

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LIEBERFARB

FOR THE

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second interview session with Mr. David Lieberfarb, on November 14, 2019, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for coming in today.

David Lieberfarb: You're welcome.

SI: To start, you continue to be involved with the University through auditing classes. You wanted to talk a little bit about that experience, so please go ahead.

DL: Should I say what I just [said]?

SI: Yes, if you want.

DL: Repeat what I just said?

SI: Yes, we did not record it.

DL: Okay, sorry. [laughter] I am once again auditing a class. I've been doing that in the fall semester every year for at least the last three years or more, always in the History Department. My class actually meets tomorrow morning. It's interesting how I got into this class. Tomorrow's class, the lecturer will be Professor Paul Clemens. He'll be a guest lecturer. He was the prof who I audited two classes with last year during the fall semester [of] 2018. One was on the American Revolution and one was on famous trials. He's an expert on the law. That's the topic he's going to be addressing tomorrow morning.

This summer, I had no idea what class I might want to take during this current semester. I went right up until September without having any idea what I wanted to take. It just happened that I ran into Professor Clemens at the Metuchen Farmer's Market on a Saturday morning. I begged him, "Give me a suggestion for a class to take this fall." He suggested a class, the title is "War, Wayfarers, and the Wall: A History of the US-Mexico Border." What could be more timely than that in this political day and age? The professor is Camilla Townsend, who is a very knowledgeable professor. I've really been enjoying the class a lot. As I said, tomorrow her guest will be Professor Clemens. What goes around, comes around. Anyhow, I'm looking toward tomorrow's class. The only thing I feel sad about is the class will be ending fairly soon, by the first or second week in December. We're just getting up to the present day now. It is a history class, so as I said, we're just getting up to the present day now. That's all.

SI: I am interested, because it is not a new phenomenon for people of an older generation to audit classes, but I feel like the University has come at it with renewed vigor through both the auditing program and then OLLI-RU being an option. How do you feel as somebody in these classes? What do you get out of it? Do you see other people of your generation taking advantage of it as well? [Editor's Note: OLLI-RU refers to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Rutgers, which offers noncredit courses with no assignments or grades to adults over age fifty.]

DL: Number one, I love it; I love the classes. I like the fact that I don't have to do anything. I don't have to take any tests or write any papers. I certainly try to come to the classes regularly and listen. There are other seniors in the class, not college seniors but my kind of seniors. I love, occasionally, after class or before class, having a conversation with an undergrad. This past Tuesday, for example, I walked for a while with one of the undergrad students. I hoped I entertained her with a story about something that happened in 1968 when I was an undergrad, a story that I probably told in this project in the previous visit. I love it. I may sign up for an OLLI-RU class in January. I haven't been taking classes during the spring semesters, because I'm pretty much fully engaged four days a week as a tax preparer for AARP. We do volunteer tax returns. [Editor's Note: AARP is a non-profit organization that provides programs, services and benefits to people over fifty.]

SI: We can come back to this at any time, but we want to also delve into your career in this session. We covered the early part, and now we want to talk about your years with *The Star-Ledger*. This might cross over a little bit with the first session, but that is fine.

DL: Yes, right.

SI: Why don't you recall for me again how you got the job at *The Star-Ledger*?

DL: Interestingly, it was 1978. I had just turned thirty. I had had a few jobs, one lasted about three years, but nothing that lasted a really long time. There was a Rutgers connection to my getting the job. There was a fellow named Steve Duthie who, let's see, he probably would have been class of, I don't know, around Class of '70 or '72. He had played freshman basketball. Anyhow, I was the editor of the *Kearny Observer* in 1974--maybe he was Class of '74--I hired him to be my assistant. He moved on fairly quickly. He went to graduate school. I think he got a graduate degree in journalism. Then, he got a job at *The Ledger*. He was there for a while as a reporter, and then he moved on. Just around the time that he was getting ready to move on, he informed me that there might be an opening in one of the bureaus as a reporter. It was his job. So, I applied again. I had applied to *The Ledger* previous times and had not gotten in. This time, I got lucky. I didn't get a job as a reporter. I got a job on the copy desk.

I had one really, really hectic summer of 1978. My son was two years old. My marriage was starting to have a couple of cracks. That summer particularly made the cracks a little worse. I had a full-time day job at the *Union Leader* chain of weeklies, where I was working Monday through Friday, nine to five, basically. Then, I was trying out maybe three nights a week at *The Ledger* after work. Basically, three days a week, I was working a double. It was pretty taxing. I had a two-year-old at home. My wife, who was a teacher, was off during the summer. The tryout started around the beginning of June. It went on for a while. Then, around August 1st, I was hired at *The Ledger*. I had to give notice at the *Union Leader*. There was a little competition there. They offered me a nice raise to try to keep me, but it wasn't as good as what *The Ledger* was paying. I really wanted to work at *The Ledger*.

I guess through most of August, I was working full time at *The Ledger* and I was still going into the *Union Leader* office to try to help out. She finally put her foot down. She had to go back to work at the beginning of the school year, around Labor Day. She put her foot down. She said,

"It's either Les or me." Les was the editor at the *Union Leader*, my mentor, who was a man I had profound respect for. I really loved him. His name was Les Malamut. Basically, she said, "It's either Les or me." Of course, I reluctantly told him I really couldn't keep going there. It was around, as I said, August 1st. That might have been my official hiring date at *The Ledger* in '78. It was after that hectic month of August, somewhere along the way, I went to just working the one job.

I was on the copy desk. It was originally four nights, Wednesday night, Thursday night, Friday night, and a double on Saturday. It was maybe two PM to two AM or one PM to one AM, something like that, shepherding the Sunday paper. That worked out pretty well for a while. I was able to be home during the daytime for my toddler son. When we had a daughter in '79, again, I was still able to be at home during the day and be a daytime daddy. The job at *The Ledger*, it was an almost strictly nightside job from '78 until about '95 or '96. It was almost always nightside on the copy desk. Somewhere along the way during that time, around '86, the marriage finally ended. The kids were ten and seven at the time. I don't know where to go from there. I'm ready for another question for some guidance.

SI: You were on the copy desk for a long time. Can you explain what that job entailed and what the challenges were?

DL: The copy desk was primarily writing headlines and captions and proofreading. Late on Friday night and during the double on Saturday, I was in the composing room. I was the editor who had the last look at every page, or almost every page, in the paper to scan it and make sure whatever corrections had to be made were made properly and that there were no glaring bad headlines or captions or anything like that. I think I was pretty good at that. My boss, his name was Jon Lazarus. He could be somewhat intimidating at times, when he was head of the copy desk. He and I eventually became very good friends, but, initially, the relationship was a little rocky at times. Basically, I enjoyed the work. It was a rare day that I didn't look forward to going to work. Sometimes, I was really, really eager to get to work, because either I had a rough day with the kids, or when the marriage was not doing well, I was happy to get to the office.

SI: How did the job change in those twenty years or so that you were doing it?

DL: Good question. *The Ledger* was very profitable. Expenses were relatively low. The editor-in-chief, his name was Mort Pye. By the time he retired in '95, he had been there over thirty years as the editor. When he retired, a new editor came in. His name was Jim Willse. He brought in a lot of new people. There was some friction between some members of the old guard and some of the new people. That really didn't affect me at all. He held a meeting where he said, "Is there anybody who would really like to change what they're doing? Speak now." It was around '95 or '96. I spoke up. I said, "I'd really like to spend more time working dayside." I had spent a lot of time in the features department, not on the hard news desk, but in the features department as a fill-in. Whenever the copy editor, in the feature department, whenever they were out sick or out on vacation, I was often the one who went over there and helped out, filled in. That became my job. [Editor's Note: Mort Pye served as the editor of *The Star-Ledger* from 1963 to 1995. He died in 1997 at the age of seventy-nine. James Willse was the editor of the *New York Daily News* from 1989 to 1992 and *The Star-Ledger* from 1995 to 2011.]

I became one of the feature copy editors. At least three or four of the days, I was working maybe from ten to six or noon to eight PM, rather than nightside, which was a plus at that time. I really enjoyed, for example, on Tuesdays, I would primarily edit for Wednesday's "Savor" section, which was our food section. I would enjoy being the main copy editor for that section. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I would be the main copy editor for the weekend section, which was and still is called "Ticket" in the Friday paper. I'd love handling the movie reviews, the theater reviews and previews, concerts, and things like that. It was really a lot of fun. It was usually Monday through Friday. The last few years, it was Sunday night, Monday dayside, Tuesday dayside, Wednesday kind of an evening shift, and Thursday dayside. I'd have Fridays and Saturdays off. It was a nice fit. The last few years at the paper were really wonderful, except for the storm clouds. The storm clouds started developing in the form of people being offered buyouts and the word going around that the paper was losing money and we were starting to make cutbacks. Eventually, I accepted a buyout in '08, along with about two hundred other people. It was a nice buyout, a year's pay and medical benefits included. I was about sixty by then. I started there when I was thirty. I worked thirty years, and I left when I was sixty.

SI: Wow.

DL: I averaged about one byline a year. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

DL: I would occasionally get to write a story about a topic that I felt like covering, either some book reviews, or I did a story on a hot air balloon festival. I did a story on an art exhibit in Montclair on baseball-themed art. It was divided between the Yogi Berra Museum and a Montclair art gallery. Others, I can't remember right now off the top of my head, sometimes book reviews. I would get a chance to write a story once in a while. Like I said, I averaged about one byline a year, and I averaged about one sick day a year for thirty years.

SI: Technologically, how did the business change, from your perspective?

DL: Oh, good question. Good question, Shaun. When I started in '78, we were using manual typewriters, pencils, carbon paper, rubber cement. Cut and paste was literally cut and paste. That might have been the first three or four years, and then we started using computers just for editing. A few years later, we got another computer system, another program, that let us do editing, layout and what we called paginating. By the time I was done, basically, one person could do the job of what maybe five people had done in the old days. You could grab a story off the wire, edit it, pull up some pictures and edit them, lay out the page, pull up the proof and look at the proof, and then send it through. There was certainly no hot type anymore. There was no cold type anymore to paste up. One sheet would come out. That was the way it was my last years there. Of course, when I worked part time at *The Trenton Times* over the next four or five years, I was doing that; whether it was in news or sports, I would be responsible--they'd say, "Okay, take this page or take two pages or three," whatever. Those were the changes. Of course, it made it clearly less expensive to produce the papers, but it didn't reduce the costs enough to

compare with the reduction in revenues that took place. People just didn't advertise as much in the newspapers anymore, because you'd get immediate results over the Internet.

SI: When did it become apparent that the Internet was going to have this impact?

DL: The middle of the 2000s decade.

SI: Yes.

DL: I first started hearing about people taking buyouts around '05 or '06. Mine was '08. One of the dumbest things I said in my life--I remember, first, some people got one-year buyouts. Then, I heard some people who had been at the paper for at least twenty-five years got two-year buyouts. I remember thinking, "I'd like to stay until I'm seventy, but if they ever offered a three-year buyout, I think I would take it." [laughter] Well, there were never any three-year buyouts. By the time my buyout offer came, it was back to being only a one-year buyout, even though I had been there thirty years. I could have possibly gotten a two-year buyout two years earlier. I'm happy I worked there as long as I did. If the paper were still prospering the way it was in the '90s, in the 1990s, I might still be working there. I don't know. I certainly had seventy in mind. I certainly had at least age seventy in mind. I'm seventy-one now. Maybe I would have retired, maybe not. In the "good old days," there were people who worked well past age seventy there.

SI: As the years went on, did you see changes in terms of personnel? Were they relying less on full-time reporters and more on part-time freelance work?

DL: That is certainly the case now. While I was still there, I don't know. *The Ledger* had some strange--since that was the only daily I ever worked at, I don't have any real basis for comparison. Certainly, there were some strange things. For a long time, the entire photo department was not in the main office in Newark. It was in Newark, but it was in a building on Route 1 near the airport, near the Budweiser plant, that area. Eventually, though, they did bring the photo department into the main *Ledger* building. That was definitely a plus, I would say. It was better. When they moved in, we had more contact with the photographers. That was an example of a weird thing.

Then, there was a satellite news agency, Dorf Feature Service, which I may have mentioned earlier, I worked there part time. I was a stringer in high school. Dorf's was Sid Dorfman, who actually was a Weequahic High School graduate, my alma mater. He was working for *The Ledger* while he was still in high school. I think he worked for *The Ledger* for sixty-nine years, from the time he was a teenager until well into his eighties. But he wasn't exactly working for *The Ledger*. He eventually established his own business called Dorf Feature Service. As I said, I worked there first as a stringer. Then, I worked there covering games. I covered high school football games, basketball games, and baseball games for Dorf's while I was in high school. Then, when I was teaching, I did a little stringing for them. Then, the year of '71-'72, I was working there at night. I was subbing in the daytime, and I was working at Dorf's at night. Their office at that time was on Broad Street right near City Hall in Newark. Eventually, after I was no longer there, they had at least three moves to East Orange, Springfield and Mountainside. Sid died a few years ago.

When they were really going strong with *The Ledger*, they were handling the obituaries, death notices, Board of Ed meetings all over the state, council meetings all over the state. If you were a stringer--I can just give you the example of when I was there around 1970 or '72--you'd get twenty dollars a night for covering a meeting and you wouldn't have to write anything. You'd just take notes and call in, and somebody there would write up the story. If you were in the office taking notes or handling obits and death notices and things like that, you'd get thirty dollars for the evening. It doesn't sound like much money now, but in the early '70s, if I was making thirty-five dollars as a sub in the daytime and then twenty or thirty dollars in the evening at Dorf's, I was getting by pretty well as a single guy in his early twenties.

I'm pretty sure Dorf still exists. I'm not sure how much they're still doing. I know *The Ledger* doesn't have nearly as much of a news hole as they once had. I don't think they're covering nearly as many council meetings and school board meetings as they were almost fifty years ago.

SI: Were you working in Newark this whole time? The building was always there?

DL: Yes. The building was sold sometime in the last five years.

SI: Okay, yes.

DL: Yes.

SI: What was it like working in Newark during that period?

DL: Working nights in Newark, you had to be a little careful and cautious and know where not to go, especially leaving the office at one or two AM. I know people who said they never stopped at red lights when they were driving home at that time. I never had any problems. We had a police presence. There was always an off-duty police presence in and around the office, so we felt safe. [Editor's Note: From 1966 to 2014, the headquarters of *The Star-Ledger* was located in Newark at the corner of Washington and Court Streets. Crozier Fine Arts bought the building in June 2015 and operates an art storage facility there. Currently, *The Star-Ledger* has offices at the Gateway Plaza complex in downtown Newark.]

SI: You mentioned the features you wrote. Were you doing any other writing, maybe even outside of the paper?

DL: Not really. The first few years there, while I was married and the kids were little, I still had a lot of parenting responsibilities. I had some other activities. I got involved with the Black Maria Film Festival. I was on their board for a while. I got involved with a program called Operation Share, which was a food distribution network. I was on that board for a while. I think I joined Share around '84 or '85 because I was pretty depressed about the reelection at that time of Ronald Reagan. I just felt I had to try to do something in the community. It was nice to be on the Share board, because there were people there who were real business types, including some who were pro-Reagan, but it was good to be a part of a group that was doing something to help needy people get food. There were three levels to my commitment to Share. One was just being

on the board. Frankly, I was never really all that good of a board member on anything that I've been on the board of, because I'm just not. They had a newsletter. There was a food package each month, and there was a newsletter that went out with each food packet. I was helping to put that together. On the lowest level, my mother-in-law was very active with a church in Montclair. The church had a van. She was the one that got me involved with Share in the first place. I was driving the van to pick up the food. We would drive the van from Montclair to Newark. There was a factory building Down Neck where the food was distributed. I'd pick up boxes of food in the van, drive it back to Montclair, and it would be distributed. From that, as I said, I got in the other two levels of commitment to the organization, helping out with the newsletter and eventually being a member of the board for a few years. The most rewarding part was driving the van, picking up the food, and helping to distribute it.

SI: What did you do with the Black Maria Film Festival?

DL: I did help out a little with publicity. I helped out a little--again, I wasn't that great a board member, but I'd be available. When they had their judging, it was usually in November or December, they'd have a night where some people who were knowledgeable about film would come to wherever the office was. They would spend hours watching snippets of films. This was all independent films, a lot of shorts, animations. These judges would come, and eventually, they'd vote. Films would get various awards, which would include some modest monetary prizes. I often volunteered to drive people home. It might be two AM. I'd be driving somebody back from Bloomfield to New York or Jersey City to New York. I've always been comfortable driving. [laughter] My volunteer work, if nothing else, I was always a good driver. Also, for a while, I drove for the American Cancer Society. I drove cancer patients to treatments. It was pleasant enough. I never enjoyed the aspects of being on a board that involved the fundraising or organizing things or trying to run something, but I was always happy to be a good driver. [laughter]

SI: Going back to the paper ...

DL: Yes.

SI: Was there a union in the paper?

DL: You ask good questions. There were unions but not among the journalists. There was a printers' union. There was a drivers' union. As I've probably related, I was a very pro-union person. I certainly would have joined a union happily if there was one. They took good care of us at *The Ledger*. I always referred to it as a benevolent despotism. I'd get my raise every year, maybe fifty dollars a week or whatever. The working conditions were certainly decent. There was never a push for a union among the journalists, the reporters and editors. Whenever I heard that there might be some kind of a work stoppage with printers or truckers or drivers, I was terrified. There were times when I was living from paycheck to paycheck, especially after we bought a house and then after the marriage broke up. I was really terrified that there'd be a work stoppage, because I really did not want to ever be put in a situation where there was a picket line and I would then have to decide whether I wanted to cross it or not to go to work. I don't know

what I would have done. If I were desperate enough, I might have crossed it, but I sure as heck did not want to ever cross a picket line. I'm grateful that I never had to make that decision.

SI: I think even by '78, when you joined *The Star-Ledger* staff, it was pretty much the only paper in town.

DL: The *Newark Evening News* had folded in '72.

SI: Yes.

DL: They had had a work stoppage. The *Newark Evening News* was considered a cut above *The Ledger* when I was a kid. *The Ledger* was considered more of a rag when I was a kid. The *News* was a little more prestigious. It was an afternoon paper. *The Ledger* was a morning paper. When that started shaking out in the newspaper business, the morning papers did have an advantage over the afternoon papers. It probably wasn't the only reason the *Newark News* folded. It was the *Newark News* that died. *The Ledger* did inherit some people from the *Newark News*, which was a blessing for them and probably for *The Ledger*. I was kind of lucky, because it was right around the time that I was trying to get established and I was thinking, "Oh, my goodness, I'm competing with people who are more experienced and have been at the *News*." Eventually, I did get my foot in the door at the weeklies that I talked about earlier and eventually at *The Ledger*.

SI: Who were the major competitors in the market during your time there?

DL: None, really. *The Bergen Record* pretty much dominated Bergen County and maybe Passaic County. We really didn't have much of a presence there. Then, there were the smaller papers in Central Jersey, like the *Home News Tribune*. I'm not sure exactly what year it became the *Home News Tribune*. It was just the *Home News* when I was an undergrad here at Rutgers. Then, there was also the *Woodbridge Tribune*. There was *The Courier-News* and the *Asbury Park Press*. Of course, *The Trenton Times* was the sister paper to *The Ledger*. The *Trentonian* was the tabloid in that area. Then, there were papers in South Jersey. *The Ledger* pretty much dominated all of North and Central Jersey in the years that I was there, except for the northeastern corner, Bergen and Passaic.

SI: What did you enjoy most about your job or find the most interesting?

DL: Initially, I wanted to be a sports writer. I've always maintained an interest in sports. I still have to say the sports section is usually the first section I look at most days. As a matter of fact, I usually look at three papers almost every day, at least parts of them. That would be *The Ledger*, *The New York Times*, and the *Home News Tribune*. As I said, I often look at the sports section first. There's the crossword puzzles. What was the question again? I'm sorry.

SI: What you enjoyed the most.

DL: I never worked in sports at all at *The Ledger*. I worked just about every other area. There was the news-side copy desk. Then, there was the feature copy desk. There were times I would

hop over to the business department. Whatever it was, I enjoyed it. I looked forward to going there. As I indicated earlier, for some personal reasons, I often looked forward to going to work. Also, the people there, for the most part, I like to believe that I have a whole lot of friends still, some of whom we still do keep in contact, both online and with informal gatherings. We're all looking a lot older. [laughter]

SI: With the exception of towards the end when there were the buyouts and the effect of the Internet on the paper, before that period, what would you say was the least satisfying or most difficult part of the job?

DL: The hours were difficult at times. It may have contributed to the demise of my marriage. I had a rough go of it with the guy I mentioned earlier, Jon Lazarus. There was like "A" team and "B" team. For a long time, I felt like I was "B" team. It wasn't until he moved along and there was a different head of the copy desk, who was actually younger than I was--John was about five years older; Bob Importico was a few years younger--I had a much smoother relationship with him. On the features side, I remember there were a couple people I didn't get along with at times. I was the assistant travel editor for a while. The only time I was ever a squeaky wheel at *The Ledger* was when I was the assistant travel editor. The travel editor, who asked me to be his assistant, after only a few months of my working with him, I don't know if it was retired, but he left. The woman who took his place as the travel editor had a different working style, let's put it that way. I was eager to get away from her, let's put it that way. [laughter] Eventually, one of my colleagues on the feature copy desk was willing to swap with me, and he took over for a while. I don't think he loved working with her either, but I certainly was happy to get back to doing what I had been doing earlier. That was about 1998.

One of the things that brought it to a head, besides the fact that I wasn't getting along with my immediate supervisor there, was I took a trip to Israel just before my fiftieth birthday, and I wrote about it. I knew that other people in the paper, if they wrote a story that appeared in the travel section, either they'd get paid for it, or they'd get some of their expenses back. I took the trip to Israel. I wrote about it. It appeared on the cover of the travel section, including a picture of me sitting on a camel on the jump page. I never got any compensation for it, either straight pay or expenses. When I asked about that, she said, "Well, you're a part of the travel section." I said, "You mean if I weren't part of the travel section, I would have been compensated for this article?" There didn't appear to me to be any advantages for staying in the travel section, because I had written one or two other travel stories that didn't involve much expense, so I didn't even really care, but this one did involve some expense and it was a good story and I figured, "I might as well not be a part of the travel section." Plus, traveling should be relaxing and fun.

SI: Yes.

DL: If the whole time, your work brain is on when you're traveling, it's not as much fun. I found that out pretty quickly. Plus, I never considered myself to be a typical traveler.

SI: In general, did you see the role of women increasing, more hires?

DL: Oh, definitely, yes. I'm glad you mentioned that. Even though that particular relationship wasn't very good, I would say, on the whole, I had a good working relationship with women at the paper that I had to work with. She was the exception, not the rule.

SI: Was it mostly male-dominated when you first joined?

DL: Golly, we didn't even have a single woman on the copy desk for at least the first five years I was there, four or five years. Then, eventually, we had one. I remember, we had one the night we had the big snowstorm in 1983. It was February 11, 1983. It was my best friend's thirty-fifth birthday. We had this huge snowstorm on a Friday. I went to work on Friday, and I didn't get home until Sunday. We spent the night in the office. We had one woman on the copy desk. Of course, she, like everybody else, slept on either a chair, a bench, the floor or whatever that night at the paper.

SI: What about minority representation, particularly being that it was a Newark-based paper?

DL: We had a couple of good Black reporters right from the beginning, Stanley Terrell, Larry Hall. Even now at *The Ledger*, of course, there are more--there are a lot fewer people all together--but Barry Carter is an excellent columnist. He's one of the few people who's still working there from when I was there, a good columnist. I really enjoy his work. Yes, minorities did increase over the years.

SI: When we think about a newspaper or newsroom, it's often depicted in movies and shows. How does that stack up against reality?

DL: Obviously, the noise factor. The really old ones, you'd get the noise of the clacking of the typewriter, the manual typewriter keys, and the phones ringing and the yelling for the copy boy and stuff like that. Then, of course, it became more civilized. Oh, you had the smoking and everything. Eventually, it became quieter with computers, and I remember when the no-smoking rule kicked in. I remember when we had smoking in the office the first few years, I'd come home late at night. My wife had asthma and allergies. I'd come to bed. If I just took off my shirt and was still wearing my t-shirt on that I'd worn to work, she would suggest strongly that I put on something that didn't smell of smoke. Just like most other offices, that's not unusual; it's probably everywhere, most offices have done away with smoking. The noise level changed. I don't have any strong base for comparison other than the papers I worked for after *The Ledger*: *The Trenton Times* and the little chain of weeklies. It just became more like a typical office setting.

SI: Any particular days in the office that stand out in your memory, like ...

DL: 9/11?

SI: Yes.

DL: 9/11. Before I get to 9/11, whenever we had a move--we moved within the building twice. When I started, we were on the second floor. At one point, we moved to the third floor. Then,

we moved to what was called 2-R. It was literally over the street. It was a wing of the building that was literally over University Avenue. I always imagined if we fell through the floor, we would just land on a car going by. That involved the fact that *The Ledger*--when I started there, the presses were in the basement. They had collating machines. It's all kind of technical. Eventually, they did away with the presses. There was a press in Piscataway and another press in Montville, but none in the basement in Newark anymore. That was when they then moved things around in the building. They used the space that had been taken up by the presses in the basement, that was where the photographers moved into eventually, that I referenced earlier. The space where some of the collating machinery was became our office.

I remember when we moved into 2-R, it was a really huge area. We moved in a little bit at a time. I think the sports department moved in first. They moved in like a far corner. Then, the features department moved in next. You'd walk across this long expanse with nothing. For the first few weeks, there'd be nothing there, in a huge expanse of the office, and then other departments gradually moved in to the point where the whole office was filled. It would be interesting walking to our corner of the office with nothing in between, from the elevator to where we were. I'm not sure exactly when that was. It might have been the late '90s.

9/11 was probably the most memorable two days. 9/11 and 9/12/2001 were probably the most memorable two days. I remember, most people who live around here or lived around here at the time would remember it was just a gorgeous, perfect, beautiful day. It was a Tuesday, I believe. My shift was to start at ten. I lived where I still live now in Edison, which would be normally about a twenty-five-minute ride to work. For some reason, I turned on the TV that morning, which was very rare for me. I almost never turned on the TV in the morning. Sure enough, the first thing I see is the building burning. I guess it was around eight-thirty. I immediately accelerated my preparations for going to work, hit the road, and drove in. I'd come up the Parkway and I'd get on to Route 22 in Union. There'd be a little bit of a rise where I would always see the New York skyline as soon as I came up--I guess it was either Union, or we had just gotten into Hillside, and you'd see the New York skyline. Sure enough, I'm seeing the building burning.

Then, I got to work. The decision was made that we would put out an extra edition. Then, of course, the main nightside copy desk wasn't in. So, those of us who worked on the feature copy desk were the primary ones involved in editing the extra edition. I hate to say it, but for me, 9/11 was exciting. The next day, also, we put out an extra. My memories of those two days were the excitement, the rush of putting out an addition on deadline, something that I rarely did anymore because I was working at the features department.

On the other hand, my significant other at the time--I had a girlfriend; the relationship lasted from late in 1993 until early in 2006, about twelve years--she was an attorney who had an office in Lower Manhattan right near where the Bull is located on Broadway. She had gotten to work early. She had gotten up early to vote. It also was an election day in New York City, so, yes, it was definitely a Tuesday. She had voted early in the morning. Of course, anyone who voted that morning had to do it again a few weeks later. The event pretty much knocked off whatever voting took place. She was stuck. I forget exactly what she did to get home. She was breathing that air for a while. I wasn't able to get into Manhattan for a few days. I don't remember how

many days it was, but I wasn't able to get in there to be with her, which was probably just as well for my health. Those are the main memories, that it was an exciting day at work and I wasn't able to see my girlfriend. [Editor's Note: The Bull refers to the bronze sculpture that stands on Broadway just north of Bowling Green in the Financial District of Manhattan in New York City. It is known as the Charging Bull, the Bull of Wall Street or the Bowling Green Bull.]

SI: Wow.

DL: Of course, just the shock. When 9/11 really hit me personally was a couple of months later when they restored PATH service between Newark and the World Trade Center and I took the train in, and there was still nothing up above. The rail station, with kind of a circle at the end of the line, had been restored. Service had been restored, but nothing had been built above it. You'd come into it, you can see the whole loop. You look up, and all you see is sky where there used to be a bunch of stores and the office building. That was when I really felt the awe of what had taken place, personally. Then, there was one time when I was driving into the city, I believe, in the Holland Tunnel--it might've been the Lincoln Tunnel--the traffic came to a standstill in the tunnel. I sort of had the very, very beginnings of a panic--not a panic attack, but just the idea of what it would be like if the tunnel collapsed while you're just sitting there. That was the only time, just that one time, that I ever thought about [that]. I know a lot of people are scared of tunnels. A lot of people are scared of bridges. That was the only time I ever just had a momentary feeling [of] how fragile our existence was.

SI: During those two days, was everybody just pitching in on the news side?

DL: Oh, yes, it was all hands on deck. A couple of our people had been in Manhattan, one of our photographers and I think one of our editors. Both got quite a bit of a dusting because they were close enough to what happened. It may be more than that; I don't even remember anymore. There are probably people who could tell you a lot more about that than I. We did have some people who were more directly affected.

SI: Obviously not days like that, but were there other days where it was all hands on deck, where everybody stayed a long time?

DL: Election day. These were always Tuesday nights. Of course, the tradition was and maybe still is that pizza would be delivered at some point. [laughter] Everybody would be coming into the office, and a whole lot of boxes of pizza would arrive at some point, whether it was a presidential election year or one of the off years. Of course, New Jersey has its own odd-year elections. We always have the gubernatorial election one year after the presidential election. It seems that whichever way we go for president, we almost always go to the opposite party for governor. At least that's my vague perception. There'd be every November, and then there would be other elections. The school board elections used to be, I think, in February or March, I don't know. Tuesday nights could be interesting.

SI: I wanted to ask about some of your other activities.

DL: Sure. Put it on hold.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: You talked a little bit about some of your volunteer activities. You also got more involved in the programs at a temple. I do not know if you were going to that temple.

DL: I am currently a member of Temple Sholom in Scotch Plains, mostly because Margaret pays for it. [laughter] I frankly would not be affiliated with any religious organization on my own. In the interest of domestic harmony, I go along. We go to a service once in a while. Actually, I expect that we'll be going to the service tomorrow night. I forget why.

The one activity that I enjoy doing with the temple is, approximately every three months, people bake meatloaves, and they're distributed at a church in Newark. It's right near NJPAC [New Jersey Performing Arts Center] and McCarter Highway. It's St. John's Church, I think. It's always on a Friday morning. I bring some meatloaves there. I help cut them up and create these lunches for the homeless people and serve them. That's only three or four times a year, so it certainly is not a big deal. It is something that I do look forward to. There's four or five other people from the temple, they're usually there, along with the regular crew there. Like I said, it's something I look forward to.

It's really the only thing I do actively with the temple, although recently there was an interesting program. It involved Torah scrolls from Czechoslovakia that had been preserved during the Holocaust. They're on loan to various synagogues, congregations in the Union County area. I guess it was a week ago Sunday night, six temples, including the one that we're members of, displayed and talked about their Torah scroll, what town in Czechoslovakia it came from. I know there's no Czechoslovakia anymore. There's the Czech Republic and there's Slovakia. It was 1930s Czechoslovakia. Somehow, some of these Torah scrolls were preserved. It was a nice service. There was a really nice article about it in last week's edition of the *Jewish News*, and I thought the reporter did a good job. There were a couple of pictures. It was on the front page of the *Jewish News*. I'm certainly not one of the more active members of the temple.

SI: You also have been involved in a climate change lobby.

DL: Yes, CCL. [Editor's Note: Founded in 2007, Citizens' Climate Lobby is an environmental organization that seeks to influence climate policy.]

SI: Citizens' Climate Lobby.

DL: Citizens' Climate Lobby. It's a nice little group that meets monthly in Highland Park. The goal is what they call a carbon fee and dividend approach, which is a market-based approach to trying to reduce carbon pollution. If it ever passed Congress and became law, it would involve a fee. Any company that was involved in production that involved oil and coal and gas would have to pay a fee right at the beginning. That fee would be collected by the government. The government would then distribute the funds to each person in the country, I don't know, each citizen or each taxpayer. It's a market-based approach to trying to reduce pollution. I'm not sure it's ever going to take place, but clearly something should be done pretty soon about our

changing climate. I certainly believe that things are going to get worse before they get better. We've had pretty much a do-nothing approach to it for most of the last twenty years, at least at the federal government level. Something's got to change, I believe. The reason for the market-based approach was to try to appeal to people who think the government isn't helpful and think that things should be done on a private level. This would still involve the government, redistributing funds. To be honest with you, I don't really think that particular approach by CCL is ever really going to catch on. They may have to take a more direct approach eventually. I'm no expert. The group certainly has the best of intentions. You get involved with stuff like that, you just feel like you've got to do something.

SI: Tell me a little bit about ...

DL: That wasn't a glowing endorsement, was it?

SI: We just ask you for your opinions.

DL: I'm kind of getting to be more of a pessimist about the world that your generation and my grandkids' generation is going to inherit.

SI: Tell me about your post *Star-Ledger* work.

DL: The journey?

SI: Yes.

DL: The journey down the backslope. I don't remember if I talked about this. Six days after my last day at *The Star-Ledger*, which was December 31, 2008, I had my prostate removed. I had surgery. I was laid up for a couple of weeks. The first time I really went out of the house by myself was the day of Obama's inauguration. I drove up to Newark to my alma mater Weequahic, where the alumni association, which I was active with, had rented four big TV screens, so the entire student body, which was mostly Black or almost entirely Black, could watch Obama's inauguration. I went up there, and I enjoyed that. That was my first day out.

Then, I worked for the Census Bureau a little bit that year. I'm really curious to see, I've applied for a job for the Census Bureau for the next census. So far, I haven't heard anything. I'm hoping to work for the census, although I have kind of ironic reasons for it. I worked for the Census Bureau for a little while.

Then, I got a job with *The Trenton Times* part time, working anywhere from two, three or four nights a week down in Trenton, a commute that I hated. I was doing different stuff. Probably, in some ways, I was more productive there. In some ways, I was more productive there than I was at *The Ledger*. It was kind of fun except for the commute. Then, that petered out around the summer of 2013.

Shortly after that, I got a part-time job at the chain of weeklies in Middlesex and Monmouth Counties. In Edison and Metuchen, the paper is called *The Sentinel*. Some of their papers are

called *The Sentinel*, and others have different names. They are weeklies that all come out on either Wednesday or Thursday. Their main office is on Route 9 in Manalapan. I would commute to that office, which was a less unpleasant commute than the commute to Trenton, but the pay was pathetic. In Trenton, I think I was getting twenty dollars an hour, which was less than half of my hourly wage at *The Ledger*. At Manalapan, I was getting a little more than half of that. I think it was twelve dollars an hour, something like that. It was barely enough to make it worth my while to go there. Again, it was because I wanted to go there. I wanted to keep doing stuff and editing.

One of the main things, of course, as always for me, was enjoying the company of my coworkers, with a few exceptions. [laughter] There would only be one or two exceptions. For the most part, enjoying the work and enjoying the coworkers was always at the top of the list. I think that was until about September of 2016.

I have not reported to work in an office since then. Since June, I'm writing articles for *The Metuchen Mirror*, which is a monthly paper. I'm enjoying that. Actually, for me, it's a lot harder work to be writing stories than to be editing. The man who is the editor and publisher of *The Metuchen Mirror*, I have a lot of respect for him. He does a good job working with my stories. He's either added some good stuff to stuff that I've written, or in one case recently, he asked me to rewrite a story. He didn't like the way I did it. He was right. I tried to do something cute, and he suggested a more straightforward approach. In general, what I would say about that is sometimes when you're writing a story or writing a headline, you swing for the fences, and when you swing for the fences, sometimes you strike out. You have to have a mature response when someone says, "You struck out."

SI: Any memorable stories from this period that you want to talk about?

DL: I'm trying to remember if I actually had any bylines in *The Trenton Times*. I don't know if I did or not. The fun part was actually doing work on sports pages for a while, because, as I said, I never did it at *The Ledger*. It was fun editing a couple of sports pages occasionally.

At *The Sentinel*, I had one byline that was a lot of fun. There was a play or a musical, a musical comedy, at the Forum Theater in Metuchen. The Forum Theater in Metuchen has kind of fallen on hard times, although the town has purchased the property and is going to do a facelift and create a whole arts district there that hopefully will go well. The Forum was still occasionally having concerts, showing plays, or showing a movie occasionally. They booked a musical called *David Michael Finkelstein's Bar Mitzvah*. Since my name is David Michael Lieberfarb, I said, "I've got to see this musical." I went to the people at *The Sentinel*, and I asked if I could not necessarily review it but write a story about it. I attended it a couple times, and I wrote a story about it. It was a lot of fun. With the story, we ran a picture that I brought to the paper. It was a picture from my bar mitzvah album. There was an attempt at a comic picture in my bar mitzvah album, where, at the end of the day, I'm sitting there looking exhausted. My tie is undone. It's like, "Oh, God, it's over." We ran that picture with the article about the story because what I wrote wasn't a review. Part of it was a comparison between what it was like in 1961 when I had my bar mitzvah and what this show was like. This is one case where I thought I swung for the

fences and I connected. [Editor's Note: *David Michael Finkelstein's Bar Mitzvah* is a play written by Sue Fabisch.]

I covered a football game, there was a championship game--it was early December a few years ago--a high school, I think, Group I or Group II championship between my alma mater Weequahic and one of the high schools in the circulation area, Rumson-Fair Haven. Rumson-Fair Haven was playing Weequahic. The game was at Kean University on a Saturday night in early December, a very cold Saturday night. I was in the press box, which was fortunately a little bit warmer than being in the stands. That was one of the advantages of covering it. I remember sitting there and looking around. There were about three other people there with their laptop computers. I was sitting there with my clipboard and yellow pad, realizing, "I'm a dinosaur." I did a story. It was fun. Rumson-Fair Haven won the game. Of course, I understood that I wasn't writing about whether Weequahic had won or lost--they lost--I wasn't going to be writing primarily about their team. I was writing about the Rumson-Fair Haven team for that newspaper circulation. That was kind of fun.

SI: You have also done some other interesting things. You have appeared on a couple game shows. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

DL: I've tried out for a number of game shows over the years. I tried out a few times for *Wheel of Fortune*. I tried out a few times for *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* I didn't get on those shows. I probably need to have more of an outgoing personality, I would say, to be selected for those. [laughter] There'd always be a written test, which I would usually pass with flying colors, although it gets harder. There's a lot of pop culture stuff. The longer I am away from *The Star-Ledger*, the farther away I am from knowing what's going on in pop culture.

I did get on two shows. I'll go backwards on this. The shorter one to write about is the one that I wasn't very successful on. It was early in the existence of the History Channel. They had a show called *History IQ*. The emcee was the guy who, I forget his name, Marc something or other. He was involved in one of these shows for kids where they got slimed. [Editor's Note: *History IQ* was a game show that aired on the History Channel from 2000 to 2001. The show reunited host Marc Summers and announcer John Harvey, who had worked previously together on Nickelodeon's *Double Dare* game show.]

SI: Oh, Marc Summers, yes.

DL: Marc Summers, yes. That was his name. I figured a younger guy might remember that.

SI: Yes, he does a lot of other shows for the Cooking Channel and stuff.

DL: Right. He was the emcee. There were three contestants. They would ask a question, and you'd try to ring in first to answer the question. I came in second. I won some consolation prize. I remember I was really upset about a couple questions that I got wrong. For example, I think one of the questions was, "When was VE-Day?" I might have said it was May 8, 1945 and it was May 7, 1945. I was off by one day. [Editor's Note: Victory in Europe Day, or VE-Day,

occurred on May 8, 1945, when Germany surrendered to the Allies, thus ending World War II in Europe.]

SI: Yes.

DL: That was an incorrect answer, which I was not happy about. I don't even remember now, another one that I got wrong was kind of a technicality, like maybe I said radiation instead of radioactivity, something like that. As I said, I came in second. The guy who came in first took me out for a drink afterwards, which he could certainly afford because he made a few thousand dollars. He showed me a trick involving the buzzer that you hold. He felt that he had an advantage that I didn't have. I'm using a ...

SI: A water bottle.

DL: Yes, I'm using the water bottle as a prop right now. Instead of holding it in the air and pressing with the thumb, he would hold it against his leg and press it with the thumb. That might give him a split-second advantage in terms of clicking in. Sure enough, there were times when he did beat me to click in by a very short amount of time, and that was probably why he won. So, if I ever get another chance, I'll know that one.

The other one was way back in 1972. It was right around the time that I was changing jobs, or I was getting a job. In the '71-'72 school year, I had been a substitute teacher most of the year and working at Dorf's. I got a job working at a day camp, one that I had attended many years earlier. I got a job working at the day camp, working with the five-year-old boys. During that summer, there was a show called *Three on a Match* with Bill Cullen, who was a very well-known emcee in those days. *Three on a Match*, I'll do the short version of the story. My friend Jimmy and I both tried out for the show. We both got on the show. He went first. He didn't win. The night before he went to actually compete, I suggested that we be partners, that we would share our winnings. If one of us did well and one of us didn't, we would share. Sure enough, he didn't do well, and I did. I won three games, which included some jewelry, I think a diamond necklace, it included some living room furniture. Here I was, a twenty-four-year-old single guy with no girlfriend at the time, and I won a diamond necklace and living room furniture and some money, a little bit of money, and a Renault. That was the biggie. The Renault was probably worth about 2,200 at the time, or 2,300. We worked it out. I honored my commitment. It was my suggestion after all. I had a car, and Jimmy didn't. The way we worked it out was he bought the car from me for a thousand. Like I said, it had a sticker price of about 2,200 or 2,300, so he felt that that was a fair arrangement. I'd get the thousand dollars, which of course would help pay the taxes on my winnings. That was certainly an interesting experience. [laughter] We're still buddies to this day. Jimmy and I still see each other a few times a year. I live in Edison. He lives in Fair Lawn. It's not really convenient to get together with him frequently, but we see each other at least three or four times a year.

SI: You have also spent quite a bit of time in Japan.

DL: Yes. I just chatted with my son for about an hour a couple nights ago. My son is now forty-three, a lot of gray hair in his beard and stuff. He's lived in Japan almost his entire adult

life now. He went there to finish up his college--well, he went there not to finish. He had gone to community college in Morris County Community College, got his associate's degree. Then, he got into Temple University. One of the reasons he wanted to go to Temple University was because he found out that they had a campus in Tokyo, a satellite campus. Adam spent a year at their Philly campus. Then, in the summer of '98, he asked me if he could do a semester in Japan, and it'd be a little more expensive. Temple is part of the Pennsylvania state university [system], so it's cheaper to go to Temple than to go to a private college. It's more expensive than to go to Rutgers, when you're an out-of-state student. I said, "Okay, you can go to Temple." At that time, instead of maybe twenty thousand dollars for the year, for him to go to Japan, it would be about twenty-five thousand. I said, "Okay," for the semester. Then, he asked about the spring semester, and I said, "Okay." Then, he asked if he could, when he had one more year to go, could he finish up there in '99-2000. This was now his sixth year out of high school, but he was finishing up. I said, "Can you do anything to cut the expenses?" I think he got some kind of living arrangement at somebody's house where it involved teaching English to the child in the house or something like that. That cut the expenses down a little, at least for half the year.

Anyhow, he got his degree in 2000 at Temple University's Tokyo Campus. He majored in Asian studies. I visited him in '99 during the spring semester of his first year there. That was my first visit there. I remember that because we went to a baseball game, opening day of the season, at the Tokyo Dome. He's not a fan at all. He did that for me. He got tickets for the game to please his daddy, which it did. I had a good time with him then, and I've been back there.

Then, to make a long story short, he did marry a Japanese woman. They had two kids. The marriage is on the rocks. He's going through a divorce now. The boys are thirteen and eleven, my grandsons. I've been there five times since that first visit. My most recent visit was spring of last year. I guess I've got to plan to go again soon. Adam, his wife and the boys came over here about two-and-a-half years ago. I'm hoping the boys, if they learn English well, maybe they'll be able to come over here on their own either individually or together or without their parents and spend some time. It's very complicated though. My former wife and my daughter live in Ohio. My daughter has two boys also. I certainly would like all my grandsons to have a chance to spend some time together. If and when they ever do come over here, it would also involve having them go to Ohio. Needless to say, I'm somewhat jealous of people who get to spend a lot of time with their grandchildren from infancy, who are local and have their grandchildren be local--envious. I won't say jealous, envious.

I do get some satisfaction out of Margaret. Margaret has a son and two grandsons, thirteen and eleven, just like mine, two boys, in Massachusetts near Boston. We see them regularly. We're going up there for Thanksgiving and probably also the first weekend in January. They're my surrogate grandsons. They call me Grand Dave, and I love them. I've been involved with them since the thirteen-year-old was an infant, not even a toddler, an infant. That eases the pain of--I was looking for a milder word than pain--it eases the pain of not getting to see my own grandchildren very often.

SI: Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not gone over?

DL: Not really. I talked about the work at *The Metuchen Mirror* a little bit. I've got five articles to write in the next few days, mostly about school board stuff. It's going to keep me busy for the next few days. We do a lot of interesting stuff. There's a Rutgers Jewish Film Festival. We attended two movies yesterday, one on Sunday, and I'm going to see one this Sunday. Yesterday, we saw *Golda's Balcony*, which is about former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, and another movie called *Those Who Remained*. That was primarily about Jewish people in Hungary right after World War II, those who survived the Holocaust.

We've subscribed to the George Street Playhouse. They've got the new building near here on Livingston Avenue, [the New Brunswick Performing Arts Center]. We've already been there twice since the new building opened. We saw the *Paul Robeson* show. Coincidentally, I'm Class of 1969 and Paul Robeson was Class of 1919. It was his fifty year--was he deceased by then? No, I think he was still alive.

SI: Yes, he was still alive.

DL: Anyhow, it was his fifty years out of Rutgers when I graduated. Now, this year, it's my fifty year. We had my fifty-year reunion this past spring. Of course, it was the centennial of his graduation. He's no longer persona non grata like he was during the '50s, during the McCarthy Era and the Cold War. He now has the recognition that he deserves from the University. [Editor's Note: In 2019, Rutgers put on a year-long centennial celebration of the life and times of Paul Robeson, who graduated from Rutgers in 1919.]

We saw the *Paul Robeson* show. We saw the first musical, *The Last Days of Summer*. It had a baseball theme. It was kind of fun. It was a musical. We have purchased tickets for four other shows, in other words, their entire George Street Playhouse season of five shows. That brings me into New Brunswick, as well as my class brings me to the campus twice a week. I do enjoy all that.

SI: Did you have much interaction with the University before you started auditing classes and coming to reunions?

DL: Going to football games and basketball games with my friend George, who I think I talked about him.

SI: Yes.

DL: I still consider myself a loyal son, although it's very frustrating and demoralizing to see our football team competing against some of the Big Ten behemoths. Some of the decisions that have been made over the years in the Athletic Department are certainly questionable. I don't know enough or feel strongly enough about any of that to have a really strong opinion one way or the other. It would be nice if we were more successful in the high-profile sports. We've had some successes in the lower-profile sports here and there. Sports shouldn't be the tail that wags the dog at the University. It shouldn't cost as much money as it does, but what the heck. I do enjoy most of my contacts with the University.

SI: Thank you very much.

DL: You're welcome.

SI: I really appreciate all your time in our first session and today. Later on, if there is anything you would like to add to the transcripts, you can do that as well.

DL: Yes.

SI: Thank you.

DL: You're welcome.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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