RUTGERS THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH S. WEIS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and
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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Judith Weis, on March 25, 2022. I am Kate Rizzi, and I am in Branchburg, New Jersey. I am joined today by my co-interviewer. Enya, please state your full name and where you are located.

Enya Laumbach: Yes, my full name is Enya Laumbach, and I am located at Demarest Hall, Rutgers-New Brunswick.

KR: Dr. Weis, thank you so much for joining us to do this oral history interview.

Judith Weis: You're very welcome. I think it's going to be fun.

KR: To begin today, where and when were you born?

JW: I'm born May 29, 1941, in New York City.

KR: What we usually like to do in these life-course interviews is to get a sense of the interviewee's family's history. To start off today, what do you know and would like to share about your family history? Let us start on your mother's side of the family.

JW: My mother was born in 1904. She was somewhat on the old side when I was born. She was in her upper thirties, which was unusual. They had been very poor through the depression. It might have made more sense for them to have a child in 1930, but they were not well off, and so once the depression was over, I came. I was an only child, and my mother was not college educated. Her family was not well off. There were seven children, and I think two of the boys were college educated. Of two older brothers, one was a dentist and one was a lawyer. But I don't think any of the girls had gone to college. My mother worked in the New York Parks Department as a playground supervisor and worked with kids a lot. [Editor's Note: The Great Depression began in 1929 and lasted until after the start of World War II in 1941.]

Then, after I was born, she worked a while, but then decided she would stay home with me. She was a smart person. Had she an opportunity to go to college, I would have expected her to have become a psychologist, but she didn't. I'll say a little more about her. She was a really good mother. I was basically her whole life, and you'd think that kind of situation, she would be overprotective because she was an anxious person. I think were she alive today, she would be diagnosed with anxiety disorder, but that didn't exist at the time. She was just very nervous. I marvel at the fact that she let me be pretty independent and go to school on the bus by myself starting in third grade, and I imagine this was really hard for her to do.

She died very young. Well, it was, to me, very young. She was sixty-five. My parents had moved to Florida the year before. When our daughter was a toddler, they moved to Florida. My father had turned sixty-five and retired right away. Shortly after moving there, my father had a heart attack, and she nursed him back to health over the next year. They were both smokers, and he stopped but she didn't, and then she had a heart attack about a year later, when our second child was just two weeks old, and she died. I think a lot about how she would have loved

watching our children grow up and watching their families and all of that. She missed so much. It really was very sad.

KR: I am sorry to hear about your mother's premature passing. What about your family history on your father's side of the family?

JW: Well, it's very interesting. Our son is into genealogy and has discovered stuff about where they came from, going back several generations. I'm not going to go back to my great, great grandmother and all that. My father was the oldest of four children, somewhat better off than my mother's family. He was the first and then came two sisters and then a much younger brother. My father went to a two-year college program. There were no official community colleges then, but there were two-year programs--I think it was at NYU [New York University]--in some technical fields. So, he was a two year rather than a four-year engineer, a technical person, and he worked in quality control in a factory in Queens. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He was a good father. His major passions in life [were] golf and, secondly, bridge. Consequently, I never was any interested at all in golf or bridge, but that's what he loved.

Obviously, he didn't love his work that much, because he retired the day he turned sixty-five, so that says something. I guess people usually did that in those days, but I think when people love their job these days, they stay there longer. He had a bunch of friends, and when they moved to Florida, so did a whole bunch of their circle of friends. They all went to Florida, some in the same retirement community in Hollywood, Florida, and some elsewhere, but also in Hollywood. They all had second homes in a lake in Columbia County, New York, so they went back and forth. That was their life after he retired, but then, of course, my mother died only a little bit over a year after he retired. He was a widower in this retirement community, where there were a lot more single women than single men, and he was very popular. He got remarried to a widow, and we had a second set of new relatives. We all got along very well. She had two daughters about my age and they had kids a little bit younger than our kids, but that was all very pleasant. Then, my father died, let's see, about thirteen years after getting remarried. He lived to seventy-eight. After his first heart attack when they first moved to Florida, he had several others. Finally, there was one that killed him, but he had survived several in between.

KR: I am curious if you have any recollections of the World War II years.

JW: I don't.

KR: How did World War II affect your extended family and your community, if at all?

JW: My father's younger brother served in the Army. I don't know that he went overseas, but I know I've seen pictures of him in a uniform. Also, on my mother's side, I have a lot of first cousins that are much older than me, because my mother was the youngest of seven, and I was born when she was already thirty-seven. I have a whole bunch of first cousins that I thought of as aunts and uncles because they were a lot older than I was, and some of their children are my contemporaries. I have a lot of first cousins once removed, a generation after me, who are

similar in age to me. A couple of my older first cousins, on my mother's side, who were older, did serve in World War II. One of them was stationed in England and married an English girl, and so there was a branch of the family in England. That's about World War II and my family.

All of the immediate family, my parents' parents all came to the States in either the 1880s or the early 1900s. So, there were none in Europe during World War II and the Holocaust, and none were in concentration camps. If there were any, they were very distant relatives that my son, doing all this research, has not come across.

KR: Before we go into your upbringing, Enya, do you have any questions about Dr. Weis's family history?

EL: No, I do not believe so.

KR: Regarding your upbringing, where did you grow up?

JW: I grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and I'm back there now.

KR: Describe the neighborhood that you grew up in, the demographics of the neighborhood, and what it was like there.

JW: Before I was thirteen, we lived on Riverside Drive and 149th Street, which is further up than the official Upper West Side. That neighborhood didn't have a name at the time. We thought of it as Washington Heights, but it was too far downtown to really be Washington Heights. It's now called Hamilton Heights, because Alexander Hamilton had a house there, but it had no name then. It was a mixed neighborhood that was getting progressively more and more a Black neighborhood. It was also getting dangerous. Our house got burgled. A cousin got mugged. It was kind of a nervous place for us at the time. When I was thirteen, we moved downtown to 86th Street, Manhattan. That's the real Upper West Side. My memories of that neighborhood at the time was also being afraid, toward the later years. [Editor's Note: Alexander Hamilton's thirty-two-acre estate, known as the Grange, was located at 141st Street. In 2008, it was relocated to St. Nicholas Park to be operated as a National Memorial by the National Park Service.]

We had a group of friends on Riverside Drive that played in the park, especially punchball, which is one of my major memories. We had whoever could be [there], and there was no set number of how many would be on a team because we generally didn't have a full number of kids. People would be the shortstop and the center fielder and whatever, and it was a much smaller [playing area]. The bases were a certain thing on the ground; there was a certain sewer top and a certain landmark on the ground. It was not on a grass field but on cement, pavement. It was girls and boys. We also roller skated in the old-fashioned kind of roller skates that you had a key, and you kept your shoes on. It wasn't the kind of roller skate that we have now, and it didn't roll very well--it was very slow going, not the speed that current roller skates have. It made a lot of noise and it didn't go very fast, but that was fun too.

Then, when I was thirteen--it was my freshman year in high school, ninth grade--we moved. It was on a school day. I went to school from the Riverside Drive apartment, and then I came home to the 86th Street apartment. That was weird … a very strange day. I should also mention that one block away from us were my mother's sister and her husband and their daughter, my first cousin Andree, who was almost like a big sister because we lived so close together. Our parents all were friends together, and there were three summers where our parents--together, all six of us--rented a house in the country, in the summer. The mothers and kids were there during the week, and the dads came out on weekends. So, I was very close to her growing up, and I think for both of us, it was almost like having a sister. She was more of a girly girl and I was more of the tomboy, but we got along very well.

KR: Sure, we will ask some questions about some other areas. Enya, let me turn to you to ask a question.

EL: You mentioned that your mother worked for the Parks Department, and your mother left early to care for you. What experiences did you have that were unique to your childhood based on the fact that your mother worked for the Parks Department?

JW: My mother knew a lot of games, since one thing she did at the Parks Department was arrange games with the children. So, she knew a lot of games, and I think she had a really good feeling for dealing with children and me in particular.

EL: Did you feel as though it gave you more exposure to nature in any way?

JW: The summers, when we went away to the country, was where I got exposed to nature. One of the places we went when I was seven was to Shelter Island, New York, which is an island between the North and South Fork of Long Island. There were beaches, and I would love to walk in the water and look at whatever critters I could find, pick up shells, and so forth. One day, I was walking in the shallow water, and there was this whelk (it's like a snail, but longer). This whelk shell was occupied by a hermit crab, and it was crawling along in the shallow water. The shell was covered with algae and barnacles and all sorts of stuff. Here was this whelk shell with the hermit crab inside and all this other stuff growing on it, and it was walking along. I thought this was just amazingly wonderful. I called over everybody else to look at it, and they all said, "Oh yes, very nice," you know, pat you on the head. I thought it was wonderful, and that might have been a formative moment for a future marine biologist. Other years, we were in freshwater. We were always by a lake, and swimming was very, very important to me and still is. I remember one summer we were by a pond with tadpoles. I collected a bunch of tadpoles and kept them in jars and fed them and watched as they grew their legs and metamorphosed into tiny frogs and then put them back. My cousin didn't do these things, but that was always clearly an interest in nature I had.

EL: You mentioned that your mother was a major figure in your upbringing. Would you say that your parents were feminists or that your upbringing was characteristically feminist?

JW: My awakening to feminism was some months after my mother died, and I wish she had been around longer because I would have loved to ask her. All I can say is they did not put [up] any barriers to me. I think the fact that I was smart and I went to special schools helped; they didn't put anything in my way. Anything I wanted to be, I should be. I have no idea--and I've often wondered--if it would have been different if I had a brother. I suspect it might have been different if I had particularly an older brother. I wonder about it, but there's no way to know.

EL: In reference to the special school you are talking about, it was the Bronx High School of Science, correct? Yes. When you were attending the Bronx High School of Science, what was your favorite subject, and is that where you found your passion for science? [Editor's Note: The Bronx High School of Science, Bronx Science, is a specialized public magnet high school located in the Bronx, New York City.]

JW: I think I was passionate about science before going there. I also went to a special elementary school, Hunter College Elementary School, which, I think, is probably more selective than Bronx Science is in terms of who gets to go there. So, I was always surrounded by super smart people, and I remember being interested in science earlier, certainly the biology part, nature. I had no huge interest in chemistry or physics or rocks, but I was certainly interested in living things. At Bronx Science, I had really good teachers, and I took "AP Biology." I decided, when I went to college, that I would major in biology. I don't know if that answers your question. [Editor's Note: Hunter College Elementary School is an elementary school for intellectually talented and gifted students that is administered by Hunter College.]

EL: I do not think I have any further questions, Kate.

KR: Dr. Weis, how much were you encouraged to pursue sciences, as you were going through your education? I ask this in terms of my mother was born eleven years after you, and when she was in high school, she was told she could not take physics because women did not take physics, and similar to you, my mom went on to go to Cornell. I am wondering, how much were you were encouraged to pursue the sciences?

EL: Bronx Science--I have, still, some close friends, going back that far, and we've talked about this--nobody can think of any incident when any guidance counselor or teacher in Bronx Science ever said anything or indicated anything that girls were less capable of doing science than boys. We're talking about the middle 1950s, and that's quite remarkable that none of us can recall any discriminatory thing happening at Bronx Science. I guess when they decided to admit girls--it started out as an all-boys' school, and then they admitted girls. I guess when they decided to do that, the policy was that everybody's going to be treated the same. So, I never ran into anything, any restrictions like that, either at home or in school. [Editor's Note: The Bronx High School of Science became coed in 1946.]

KR: You talked about this aha moment when you were at the seashore, and it was your budding interest in biology and ecology …

JW: I didn't think of it as an aha moment, that it's just, in retrospect, remembering how excited I was and how unexcited everybody else was about that hermit crab.

KR: What were other formative experiences during your childhood?

JW: I think it was really cool raising those tadpoles that other summer. I also was interested in butterflies. So, it was certainly mostly summertime when we were in the country. We lived near Central Park and I lived near Riverside Park, but I viewed them mostly as places for playing. Central Park was for the zoo and for the Wollman skating rink, ice skating. Also, in the '50s, it was a little dicey about going into Central Park. We would go around and come in from the Fifth Avenue side rather than from Central Park West, a little dangerous, certainly later in the day. So, I didn't really appreciate the nature in the city. It was always the summers when we were in the country. [Editor's Note: The Central Park Zoo and Wollman Rink are located in southeastern Central Park.]

KR: Just a specific question about the summer country homes that your family would stay at; did you ever spend the summer at one of the Finger Lakes?

JW: No, it was always closer to the city, within a three-hour drive. My father would only be able to come out on weekends mostly, so he didn't want to have such a long drive. We did take a trip to the Finger Lakes, to visit Watkins Glen, and went to Niagara Falls. Eventually they bought a house in Columbia County, not too far from the city. [Editor's Note: Watkins Glen is a village that lies on the southern coast of Seneca Lake, one of the Finger Lakes, in western New York State.]

KR: What role did religion play in your upbringing?

JW: Basically none. We were a very assimilated family. When we moved to 86th Street, there was, across the street from us, a place called the Jewish Center, and I thought, "Well, maybe I can go over there and see if they have teen programs," and whatever. So, I went over. They did have teen programs, and I met a bunch of kids. It turns out it was an Orthodox Jewish place. I dated some guys there, and I remember one guy I dated would come to pick me up wearing a yarmulke on his head. My mother was not delighted at this sort of Jewishness. Being Jewish, in our family, was a matter of an ethnic identity and not a religion. Some years, we even had a Christmas tree because my cousin Andree, who lived a block away, had one. Her father was not Jewish. I wanted to have a Christmas tree too, and so I did. They had no problems with that. Really, there was no religion. It was an ethnic thing.

KR: What were political discussions like when you were growing up with your parents and with your extended family?

JW: They were Democrats. My mother was, I think, somewhat more liberal than my father, but I remember they were very happy when Harry Truman won the election. I don't think either of

them ever got really involved in politics in terms of voter registrations and all the other sorts of things that people do to get out the vote and have meetings, etcetera. They never were involved, but clearly they were Democrats. [Editor's Note: Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the beginning of his fourth term, on April 12, 1945. Truman won reelection in 1948 against Republican Thomas Dewey.]

KR: When you were growing up, what messages were being sent to you by your parents, by your community, by your teachers, about what you could do in your life as a woman?

JW: I don't remember hearing any messages saying that being female somehow precluded me from doing anything, from my parents, from others in the family, from teachers. Perhaps there were some subtle messages that I just didn't pick up. Being oblivious can be an advantage. That's possible, but I didn't feel like there were any constraints. My parents certainly encouraged me [in] whatever I wanted to do. Again, I don't know if it would have been that way if I'd had a brother. And certainly not at Bronx Science. The first time I was aware of something where I was clearly getting treated differently was at Cornell. That was the first time, but I accepted that--I look back and say, "Why did we put up with this?" some of the things at Cornell. Maybe there were signals before then that I was just not picking up, which was probably a good thing.

EL: If I can ask, what was your memory of pollution growing up, pollution you saw in the city around you. What were your feelings about it?

JW: The pollution that I was aware of was the soot on the window sills. This was back when they were still burning garbage in New York City, and there were incinerators in all the buildings. People would drop the garbage bags down the incinerator shoot, and they would be burning it. My mother would have to go around every day cleaning the soot off the window sills, whether or not the windows were open, but the soot was on the window sills. Before we got married, we were engaged, I said, "I don't want to wear glasses at our wedding. I want to get contact lenses." I got contact lenses, which, at that time, were just the hard lenses. It seemed like all the soot in New York City managed to get under my contact lenses. I spent a few months prior to the wedding dripping tears from irritated eyes and never quite got used to the contact lenses and certainly not the soot that would come under them. Soon thereafter, I gave up contact lenses. I had them on when we got married and they were okay that day, but that was the most visible pollution. Another issue was the fact that we weren't supposed to go swimming in the Hudson River, because it was full of sewage and all of this other stuff. So, I was aware of that, but it really wasn't until Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Earth Day and all of that environmental awareness and activism in the '60s and '70s, when I was already not a kid anymore. [Editor's Note: Rachel Carson was a writer, marine biologist and conservationist who wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962. The first Earth Day took place on April 22, 1970.]

EL: The other question I had was, were there any adverse health effects that you noticed in family around you or yourself growing up that were related to environmental conditions?

JW: I had another cousin who had asthma, but that's not necessarily related to environmental pollution. As a kid, he had asthma, but a lot of people get asthma who live in the country. That's the only thing I can think of.

EL: Thank you.

KR: Dr. Weis, what sort of extracurricular activities did you do, and was there any opportunity to play sports?

JW: I took music--what age now are we're talking about? High school? College?

KR: During your upbringing, so middle school, high school age.

JW: I took music lessons for many years. I sang in the chorus in high school and college; singing in choruses has been a continual thing in my life. I still sing in two choruses now. It's really important to me, and it started then. I was on various committees in high school. When in high school, I really became enamored of Gilbert and Sullivan, and I bought all the records and I learned all the songs and went to see productions of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. In college, I was able to perform in the G&S shows all four years. That also has been something I loved through my whole life. Music, in general, was an important thing. I took piano lessons for quite a few years. [Editor's Note: English dramatist W.S. Gilbert and English composer Arthur Sullivan, commonly referred to as Gilbert and Sullivan, collaborated on fourteen operettas between 1871 to 1896.]

You said something about sports. They didn't offer--ah, there we go!!--high school had sports teams for the boys and no sports teams for the girls. There it is! I had said everything was equal in high school, but when it came to sports, they had intramurals for the girls, but only boys' teams played with other high school teams. They didn't have football at Bronx Science, but they had baseball, swimming, tennis and a bunch of other sports for the boys and they had nothing except intramurals for the girls. Now, finally, there's one thing at Bronx Science that was unequal, but I wasn't really interested in being on one of those teams. Now, if I had, I wouldn't have answered your other question a while back saying everything was totally equal at Bronx Science because it clearly wasn't when it came to sports. But that's not the fault of Bronx Science; that's the whole New York City school system. They had leagues for baseball and for the schools who had football and basketball, etc., for the boys, and they didn't have it for girls. So, I guess you can't blame Bronx Science; it was the New York City Department of Education that had done that. It wasn't until Title IX, in the '70s, when everything needed to change for that. [Editor's Note: Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in education programs that receive federal financial assistance.]

KR: Before we go on to your college years, Enya, do you have any other questions about Dr. Weis's upbringing?

EL: I believe you said not particularly, but is there any political figure or speech, by, say, the governor or the president when you were growing up that was impactful to you in some way?

JW: I remember my parents were very enthusiastic about Adlai Stevenson. He had been in a motorcade in the Bronx, and I had been there and waved to him. He was sort of a hero. Of course, he lost twice against Eisenhower, but when you look back at Eisenhower and you compare him to the kind of Republicans we have today, he comes out looking like a Democrat. [Editor's Note: Adlai Stevenson ran for the presidency as the Democratic candidate in the elections of 1952 and 1956, losing to Dwight D. Eisenhower both times.]

EL: You would definitely say that your politics, both back then to today, are firmly rooted in the Democratic Party.

JW: Oh, yes.

EL: I do not have any further questions, I believe. Thank you.

KR: Dr. Weis, before we go on to your college years, is there anything that you would like to add about your childhood that we did not ask you about?

JW: I think you covered most of it. I can't think of what we might have missed.

KR: What was your college application process like?

JW: They didn't have the uniform admissions form that they have today. I was filling out by hand--no computers--filling out by hand all these questions, and certain of them would be the same for each school. Then, each of them had an essay, and you probably couldn't use the same essay for different ones because they were asking different questions for the essay. There were college advisors, guidance counselors, at [Bronx] Science, who we could talk to and get help. They still have guidance counselors in high schools. We were encouraged not to apply to a whole lot of schools, three or four, whereas sometimes now, kids are applying to huge numbers. I applied to Swarthmore, Cornell, Rochester and Brandeis and then Queens College; you had to apply to one of the city colleges. That was sort of expected. So, that was what I applied to.

My first choice had been Swarthmore, and I didn't get in. My next choice was Cornell, and I did get in. It was very odd though, when you think about that assortment; I didn't quite appreciate the difference between a small liberal arts college and a major big humungous university. Many things in my life I really was pretty naïve about, and that was one of them. I am a big fan of the small liberal arts college, and both our kids--our daughter went to Skidmore, our son went to Vassar. I think, as an undergraduate, that's a whole lot better than getting lost in a big university like Cornell. It's interesting, a friend, who's my oldest friend--we met in like kindergarten in Hunter Elementary School and we have been friends ever since--she also applied to Swarthmore and Cornell. She got into Swarthmore and not Cornell, and I got into Cornell and not

Swarthmore. So, that's how it goes. So, I was happy to go to Cornell. Do you want me to talk about freshman year or still just the application process?

KR: Yes, sure, you can talk about your freshman year.

JW: I was pretty lost there for some time. It was so big, and the atmosphere that you first came upon as an incoming student at freshman orientation was, "This is a fraternity school, and what's important is fraternities and football." This was not what I thought was important, and I was not happy there my first semester. I was seriously thinking about transferring, but I was making some friends, and I never did actually apply to transfer away. It took until the second half of freshman year to sort of find my place there. I think that's what I wanted to say about that.

KR: Which school did you go to at Cornell?

JW: Arts and Sciences. In retrospect, I probably could have gone to Ag and saved my parents a bundle of money, but I guess there was more prestige in Arts and Sciences. In Arts and Sciences, the biology major was not biology but zoology, and zoology was the major for the pre-meds. So, I was in classes with pre-meds through the whole four years, and I had never had any interest in medical school. The vast majority of the zoology majors were at least aspiring to be medical students or other health-related fields. There were relatively few of us who really wanted to be biologists rather than some kind of health practitioner. [Editor's Note: The College of Arts and Sciences and the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the Ag School, are undergraduate colleges at Cornell University.]

KR: You were at Cornell between 1958 and 1962. I was wondering if you could describe for us what Cornell was like during that period, for example, what the campus culture was like in the College of Arts and Sciences, and what the demographics were like.

JW: The dominant culture was the fraternity-football culture, which was not my thing at all. There was also, less visible but still there, the sort of bohemian, Beatnik, pre-hippie type culture as well and nascent student movement, anti-war, civil rights. They were just getting started; the peace movement and civil rights movement were sort of just getting started, folk music society and so forth. That's sort of where I gravitated. Of course, after I graduated, that became so much more important in the middle '60s. '62 was still just very small beginnings.

The demographics, well, there certainly were quite a small number of African Americans there. Most of the Black people there were from Africa, graduate students. There were not that many Asian students. On freshman corridor, there was a girl from the Middle West who had never met a Jewish person before. She wasn't sure if we had horns or not. Whereas, prior to that, growing up in New York City, there were mostly Jewish kids at Bronx Science and so forth. So, that's the demographics at Cornell at that time.

KR: Were there many women in Arts and Sciences?

JW: I think there was about one-third. Overall, I think at the whole university, undergraduates, putting together Arts and Sciences and all the undergraduate colleges (including Home Economics, which was close to one hundred percent female), I think it was three men per one woman. So, we were certainly a minority. Then, there were all these rules that we had that the guys didn't have. We had to live in dorms the whole time, whereas they could get apartments. We had curfews, and we couldn't just eat wherever we wanted. We were supposed to eat in the dorms. On Sundays, we couldn't wear pants. They called it "gracious living," and it was like a formal Sunday dinner in the dorms. The guys had a whole lot of freedom, and we didn't. We objected to it, but nothing got changed until the year after I graduated. The year after I graduated, the senior women didn't have a curfew anymore, but I just missed that by one year. Then, the following year, junior and senior women didn't have a curfew. So, they progressively, over four years, got rid of the curfews for women and changed the dining rules and all of that nonsense.

KR: Go ahead, Enya, with a question.

EL: What were the quality of the dorms that you stayed at?

JW: They were fine. I mean, they were dorms. They had enough room, and they had what you needed to have in a dorm. This was before everybody came with computers. You came with your Royal portable typewriter, and you didn't come with the whole big music setup. You had a small, portable phonograph and some 33 RPM records, LPs, and there was room for that. My favorite was two years in a dorm called Balch [Hall], which had suites, where there were two rooms with an interconnecting bathroom. That was very nice. So, I had no complaints about the physical dorms. They were kept up well, and they were fine.

EL: Another question I have is, you mentioned you involved yourself in the folk counterculture. How deeply did you involve yourself within that counterculture, and to what extent was that counterculture folk music, etcetera?

JW: Oh, yes, there was a folk music society. Pete Yarrow, of Peter, Paul, and Mary, was a couple of years ahead of me, but he was one of the leaders in that. There were sings in the student union, and it was nice to see him become a famous folk singer after that. [Editor's Note: Peter Yarrow graduated from Cornell in 1959 with a B.A. in psychology and went on to form the folk music group, Peter, Paul, and Mary, with Paul Stookey and Mary Travers.]

EL: First, let me ask, *Silent Spring* came out when you were in your senior year. Is that correct?

JW: It came out after I finished Cornell. It came out in 1963. I had read Rachel Carson's earlier books, which were mostly about the sea. She wrote *The Sea Around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*, *Under the Sea Wind*. She was a beautiful writer and she had such talent as a writer, not just as a scientist. I guess I could say she was sort of a role model. Then, of course, *Silent Spring*, that didn't set me into a career of being an environmental sort of biologist though, not yet, not yet. I think the marine environment was always very attractive to me as something to study.

EL: When entering college, did you debate declaring another major than zoology, or were you mostly set on it?

JW: In retrospect, I could have done equally well or better going to the Ag School, but there I was in Arts and Science and it was zoology. I took some courses up in the Ag School. I think genetics was offered up there, and I sat in on a limnology course. Limnology is the study of lakes and rivers, freshwater environments. So, there really was no doubt, although, I must say, the freshman course was awful. I think the freshman course, "Zoology 101, 102," the professor was a good teacher, but the way it was organized and what it did was really dull, despite his being a good teacher. I think you'd have to be very determined to continue on with a zoology major after suffering through that freshman course, and I continued on.

EL: Did you have an opportunity to do hands-on research while you were at Cornell?

JW: Yes, I did. I did the honors program. I started out in one lab that was doing research that wasn't quite down my alley, but then a new professor came in who was a fish physiologist. I worked in his lab looking at fish respiration rates under different conditions; so, yes, I did.

EL: Did you make any connections with professors that lasted you much longer after you left college?

JW: Not much longer. While I was in graduate school, I kept in touch a little bit but nothing that lasted very long.

EL: Thank you so much. I think that was the extent of my questions.

KR: How else do you think Cornell shaped you and what you would go on to do in the rest of your career?

JW: I am really not sure. I can't come up with a definitive answer to that. I don't think Cornell had that much of a positive effect. I saw all the faculty were men, and I had one female professor in all the courses I took there for four years. That was not a positive thing. One thing I enjoyed there is being in--and this is not career-wise, but another part of my life--I got great joy at being in the productions of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas there. I have continued that for many, many decades afterwards. That's extracurricular. I've also had lifelong friendships from people I met at Cornell.

KR: Did you meet your spouse at Cornell?

JW: No, although we could've because we overlapped for two years.

KR: Right.

JW: We didn't meet there. We met at Woods Hole, which is at the beginning of Cape Cod. It's a major marine biological center. There's a Marine Biological Lab there, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute there, and government fisheries lab there. So, it is a mecca for marine biology. The summer after my sophomore year, I had originally planned to volunteer at the American Museum of Natural History to work in somebody's lab there. I went over to the museum, which was not far from where we lived, and I got sent up a spiral staircase up to the fifth floor, which is not open to the public. There was a woman named Evelyn Shaw in the Department of Animal Behavior at the museum. She was going to Woods Hole for the summer and wanted somebody to be a part-time lab assistant and part-time babysitter for her three kids. She was divorced with a nine, a seven, and a five-year-old kid. So, I took that for my summer job. [Editor's Note: Evelyn Shaw was a scientist and author who earned a Ph.D. from New York University and worked for the American Museum of Natural History and later Stanford University. She was an expert on schooling fish.]

The summer at Woods Hole was a whole lot more formative than four years at Cornell; I also met Pete there. He was a lab assistant working with squids at the time. There were a lot of young people around and I had a whole group of friends that I met there. It was also being immersed in this exciting world of marine biology. I would say that those three months were more formative than Cornell.

KR: If there are other ways that Woods Hole was formative to you, please share with us.

JW: I loved the experience there working with her. I lived in the attic of the house she had rented. There, for the first time, I got to know, pretty well, a female biologist, a divorced one. She was not a sort of warm fuzzy person. She was kind of hard-edged; I imagine it was hugely difficult for her to make it in her field, being a generation--well, she wasn't a whole generation older than me. I was nineteen, and she was probably in her upper thirties, maybe, with these three kids. No doubt, her experiences were a lot rougher than mine, and her age group was much more of a pioneer than my age group. It was easier for me than for her, no doubt. So, she was pretty hard-edged, and it sort of gave me pause to think, "Will I have to become like that to be successful as a biologist?" and I think I've managed not to be like that. She was also very glamourous. She was gorgeous, and *Look* magazine (which was sort of like *Life* magazine--*Look* magazine has disappeared, I don't know if *Life* magazine is still around) did a feature about her, and she put on her best bikini to pose with the net for pictures.

I loved the experience and then went back to Woods Hole the following year to take a summer course in marine ecology, which was also really formative. That was after my junior year in college, going back to Woods Hole that second summer. That second summer was when Pete and I really got together as a couple, and a year after that, we got married right after I graduated. Woods Hole was really important for both my professional growth and development and my personal life.

EL: Did you have any experience with science education? Did you gain any experience with science education, or did that come later on in your career?

JW: Well, I'm not sure what you're asking about science education.

EL: In the capacity of the internships you did there, did you interact with the guests in any science education capacity, or did that all come later with your work as an educator?

JW: Woods Hole ran a very good children's science education program for children, but I wasn't really involved with that. I was still getting educated myself, and that marine ecology course, that second summer at Woods Hole, was a wonderful course. It was lots of hands on in the lab and out in the field and was taught by some of the most eminent ecologists of the time. Eugene Odum, who is not a famous name anymore, but he was a very famous name then. Howard Sanders, a member of the National Academy of the Sciences. I mean, really top-notch people, and the other students--there were maybe twenty of us, I'm guessing twenty students in the class. It was great. It was just two incredibly wonderful summers. [Editor's Note: Eugene Odum, a professor at the University of Georgia, was a pioneering ecologist who introduced the concept of the ecosystem. Howard Sanders was a marine biologist who spent his entire career as a researcher at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, from 1956 to 1986.]

KR: How did that experience, that second summer doing marine ecology, shape what you decided to focus on in your career?

JW: That's what made me think about wanting to do marine ecology for my field. Clearly, I was interested in it enough to want to take that class, instead of many of the other courses that they offered, and I think that sort of affected my decision, that's what I wanted to do.

KR: Did you get any sort of guidance, when you were at Woods Hole, about going on to graduate school and what to focus on in graduate school? Was there any sort of mentorship that you experienced about what could come after your undergraduate experience?

JW: Well, I had already decided I would go to graduate school. But by that summer, it looked like I would be getting married to Pete, so I wasn't going to go too far away from the New York City area because he was here. There was a possibility--I did apply to graduate school at Yale. There were some graduate students involved in that marine ecology course who were at Yale. So, I did apply to Yale and get in but, for personal reasons, didn't want to be commuting, and so I ended up going to NYU instead.

KR: Yale and NYU were the two graduate schools you applied to?

JW: Looking around the New York City area, at that time, there were really very few options--if you want to have a faculty advisor to do marine biology of some kind, there really was very little around New York City. The City University had not started a graduate program yet. Columbia had decided that the only kind of biology that counts is cell or molecular biology and no longer had ecological people on the faculty. Columbia had had an excellent set of ecological and evolutionary biologists before this, but they gotten to a point where only cell and molecular

biology was important. Later, they saw the error of their ways and took care of that more recently, maybe in the '80s, but during the time when I was looking at graduate schools, there was very little. Rutgers seemed to be a million miles away. The NYU Biology Department had a "fish guy," and so that's where I ended up going. I decided Yale was too far away, I didn't want to have a commuting marriage, and so I settled on NYU. Should I start talking about NYU now, or are you not ready?

KR: Yes, sure. Please, go ahead.

JW: Yes. When I started at NYU, I went to visit the "fish guy" to say, "I am a graduate student. I'd like to work with you." I was the first female who had ever walked into his lab, so he didn't quite know what to do with me. He was, can I say, an old-school gentleman, and his view was that I was dainty and delicate and going into the field and pulling nets (what I'd been doing two summers before this) would be too strenuous, or somehow would I melt--it was that sort of thing. I ended up doing lab studies; they had zebrafish all over the place. They were breeding, and there were eggs around. I got interested in the fish development, which is not marine ecology at all. It's a freshwater fish and it's developmental biology, not marine ecology, but I got interested in it and that's what I ended up doing a dissertation on and worked for a couple of years afterwards on fish development. So, it was kind of a detour. If I'm jumping too far ahead, I don't know how far to go into the future.

KR: Sure, you can tell your story, and then Enya and I can go back if we need to and ask follow-up questions.

JW: All right. Well, when I was finishing up my doctorate, the job I applied for at Rutgers-Newark was to be teaching embryology, developmental biology. So, I continued for a couple years at Rutgers working on developmental biology but then, after some years, sort of migrated back into more ecological, environmental things by using fish development, which I knew a lot about, to ask, "What happens with environmental pollution affecting fish development?" That was the bridge, using what I already knew about fish development, to look at pollutants, such as mercury, asking how does this pollutant affect the fish development? That was the bridge from the developmental biology into the environmental work.

EL: Was there a watershed moment, perhaps early for you, that led you to focus your research on estuarine ecology and ecotoxicology, or was it more, like you are saying, a natural connection and progression?

JW: By accident, we discovered a marine lab in Montauk, New York, and remembering how much fun my summers were going out to the country for the summer, (we already, by 1973, had kids) we went to this marine lab in Montauk, which mostly involved people who were working there as full-time jobs, but there was extra space. They welcomed us to come and do our own thing in their space, and they charged us a nominal dollar.

We set up our own lab and had access to the killifish, which was a fish I knew from Woods Hole. It's a very, very common shallow water fish that lives near marshes in estuaries, and they're very abundant just about anywhere along the Atlantic coast. Every two weeks, they reproduce, and you can squeeze the gravid female and get the eggs out, squeeze the male, get the sperm out, mix them together, and you get embryos. We studied mercury, which had caused this serious problem in Minamata, Japan with deformed fetuses and people getting all kinds of neurological problems. It was a logical step to ask what does mercury do to the fish embryo? That was the first step back to the environment, using development as the response to the environmental problem.

KR: While we are on this topic, what did you find while you were studying the killifish?

JW: How much detail do you want?

KR: A good overview.

JW: All right. We found a variety of deformities. The most obvious deformity was that in head and eye development--a fish usually has eyes on each sides of their head--some of them had the eyes closer to each other, kind of coming together, and others, it was more so, eyes closer, others had the two eyes actually touching in the front, and then others the two eyes had merged and they had one big cycloptic eye in the front, and then others had no head, no eye, no nothing. So, there's a wide variety of degree of this effect. It's the same effect; it's just a little bit and a little bit more and a little bit more severe. Then, there were also defects in the heart development, also ranging from very mild to very severe, and also defects in the vertebral column development, also ranging from very mild, a slight bend, to a large bend, to curled around within the egg membrane, to no development at all. We had these three major types of defects, all of which could be either very mild or very severe or anything in between. It turned out that different females were responsible; some females were giving us eggs that would be very resistant and have only mild problems with the same dose of mercury. Other females would give us eggs that were messed up very badly, and then other females would give us eggs that were somewhere in the middle. A particular female is consistent in the response of the eggs, whether it's a mild response or very severe response. This appeared to be a genetic kind of thing.

Montauk was clean; there's no heavy industry there. Then, we went to study what might happen if we used fish from a highly polluted place. We went to this place in the highly industrialized Newark Bay area, a little creek in Linden, New Jersey that goes into the Arthur Kill. Now, the Arthur Kill is industrial New Jersey, and this is in the '70s. The Clean Water Act had just recently been passed, but this is not cleaned up yet, by a long shot. This is a highly polluted place, but the fish are living there. We did the same experiments with the fish from this site, Piles Creek, and found that practically all the females had eggs that were barely affected, showing that this population is resistant or tolerant to the methylmercury, a huge difference between the whole spectrum in Montauk versus Piles Creek, with almost no susceptible embryos, only tolerant ones. Females that produced susceptible eggs would have had no offspring survive there. Only the females that produce tolerant eggs are left. So, evolution has

happened, and it can happen very quickly because there already are, in the clean population, females that give resistant eggs. You don't need a new genetic mutation. You already have the diversity, in the clean place, of having females that give very resistant eggs. One can envision that if the others are wiped out, resistant egg producers are the ones that are going to have offspring the next generation. So, you could very quickly go from a very wide range of responses to being just resistant embryos.

EL: What did you do with the data once you had collected it?

JW: We published it. We published a lot of papers all about this. That's what you do when you're a scientist.

EL: Did you try to go to, say, activist groups or maybe the government and present your data to try to affect change or policy making?

JW: No. There were newspapers that were interested. There was, I think, some writeup in a newspaper, but I don't know what activist groups would do with it, because it would be possible for somebody to misconstrue this to say, "Oh, well, if in polluted environments, the animals are adapted and tough, we can just pollute more. We don't have to clean it up." That was something we might worry about, if somebody interprets the findings about evolution, that animals can become resistant in a polluted environment. The fact is that some species can do that, and many species cannot. If you look in Piles Creek, there's much fewer kinds of organisms living there than in a clean place. Killifish are very tough and can evolve resistance to a lot of pollutants. Other people have found them in other kinds of polluted places with other kinds of pollutants, and they can become resistant. But the polluted places have much less biological diversity than clean places. So, you don't want that kind of result misinterpreted by some politician who says, "Well, we can just pollute everything; animals can become resistant." It's not true.

KR: Amongst your peer group of academics, what was the reception of these findings?

JW: I gave a talk at one meeting that got the award of the best talk at the meeting. I think it stimulated a lot of other people to look at killifish in other environments and look at other pollutants, such as PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls] and oil pollution and other kinds of pollutants, and finding that this particular species can do this very well, tough fish.

KR: You have explained to us how you basically linked your dissertation and then were able to go into an area of focus in marine ecology, which is what you wanted to go into. We are going to ask you more questions about your research, and before we go on into your scholarship, can you tell us about your job search after you got your Ph.D., or maybe you were doing your job search while you were still finishing your dissertation?

JW: Yes.

KR: What was your job search like?

JW: I was so naïve. This makes me laugh. I didn't understand that the career one might have as a faculty member at a university like Rutgers would be a totally different thing than the job I would have at a small college that wasn't research focused. At this time, my husband and I were both looking for jobs, and he had already gotten an offer from the medical school at Newark, which now is part of Rutgers, but it was UMDNJ back then. He got an offer in the anatomy department. So, I restricted my search to New York-New Jersey, and I applied to places like Bloomfield College. I didn't know. But I ended up getting a job at Rutgers-Newark, which was a huge piece of luck. I think a lot of my whole life has been dependent on luck. I should say that. I may have to say it again a few more times, but a huge number of things that have happened were just luck. It was luck that I got the job at Rutgers-Newark instead of Bloomfield College or some other small school, but I was really totally naïve. [Editor's Note: The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) merged with Rutgers University in 2013 to form the new Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS).]

KR: I read the interview that you did with Gil Cohen in 1991.

JW: Did you find that?

KR: I did, yes. I can send you a link to it.

JW: Yes, I never knew whatever happened with that.

KR: Yes, it is online. The transcript is online.

JW: Ah.

KR: Yes, so I will send you the link to that. You talked about how you actually had a unique experience interviewing at Rutgers-Newark, in that you were pregnant during your job interview.

JW: Oh, yes.

KR: Can you tell us about that?

JW: Yes, I was pregnant at the time. I was interviewing at other places; I can't remember other places that I--I think I interviewed at Barnard and didn't get the job. I don't think I was the first choice for this job at Rutgers, because I didn't hear back from them until July. So, I'm pretty sure that someone else was first choice. When I came for the interview, the campus hadn't quite opened yet. My coming to Rutgers, September '67, was the opening of the campus, but when I was at my interview, in the spring of '67, Rutgers was still in a bunch of different buildings, rented space in buildings, in downtown Newark. It was on Rector Street, where the Biology Department was. It wasn't the Biology Department yet. It was the Zoology and Physiology Department; there was a separate Botany Department at that time. That was the first time I'd been to Newark. I grew up in New York City, and it was like New Jersey was a foreign country.

I think it's probably true; there are probably huge numbers of New Yorkers that have never been to Newark. It was just weird.

KR: I have a couple questions about your early times at Rutgers-Newark. Let me turn to Enya first. Enya, is there anything you want to ask?

EL: I was just curious, did you move from New York City to New Jersey to take the job, or did you stay in New York for a while?

JW: Oh, we moved to New Jersey. We moved to the Colonnade Apartments in Newark, at the beginning of Branch Brook Park. I don't know if either of you are familiar with Newark at all, but this is about a mile from the Rutgers campus. Branch Brook Park is this wonderful Olmsted park that wanders through Newark. It's soon going to be cherry blossom time. Branch Brook Park has the most cherry blossoms anywhere, other than Japan. Next weekend, you should take yourself up to Branch Brook--I assume you guys live somewhere near New Brunswick--take yourself up to Newark to visit Branch Brook Park and the cherry blossoms, absolutely gorgeous. Anyway, so, that's where we lived. These are the Colonnade Apartments. They're tall, all glass, [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe buildings. They're wonderful. When we were looking to move, we had friends who were architects, and they said, "If you're going to move to Newark, you've got to go to Colonnade Apartments. A famous architect designed these buildings." They were wonderful buildings to live in, and it was a mile away from the newly-opened campus. So, that's about moving to Newark.

By the way, we were looking at apartments during the time of the disturbances in Newark, in the summer of '67. So, I ran into a number of surprised moving companies. "We're moving from Queens, New York to Newark, New Jersey," and they said, "Lady, you're moving ***to*** Newark?" This was because of the disturbances in Newark that summer. In the building, when you have a small child and you're spending time in the playground, you meet people. It's very easy to meet people if you've got a baby or a small child. I met other Rutgers faculty members there and other people that have stayed friends since then. We lived there for six years. [Editor's Note: The Newark Rebellion took place from July 12 to July 17, 1967 and resulted in over two dozen deaths, more than seven hundred injuries, fifteen hundred arrests and property damage exceeding ten million dollars.]

KR: I have a quick follow up on that. What are your recollections of living in Newark in the aftermath of the Newark Rebellion?

JW: I remember that not that long afterwards, Newark elected the first Black mayor, Ken Gibson. It took Newark many years to recover, not just from the disturbances, but just the whole city. It was a great place to live for those years. We moved out to the suburbs six years later because our friends with kids the same age, kids getting ready for school, were moving out too. The public school system in Newark was not good, and so we went out to Maplewood, where the Maplewood-South Orange School System was--I assume still is, but I don't know--an excellent

school system for kids and not a far commute to Newark from there. [Editor's Note: Kenneth Gibson served as the mayor of Newark from 1970 to 1986.]

KR: Just for the record, your department was the Department of Zoology and Physiology at Rutgers Newark College of Arts and Sciences?

JW: Yes.

KR: What was the department like at that time?

JW: Well, the interesting thing was that the department already had three women before I was hired, which, compared to Cornell or NYU, is remarkable. It was not a huge department. I don't think it reflects any great feminist thinking or enlightenment on the part of the chair or the senior faculty in the department; I think it reflected the fact that they could pay us less, that we would come for less money. It ended up that one of the women in the department kind of took me under her wing and showed me the ropes. She was not at all in my field, but she acted as a mentor toward me. Her name was Helen Strausser, and she was a physiologist.

KR: Enya, I will turn to you for a question.

EL: I saw that you authored books. Did that come while you were at Rutgers, or was that later on?

JW: The first book came out in 2009, so I had not retired yet. So, I was working on that while I was still there. The second book, I think, was 2011, and that's when I retired. [Editor's Note: Dr. Weis is the author of *Salt Marshes: A Natural and Unnatural History,* published in 2009, and *Do Fish Sleep?*, published in 2011.]

EL: Going back then to around the start of your tenure at Rutgers, did you have an immediate interest in science education and science literacy, or did that come on later in your career?

JW: I think, at the time I started, I was much more interested in teaching than in research. My joy was in teaching, and I did research because I had to, to get tenure. It's interesting that over the years, over the decades, my enjoyment in teaching generally went down, and my enjoyment in research generally went up. By the time I was getting ready to retire, I was getting much more joy out of the research, and I was teaching because I had to. This could never have happened had I taken a job at a small college, because I wouldn't have had the research opportunities and the graduate students and all the things that come with a research enterprise, which I had not really appreciated at all when I was job hunting. The teaching got old, and the research was still new and exciting by the end.

EL: This is jumping ahead a little bit, but I saw that you worked with the National Science Foundation as a rotator. Can you explain your role in that position and your time there?

JW: Yes. This was in the Division of Higher Education. The major program that I worked with was called Instrumentation and Laboratory Improvement. It was ILI. Applications would come in to improve teaching labs, getting new equipment for making labs better. I would arrange panels for reviewing these proposals. We'd send the proposals out for external review and then assemble a panel, which would meet together and rate those different proposals to see which were more competitive and which should be funded and which not. So, it was an administrative thing. I did that for two years. That's what it was. [Editor's Note: In 1988-1990, Dr. Weis served as a program director of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Division of Undergraduate Science, Engineering and Mathematics Education.]

I also got interested in undergraduate programs in environmental science and did a little study sort of separate from that but using the NSF to be able to get information about interdisciplinary environmental science programs at different institutions. Some places had a Department of Environmental Science at that time, and more do now, but at that time, most schools that had any environmental science did not have it as its own department. It was taking a couple of courses from earth sciences and a couple from biology, add a few new courses, and then hire somebody to be the coordinator. In these kind of programs, the schools don't put enough money into them to make them work very well, because they're sort of borrowing faculty who are basically in a biology department, and borrowing others who are in earth sciences, and borrowing other people's time from various other departments, but only one person really has their main home in the environmental sciences. I did some study of that.

EL: Thank you. The other question was, just jumping back to the '70s, working at Rutgers in the '70s, I know that in the supplemental information you provided, you mentioned that Edward Bloustein and his administration did not come out looking well. What did you mean by that? Could expand on your opinion? [Editor's Note: Edward Bloustein served as the president of Rutgers University from 1971 until his death in 1989.]

JW: Oh, that's about the women's group. Around 1970, the women's movement was burgeoning. It was popping up at campuses all around the country, and it popped up at Rutgers-Newark. We had two full professors who were leading the Faculty Women's Caucus, one of whom was Helen Strausser, who was in my department, sort of my mentor, and the other was Dorothy Dinnerstein, who was in psychology. They organized the Faculty Women's Caucus to get data on the salaries for women versus men, the appointments, the hiring of women versus men, and the promotion rates of women versus men, and everything. At that time, this was not open information, although it is now. You can find it, but at that time, this was not available. They had the luck that the current dean was willing to share the information with them. Names were blocked out, but the data had each person, when they got their Ph.D., when they were hired, what their salary was, when they got promoted, what their publication rate was, et cetera. They got all this information without names attached, but probably you could figure out the names. If you knew the department, you could figure out who was who.

Anyway, they had all this data, and being scientists, they analyzed the data statistically. That's a key, important thing. They did the statistics and analyzed the data. Dorothy Dinnerstein's quote

is, "This is like bologna. No matter which way you slice it, it stinks." So, they had the data to put forth a credible complaint to the federal government. At the time, that was one avenue to file sex discrimination charges without being a lawsuit where you have to hire a lawyer. This was a mechanism of filing a complaint to the federal government, and at the time, the government agency was called Health, Education, and Welfare, it was HEW. Now, those are separated out as different agencies, but that was all together as one agency at that time. [Editor's Note: In 1971, Rutgers-Newark professors Dorothy Dinnerstein and Helen Strausser filed a complaint with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) against Rutgers University's Newark College of Arts and Sciences for sex discrimination in employment, based on Executive Orders 11246 and 11357 and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Guidelines (Title 41, Code of Federal Regulations, 69-20.5).]

By the way, they did most of the work, but there were many of us that helped. There were meetings where we consulted with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was on the faculty at the law school a block away from where we were. That was, in retrospect, quite an honor that I sat in her office a couple of times at meetings. When they submitted the complaint, the only ones whose names were attached to it were the eight tenured women. They protected all of us untenured women at the time that this complaint was filed, which was very smart, because at other universities, when such complaints were filed and an untenured woman had her name on something, her promotion to tenure was very jeopardized. At a number of places, people lost their jobs. So, they protected us. I was one of the baby assistant professors at the time. There's a whole long story that I'm not going to go into; it would take hours to go into all the details, but a lot of the details are available in a report that Kathryn Mahaney did. I don't know if I've mentioned that report should be included. [Editor's Note: Ruth Bader Ginsburg taught at Rutgers Law School in Newark from 1963 to 1972. Kathryn Mahaney is the author of "A Pervasive Pattern of Delinquency:" Rutgers University and the Struggle for Equal Pay, 1970-1976 (2010), which can be accessed at https://wisem.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/RUFAIR/pdfs/Dinnerstein%20Strauss_Mahaney%20paper.pdf]

KR: Yes.

JW: Yes. Anyway, at the time, Edward Bloustein was the president of Rutgers. He had come in calling himself a feminist. He had previously been at Bennington College, which was a women's college, and his wife was a professional. I think she was a physician. So, he came in saying he was a feminist, blah, blah. Some of the conversations that were uncovered by Kathryn Mahaney, looking at all the records, it was clear that they were going to fight this complaint, and they weren't giving credence to this. Eventually, we won, and we got major back pay, which was pretty unusual, as well as boosts in our salary. So, that's why I said Bloustein didn't come out so well. This president who claimed to be a feminist was talking a very anti-feminist line in his response to this sex discrimination complaint. There was one time Bloustein was giving a speech; I think it was his inauguration in Newark. He went to all three campuses for his inauguration to show he wasn't just going to be president for New Brunswick; he went to Newark and Camden. All the women sat together. At one point, Helen Strausser and Dorothy

Dinnerstein stood up and we all stood up and we all walked out of Bloustein's talk, which was pretty gutsy. It made a statement though.

EL: Do you remember the reaction within the media and also among people close to you, friends of family, to the controversy that was going on? Was it really big news?

JW: I don't think it was big news. I think it was probably bigger news when we won, but I can't remember newspapers about that.

EL: It did catch the attention of the senator at the time, correct, Clifford Case?

JW: Yes, Clifford Case had helped--I know that when the process got bogged down at HEW that Senator Case had a staff member who was extremely helpful in moving our complaint along. There were other shady things that went on, whereby the investigator from HEW, who came up to interview everybody about the complaint, who was supposed to be responding to our complaint as a representative of HEW, soon got hired by Rutgers as the affirmative action officer. That, to me, is a very shady thing, and I don't know whether it's Rutgers being shady or her being shady or both, but that didn't seem like quite a legitimate thing to do. [Editor's Note: Clifford P. Case represented New Jersey's Sixth District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1945 to 1955 and served as a U.S. Senator from New Jersey from 1955 to 1979. Case is credited with pressing Rutgers administrators to settle the complaint and pushing Rutgers to find funds for back pay (Mahaney 2010).]

EL: Thank you. I have no other questions, if you want to continue, Kate.

KR: During that time period, what other feminist activism were you involved in?

JW: I started a NOW chapter, the Essex County Chapter of NOW. Everybody, not everybody, but a lot of people have this lightbulb moment, the aha moment, that happened at Rutgers, a conversation with a colleague--I don't know if you know this already. [Editor's Note: NOW is the National Organization for Women.]

KR: No, I don't.

JW: At the time, our department had not had a professor who was dedicated to teaching the freshman biology course, and the task sort of got dumped on junior people. As new people got hired as assistant professors, they dumped "General Bio," which is a huge responsibility, on the new people who would have to do that, in addition to the more advanced courses in their own specialized fields. At one point, I was doing it, along with another junior assistant professor. We decided that this was not a good way to do it, that the next time the department would hire a new person, we should hire somebody who really wants to do the freshman course, who wants to make teaching "General Biology" their major teaching responsibility, rather than getting it dumped on new people who really wanted to be teaching in their specialty. So, he said, "I'll write the letter to the chairman over the weekend." He wrote the letter to the department

chairman and showed it to me. The letter says, "The person should have a Ph.D. and yada, yada, yada, and the person should be a man," and blah, blah, blah. I said, "What??? The person should be a man??? Why?" He said, "Oh, well, doing this job requires doing all this administrative work, and women are very bad at doing administrative work." I said, "What? Some are good and some are bad, and some men are good and some men are bad." He said, "Oh, but doing this job requires getting the respect and cooperation of all these graduate students. A woman couldn't do that." Meanwhile, my consciousness-raising, as we said, was going up through the ceiling, and I said, "Well, some women could and some couldn't, and some men could and some men couldn't." I said, "I'm not going to sign your letter unless you take that out."

I went home that day and looked up NOW and found that the next weekend, there was going to be a National Organization for Women conference in New York City. I said to my husband, "I'm going to this conference." We had a baby and a three-year-old. I went to NOW and came home with a stack of papers that changed my life. It was like my whole mind opened up about all the stuff that hadn't happened to me until that moment, at least that I was not consciously aware of, and I just had to get involved. I learned there was not a NOW chapter in Essex County. I got my friends together, and we started one.

That was a big part of my life through the '70s, working with NOW. We were some of the first to get the junior high schools to not require the boys to take shop and the girls to take home ec [home economics]. We got the schools to make everybody take both, shop and home ec. I guess my major claim to fame in the women's movement is the Little League case in '73, where it was in the paper that this girl, Maria Pepe, on the Hoboken Little League team got kicked off because the National Little League didn't allow girls. The Hoboken Little League loved her; she was the star of their team. So, this got into the newspapers, thanks to the coach of the Little League team, who was the unsung hero of this story. Then, I realized that since Little League played in public parks, they don't own the fields, and New Jersey civil rights law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in public accommodations. A park is a public accommodation; it's not private. That was the grounds that we filed a complaint against the Little League through the New Jersey Division of Civil Rights, so, again, it was not a lawsuit requiring hiring a lawyer. It was the same kind of thing, filing a complaint. [Editor's Note: In 1972, Maria Pepe played for the Young Democrats in Hoboken, New Jersey. She was dismissed from the team, after Little League Baseball threatened to revoke the team's status for allowing a young woman to play. The National Organization for Women (NOW) represented Pepe in a complaint against Little League Baseball. In 1973, a New Jersey judge ruled in favor of Pepe, forcing Little League to remove the gender clause from its original federal charter. By this time, however, Pepe was too old to play.]

That made the papers. That was my fifteen minutes of fame. It went through the Division of Civil Rights, and we won. Then, Little League appealed, and it went into the court and we won. There were all kinds of things going on in the state--this dragged on a few years--but by the time it was all finally settled, she was too old to play. She has since been rewarded. I've stayed in touch with her since then. She was on the *Today* show a couple weeks ago for Women's History Month, and she's now--what is she?--not a kid anymore. She's been honored a number of places.

I think her glove is in Cooperstown, but she had a really traumatic experience at the time. It was really awful for her for a few years because at school, some kids would be complaining about her, and it was really hard on her. But she's come through as a hero, and I got my fifteen minutes of fame in the women's movement. I found that case very rewarding, and it's also rewarding to see good things come to her after this really horrible thing happened to her as a kid. So, that's the sort of things I did in NOW. I have not been active in the women's movement much, lately. I mean, I send my money and let younger people do that.

KR: For today, we will do a couple more questions, and then we can meet for a second session.

JW: Okay.

KR: Okay. Enya, I will turn to you for the final questions of today, and that way, you get to ask questions that you want to ask.

EL: All right, thank you. One thing I was definitely thinking about while you were talking, were there any examples where for your research into point-source pollution and things like that, that you identified an intersectionality with other things you were passionate about, like civil rights or feminism?

JW: What's interesting, the feminism, to me, did not interact with my research at all. I did not see that connection, but certainly becoming an environmental activist, which came later, is a good fit with my research. For people in the women's studies field, women's history, women's literature, all of that, their research feminism fit together nicely. For me, the research and environmentalism are a good fit. In feminism, I certainly have been involved with trying to get more women in science, stop sexual harassment against women in scientific fields, etcetera, but that's not a real mesh with the research, whereas environmentalism does mesh easier.

EL: What is the work that you are most proud of that you have done in your life?

JW: The work that I'm the most?

EL: The most proud of.

JW: Proud of. That's hard to say. I might say--I'm not really sure--but I might say the work on impaired behavior of animals in contaminated environments, which I haven't had a chance to talk about yet. Maybe that, but that's just a maybe.

EL: Do you think you could be a brief overview about that in the time we have left?

JW: Can I do that next time because I don't want to have to rush? I guess I've been too talkative.

EL: Not at all.

JW: I'd rather talk about that the next time, if that's okay.

EL: Of course. I think that is most of my major questions. Kate, do you have anything else you would like to ask?

KR: I was wondering if you remember the first Earth Day in 1970 and if there were any events going on at Rutgers-Newark.

JW: I don't think so. In 1970, we had an infant and an almost three year-old, so we weren't doing much outside stuff. We would not be going out to demonstrations. We were really involved with our careers and the family and the baby. Also, my mother had recently died, and so I was really not involved in environmental stuff until quite some time later.

EL: What year would you mark as the start of your environmental activism?

JW: Somewhere around 1980, yes, early '80s.

EL: That lasted from then until today, right?

JW: Yes.

EL: Would you say that the literature that you write is just general scientific literature, or do you make sure to include an emphasis on environmental activism within your literature?

JW: You're talking about my books?

EL: Yes, your books.

JW: The books certainly have environmental slant. I don't think I'm saying, "Everybody go out and join the Sierra Club" or anything like that. When you're studying something in nature and it's all threatened by human activities, it's hard not to care about that.

EL: You also mentioned the Sierra Club. How long have you been involved in the Sierra Club, and to what extent have you been involved?

JW: I forget when I joined Sierra Club, but I had a couple of years on the board of the executive committee of the New Jersey chapter. Now that we live in New York, I'm involved with the New York City group. I'm also on--there is a grassroots network throughout the country, people with particular interest in particular issues. There's a Marine Team; all the people interested in marine issues can be part of it. Then, some of us are in the "core" group that does more of the work and the other people get email messages about news and things, but I'm in the core group of the Marine Team.

EL: Thank you so much.

JW: Yes, you're welcome.

KR: Well, Dr. Weis, thank you so much for meeting with us today. You have been so generous with your time.

JW: I talk too much, I think.

KR: Not at all. This is great. We really like to go in-depth into the person's life. Thank you so much. We will let you go for today, so you can make your twelve o'clock appointment. I will email you to schedule a second session.

JW: Okay, very good. Thank you.

KR: Thank you so much.

JW: Okay, have a good day.

KR: Okay, you too.

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

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