidays, in one room, which is to say, all the Christian students. I remember in sixth grade, we were reading a piece of literature that made reference to holy water, and there was one kid in the class who was not Jewish. The teacher was Jewish and turned to one Christian student and said, "Why don't you tell the class what holy water is?" At the time, I didn't think anything of it. In retrospect, it seems horrible, singling somebody out like that because of her religion.

SI: Yes.

SD: She didn't seem phased by it. The junior high school I attended, in the same building as my elementary school, demographically, was about the same.

Then, I went to a selective high school. It was then called the High School of Music and Art. It's now LaGuardia High School, okay. My brother had gone there. I was into music. My father was into music and encouraged me, but also my mother had arranged for me to take piano lessons from a very young age. So, I applied to Music and Art, and I was accepted as a voice major. I took four years of singing and music theory and history. It was a great school. [Editor's Note: The High School of Music and Art was founded in 1936 on West 135th Street in Manhattan. The school later moved to Lincoln Center and became known as Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School.]

Many residents of my neighborhood saw the local high school for boys as unsafe. The all-boys high school, DeWitt Clinton, back in the '50s, already had significant numbers of black students coming there from Harlem. So, the informal attitude around town was, "Oh, you don't want to go to DeWitt Clinton, it's dangerous. They got all those black students." Now, I had a bunch of friends who went to DeWitt Clinton and it wasn't dangerous and they had no problems. But many people in the neighborhood believed it was better to go to a special school. So, I went and Music and Art High School whose student body was, I'd say, ninety percent white, something like that. [Editor's Note: DeWitt Clinton High School, originally founded in Lower Manhattan in 1897, moved in 1929 to the Bronx on Mosholu Parkway, where it is located today.]

SI: How far away was it?

SD: It was at 135th Street and Convent Avenue, so basically on the campus of what's today City College, what then was City College also, yes. So, it was about a thirty, forty-minute subway ride for me.

SI: Looking back earlier, were your teachers always pushing you towards high academic achievement and thinking about college someday?

SD: Yes, absolutely.

SI: Yes.

SD: Absolutely, and my parents. This is not at all unusual for Jewish immigrants, but my mother kept telling me, throughout elementary and high school, she said, "You've got to get an eighty-five average so you can get in City College because we can't afford to pay all that money to send you to NYU." Anyway, NYU, an expensive private college, wasn't particularly prestigious. So, a lot of students went to NYU because they couldn't get into City College. My grades were higher than that, and I ended up going out of town to what's now Binghamton University. My mother was appalled that I wasn't going to live at home, "How can you do this?" Yes, she was really upset, but I thought, "What a great experience to actually live away from home!" She told me that at least once, she was talking with a friend or a relative, who said, "Well, how come Steven is going to Harpur College? He didn't get into City?" [Editor's Note: Triple Cities College was founded in 1946. In 1949, it joined the State University of New York System (SUNY) and became known as Harpur College. In 1965, it became the State University of New York at Binghamton.]

SI: Yes.

SD: The standards for Harpur were much higher than City, but she was embarrassed I was not a city college student and she wanted me to live at home, which I understand.

SI: Go ahead.

DK: When you were growing up, did you always plan on going to a high level in academia?

SD: Yes.

DK: Okay.

SD: Well, definitely going to college.

DK: Okay.

SD: As far back as I can remember, certainly in high school, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. I assumed all along, as did my parents, that "You've got to do well academically. It's the more important thing."

SI: Now, what kind of activities would you do, either extracurricular or for fun or for hobbies?

SD: Well, I belonged to the Boy Scouts and probably more relevant, the Explorers, but I actually ended up belonging to the Sea Explorers.

SI: Oh.

SD: I'm not exactly sure how that came about, but there was a leader, a scout leader who was really into the Sea Explorers and he persuaded all of us, in our cohort, to go to the Sea Explorers. The beauty of the Sea Explorers is that we got to take cruises in the summer on military ships, which was, for us, at that age and time very exciting. So, I remember we went to Italy and Spain.

SI: Wow.

SD: Yes.

SI: Tell us a little bit about those experiences.

SD: Well, we went on naval ships. We slept all the way down on the bottom, but the ships were fine. We saw that there were some very privileged people who had more luxurious facilities. These would've been family of military people or officers themselves. The cruise was fine. I think they occasionally showed movies. I don't remember a whole lot of activities.

SI: When you would go to these other countries, would you get to tour around a little bit?

SD: We would tour around a day or two, basically.

SI: Yes.

SD: I remember, I think, on the cruise, on one of the cruises, the leaders of our scout troop worked it out so that we'd leave the ship in one port in Italy and move around and then rejoin the ship three days later at another port. Mostly, what we did was we just got off the ship for the day, looked around, came back and slept there.

SI: What about other experiences that may have taken you out of your neighborhood or given you a little more of an independent experience as you were growing up? I talk to a lot of people who grew up in New York City and the subway takes you all over. Particularly growing up in this era, kids were given more freedom than they are given today. Do you remember making use of the city or the subway?

SD: A bit. I'm trying to think. I worked a bunch of years in summer camps. I was a counselor, and then I was a division leader. I do remember getting together with people from these summer camps at various places where folks lived. I remember, in particular, there was one group I was in, most of whose members came in from the Upper West Side. This was my first exposure to the Upper West Side and I was just sort of blown away by the beauty of the apartments and all of that.

SI: Where would these summer camps be?

SD: Well, one of them was in Hunter, New York. I worked there six summers, and the other was in Poyntelle, Pennsylvania.

SI: What kind of jobs would you do there?

SD: At the Pennsylvania camp, I was division head. I supervised the counselors and oversaw the programming and all of that. At the other camp, at Hunter, I was a counselor for a couple of years. Then, I was a music counselor for a couple years. I used to lead. Kids would have music as one of their activities, so I would deal with that. The, the last two years there, I was a division head. So, I supervised, one year, counselors for the youngest kids and the other year counselors for the oldest kids. When I went to Poyntelle for two summers--this is when I was in a master's program at Binghamton before I went to the University of Chicago for my Ph.D.--I was also a supervisor, I didn't work at any other summer camps.

SI: When you were in high school, did you have any part-time work locally, after school?

SD: Yes, I did. I did clothes delivery for the dry cleaners around the corner where my father was a tailor. He would come after regular work and spend two hours doing things that people needed. So, therefore, he was able to get me hired, so to speak, to do roughly two hours a day of delivery. That was the only job I had.

SI: You talked earlier about music being a significant part of your life. You said your mother gave you piano lessons.

SD: Yes.

SI: Did you play any other instruments?

SD: No.

SI: Okay. When you were in high school, outside of school, would you play in bands or participate in any activities along those lines?

SD: No, but my focus became, very quickly, singing, and there was a lot of singing at the high school. I don't remember singing in any other entities except in summer camp, of course. As I said, I led singing. A couple years ago, when I was still chancellor, someone asked if he could see me. He was the parent of a student in a law school. He says, "You won't remember me, but I went to your camp and you used to lead singing and I still remember all of that."

SI: Wow.

SD: It was very flattering.

SI: What kind of music were you interested in?

SD: Well, in general, classical music; that was my training and [what] I loved. I had an aunt who managed to get me tickets to the Metropolitan Opera. She had poor vision and was a member of the Guild for the Jewish Blind, and they offered tickets in the last two or three rows of the old Met, which was way, way up. You couldn't see very much, but the idea was these people would listen but couldn't see. She would get me tickets through this program, and so I would go to the Metropolitan Opera and loved it. [Editor's Note: The former location of the Metropolitan Opera House was located at 1411 Broadway from 1883 to 1967. The building was demolished. It is now located at Lincoln Center.]

I listened to a lot of classical music at home. My father was into classical music. In fact, I joined some kind of entity, where you got a significant number of records at a discount or you got a bunch of things when you joined, and then you could pay for others. So, I remember ordering eight or ten records and I had discussed the choices with my father. When they all arrived, my brother said, "They're overwhelmingly Russian." My father has said, "You should get this. You should get this and you should get this." They were largely Russian composers. I listened to classical music all the time, as a kid, particularly in high school and went to concerts when I could. Of course, I was at the High School of Music and Art, where there were concerts all the time, concerts by students.

SI: Do you have a question?

DK: Do any performances stand out that were particularly moving? When you were going to the Met Opera, do you have a favorite memory that you have from there?

SD: Oh, that I don't remember.

DK: Okay.

SK: I thought you meant performances that I was in.

DK: Either way. Do any of those stand out as particularly memorable performances, any great victories?

SD: Well, there was one time we performed a work that was composed by an alum of the high school, and all that was about high school, going to high school, and I think we really enjoyed that.

SI: Would they have outside artists come into the school, or was it all student-driven performances?

SD: It was all student driven.

SI: Okay. In general, when you were growing up, particularly in your teenage years, would you often follow world events or follow the news?

SI: Was there any teacher that was kind of pushing you towards history or the humanities in general, or were you mixed in your interests at that point?

SD: I had a marvelous history and social studies teacher in high school. I had worked out this deal. If you signed up to work on the scheduling committee--you could schedule your own classes, which was great. You picked exactly the teachers you wanted. So, there was one man, his name was Mr. Graham, who was really a marvelous social studies teacher, and I think I had him for five different courses. His son and I are still friends. His son was in my grade at the school, at the time. Yes, that was one piece. I had a homeroom teacher for four years. She was a biologist or a biology teacher, and she was definitely encouraging me to pursue academic ambition, but not specifically. It's funny. Her son was also a student at the school, and a couple years ago I ran into him at a reunion, and he said, "Oh, my mom talks about you all the time," or something like that. He arranged for her to call me, and she said, "I always knew you'd get ahead and be someone important," and so on. Yes, so, that was nice.

SI: Do you have other questions about his earlier life?

DK: Yes, if we can step back a little bit, I am curious about what kind of language memories you have. Your parents, obviously, had to learn English at some point. Do you know when they learned English?

SD: Well, before I was born.

DK: Okay.

SD: Yes, their English seemed to me perfectly fine, when I was growing up. I mean, they spoke English quite coherently. But I do remember, every so often, my father would need to write a letter in English, and he would ask me to do it. His writing wasn't good enough.

DK: Did you speak any other languages at home? Was there any carry over from Russian or Polish?

SD: There was Yiddish.

DK: Okay.

SD: Yes, my parents spoke Yiddish, and my Jewish education was in Yiddish.

SI: You wound up going to a Hebrew school, that sort of thing.

SD: I went to a Jewish after school, one hour a day, which was pretty standard in our neighborhood. Almost everybody went to some kind of Jewish school, but mostly they were attached to synagogues and they taught Hebrew and they taught about Jewish religion and so on. There was a left-wing Yiddishist school that met in the basement of my building, of the building we lived in, and it was called the Emma Lazarus Folk Shul and it was definitely very left oriented. I remember the teachers talking about workers who went on strike and this and that, but its content was Yiddish. My brother went there, I think, five or six years. I went there one year, and then it closed. It was the McCarthy Era. [Editor's Note: Emma Lazarus was a Jewish poet and activist for Jewish rights. She lived her entire life in New York City from 1849 to 1887. The Red Scare of the 1950s is also known as the McCarthy Era due to the anti-communist hysterics led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy played on Americans' fears by declaring that there were communist subversives within the country.]

SI: Yes.

SD: So, after that, my mother said, "Well, you have to have Jewish education. I'm going to send you to something called the Sholem Aleichem Folk Shul." Now, Sholem Aleichem Folk Shul was a place that educated Jewish kids primarily in Yiddish. It was like a five-year program and teaching Yiddish was its primary focus every year. I think in the third or fourth year, they introduced Hebrew, which, again, was very unusual because Yiddish was the prime focus of the school's program. I remember my father complaining. He said, "Oh, that my son would go to a right-wing Jewish school." It wasn't right wing, but my mother insisted that I had to have some kind of Jewish education and it should be Yiddishist and so I went there. My Yiddish isn't very good. I can understand and I can speak a little. But the school also taught us Jewish history and they taught us about all the holidays and the rituals. [Editor's Note: Yiddish schools like those operated by the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute provided supplementary education following public school attendance.]

SI: At that point, obviously, Israel had been a state for a while. Was that a subject of discussion in the schools? [Editor's Note: On May 14, 1948, the nation of Israel was created.]

SD: Yes. I don't think it was discussed all that much other than, "Isn't this great," and, "Finally, Jews have a place they can escape to if there are any more Nazis." I do remember that. I also remember that there was a fundraising undertaking in which we were expected to go around and ask people to make donations for Israel.

SI: Oh, did you have like the Blue Box? [Editor's Note: The "Blue Box" refers to a fundraising campaign by the Jewish National Fund (JNF).]

SD: Yes.

SI: Okay.

SD: Yes all the students at this Yiddish school were told to do this. But I also remember, in 1967, after the war, my father saying, "Everybody's celebrating this, but what are they going to do with all those Arabs who live there?" He was anticipating, of course, the profound issue faced by Israel. My mother had been a Zionist as a kid and she had wanted to move to Palestine and her father said, "No, we have to stay together," so she didn't. But she was very oriented toward Israel, and later in life, when they could afford it, they travelled to Israel and she was very moved by it. He was not. [Editor's Note: Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Zionist Movement called for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Israel. In 1967, the Six-Day War occurred between Israel and an alliance of neighboring Arab nations. Israel won the war and gained territories such as East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights.]

SI: All right. Do you have other questions?

DK: Not about early life, no.

SI: Okay. Going back to the idea of exposure to the world at large, were politics discussed at home a lot? Was that something you are following?

SD: Yes, yes.

SI: Okay.

SD: Yes, politics was discussed a lot at home, and my parents were both very enthusiastic about Adlai Stevenson, who lost twice to Eisenhower. When Nixon was elected, it seemed like the world had come to an end. They were beside themselves, as were most people in my neighborhood. "What is going to happen to us? Richard Nixon is President." John Kennedy was sort of liked, and Lyndon Johnson, of course. [Editor's Note: Adlai Stevenson was the Governor of Illinois from 1949 to 1953. In the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections, he was the Democratic candidate, losing both times to Dwight D. Eisenhower. Richard Nixon was elected in 1968 and 1972. He resigned in 1974 due to his role in the Watergate Scandal. John F.

Kennedy served as president from 1961 until he was assassinated on November 22, 1963, when Vice President Lyndon Johnson became president. Johnson was reelected in 1964.]

SI: Let us talk a little bit about college. You mentioned your mother would have liked you to go to City and stay closer, but how did the opportunity to go to Binghamton come up?

SD: That's a great question. First of all, my brother, who had gone to City College, majoring in accounting, at some point decided he wanted to be a psychologist and he looked around and found a place in Missouri I think, where he could enroll and take undergraduate psychology courses before he could formally get into a master's in psychology. After that, he said to me, "Everybody around here just goes to City College, but there's a whole world out there of residential colleges and you might really enjoy that." So, that got me focused on it.

The New York State Regents Scholarship, had a provision that would pay up to seven thousand dollars a year in tuition, and Binghamton was roughly four thousand dollars a year. So, I discovered that I wouldn't have to pay any tuition to go to Binghamton. I would only have to pay for housing and food and so on. As I said, I had worked in summer camps, and I worked delivering dry cleaning. So, I had saved some money. I think I went to see a counselor at my high school, and said, "I'd like to go to a state university out of town." Immediately, she said, "Harpur College," which is now SUNY Binghamton. So, that's how I got interested. The other college she pointed me to was Long Island Center at Oyster Bay. It's now Stony Brook.

[Editor's Note: In 1957, the State University College on Long Island was founded as part of the SUNY system. In 1962, it was moved and renamed as the State University of New York at Stony Brook. New York State Regents Scholarships were awarded based on performance on standardized tests taken prior to graduating high school.]

SI: Oh.

SD: Stony Brook did not appeal to me. It was more heavily on the sciences, but Harpur College seemed terrific. By the way, I enrolled in Harpur College without having visited it first. Most students, more privileged, would of course visit colleges before enrolling, but I didn't have the means to get up there. So, I just went. I loved it, absolutely loved it.

SI: Well, tell us about getting immersed in this new environment.

SD: Well, it was very exciting to be at a 24/7 college. I think when I entered, there were about twelve hundred students. One of my friends was editor of the student newspaper and he urged me to come on to the staff, thinking that I would be a great successor to him as editor-in-chief. So I did that. Actually, I should say, before that, I had attended various politically-oriented programs about how do we make the university more democratic, how do we limit the terrible power of these administrators and put everything into the hands of students? In fact, very 1960s.

So, anyhow, he persuaded me to join the newspaper, and two years later, I became editor-in-chief. Obviously, that was a very formative thing for me, and I spent a lot of time there, writing about and examining how the university runs, but more generally the nature of higher education, what should it be? My favorite story--when I graduated, the provost, who I had denounced [in]

virtually every article, said to me, "What are you doing next year?" I said, "Well, I'm going to the University of Chicago to study for Ph.D. in history." He said, "That's wonderful. That's a great institution." That's where he got his Ph.D. Then, he said, "I'll bet you end up in administration." Of course, I told all my friends, "What an insult. How could he say that I would turn to the dark side to do administration?" [laughter] But he obviously understood me better than I understood myself. In retrospect, I think he saw two things in me. One was leadership ability. If you're going to be editor of the newspaper, you've got to have some leadership ability. But the other was an interest in how universities run. In fact, my scholarship has been largely about higher education, the history of higher education.

SI: Well, I would like to break that down a little more. You mentioned you were going to these workshops, you said, or seminars on campus politics.

SD: Yes.

SI: I guess you were challenging the authority.

SD: Yes.

SI: How did those come to your attention? Were they just sort of organic or backed by any groups?

SD: I don't really remember. It was a very small campus. I don't remember if there was an SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] chapter on the campus, but there were various speakers who came to campus and talked about the need for revolution and all that. So, that undoubtedly had an influence on me. [Editor's Note: The Students for a Democratic Society was a student organization that had chapters at colleges and universities across the United States from 1960 to 1974. They are known for leading protests against the Vietnam War.]

SI: Do you know if the National Student Association was active on your campus? [Editor's Note: The National Student Association was a confederation of student governments of colleges and universities. It existed from 1947 to 1978.]

SD: I'm not sure.

SI: If you could remember, what would you say were your grievances against the administration when you first started?

SD: That's a great question.

SI: It seems like a lot of campus activism in the early 1960s revolved around in loco parentis-type issues.

SD: That was definitely the case. One of the issues was curfew. The women had a curfew and the men didn't and that seemed wrong. So, opposing the university's attempt to supervise our personal lives in the dorms and the like, that was a big thing. The other thing was the Vietnam

War, even though the university was not directly involved in it. In the mentality of the time, we believed that the powers that be should speak up against the Vietnam War, but they did not. I can check this in my files, but I believe I wrote an editorial saying that the university should not cooperate with the draft board in any way, providing information about who graduated, who didn't graduate, who was enrolled and all of that, because the draft was such a big issue.

SI: I know you said you were not in ROTC, but was there an ROTC unit on the campus?

SD: No.

SI: Okay.

SD: No, not on campus.

SI: Would they have military recruiters come to the campus?

SD: I don't remember any.

SI: How about awareness or activity in the civil rights movement? Do you recall anything along those lines?

SD: Yes, that was a big issue, and I believe I participated in some demonstrations in Binghamton about desegregating schools and other entities. Yes, that was definitely a big issue. Yes, we were all very sensitive to it, and it was striking that there were so few black students on the campus.

SI: Was that part of the protest? Often in the black student movements, that's the first thing they ask for is to recruit more African American students.

SD: Yes, and that became an issue. The administration did start to recruit more black students.

SI: All right. We will leave the paper for a second, but did you have a mentor or any professors that stand out in your memory at Harpur?

SD: Yes. There's one in particular, and he was an historian. His field was post-World War II American history, which, at that point, was a little bit on the edge. Many believed that historical scholarship did not extend beyond World War II, but he had written about Truman and Eisenhower. He and I became very close, and I took a whole bunch of courses from him. He supervised my undergraduate thesis, which, interestingly, was on how college student newspapers dealt with the Great Depression. I went to look at the newspapers of Columbia, City College, and Fordham University. He was very helpful and very supportive. I stayed there and did my master's, and I think while I was doing my master's, he left and went to the University of Vermont, where he was Dean of Arts and Sciences and then Chancellor. So, a number of years later, we would get together and I was beginning to have inclinations toward administration and he and I would talk about that. [Editor's Note: Harry S. Truman served as the U.S. president from 1945 to 1953, succeeded by Dwight D. Eisenhower from 1953 to 1961.]

SI: Any other professors stand out?

SD: There was one, but I don't remember his name, who was very engaged with students and very informal by the standards of time. I remember having coffee with him in the cafeteria, him and one other person. I forget how the subject came up, but we were talking about religion and I said, "I'm not Jewish. I'm atheist." He said, "You are more Jewish than you recognize. You are profoundly Jewish, and someday you'll come to realize this," and of course, he was talking ethnicity, ancestry. He was absolutely right. But it was funny at the time. To me, Jewish meant religion and I was against religion.

SI: I am wondering, if in your work as editor-in-chief or other activities you were involved in, would you go to conferences or be in some kind of conversation with peers of other institutions?

SD: Occasionally.

SI: Okay.

SD: But I don't really remember much of that.

SI: Okay, all right.

DC: Do you remember being involved in any other student organizations?

SD: Well, I belonged to what they called a Social Club, really fraternity, but it didn't have a residential center to it. So, I belonged to one of those and it's interesting. I'm still in close touch with a couple of the people who were members of it. It was called Baccacia. It seemed to attract students who were very academically oriented and more so than some of the other social clubs. So, I was involved in that. I must have been involved in other things. I think I served on student government and I know I undertook to lead the campaign of a friend who was competing to be president of student government. We believed that student government had to be radical. It had to challenge the nature of the university and university governance and all of that.

SI: You mentioned when you first got there, it was about twelve hundred students.

SD: Yes.

SI: Did it grow significantly while you were there?

SD: Again, I was there six years. I did bachelors and master's. I think it was around two thousand students when I left, after I got my master's. So, that's substantial growth, but it was still very small.

SI: Yes, I was wondering if there were any growing pain-related issues that you tackled with the paper.

SD: I wrote a bunch of editorials saying they should stop expanding the school. We don't want to become like the big state universities. Here we are, a public, affordable institution that has all the qualities of a small liberal arts college and they shouldn't be undermining this by bringing in more and more and more students. Needless to say, it didn't do any good, but, yes, that was an issue I was very involved with, particularly through the newspaper.

SI: Was it a daily paper?

SD: No, twice a week.

SI: All right. Let me pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: All right, so another question I had was you had come from this very homogenous milieu, I guess, you described earlier. Was it a more diverse student body and atmosphere at Harpur?

SD: That's a great question. Yes, in that the student body at Harpur was about fifty percent Jewish and about fifty percent New York City.

SI: Okay.

SD: Or New York City and suburbs.

SI: Yes.

SD: So, it was fascinating for me to meet these Upstate students. I remember I had a roommate who was Upstate, but he was Jewish and he was from Buffalo. He kept saying, "Why does everybody think there's something weird about people from Buffalo?" One of the things I do remember is, those of us from New York City, when we were talking, we would say, "Oh, I'm from the city." The Upstate students would say, "Sioux City? Iowa City? Johnson City?" They objected furiously at our referring to New York as "the city." I did become friends with a couple of non-Jewish people from Upstate, one of whom came and stayed with me in my parents' apartment. He said he wanted to see the Bronx, and he had grown up in an agricultural community. So, I remember driving him around, and he said, "I'm beginning to understand. I'm beginning to understand." He saw all these apartment buildings and the like, and said, "Ah." Then, "I understand." It was good natured. Yes, so, the interaction with non-New Yorkers, I can't say I had extensive ties, but it was very interesting to meet people who hadn't grown up in New York City.

SI: Vietnam was obviously a big issue. You got a student deferment, I assume.

SD: Yes.

SI: Can you describe your dealings with the draft board or any issues you may have run into?

SD: Yes. So, at the time I was an undergraduate, you were deferred if you were a full-time student. Then, I started my master's at Binghamton and I was deferred again, but here's where the trick came. After I finished my master's, I wanted to go to a prestigious university for a Ph.D. and I got a fellowship at the University of Chicago. When I enrolled there, I got a letter from the draft board saying, "You're due to be drafted." I thought that, since I was, in my mind, transferring from one school to another, it shouldn't make a difference, but the draft board did call me down and I got really terrified. My father paid a lawyer to help me with all of this, and the lawyer was also a member of the legislature, but I went through a period when I was just horrified at the prospect of being drafted. I thought, "Well, if they do that, maybe I'll just move to Canada." Then, finally, when I was called down for a meeting with some draft board people and I explained to them, "Well, I'm just really continuing the same program," and one or two of them said, "Oh, yes, that explains it. That makes a lot of sense. We got an inquiry about this," i.e., the connections to the legislators. So, I was continued as a student deferral.

SI: Part of what I have seen a lot of in school papers at the time were, one printing information on the draft and how it is changing and even tips on how to keep your deferment. Others are kind of this running dialogue between groups like Students for a Democratic Society and Young Americans for Freedom. Do you remember those being pressing issues in your work as editor or just your work in the paper, in general? [Editor's Note: Americans for Freedom was founded in 1960. It is a conservative and libertarian student group that supported the Vietnam War.]

SD: We certainly talked about the draft and, in particular, the role of the university in supporting it or participating in it. So, in that sense, yes. I am not sure, but I think I wrote an editorial saying there shouldn't be a draft, that it's undemocratic or whatever. I know I did a front-page editorial denouncing the war in Vietnam, which wouldn't make me particularly unique at that time.

SI: Yes. Do you remember getting any backlash, either from the university or even from the local area?

SD: Yes, from the local area, I remember getting some nasty phone calls of people saying I was un-American, how could I possibly write this? I think, but I'm not sure that there was an article in the Binghamton newspaper denouncing what I had written.

SI: Okay.

SD: Nothing on campus. It was all folks in the city.

SI: Was the paper independent, or was it funded by the university?

SD: It was funded by the university.

SI: Did the administration ever try to exert influence over you on anything?

SD: No.

SI: Okay.

SD: The newspaper was funded by student fees, which were essentially controlled by the student government. So, I mean, at that point of time, if the administration were to get involved in that way, they'd be in a lot of trouble.

DK: You had mentioned writing, trying to establish a policy where the university would not cooperate with the draft process. What can you tell us about that experience?

SD: I really don't remember any of the reactions to it. It wasn't a big deal. My sense is, "Oh, well, sure, that's what college newspapers say." So, no, it didn't get a lot of attention.

DK: Okay. So, the backlash then that you mostly received was writing against the Vietnam War?

SD: Yes, and that was from people in the city.

DK: Okay.

SI: Were there actually a lot of actions on campus like protests, maybe building takeovers? That usually came a little later.

SD: No.

SI: Okay.

SD: No building takeovers. There were demonstrations, but, yes, there were a bunch of demonstrations in Binghamton and I believe the student government spent money to rent buses to bring us there. At least at that point in time, there was no simple way to get from the campus which was in Vestal, New York--into downtown Binghamton. So, they rented a bunch of buses.

SI: Now, you went to the MA program at Harpur, as well.

SD: Yes.

SI: Were you studying under the same professor you described earlier?

SD: Yes.

SI: All right. Did you have to write a thesis in your master's program?

SD: Yes, but the professor I was working closely with left, I think after my first year.

SI: Oh, okay.

SD: I think I had to come up with something else under a different professor for the thesis.

SI: You would have been there in the first half of 1968 ...

SD: Yes.

SI: ... Which obviously was a pivotal year.

SD: Oh, yes.

SI: Do you remember, for example, the reaction on campus to Martin Luther King's assassination? [Editor's Note: Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee by James Earl Jones.]

SD: Yes.

SI: Yes.

SD: Well, I remember riding in an elevator on campus, and somebody came in and said something about Martin Luther King had been killed. Most of us didn't know and [were] utterly shocked and immediately ran to whatever we could to find out about this. It seemed so horrific, so devastating. I think I had a class on that day. I think the instructor said we should just talk about that among ourselves and just dismissed class.

SI: How did you decide on the University of Chicago? How did that opportunity come about? [Editor's Note: The University of Chicago was founded in 1890 in Chicago, Illinois by the American Baptist Education Society, with money provided by John D. Rockefeller.]

SD: So, when I finished my bachelor's degree, I applied to a number of places for a Ph.D. program and I got into several, but I didn't get any financial support other than at Binghamton. My grades in college were okay, but they weren't spectacular. So, my advisor said, "Stay here for your master's. Work really hard. Get good grades and then you can apply to all kinds of terrific places." Indeed, that's what I did, and I think I had straight "A's" in the master's program. So, I asked around, given my interests, at the time, for suggestions and I applied to a whole bunch of programs, but Chicago offered me a full fellowship that included living stipend for four years, as well as full tuition.

It's interesting. This fellowship program had been started by the Carnegie Foundation, because there was a shortage of college teachers in the humanities, which is very funny, because by the time I got my Ph.D., there was a glut of professors in those fields and getting a job was a real challenge. I did have a connection to the University of Chicago when I applied. There was an economic historian who was essentially retired from Chicago, but he had been there many, many years, and I took a course from him and we hit it off. So, I know that he wrote a letter on my behalf, maybe he even called somebody there. That's probably why I got my best offer from the University of Chicago. [Editor's Note: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching was established by Andrew Carnegie in 1905.]

SI: Well, what was it like heading out to Chicago in the middle of '68? I do not know if you were there for the summer.

SD: No. I came right after that.

SI: Okay.

SD: I came shortly after the Democratic Convention and all of the protests it triggered. I remember, at the time, people saying and thinking, "I don't know who we should be more scared of, the government, which is harassing leftists and liberals, or the poor black people on the street who might rob you." But I went out there and, I mean, I wasn't scared-scared. I did ask around about what's the best practices in terms of personal safety. It turned out, there wasn't much one had to do. [Editor's Note: The Democratic Convention of 1968 took place in Chicago from August 26th to 29th. Thousands of anti-war protestors clashed with police in the city. The National Guard had to be used to quell the protests.]

I do remember that I was driving in Chicago, near my apartment, and a police car pulled up after me and said, "You went through a yellow light." I said, "Oh, did I really? I don't think so." He said, "Well, you did." I said, "Well, can't you just leave this alone?" I had New York City plates and a New York City driver's license, which meant, if I were stopped as someone from out-of-state, I'd have to go down to the jail and until somebody posted the appropriate bond. So, the guy says, "Well, we might consider it if you have something to give us." I said, "How much?" He said, "Whatever you think." So, I don't remember how much, but I gave him some money and that was the end of it. To me, it was so classically Chicago police. This was the image that they had and very appropriately.

SI: Wow. When you came to Chicago, did you have an understanding that you would be studying with somebody, or did you figure that out when you got there?

SD: I figured it out when I got there, but I pretty much knew who I was going to study with. There was a professor there who was a specialist in 20th century history, progressivism, that kind of thing, and that's what I thought I wanted to do.

SI: Do you remember his name?

SD: Yes, Arthur Mann, and it's interesting because he was a Jewish guy brought up in Brooklyn. He did his Ph.D. at Harvard under Oscar Handlin, who was the preeminent immigration historian and was also Jewish, but Arthur Mann basically pretended he wasn't Jewish. He changed his name. His name had been Finkelman, and he changed it to Arthur Mann. He taught at one of the elite women's colleges for a bunch of years and then came to Chicago. He had written work on *LaGuardia* and some other books on urban reform. So, yes, that's who I ended up working with, and he was a character. He could be difficult, but he was very good to me. [Editor's Note: Arthur Mann was a professor at the University of Chicago from 1966 to 1992. He lived from 1922 to 1993. From 1955 to 1966, Dr. Mann taught at Smith College, the private women's college in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1959, Mann published *LaGuardia: A Fighter Against his Times, 1882-1933*. In 1965, Mann published *LaGuardia Comes to Power: 1933*.

Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1945. Oscar Handlin was a historian who lived from 1915 to 2011. He was a professor at Harvard University for over fifty years.]

SI: Tell us about that process developing, what you wanted to do your research in and how that unfolded.

SD: I took several courses from him. At various points, we talked about my dissertation, and I had this idea that I wanted to write about the role of professors in Progressive Era reform in Chicago. He thought that was very good, and that's what I ended up doing. The advantage of that was that all the archives I needed were at Chicago at the university. That ultimately became my first book. [Editor's Note: The Progressive Era occurred from approximately 1897 to 1920. During this era, the government passed reforms to regulate the economy and to assist in social problems. Private organizations also became involved in the reforms of the era.]

SI: Do any other professors from Chicago stand out?

SD: Yes, John Hope Franklin, world-renowned scholar of black history, and I took one or two courses from him. He was very impressive, this was just the point where black history was becoming very mainstream. Of course he had been studying Black History for all of his career. He served on my dissertation committee. I think he was second reader or third reader. [Editor's Note: John Hope Franklin was a professor at the University of Chicago from 1964 to 1982. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995. He lived from 1915 to 2009.]

The other professor who stands out was Richard Wade. Richard Wade was really the pioneer in urban history. I wasn't particularly close to him, but I took his courses, which focused on cities, suburbs, the movement out from the city, and dispersal of population. So, those were the ones I remember. [Editor's Note: Richard Clement Wade taught at the University of Chicago from 1963 to 1971. He lived from 1921 to 2008.]

DK: Would you say this is the point that you wanted to focus on urban education?

SD: When I got to Chicago I wanted to study the Progressive Era, and Progressive reform. I don't remember exactly how I got interested specifically in academics and Progressive reform, but I think it may have grown out of a course I took. I took a course on the history of sociology and Chicago was the leading place for the study of sociology. It's basically where sociology began, and I did some research, for one graduate course, on the early history of Chicago sociology. There was a distinguished professor there, Edward Shils, who urged me to write about Chicago sociology. Initially, I thought that would be the subject of my dissertation, and then I changed my mind and decided it had to be much broader, studying professors in many disciplines. He was the editor of a journal, *Minerva*. He urged me to go ahead and write up what I had done on Chicago sociology because none of this research had been done. So, I did write it up, and, actually, I think that was my first article. It was on the history of Chicago sociology. It appeared in *Minerva* journal. However, I got more interested in a broader look at professors and reform. I don't think when I was applying to Ph.D. programs, that I expected to work on the history of higher education, but I had done my undergraduate thesis on student

newspapers, and clearly I had a deep interest in the history of higher education. [Editor's Note: *Minerva: A Review of Science, Learning and Policy* began publication in 1962. Dr. Edward Shils was a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He began teaching at the university in 1947.]

SI: I would imagine this takes up a lot of your time, but were you involved in other activities when you were in Chicago as well?

SD: Well, I met my wife.

SI: Okay.

SD: She was a student there also.

SI: Well, it is also a hot spot for social protest and social justice movements. Did you have any involvement in there?

SD: I think I participated in some demonstrations, but I can't remember the particulars.

SI: I am curious, at a place like Chicago, would the professors be encouraging graduate students to look to those kinds of things?

SD: No, definitely not. They told us to stay focused on our scholarship.

SI: Okay. You were there from '68 to '72.

SD: That's right.

SI: Okay. What is the process for getting a job in those days and advancing your career?

SD: That's a great question. So, my advisor, Arthur Mann, said to me, "You don't have to get yourself a job. It's my responsibility to get you one." That's the way it had been, that if you went to a major, leading university, then your advisor would call around and see who wanted what and get you a job. Then, I remember, it was getting late, March, April, and no jobs. So, I began to panic, and he was very frustrated because, basically, the nature of things was changing. So at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, he told me when I arrived, "You have two interviews." So, I went to these interviews and they were fine, but nothing came of them.

So, then--this is a great story--the history department sent out a notice to people that someone in the department had gotten a job through the Cooperative College Registry. The Cooperative College Registry was an entity in Washington, D.C. created in the old days when there was a shortage of college teachers. You'd fill out a form and describe your scholarly interests. People who were looking to hire would come and say, "Who do you have in this field or that field?" That's how many universities recruited new faculty.

By the time I was looking for an academic position, things were changing very dramatically. Departments would advertise new openings and get inundated with applications. I remember we got a note from the Chicago History Department, saying, "Well, we heard that one of our students got a job through the Cooperative College Registry." I remember saying to my wife, "Oh, this is ridiculous, I'm not going to waste twenty dollars on this or whatever they charged." She said, "It's worth it. Just go ahead and do it." I think it was in June, and we actually had decided we were going to stay in Chicago another year. I had gotten a position organizing the papers of a sociologist at the university's archives. It didn't pay fantastically, but it was adequate money. We could live on that. So, I was planning to do that.

Then, one day, the phone rings, and it's someone from a place called Federal City College. It's now the University of the District of Columbia. The call was from chair of the Urban Studies Department. He said, "Hi, I'm calling to offer you a job," not an interview, a job. This just sort of blew me away, so I said, "Well, I'll come down to Washington and we'll talk," because I didn't know anything about it.

First of all, the Federal City College was started in 1968. It was one of Lyndon Johnson's civil rights initiatives. Washington D.C., other than a teacher's college, had no higher education until 1968. Then the city started that school and also a community college. My advisor said, "Oh, you don't want to go there. John Hope Franklin knows people who were there and said they're very hostile to whites." But I decided, "Well, I should go and see what it's all about." No one in Federal City College's Urban Studies department had a Ph.D. The chair of the department, though, was enrolled in a Ph.D. program in history at the University of Maryland. I don't think he ever finished it, but, anyhow, he'd gotten interested in history and so he saw my resume and thought, "Oh, well, this is a good person." He didn't interview me, as I said; he just offered me the job on the phone. So, I went down with my wife to meet him and to talk to some other people there, and I decided, "Perfectly reasonable thing to do for a year until Harvard is ready for me." So, I went and I ended up spending thirteen years there. [Editor's Note: Federal City College was created by the Public Education Act, which was part of Johnson's Great Society initiative. Federal City College existed between 1968 and 1977. In 1977, it merged with two other institutions to form the University of the District of Columbia.]

SI: Tell us a little bit more about the lay of the land when you first got there. It was a very new institution.

SD: Yes, it was very new. It had a very peculiar faculty. The founders had this idea that they wanted to hire new leftists or leftist activists, who were eager to teach these working-class black students. The student body, by the way, ninety-nine percent black. Washington D.C., at the time, was seventy-two percent black. It had no public higher education, so a lot of students who came were older adults who never had access to higher education before. But, when I got there, I had to get used to the idea that I was the only white person in the room when teaching. The faculty was a little bit more mixed, but, as I said, they hired a lot of radicals but there were a lot of complaints that there weren't enough black faculty. So college leaders started going out of their way to hire black faculty. They didn't really try to get people with the traditional credentials, Ph.Ds.

So, when I was hired, the college was getting ready for accreditation, and one of the concerns the university had was, "We don't have enough Ph.Ds." So, this fellow, who was chair of the department, read one of the scholarly articles I had published. He liked it a lot, and so he called and offered me this position.

Federal City College did not, at this point, have a campus as such. It was in buildings that had been rented at various places, scattered around the downtown.

It turned out, I loved teaching there. I didn't think I would, but I found the students very, very stimulating and very engaged. I taught about race and ethnicity and urbanization. I found teaching these students fascinating and very engaging, and I became close to a number of students, two of whom invited me to their weddings. At both of these, my wife and I were the only white people there. I knew that I didn't want to stay at Federal City College forever. One of the ideas I had was if I went into administration, I could move somewhere else. I served as department chair. It didn't require a lot of expertise or clout. The previous department chair didn't want to do it anymore, and so the faculty turned to me and said, "Wouldn't you like to do it?" So, I did, and once I did that, it sort of gave me an initial credential into administration.

The American Council on Education, which is the umbrella organization for all the higher education, had this program they called ACE Fellows, which took mid-level faculty or administrators who had an interest in senior administrative leadership and had them spend the year interning with the president of another university. So, I decided to apply for that, and I got in. They accepted me to the program, and then I ended up spending a year interning with the president of George Mason University. When that was over, I went back briefly, and then they hired me at George Mason in an administrative capacity. But this ACE Fellows Program was a very interesting entity. It's still around. When I interviewed for the ACE Fellows Program, one interviewer asked me, "Well, when did you first hear of the ACE Fellows Program?" I said, "In 1965, when I was editor of my college newspaper, there was an announcement that an ACE Fellow would be coming to campus." I said, "So, that's where I heard of it." It was just [an] interesting coincidence. But the ACE Fellows Program has been very important. [Editor's Note: The American Council on Education was founded in 1918. It is a non-profit association. George Mason University was founded in 1949. It is located in Fairfax, Virginia.]

SD: When I was chancellor, the director of the ACE Fellows Program was looking to have all the fellows in that program study one institution in depth, one with a lot of racial and ethnic diversity. So, I persuaded her to have all the fellows study Rutgers-Newark and they did. I also had created a kind of local ACE Fellows Program. I would ask a faculty member to come and spend a year in the chancellor's office doing special projects and learning about university leadership. The person who was doing the fellowship that year, was Sherri-Ann Butterfield and she's now the executive vice president of Rutgers-Newark. I had persuaded her to come and spend a year in the chancellor's office in my newly established fellowship program. The ACE Fellows Program studied us that year. And then the following year, Sherri was selected as an ACE Fellow herself. Sherri spent much of her time teaching the fellows about Rutgers-Newark and connecting them to key faculty and administration. [Editor's Note: Dr. Sherri-Ann Butterfield serves as the Executive Vice Chancellor and a professor of sociology at Rutgers-Newark.]

SI: Before we talk about George Mason, I want to ask you a few more questions about Federal City College. It sounds like it was mostly a teaching university.

SD: Yes.

SI: What was the tenure process like there?

SD: We didn't have tenure. When I was there, there was no formal tenure, but the faculty was unionized. The union, at some point, negotiated an arrangement that if you had been there more than x-number of years, they basically couldn't dismiss you unless you had done something wrong. So, that became virtual tenure.

SI: You talked about this relationship with your students. Not that you have to give names, but can you recall any examples of experiences in the classroom that illustrate that?

SD: Well, all kinds of things, but I remember in one class, a student raised her hand and said, "Professor, can you explain to us how you got here? You have a Ph.D. from a top university and you've published things and that's not like most of our professors." Then, she said, "Did you come here because you wanted to help us?" I said, "Hell no. I'm not here as a missionary." I said, "I'm not here for that reason, but I'm very happy to be here." So, that was very interesting. Obviously, I stood out. I was unusual that way. Obviously, there was a lot of discussion about race in my classes. I remember once, an African student came to my office one day and said, "Why are these students so obsessed with race? That's all they want to talk about." He was black skinned, but he had come from Africa, didn't have that same orientation. But given the subjects I taught, issues of race were profoundly important. At the beginning, it made me anxious. Here I am in an all-black classroom and people want to ask me about race. Pretty quickly, I became quite comfortable with it. But in one class there was a student, who during the first two classes of my course kept saying, "I can't believe all the terrible things you're saying about me." I hadn't said a word about him, but he kept saying, "You're so racist." So, I called the counseling office, and they said, "What's his name?" They said, "Oh, him. Yes, he disrupted all his classes last semester and we were told by the legal people to give him one more chance. Now that you've complained, we'll get him out." At another time, a student said to me, "How do you justify all the horrible things Jews have done to black people as landlords?" I didn't respond. This kind of thing didn't happen very often. The college was not a hostile environment, but every so often, there'd be a disturbing incident.

SI: You continued your research during this period.

SD: Yes.

SI: How did your research interests develop?

SD: The first thing I did was publish my dissertation, substantially revised. That book, *A City and Its Universities: Public Policy in Chicago* and it was about the role of Progressives and Progressive reform in Chicago. That occupied a fair chunk of my time. I started a project at

UDC and got funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities for it. It studied the history of public policy issues that were of concern at that time in the city, then to make public policy leaders aware of that history and hopefully help it shape decision-making. The first year we studied public education and the history of public education in Washington and its implication for contemporary public schools. When we completed our work, we met with the superintendent of schools and I think we met with the mayor and key people and tried to summarize our findings for them. The second year, we did the same with housing. What is the history of housing in Washington? How did that change over time? In each case, I was one of three or four authors. The other authors were all faculty, but I was the project director and supervisor. As a result of that, I published a several scholarly articles on the history of Washington, D.C. [Editor's Note: *A City and Its Universities: Public Policy in Chicago, 1892-1919* was published in 1980. The National Endowment for the Humanities was founded in 1965 as part of the Great Society initiative. It provides grants and funding to research, programs and education within the humanities.]

SI: In general, this institution was created in the Great Society and then you have almost two decades of conservative government. How did that affect the campus and that sort of thing?

SD: Well, the conservative government was not the government in Washington. So, Washington had liberal black mayors. The funding came through the city government, but much of it was funded directly by Congress. I don't remember if there were major budget cuts as the government grew more right wing.

SI: Did it remain mostly a teaching institution for the time you were there?

SD: Yes.

SI: Okay, all right.

SD: But one of the things they did was built a campus that I taught at for my last two years. It was a fully-built campus, it turned out to be four blocks from the house in which we lived, in an upper-middle-class, white neighborhood.

SI: As the chair of the department, what did you try to accomplish, and how did you try to build the department?

SD: Well, one thing is [that] I succeeded in recruiting some new faculty who had Ph.Ds. and who were active scholars. We also started a master's program in urban policy. One of the things that I tried to do is give the program some national visibility, so I would go to all kinds of conferences, the Urban Studies Association or other similar organizations, and talk about our program, which previous chairs didn't do. So, we got a certain amount of attention as urban studies in a black institution. I expanded the curriculum into some areas that had not been prominent, including, the study of Washington.

SI: Did the student body continue to be older folks or nontraditional age?

SD: It was a mix.

SI: Did that change the classroom experience much?

SD: No, I found the classroom experience pretty consistent.

SI: In the last year, you were director of the Center for Applied Research and Urban Policy?

SD: Yes.

SI: Was that the time in between the internship at George Mason and when you left?

SD: Yes, and that's something I set up and got funding for. This was pioneering in a sense. There were some faculty engaged in research but the college wasn't a heavily research-oriented institution. I made the case that an institution like ours should be deeply involved in research on urban issues generally and in Washington in particular. So, that's how I got funding to set up the Center for Applied Research and Urban Policy.

SI: Going back to the ACE Fellowship at George Mason, what did you do for that year? What kinds of projects did they put you on?

SD: I worked very closely with the president of George Mason. His name was George Johnson, and he's the guy who really built George Mason into a major institution. One of the things he was very interested in was how to connect George Mason with Northern Virginia, and this was right up my alley because I was very interested in connections of universities and cities. So, he did a lot of that kind of thing, and I worked with him on a number of initiatives.

One of the things that came about was a significant donation to the university to set up a research center which we focused largely on cognitive science. One of the ways I was able to set that up was by working with some of the distinguished faculty we had recruited. George Mason also received a large endowment from a northern Virginia businessman, Clarence J. Robinson. The funds were used to recruit distinguished faculty to George Mason, who were not tied to a specific department. I was in charge of recruiting Robinson Professors. Although Robinson Professors had department membership, they were free to teach in many different departments. I was able to recruit a number of really excellent scholars.

One was a biological scientist who was at Yale. When the money came forward to establish this research center, we had to figure out what would be the focus of the research center. He argued that we should do it in cognitive science. So, we did. [Editor's Note: The Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study specializes in neuroscience and cognitive research. It is located at George Mason University.]

Recruiting these Robinson Professors was really one of my major tasks, and I really enjoyed it and [was] pretty successful at it. As I said, we recruited a number of people who were quite distinguished, and what would appeal to them was the freedom basically to do what they want to do without departmental constraints. They weren't tied to a particular department, and they

actually had offices together, that were sort of separate from the departments. I realize, in retrospect, that's basically the kind of appointment I have now. [Editor's Note: Dr. George Johnson served as the president of George Mason University from 1978 to 1996. He died in 2017 at the age of eighty-eight. A Robinson Professor is a distinguished professor at George Mason University.]

SI: Let me pause again.

SD: Yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: In addition to being part of the administration, you were also a part of the history department. Did that actually call on you to do teaching duties and that sort of thing, or were you just mostly an administrator?

SD: Okay. Well, I served as vice provost for a number of years. The provost and I got along very, very well. He died unexpectedly, so the university hired a new provost. The new provost, after about six months or so, called me in and said, "I want my own person. You're out." So, I had a year off, which I used to do some research, and then I went to the history department.

SI: Okay, all right.

SD: It was a very welcoming department, and I was able to teach what I wanted and participate in some departmental issues. I got on very well with the folks there. A couple of them expressed great disappointment when I went to Rutgers-Newark.

SI: Had there been other, I guess, urban historians or historians of higher education there?

SD: No.

SI: Okay, all right. I guess you had to do a little bit of each, but did you focus a lot on your research or undergraduate or graduate education to try to split your interests?

SD: As I recall, I taught a graduate course on the Progressive era. I think I also taught one on urban history. I remember doing an undergraduate class on the Washington metropolitan area and that's because when I was at Federal City College, in D.C., I regularly taught a course on Washington. So, I thought, "Well, I should do this here as well." I changed it. I called it "Metropolitan Washington."

SI: How did the student body you were working with change at George Mason compared to Federal City College?

SD: The student body at George Mason was pretty mixed. It was largely middle-class, upper-middle-class, suburban students. The more affluent, more elite, suburban students went to more

prestigious institutions, but it was a nice mix of students, some immigrants, but pretty diverse racially and ethnically.

SI: Did you find your teaching them equally rewarding?

SD: Yes.

SI: All right. How did your research interests grow during this period?

SD: Well, I got very involved in a book on the Progressive era. What I tried to focus it on was less the politics of the reform and more of its impact on people, more of a social history.

SI: All right. What about dealing with the profession at large? Did you become involved with any of the professional associations or anything like that?

SD: Not much.

SI: All right.

SD: I'd go to meetings of the Organization of American Historians and other organizations. I was involved in the Washington History Association, which was fairly small. I gave a couple talks at Washington History Programs, and I was very active in the organization. I think I played a role in getting some archives of Northern Virginia placed in the university.

SI: You had done this series in Washington, looking at housing and others, to kind of build up ties with the city and so on. Was there any kind of equivalent at George Mason?

SD: Not that I did, no.

SI: Okay, all right. How about just in general, building ties with the local constituencies?

SD: Well, that was the whole focus of George Johnson as president.

SI: Yes.

SD: The focus was to build very, very close ties with northern Virginia. There were all kinds of projects that did that, but nothing I was specifically responsible for.

SI: Okay. I was curious, when you were working on the Robinson Scholars or Fellows?

SD: The Scholars.

SI: Okay. Would you often be travelling, or would you be doing it from your place on campus?

SD: Doing it from campus.

SI: How would you find these folks?

SD: Well, basically, a lot of faculty would send me suggestions, and there was a committee as well. They'd say, "Well, maybe we should look at this person and that person." Often, I would communicate with them and just ask if they were interested in coming to campus and interacting with people.

SI: Is there anything else you would like to say about George Mason?

SD: I don't think so.

SI: Well, let's maybe ask a couple questions leading into Newark since we have a little time. You had been out of administration for a few years in between.

SD: Yes.

SI: Was it a case of an opportunity came up that you wanted to pursue, or did somebody from Rutgers reach out to you?

SD: Okay, excellent question. My wife was offered a title chair at NYU in American Jewish History, and we talked about it. Two of our kids were grown, but we had a little one as well. He was four or five years old. We definitely didn't want to live apart, but I had said to her, "Look, I really want to get back in administration and my scholarship is okay, but no history department is going to hire me as a full professor. I haven't done enough to warrant that," but I could get hired in administration because I had done a fair amount of that. So, we agreed, and she took the job at NYU. I began applying to whatever I saw in the New York area, and one of the places I applied to was Rutgers-Newark, looking for a Dean of Arts and Sciences. They offered me the job. I shouldn't say they. The person who offered me the job was Norm Samuels, who is a very dear friend to this day. [Editor's Note: Norman Samuels served as the provost of Rutgers-Newark from 1982 to 2002.]

SI: Yes. Before we go into that job, tell us a little bit about your wife's career.

SD: Oh, yes. She did her Ph.D. at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and she went for any number of years with marginal jobs. She'd be hired someplace for a one-year appointment. For two years she taught at the elite Sidwell Friends High School in Washington, but she kept on doing scholarly research. She published several books. She then got hired by the University of Maryland, College Park, in American Studies, and she taught there for a number of years. Then, she got this offer from NYU that was looking to build Jewish Studies. Not everything she wrote was on Jews but most of it was. Her very first book, which was her dissertation, was on the relationship of Jews and blacks. She's fluent in Yiddish and Hebrew, and she used the Yiddish press to see what they said about blacks. Their writing about blacks was quite substantial. Basically, she discovered that the Yiddish press kept saying things like, "Well, blacks are the Jews of America. This is our experience in Europe and this is their experience here." Jews also were very active in the civil rights movement.

She's done eight or nine books now, but she published several others. Then, unsolicited, NYU approached her and said, "We have a new chair in American Jewish History and we'd like you to come." So, we agreed that she would do that, and, in the meantime, I would look for something in the New York area. One year later, I was offered the position of Dean of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers.

SI: Well, what was the process like? I would imagine it was rather involved, as dean searches usually are. I know Dr. Samuels was very involved.

SD: Yes.

SI: Can you talk a little bit about that process?

SD: Well, obviously, I filled out all the paperwork and wrote about my interests and so on. Then, I was invited to a preliminary interview. I had not heard of Rutgers Newark until I saw the ad and applied, but my whole focus had always been on connecting universities and cities, and it seemed to me, from what I knew, if Rutgers is a multi-campus institution and New Brunswick is what everybody knows, Newark has an opportunity to build something distinctive if it's urban oriented. So, I came and said to the people who interviewed me, "There's tremendous opportunities for teaching, learning, for research in the City of Newark. That should be a focus that'll give this institution a presence and a vision that's different from New Brunswick." I would say, a lot of the people who interviewed me liked it. Some thought I was out of my mind. "What? Talk about Newark?" because there was a prevailing idea that, "Don't tell people we're in Newark" because the very term, Newark, is denigrated. Obviously, I prevailed enough with the committee, and then Norman had been thinking this way for years and years and was very happy to find somebody who shared that vision. So, I got the job and I did the deanship for four years and then I became chancellor.

SI: Well, I am curious again, how much involvement did New Brunswick have in that process, or was it mostly done strictly with Newark folks?

SD: That's a good question. I did have an interview in New Brunswick, I think with the president, but it seemed to me pro forma I think. Not so with the chancellor's job but for the dean, they were perfectly happy to let Norman decide.

SI: How do you prepare for a job like that?

SD: Great question. You learn as much as you can about the institution, and I spent a lot of time looking at various documents that were around about Rutgers-Newark but also about the City of Newark. That's my orientation, see what I can learn about the City of Newark. I came to realize that Newark had an incredibly rich array of institutions that could be very valuable to higher education, the Newark Museum, The New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the hospitals, the medical entities, and many other things. So, I tried to bring myself up to speed, so to speak, on the nature of the city and the nature of the university. [Editor's Note: The Newark Museum was founded in 1909 by John Cotton Dana.]

SI: I would imagine this would be very important in the chancellor's job, but even as dean of one of the sections of the university, did you work on building relationships with the community ...

SD: Yes.

SI: Reaching out to certain figures. How did you go about doing that, and how did you identify who you should work with?

SD: I immediately identified people who were familiar with the civic leadership of Newark, and I made appointments as quickly as I could to meet with these civic leaders. I also met with the mayor, Sharpe James. He seemed pleased that I found it important to come and talk to him. That was my orientation from day one, get to know as many leaders in the city as possible. So, yes, I did a lot of that, and I found it very interesting and very gratifying in many ways because I discovered that there was substantial civic leadership in Newark that was working aggressively to revitalize the city. This was perfect for the university because obviously the university had a great stake in the revitalization of the city but also because there was many, many ways in which we could participate in that. [Editor's Note: Sharpe James served as the Mayor of Newark from 1986 to 2006. He was also State Senator representing the 29th District from 1999 to 2008.]

SI: How did you go about building your relationship with the faculty here?

SD: I met with faculty groups on a regular basis. There were various faculty committees. There were meetings of the full Arts and Science faculty, and I would obviously attend those and speak at them. But it was hard to build rapport with faculty at these large meetings. Meetings with departments or committees was more important. I don't think I met with every department, but I did meet with a number of them. Plus, I also had lots and lots of individual conversations or lunches with faculty of all kinds to try to get to know who they were, what they did.

SI: You came in with these ideas, but when did you start developing the when and how? Did you start developing what you saw as what needed to be done here?

SD: Well, I think from day one, it was clear to me that what needed to be done was to build stronger ties to the resources of the city. When I interviewed for dean, I said, "Well, what do you want the dean to do?" A number of faculty said, "Get us better students. We have really weak students." In retrospect, I'm not sure I cared about that, but one of the things I proposed and implemented, when I came, was, "Let's start an honors college or an honors program." The way we will attract top students to the honors program is by highlighting the opportunities for learning in the city. Even then, I had this idea that very good students might really like a chance to work at Prudential, the Performing Arts Center, or lots of other places in the city. That's the honors program that we have now. It that was one of my earliest initiatives, "Let's get more and better students by highlighting the opportunities to learn in the city," and it worked.

DK: The community members you were working with and building these relationships, how did they react? Were there challenges with getting them on board or were they pretty receptive?

SD: They were very receptive in terms of meeting and serving on boards or whatever, not necessarily giving money, that's more complicated. But, yes, they were very receptive.

SI: All right, well, I thought we would maybe conclude for today because I have some other things I want to look up before we get deeper into Rutgers.

SD: Okay.

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