

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL J. BLECKER

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Michael J. Blecker on May 20, 2024, with Shaun Illingworth in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Thank you very much for sitting down with me

Michael Blecker: Pleasure.

SI: To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

MB: I was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, in 1945, November 1945.

SI: Your parents, I want to know a little bit about your family background, maybe starting with your mom's side.

MB: Okay.

SI: Can you tell me anything you may know, their immigration history, and so on?

MB: Yes. My mother was born in Minsk, Russia, and her mother came to the United States with three babies on a ship. [laughter] Her husband, or my grandfather, who I never met (he died long before I was born), had come previously, and then, he sent for her.

How a woman could carry three kids, three young kids, on a ship, I don't know. It was really great. My mother was born in Minsk, Russia--well, it was Russia then, I guess it's now Belarus, I believe--and spoke English without any kind of accent at all.

SI: Did you grow up knowing that grandmother?

MB: Yes.

SI: Did she ever share any stories about what life was like there?

MB: Not really. I think they chose to forget what it was like. I don't think it was very good.

SI: Sure; any other information you might have about that side of the family? Did they actually come from the city or was it an area outside Minsk?

MB: I have no idea, no. Well, my mother didn't have any experience there, because she was so young, and my grandmother never talked about it.

SI: Did they ever talk about the trip here?

MB: No, not at all, unfortunately.

SI: Where did they come into the country?

MB: Ellis Island.

SI: Okay.

MB: I had gone back in the Ellis Island records and I could see the ship, and with the three children.

SI: Yes. Was her name changed at all at Ellis Island?

MB: No.

SI: Okay.

MB: Not at all. That happened on my father's side of the family. [laughter]

SI: Okay, we'll get to that. Did they stay in New York for a while? Did they come straight to New Jersey?

MB: No, that, I don't know. They had relatives all over the place. They eventually wound up in Bayonne, but I think they might've stayed with relatives in New York City, because most of the other relatives were there rather than in New Jersey.

SI: Did your mother grow up in Bayonne?

MB: Yes.

SI: Go ahead.

MB: She attended Bayonne High School, the whole works.

SI: Was there a particular area in the city, like did it have a neighborhood name?

MB: I don't know where she grew up. We really never discussed that.

SI: Do you know if it was different from where you grew up in the city?

MB: The city's pretty homogenous; I don't think there's any one area. I mean, there's rich areas, but I don't think those rich areas were there when she grew up. They sort of arrived about the time after the war.

SI: Let's talk about your dad's side.

MB: Okay, so, my father was born in Manhattan, in the Lower East Side. His mother had come from Austria with her husband, no kids. He was the first, and then, my grandfather--well, my name is spelled Blecker, B-L-E-C-K-E-R--he had an uncle, who I later met, who spelled it, it was spelled B-L-E-C-H-E-R.

It just depended on, when you got to Ellis Island (or wherever they came in), how they decided how you should spell it. That whole side of the family, which I only met the uncle--then, that's a long story, why I only met the uncle once--but that side of the family has a lot of actually famous people in it, that I've never met. [laughter]

The daughter was named Miriam Blecher. She was a dancer with one of the big ballet companies. You can Google her and she's there. She married a man named George Sklar, who was one of the people that was persecuted during when they were getting Communists out of Hollywood. He was a screenwriter.

He did the movie *Laura* and he had a book--but they were really Communists, okay, because the one time I got to visit my father's uncle, I mean, he pulled out books and everything. There she was, "The Red Menace," basically. In any case, they had three children, one of which was the co-author, with Oliver Stone, of the original *JFK* thing.

[Editor's Note: Often a soloist, Miriam Blecher also performed with Martha Graham and Hanya Holm in New York and was a member of the Workers' Dance League during the Great Depression. She helped found the New Dance Group. George Sklar wrote numerous plays and novels, including the stage production version of *Laura*. Their son, Zachary Sklar, co-wrote the screenplay for the 1991 Oliver Stone film *JFK*.]

Unfortunately, I've never met these people, [laughter] but that's that side of the family. The reason I only met the uncle once is, the first thing that happened is, my father's father passed away. I assume it was in the Flu Epidemic of 1914 or whatever. So, he was very deceased.

[Editor's Note: Between twenty and forty million people perished in the influenza (also known as "Spanish Flu") pandemic that swept the globe from 1918 to 1919, following the end of World War I, including an estimated 675,000 in the United States.]

I'm losing my train of thought.

SI: No, that's okay. [laughter]

MB: I was going to get to a point. So, what happened was, when he was in his twenties, his uncle tried to make a match, get him married to somebody. He just ran away from his uncle and didn't see his uncle until the late 1950s, when he brought me into New York to meet him.

So, that was that part of that side of the family. His father, my father's father, my grandfather, passed away in the epidemic, probably in the epidemic. That's what I would think. He didn't say it was, but he told me he died of pneumonia.

His mother, with him as the only child, remarried a Romanian painter. They had three daughters, my aunts, and, plus, he brought into the marriage one stepsister for my father. Everything was going well for my father. He grew up on the Lower East Side, where he said everybody there either became a lawyer or a convict. There was no middle ground. [laughter] That's what happened. Basically, he became neither.

He got into college at the City College of New York. Right about that time, I guess the Depression was happening. He had four sisters, three sisters and a stepsister, and a mother who wasn't working. So, that was it. He dropped out of college and supported the whole family as a cab driver in New York, among other things. He went through that, had various jobs, whatever he was doing.

Then, World War II happened and he got drafted, but he was very old. I mean, he was like in his thirties by that time. So, they made him--he was bigger, much taller than me, and much stronger than I am [laughter]--they made him a Military Policeman in the Army Air Force. He never went overseas or anything. He was in San Antonio, he said, and then, in Miami.

Then, he had met my mother sometime before that. They got married in 1944. What happened was, at some point, the Army said, "You're too old." So, they sent him out, which is the worst thing that could ever happen, because [of] where he went. He went from a Military Policeman in Miami to working in the Kearny Shipyards. He was a smoker. He eventually died of lung cancer, probably having been working in the shipyards.

SI: Yes, all that asbestos.

MB: And then, once the war was over, he got a variety of jobs, basically worked as a restaurant worker in Newark. That's basically where my father stood. He passed away with lung cancer my freshman year in college.

He got sick my freshman year in high school, had a lung operation, seemed to be doing fine, and then, things just got bad--he probably had metastasis--and passed away April of my freshman year at Rutgers, which made my freshman year, was really [sad]. I pledged a fraternity and everything, but, basically, every weekend, I ran home to help my mother with my father.

That's basically the family. [laughter]

SI: This is jumping ahead, but, based off what you just said, did watching your father fight this disease have any impact on your decision to become a doctor?

MB: Yes. I think I spent a lot of time in hospitals, basically, [laughter] and I decided that's what I would like to do.

SI: On that side of the family, did you get any stories about what life had been like in Austria?

MB: Not really.

SI: Okay.

MB: My grandmother lived in--I don't know what you'd call the building--she had like two rooms in Brooklyn, on Parkside Avenue. There was one bathroom. It was at the end of the hall. This was in the '50s, when everybody sort of had a bathroom, but that building didn't have it.

Then, both of my grandparents passed away after breaking their hips. That was a time when if you broke your hip, it was almost a death sentence. For some reason, they both died on May 16th, not the same year. So, I approach May 16th every year with trepidation. [laughter]

SI: Wow. You got past it this year.

MB: Yes.

SI: Tell me about some of your earliest memories of Bayonne. Did you grow up in Bayonne?

MB: Yes, yes.

SI: What was your neighborhood like, for example?

MB: I don't remember my early childhood. We lived on 35th Street. My mother told me that, as a baby, I used to stare out the window. There was a funeral home across the street. They were bringing back bodies from [Europe], soldiers who'd passed away in Europe, and that I was fascinated by that, is what she told me. I don't remember that.

Shortly thereafter, we moved to a house on 49th Street we rented, on the first floor, from a gentleman. It was really nice. I actually had my own room.

My father, his stepfather was a painter, so, he dragged my father along to all his projects and had my father helping him paint, because they could make more money that way. [laughter] So, my father was really good at painting. So, at one point, after we'd been there a while, he painted the whole house. We bought new blinds and everything.

He was working in Newark. Every day, he would go into Newark. He worked nights, worked like crazy to fix up the apartment. Then, the Landlord turned around and said, "You have to move out. My son-in-law, my son, is moving in," with his daughter. So, my father said to him, "Well, will you pay me for the blinds? I put new blinds up." He said, "No." My father then threw the blinds out.

We moved down the street to a garden apartment where we lived. The son of the person-- another son, there were two sons, not the son who moved into our former dwelling, but the other son, who was younger--was a drummer. He was up in the attic, every day, drumming. You could hear it on the whole [block]. All of 49th Street, you could hear him drumming. [laughter]

He went on to be in the Navy. His thing of fame was that he was in the parade for [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower, when Eisenhower got inaugurated. He brought me back a hat, a white sailor hat, that I wore for a while, but, then, it didn't fit my head anymore. It was a small one.

So, then, we moved down into a garden apartment. We stayed there until my father got sick. When my father got sick, he couldn't work. My mother was working at Maidenform, which, in Bayonne, everybody worked for Maidenform or for Esso, basically. [laughter] There were a

couple other businesses, but those were the big ones. So, she worked, had gotten a job at Maidenform.

When he got sick, her salary wasn't enough to support us. We moved into the projects in Bayonne, downtown. In looking back at it, that was really [eye-opening]. The projects were set up, it was a racist thing, okay.

The projects we lived in, there might've been one black family in all the project. That was down by the Kill Van Kull, facing Staten Island. The other projects were full of black families. I think that's how the Housing Authority in Bayonne worked in those days. I doubt that they still do that, but that's in retrospect. You wouldn't think of it while you were doing it.

My father passed away down there. That was my freshman year at Rutgers, and then, we moved out of that [area]. She moved up to 39th Street, to an older apartment, and stayed there, and then, moved to another apartment and, eventually, passed away suddenly in 1993.

That's basically the family.

SI: When you were in the garden apartment area, it was the same street, but what was the background of your neighbors? Was it a melting pot area?

MB: It was a melting pot. There were people from all over. There were no black families at all. There was people from Germany. I don't know what their story was, but, as a Jew, I was friendly with her, but, by the same token, I had suspicion that something was going to happen, although it was great. All the kids played with each other constantly, from [when] the sun came up to the sun going down. If you weren't going to school, you were playing the whole time.

This was right on the bay, so that if you go down the hill, you were right at Newark Bay, which was really disgusting. [laughter] There was oil slicks and everything on the sand. I'm not sure how I didn't get some disease down there--rats, the whole works--but that was sort of an adventure. We would go down the hill, come back. My mother would go crazy because my clothes were just so filthy from being there.

SI: I guess you couldn't swim or anything.

MB: Oh, you wouldn't want to swim in it. There's a story that my Uncle Benjamin had actually swam across the Newark Bay to the other side, at one time when he was young, but I wouldn't have wanted to get in. Even then, I knew that it wasn't going to be very healthy.

The time when I was there, when we lived there, they were building the Turnpike extension that goes into the eastern part, so that every night, all I heard was, "Buh-bang, buh-bang." They were putting in the piles the whole night. Somehow, I managed to sleep.

SI: You get used to it.

MB: That was going in.

SI: Once you were in the project, did the project have a name?

MB: South Shore Village, I think it was called.

SI: What was that area like? Was it well maintained?

MB: I mean, they kept it up. What happens is, we were told that each family had a night to clean the hall on your floor. So, one night a week, I would go out with a mop and clean the floor, because that was our assignment. Other than that, it wasn't dirty. There was no rats or everything. It was kept up.

It wasn't a bad life. It was right on the shore. It was interesting, because we were there, and then, we were in the garden apartments, we really didn't need air-conditioning, because the wind right off of the [water], the breeze off of the thing was really good.

Although, when my father got sick, my aunt, one of my aunts (they were rich), bought us an air-conditioner, so [that] he'd be more comfortable. There is a story about her husband, my uncle by marriage. He owned two pharmacies in Harlem. In those days, well, every pharmacy had a counter, a lunch counter.

So, he was buying Coca-Cola syrup and it came in big barrels. What he did was, in his spare time in the pharmacy, he took the Coca-Cola syrup and basically experimented, and was able to make a syrup that was almost as good as Coca-Cola syrup. He then saved up the barrels, didn't give them back to Coca-Cola. So, he had a whole bunch of Coca-Cola, and then, started selling it to all the pharmacies in Manhattan. So, he became a millionaire, basically.

What happened is, Pepsi-Cola turned around and bought them out for the formula. Then, he opened up a soup company in Johnson City, New York. [laughter] That's the way it was, I guess, in the '20s or '30s, whenever he did this.

So, my aunt, realizing my father had really supported them when they were younger, she would come once a week and give my father money and bought us an air-conditioner and stuff. Then, we just didn't have enough. We decided--my mother decided--to move into the projects.

SI: You have siblings, right?

MB: No.

SI: Okay.

MB: I'm an only child.

SI: Would you be in the same school or would you have to switch schools?

MB: By then, I was in high school when we moved, so, it didn't matter. I just had new friends on the bus to go to high school every day. Then, when my father [became ill], once I got a driver's license, my father couldn't drive, so, I had the car.

I could drive to school every day. We had a 1954 Chevy Bel Air, green and white. Sometimes, it wouldn't start, [laughter] but, most of the time, it started. I just drove it to school every day with my new friends from downtown.

SI: What would you do for fun as a kid? It sounds like you did a lot of playing in the street.

MB: Yes, we played stickball. There was no basketball. I guess my father played basketball through his whole youth in New York, but he bought me a basketball. The first day or the second day I had it, I went with my friend to one of the playgrounds.

I'm playing and a person, his name was Pete Capitano--he was an all-star at Bayonne High School and had gone to Niagara College as a basketball player and he had flunked out--he shows up on the basketball court, grabs our basketball and starts dribbling around, making baskets and everything. We're crying, "Give us our basketball back."

I was so afraid, I never went back to the playground again, because I was afraid he would come and steal my basketball. I don't know what good it did me since I wasn't playing. So, that was my basketball career. It was over before it even started.

One year, I guess it was maybe in high school, my mother got me a job working at Maidenform in the warehouse. We would pick up boxes and deliver it to these guys who were called pickers. They would run around putting the orders together for various places. So, you'd lift the boxes up and everything. It was hard work, but it was sort of fun.

His father was a foreman--not a foreman, he was a cutter there--Pete Capitano. He eventually wound up, I think, working at Maidenform under his father. So, that was sort of our revenge. The only people that made a lot of money there were the people who cut the fabric. They made a fortune. Everybody else sort of made a dollar an hour, was what I was getting paid for my forty-hour week, but, in 1959 or whenever that was, that was a lot of money, I guess--at least it seemed a lot to me. [laughter]

SI: What did your mother do?

MB: She was the secretary of the purchasing agent. She did that until she retired.

SI: Do you know how far she went with her education?

MB: She went to high school, and then, went to secretarial school, worked as a secretary for a lawyer, and then, I came. She didn't work for a while. Then, she got a job working at a company that was called Allied Equipment and Supply. They did building supplies.

The interesting thing about it was, there was a gentleman, the guy who owned it was a man named SY Dubowsky--but, in effect, there was an "Angelo" and "Carmen." You'd think it was *The Sopranos*, basically. [laughter] I don't know if they owned it, but they basically [did]. It was a very small company, but, if you looked at things, they had a lot of business in Long Island that Angelo and Carmen arranged for them. [laughter] So, it was, definitely, they were pocketing a lot of the money.

She would bring me there in the summer, because there was no childcare and the boss didn't care. So, I would sit at a typewriter and hunt-and-peck. That's why, to this day, even though I took courses in how to type, I still hunt-and-peck, because I'm faster hunting-and-pecking than typing, because I spent my youth typing away at this extra typewriter at this place.

SI: Growing up, was religion important in your family life?

MB: We were Jewish. I got *bar mitzvah*-ed and all that stuff, but it wasn't a big thing. I would've rather played Little League baseball than go to Hebrew school. Hebrew school, because it was an Orthodox--in Bayonne, if you were in the Conservative, you had to have enough money to be a member of that temple--the Orthodox temples, you could get away with it.

So, they had one Hebrew school for the entire Orthodox community of Bayonne. So, I would take a bus every day down there. It was like four days a week and Sundays, but I refused to go on Sundays. [laughter] I would pretend I was sleeping. I don't think I attended a single Sunday.

I hated it so much that--one of the Hebrew school teachers was also an English teacher at Bayonne High School. When I made the Honor Society, the night of that meeting, he went up to my mother. He said, "I don't understand that your son," I never had him in Bayonne High School, but he said, "is in the Honor Society. I thought he was one of the stupidest people I had in all my Hebrew school years." [laughter] I just hated it.

So, that was it for me for religion. I mean, my son got *bar mitzvah*-ed and everything. It's more tradition than anything. I'm not into religion.

SI: Would you have to go to services each week?

MB: You were supposed to. I didn't. [laughter]

SI: Were there any kind of organized things for kids then?

MB: Little League

SI: Yes, that was it.

MB: Yes. I wasn't very good. So, what they had is, they had a draft, but I was big at the beginning. I was a lot taller than a lot of the other kids. For some reason, I could throw a ball very far. So, they actually had a draft. It wasn't like now, where everybody gets a chance to participate and everything.

They had a draft and I got drafted, but they put me in the minors for the first year. They had minors. Then, I came up the second year, but I didn't play there very much, because I didn't have it. It was interesting. The baseball team, we were good. We were the Fifth Street Deli-Ette.

The Fifth Street Deli-Ette is actually still there on Fifth Street in Bayonne, near Maidenform, in fact, where Maidenform was. They're out of there now. I don't even think there is a Maidenform now. They may have the name, but somebody else has it. We were actually very good. One of our pitchers--am I allowed to give names?

SI: Yes. You can always cut them out later if you want.

MB: Yes, was a guy named Fran Cushing--he's Brian Cushing, the football player's father. We were challenging for the championship. Basically, what happened was, one of the players' fathers was the coach. What he did was, he basically got in an argument with an umpire, cursed like crazy, God knows what else he did.

So, they threw him out and put another gentleman [in], a real nice man named Nicholas Mink. His son actually went to Rutgers. He was the catcher who succeeded [future New York Mets coach] Jeff Torborg at Rutgers, but Mr. Mink was a really nice, calm gentleman, actually the opposite of Mr. (McHugh?), who was the one before.

I wasn't privy to it, but, in retrospect, then, we started losing every game. The kids on my baseball team actually threw every game. [laughter] In retrospect, that's what's happening, because the season was divided into two halves. This happened early in the season.

The first half, we were terrible. The second half, we won every game, because they brought Mr. (McHugh?) back as the assistant coach. [laughter] I didn't think of that until maybe twenty years later when I was reminiscing about it. I said, "That's what happened."

In terms of race relations, we had one black kid, his name was Riley. I was really friendly with him. He got to play. I didn't think there was any discrimination on the team. Even though Mr. (McHugh?) was a nasty guy, he played him. So, that was at least one place where there was some [tolerance].

SI: Was there a larger African American community somewhere else in the city?

MB: Yes, there were certain streets where there were a lot, not that anything was scary about it or anything. We walked down every street, but they tended to cluster in a given area, and in the one project that, I guess, was on the east side of 49th Street.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your early education, before going into high school. What stands out about it? Did you think it was good?

MB: Yes. I thought the schools in Bayonne were excellent. The teachers were really committed. I thought I got a good education.

Every day, you started with the Lord's Prayer. For holidays, we had a Christmas show--they had a Christmas show. We sang Christmas carols. I can sing you *Silent Night*, even though I'm Jewish, [laughter] although I was asked not to sing.

It's an interesting story, because I don't know if you know Barney Frank, the Congressman, who's retired a number of years ago. I lived on 49th Street. He and his sister, Doris, lived on 47th Street, 46th Street. So, they went to Washington School. I didn't know him, because he was much older. Doris was maybe a year older than me, so, I knew Doris.

[Editor's Note: Democrat Barney Frank (1940-), a Bayonne, New Jersey, native, represented Massachusetts's Fourth District in the US House of Representatives from 1981 to 2013.]

He had a show on Showtime (or one of the cable things) where they went over him, because he's such a character. In the middle of the thing, he says that when he was in grammar school, the music teacher--he said her name was "Mrs. Miller," but my music teacher was Miss (Mickowitch?)--he said, "She said to [me], 'We're having the Christmas thing, but you're to mouth the words. I don't want to hear you singing, because you're such a lousy singer.'" [laughter]

Well, the same thing happened to me. Miss (Mickowitch?) told me to mouth the words. I'm a terrible singer. When I sing, people cry, and they don't cry because it's so beautiful. [laughter]

SI: It wasn't antisemitic.

MB: No, everybody just sang, were happy to sing it--our parents didn't make anything [out of it]--for Christmas, for Easter. In first grade, we had the Easter Parade. It was me and Patricia Esposito and all the other kids. She was my partner and we sang *In Your Easter Bonnet*. It was fine.

SI: Were there any problems in the street, any name calling or anything like that?

MB: No. There were bullies. I only had one problem, where, one day, I'm down on the bay and I'm alone for some reason. These two kids come and they started taunting me, because I was obviously Jewish. Other than that, I don't think there was anything I ever really had any problem with. Most of my friends were not Jewish. We got along. It was not a problem.

SI: Tell me a little bit about Bayonne High, going there.

MB: My mother had gone there. There was still one gym teacher that she had had, Ms. (Zonic?). They called her "Super (Zonic?)," but she was so old and decrepit. It was horrible.

The school was divided into two parts. There was an academic part, but there was also a vocational school, which was in another part. The teachers, I thought, were really dedicated. I think I got a good education, nothing really special.

SI: Was there maybe a particular teacher that helped you along?

MB: No, not really.

SI: Throughout high school, did you always think you were going to go to college?

MB: They sort of told me I should. I didn't think the money was going to be there, but, when I got to Rutgers, I had a State Scholarship. I didn't pay anything to go to Rutgers. It was like four hundred dollars for the year, but the state paid. I got a State Scholarship to go.

When the time came, I was third in my class at Bayonne--number one went to MIT, number two went to Amherst, and then, me. You sat down with the guidance counselor. She basically told me that I should apply to Rutgers and maybe two safety schools, but the money wasn't there. I guess they talked to my mother, I don't know.

So, I applied to Rutgers. I got in early. As soon as I put my application in, like two weeks later, I was in. We decided that's where I was going. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't know what would've happened elsewhere.

SI: Just a few more questions about high school. You were growing up during the Cold War, obviously. Did that impact your school experience?

MB: Yes, in grammar school and high school, we had air raid drills, where you were going to go when the bomb was going to come down, [laughter] less so in high school, but that was basically what happened.

SI: Did they teach a lot about Communism?

MB: Not really. I don't think so. I mean, when Kennedy was running for President, I think that was my freshman year, we went to--Bayonne High School, the first football game of the year was always against St. Peter's. It was always in Roosevelt Stadium, Jersey City, which no longer exists. It was down on the water. There's houses there now.

So, you would go to that game. After the game, my freshman year (I think it was my freshman year, whenever it was), we walked to Journal Square in Jersey City to hear Kennedy. He came. We stood there in Journal Square and waited and waited, because he was late. He gave a speech, and then, we got on a bus and went home.

SI: What did you and your family think of Kennedy?

MB: We voted for him. My family were Democrats. My father grew up on the Lower East Side. He was friendly with the Attorney General of New York. It was Louis Lefkowitz. My father had gone to school with him. He [his father] was a Democrat.

[Editor's Note: Republican Louis J. Lefkowitz (1904-1996) served as Attorney General of New York from 1957 to 1978.]

He worked nights at that point and had Sunday mornings off. So, Sunday morning, he listened to all the political things on TV, but not that he was an organizer. He was just very interested in it. When Adlai Stevenson lost, Kefauver was the Vice Presidential candidate--when Adlai Stevenson lost, my mother cried. They didn't want Eisenhower to win. [laughter] That was basically where they were.

[Editor's Note: In the 1956 Presidential campaign, Republican incumbents President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon defeated Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, II, and Tennessee US Senator Carey E. (Estes) Kefauver on the Democratic Party's ticket.]

SI: Did you get involved in any activities in high school?

MB: I was in the science club. I went to a lot of ballgames, but, other than that, no.

SI: You mentioned one job, during high school, I believe.

MB: Yes, Maidenform.

SI: Yes. Did you have other jobs?

MB: Not during high school, but, in college, I had jobs. My mother's boss' brother was the superintendent of the General Motors plant in Linden, which no longer exists. There's something there on the space. He got me a job one summer when I was in high school, working on the assembly line during the summer.

My job was--I was on the driver's side of the car in the back--I had a thing that turned the window. I had to put the window down and open up the trunk. Don't ask me, I didn't do much. [laughter] There were fourteen cars a minute--or fourteen cars an hour, an hour. It can't be fourteen a minute. That'd be very fast.

The spare tire was in the back. Every now and then, the tire would fall down. So, I would pick it up, because it was supposed to be up. Sometime after I had done that a couple [times], maybe for a day or two, somebody came over, he says, "I'm the union representative. You've been picking up tires. That's not your job. If I see you picking up another tire, I'm going to shut down the line." Now, when the line shuts down, the alarms would ring, the minute it shut down.

There was somebody on the other side of the car from me who was this tall, black guy and he had been exiled. He worked with the welders at the beginning of the line. The way it worked then, way before where there were robots, is, they would take some kind of brace or something and put it on the two pieces that were going to be welded. Then, they'd weld it. Then, his job, among other things, was to take the two pieces off.

He found the job boring, but he saw that if he left the pieces on, when it got to a certain point, whatever it was attached to would pull and the line would shut down and the alarms would go

off. Until they figured out how to get this undone, he could rest. So, he had done that a couple of times, and then, they exiled him to be my partner on the other side of the car. [laughter]

What would happen there was, at the place, that I found fascinating is, there was a lunch hour, okay, and it wasn't a full hour. Whatever it was, the alarm would go off and everybody would do it--there was a whole host of people--you would watch them run. They ran through the whole facility, which was huge, got in their cars, drove to a bar, had a couple of drinks and came back in time for the next shift.

There was one gentleman, his whole job was, near where we were, there was nothing in the inside of the car. He had a gluepot that was in a thing, like a shoeshine person would have between their legs, with a seat on it. So, he would get into the car, sit on the seat, take a paintbrush and dab this yellow glue along the top, so that they could put the headliner, the top padding, on it.

He found that what he could do is, he could do fourteen cars in a minute. He'd just jump in and out, and then, he could rest for another hour until the next line came along. The job was so easy that he had two jobs. He worked at, I think it was the Pabst Brewery in Newark or wherever that was, someplace in Essex County, in the daytime. Then, he worked at General Motors at night.

So, what would happen in those days, if you worked in the brewery, you could drink as much as you wanted. So, at the end of his shift, he drank a load of beer. He came to work drunk. He was able to do his job, [laughter] but, then, he could sleep every hour, until somebody woke him up saying, "Okay, the line is at a certain level. You've got to put more glue in."

The other thing that happened is, about twenty feet ahead of me on the assembly line, it was a place where they drove cars off the line. Somebody would get in; the motor was already in, they'd put some kind of seat in, because there weren't real seats in it.

They would drive it off the line or drive it to the next part of the line, depending on whether a computer or whatever it was, the data they had, told them that everything was ready to finish the car, like all the parts were available. So, some cars went straight and, sometimes, the person drove it off the line.

Well, one day, the alarm starts ringing like crazy. The reason the alarm rang is because two cars had crashed into--there was a big pole there as you came out. Two cars had crashed into the pole during that shift.

What they found is, somebody was putting, instead of whatever fluid they have in them for the hydraulics of the brakes, they were putting transmission fluid or something in. It was a lower viscosity, so, the brake didn't work. It took two or three crashes before they figured that out, [laughter] which was an interesting part of the thing. I'm trying to think--I had one other story about it, but I don't remember that.

Oh, well, yes, that was the other thing that would happen, is there were a lot of people who weren't exactly the nicest type of people, in terms of their loyalty to General Motors. There were

a lot of spare parts in the trunk. In other words, if they had an extra thing or a broken part when they put it [in], instead of just throwing it into a garbage can, it wound up in the trunk.

There was a space in Oldsmobiles--it was Oldsmobiles and Pontiacs that they were making--there was a space in Oldsmobiles in the trunk, like a little gutter, toward the back. They would throw it in there, because, shortly thereafter, some kind of a carpet would be put over it. Then, it was going to rattle for the rest of the time of the car. [laughter]

These people were really misanthropes. I saw them do it, but I wasn't going to say anything after having been threatened by the union leader. Then, the line finally shut down in August. They were finished for that model year, but they said, "If you want, we can keep you on. You can be a painter." I said, "Okay, my father was a painter, so, I'll be a painter," [laughter] but what it involved was, they put us in these bucket trucks and it was spray painting the ceiling of the factory.

I wasn't wearing glasses then. Actually, my eyes were fine until I got to Rutgers. They didn't give us goggles or anything. So, you'd be spray painting the ceiling--I was getting paint in my eyes. So, after about three days, I just retired from General Motors. I said, "That's it. I'm not doing it."

Then, my other job after that, the next two summers or three summers, I guess two summers, while I was in college, by then, was, I worked nights at Esso Research and Engineering, also in Linden or Bayway. It was really Linden where I worked. It was at night. I monitored a fermenter.

What was happening, at that point, they said, "Gee, there's plenty of oil, but there's not going to be enough food. So, we're going to try to grow something that we can feed people with on oil products." So, they would have these fermenters and they were growing yeast or other things to do it. All my job was, every hour, I just had to take a sample from the fermenter and weigh it and do all sorts of things to keep the statistics on it.

So, I did that for a couple of years, and then, that was it. There was a part in Esso Research and Engineering in Bayway. We were in the New Materials or New Projects, something or other, Division. We were in a locked-off area of the thing. I was told, when I got the job, that somebody might call me. I wasn't to give any information about what was happening.

They took us on a tour of the area. They actually had one section that was like a jungle in Vietnam. It was literally a hot box, growing all these plants. I don't know what they were doing in it, but it was in the middle of there. So, that was my work history until I got out of college and went to medical school.

SI: Before going to Rutgers, you mentioned your father was very involved in following the news and politics. Were you also following world and national news?

MB: We only had one TV and there were no computers or anything, so, there wasn't much to do on a Sunday morning. So, I might sit next to him and watch it.

SI: I guess you were a senior in high school when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened.

MB: Yes, junior or senior, yes.

SI: Okay. Do you remember that period?

MB: Yes, it was really tense. It was a very tense time in the high school. We didn't know what was going to happen. The history teacher was a lady named Molly Bayroff. She was really good and she was into that and made a lot of it. It was scary, but I don't have specific recollections of any details other than that.

[Editor's Note: In October 1962, the United States demanded that the Soviet Union remove its nuclear missiles from Cuba. The United States placed a naval blockade around the island nation, creating a tense standoff between the superpowers that many feared would lead to nuclear war. The crisis was averted when the Soviet Union agreed to remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba in exchange for the United States removing its nuclear missiles from Turkey.]

SI: Turning to Rutgers, we talked about why you chose Rutgers. What was it like coming to Rutgers for the first time?

MB: In May, before you went, you had to come down for like an orientation and to take a language exam. That was really the first time. I applied and everything; I never went on campus until that day. [laughter] I was going to Rutgers, we didn't have the money and it didn't matter. So, it wasn't like I had to look at the place beforehand, like everybody does now, even then. We certainly took my son on a college tour.

Then, from that day in May (or whenever it was) until I got there in September, I didn't go back. Then, in September, I arrived. My father was really sick by then. So, he didn't come with us. I think my uncle drove us down, because my mother didn't have a driver's license. I actually taught her to drive after he died, because she hadn't had a driver's license at all. Women didn't drive in that era.

So, they left me off. I went to the bookstore. I bought a Rutgers sweatshirt, to have something, but that's all I had. I think now of how many millions of Rutgers apparel I have--then, I think I went through college with two sweatshirts and that was basically it.

You got a dink. You had to wear these hats. If an upperclassmen--there was a lot of hazing going on; at least they'd try to do it--if you weren't wearing your dink and they knew you were a freshman, they could sort of haze you, but, other than that, it was fun.

SI: What sort of things would they do to haze you?

MB: They'd just give you a lot of grief, no bad things. They weren't hurting you or anything like that.

SI: Would you have to light cigarettes?

MB: No, [laughter] and I wouldn't know how to. I don't think I could even strike a match at that point. My father had had [a smoking habit]. Both my parents had smoked in my childhood. I spent most of my time on the floor, just to get out of the smoke. I couldn't stand the smoke. I'm not sure I could even light a match then. I'd probably never lit a match in my life.

SI: Where did you stay at first?

MB: I was in Mettler 301. It was the second year of those dorms. So, it was relatively new. A lot of the people on the floor flunked out after first semester. There were wild things going on. There was one kid from Bayonne named Larry Moriale who figured out a way to run the elevator by climbing onto the top through the hatch. He would get himself up on top of the elevator and turn it on and off, so [that] he could stick people between floors. [laughter]

He stuck one of the deans (I think it was a dean) with one of the student advisors living in the residence, got caught in the elevator. The story is, he said, "I know you're up there Moriale." [laughter] Larry was from Bayonne. That's how I knew him, but it was fun.

SI: Tell me a little bit more about getting settled at Rutgers. What was your first semester like in terms of your classes? Was it difficult making the transition from Bayonne to Rutgers?

MB: No. I was a bio sci, but you had to take this math course. I had had all that in high school. The unfortunate thing was, the second semester was more calculus-based. For some reason, I don't know if there was trigonometry at Bayonne High School [or not], but I hadn't had trigonometry.

Literally, I went from, like, my first semester, I got "1"--first of all, the grades were backwards, okay. A "1" was the highest grade you could get. I had all "1s" except for one. I don't know what it was, maybe English?--yes, English, because English was a harder course. That was a "2." So, really, I had a great thing.

Then, second semester, all of a sudden, there were trigonometric functions that I had never been exposed to. I went to--it wasn't a professor, it was a student, a graduate student, teaching it. I told him I hadn't had trigonometry. He helped me through, but that was rough, because I hadn't been exposed to it.

Kennedy was assassinated right at the time we were going to have exams, which probably saved my life, because, for chemistry, I really wasn't ready. The chemistry exam was supposed to be the next day and it gave me all this extra time to study.

[Editor's Note: President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Friday, November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.]

I went to a class that morning--I think it was a Friday or a Thursday, I don't know--I went to a class that morning, came back to the dorm, opened up a book to start studying. Then, somebody

knocked on the door and says, "Kennedy's been shot," and then, everything went to pot. They canceled all the exams, which helped me, but everybody was in mourning.

For some reason, my roommate and I, the next day, went to the movies. There were a lot of people in the movies. You're supposed to be mourning, but, for some reason, we had to get away from it. So, we went to the movies, and then, that was basically that thing. I basically got the "1" in chemistry because Kennedy was shot--if it wasn't for Lee Harvey Oswald.

I'm getting ahead of everything and I apologize for that. [laughter] When I was chief resident at my hospital, they let you go to one convention a year. So, I went to the American Heart Association in Dallas. This was probably 1973 or '74, so, it's like ten years after Kennedy was shot. Of course, you have to go to the grassy knoll and everything. I swear to you that on the glass of the door to the book depository, you couldn't get in, someone had written "Lee Harvey Oswald was here".

Now, we subsequently went back a number of years later (in conjunction with the Rutgers football game against SMU) and it was open. You could walk around, but this was locked shut. I swear to you, on the door, somebody with their finger had put, "Lee Harvey Oswald was here," in the dirt, in the dust. [laughter] So, that was the time of the assassination, and then, we had exams.

SI: Did your father pass away in the spring?

MB: Yes, in April of--I guess it was '64. I didn't like the food in the Commons, which opened up. At the beginning of the year, we were down in those Quonset huts that were down below Stonier Hall, and then, they opened up. I think it's still where they eat. I forget the name of it, across from Stonier on the other side. They opened it up.

SI: Brower Commons?

MB: Yes, Brower, and I couldn't stand the food. So, I basically pledged a fraternity. I asked my mother if we had enough money for me to pay the dues and I pledged the fraternity. I wound up, my sophomore year through my senior year, living in the fraternity house, whereas most of the other people my year had apartments.

I couldn't afford an apartment, so, I stayed in the fraternity. I became secretary of the fraternity. The fraternity actually gave me a scholarship to pay for my board, my room and board, my junior and senior years. That's how I got by.

SI: That was ZBT.

MB: Yes.

SI: Why ZBT?

MB: It was mostly Jewish. I don't know if it was in the *Targum*, I think it was in the *Targum*, they would publish a list of the fraternities and who had the highest grade point average. They had the highest grade point average, so, I went there. When I got there, and, once again, getting into race, the president was Black, (Ronnie Howard?). We had Blacks, not a lot, but we had a couple of Black members. Everybody got along and it was a great thing.

SI: How many--maybe not a specific number--but were there other fraternities that allowed African American members?

MB: I have no idea. [laughter] I think so, but, certainly, the one across from us--we were on Union, 26 Union Street. It's no longer there. In the middle of Union Street is this beautiful building and that was Delta Phi. They were against everybody. They only had like ten members, but they were so old that they had been there forever, that they were endowed or whatever.

They were nasty people. [laughter] The rumor was, they had thrown a dean through the door. He came in to tell them he didn't like what they were doing and they threw him [out]. I don't know if that was true.

SI: What was life in a fraternity house like then?

MB: It was fun. You ate your lunch and your dinner there. We had a cook. You had a maid. Lou Diggs was the cook. He was this huge Black gentleman who had been a cook in the Army, and his wife was the maid.

One of the younger people, Bob Rosenwasser--I don't know if you [know him], his wife, Marian Rosenwasser, was the tennis coach before, two tennis coaches ago--he was a judge in New Brunswick. The story is that Lou--this is years later--gets into a fight or something and winds up in court. He walks into the court.

He [Lou Diggs] looks up, he says, "Rosie?" He says, "Lou, what did you do?" Lou told him whatever it was. He says, "Dismissed," [laughter] but he was the cook. Watching him make tuna fish was--I loved tuna fish, but I never ate it again, because what he would do is, he basically would open this huge can of tuna fish, throw it in the thing, and then, with his hands.

SI: Okay.

MB: And put it together. So, that was it. I never ate tuna fish at the fraternity house again. [laughter]

SI: Did you have a housemother?

MB: Yes. She was this elderly lady. She had a room there. Rumor has it, she probably got drunk in the room constantly. Everybody, it was like you were told you could go up there and sit with her for a while--it was almost like on a schedule--just to keep her occupied, but she didn't

do much. She just hid there. When we had parties, she was nowhere in sight. It wasn't like she was there to police the place, but we had a housemother.

Union Street was unbelievable in those days. On weekend nights, first of all, we had beer, okay, and it didn't matter if you're twenty-one or whatever. Everybody could drink, and anybody could come off the street and drink. How you didn't get sued for somebody getting killed in drunk driving, I don't know.

There was just people driving down the streets constantly on Friday nights. It was called "hawking." Guys would stand on the [porch] and look for nice-looking girls, to invite them into the fraternity house. The first time I ever saw my future wife was in the fraternity house.

I'm starting to walk down the stairs, because the bar was in the basement during a thing. A friend, my eventual roommate in medical school, one of his roommates, who was in the fraternity next-door, which was Sigma Alpha Mu, comes walking up with this girl, introduces me to her. Then, they go about their way. Well, that was Nan, who later became my wife. [laughter]

That was the first time I ever saw her. Then, in retrospect, somehow, she told me she'd once been in ZBT and come up the stairs. I said, "Well, you were the one I met with Davy Ostfeld on the stairs," but weekends were unbelievable there. A lot went on.

SI: Would big weekends be like Military Ball and the proms?

MB: Yes. I didn't go to many of those because, well, first of all, my father was sick. I really never went to any of those things. I went to a lot of the concerts that they had. We had the Supremes and Soupy Sales.

It was interesting that Soupy Sales came and there was like a band that started the thing. Everybody, they wanted Soupy Sales. Well, the band was the Young Rascals. [laughter] We didn't know that. They were nobody at that point. I went to those things, but I really didn't participate in Military Ball or any of that.

When I first got into Rutgers, I signed up for ROTC, Air Force ROTC, because my father had been in the Army Air Force. The son-in-law of my uncle, the Coca-Cola person, said to me, "Don't stay in ROTC, get out of ROTC. You don't want to be in ROTC, because you're not going to be able to do anything when you get out." [laughter] So, I got out of it right away. I didn't even get to pick up a uniform. I just canceled it, but I had signed up for it.

SI: At that point, it was voluntary.

MB: Yes.

SI: The first two years weren't mandatory at that time.

MB: No, it was all volunteer.

SI: In the spring of your freshman year was the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Were you starting to hear about Vietnam?

MB: I really didn't pay much attention. I was just studying, [laughter] but not really. Vietnam, as time went on, things tended to happen. In, I think, either my junior or senior year, Hubert Humphrey came to campus. I went to the thing. They protested him. They yelled and screamed at him.

[Editor's Notes: Hubert H. Humphrey, Jr. (1911-1978) served as US Senator from Minnesota (1949-1964, 1971-1976) and Vice President under Lyndon Johnson from 1964 until 1968. He later served as the party nominee in 1968, losing to Richard Nixon.]

Scott Hall is here, although it wasn't called Scott Hall at that time--it was called the General Classroom Building. The joke was, it was named after "General Classroom." [laughter] That area where the [Rutgers University] Vietnam Memorial is, he spoke on the sidewalk, on George Street, at the top of that hill. They picketed behind him and there was yelling and screaming. It wasn't a very pleasant thing. I went to that.

There was a lot of protesting going on. I really didn't have anything to do with it. I was sort of neutral. There was one of my fraternity brothers who flunked out and was immediately drafted. Everybody felt sorry for him, but we felt pretty secure.

SI: You came here looking to get into medical school.

MB: Yes.

SI: Was there someone who gave you guidance?

MB: Oh, well, that's a great story. His name was [Ralph] DeFalco, okay. I guess he was in the Biology Department; I'm not sure. He had a system, okay. He held a meeting with you your junior year and told you how you were going to get into medical school--not you as a person, you as a whole group. He said, "First of all, you take my course 'Heredity and Eugenics,' so [that] I can say I know you."

Then, he said, "And we will get almost all of you into medical school," he said, "and here's how we do it." He said, "If you want to apply to Harvard Medical School, be my guest," he said, "but I will not let you apply to a medical school that I think is below your grades, so that this 'medical school Y' (I won't give names, because I don't know) has never seen a really good Rutgers student, a super Rutgers student. They think what I'm sending them is the best Rutgers has."

"So, by doing this," he said, "I won't write you a letter for something below you. I'll write you a letter for anything--you want to try for Harvard? fine--and this is how we'll get most of you in," and he was right. So, then, you had a meeting with him individually. He said, "Where do you want to apply?" I said, "Well, Temple, Jefferson, Georgetown, Boston University," whatever. He said, "I will get you into Georgetown."

He said to me, "With your grades, I can get you into Georgetown--but I have a deal with the Admissions Director at Georgetown. If he accepts you, you *must* go there." In other words, what he's basically telling me is, "The only application I will sign for you is Georgetown, because I'll call the Admissions Director, tell him he's taking you. Then, you won't apply anyplace else."

Then, I said, "Well, that's not my first choice." He says, "Then, don't apply." So, I applied to Hahnemann, Jefferson and Boston University. I got into Hahnemann, which was in Philadelphia, Labor Day Weekend, which was unbelievable. I was the first person in the fraternity. There were a bunch of us going; I was the first person that got in anywhere.

Then, I was waitlisted at Jefferson, and then, I got in two weeks later or three weeks later. Actually, in my class at Jefferson, there were about ten people from Rutgers. They liked people from Rutgers at Jefferson. [laughter]

Jefferson, which is now the Sidney Kimmel Medical School, in Philadelphia had a reputation that people flunked out, that they were really tough and that half the class was gone by the second semester of the year--but Rutgers students didn't flunk out. So, they took a lot of Rutgers students.

The school had not allowed women in until 1965 or '66, sometime around there. It'd been all-male. By the time I got there, they weren't flunking a lot of people out. You had to really work hard to flunk out, not that I did badly or anything. I wasn't the top of my class, but it was okay.

DeFalco, he was really good and he made us promises. Then, what happened? There was one person, I won't mention a name, who got a Bell's palsy. In other words, his face was pulled to the side--right when he was going on interviews. So, even though he was pretty high up in the class, they all rejected him. Well, DeFalco turned around, got him into Newark. He knew everybody. He was really super.

I don't know what they have now, but I'm sure it's not as good as what he did.

SI: Other folks have mentioned him. It sounds like a big part of that aspect of the job was just knowing people.

MB: Yes.

SI: Much less reliance on outside tools.

MB: Knowing the admissions directors and people.

SI: At Rutgers, did you get involved in any activities?

MB: I went to a lot of sports events and the fraternity, but nothing else.

SI: Were there any particular activities that your fraternity participated in? I know some fraternities would have a particular party each year.

MB: No, just did our thing. [laughter]

SI: Do any other professors stand out in your memory?

MB: I took a history course. McCormick was really good, but that was later on. The French professor, (Salamon?) was his name, was really, really good. Bob Lloyd, the basketball player, was in my class. He wasn't a very good student. He was a great basketball player, wasn't a very good student, but (Salamon?) got him through. I mean, we came out of one exam and Lloyd's scratching his head trying to figure out what anything was. I thought it was the easiest exam I ever had in French. He was really good.

[Editor's Note: Under head coach Bill Foster, star players Bob Lloyd and Jim Valvano led the Rutgers Men's Basketball Team to a string of successful seasons in the mid-1960s, culminating in the 1966-67 season, when Rutgers made the post-season for the first time ever and finished third in the National Invitation Tournament. Bob Lloyd became Rutgers' first All-American in basketball that year.]

There was a gentleman named (LaMarca?). He taught a course called Histology, which was basically more rigorous than the histology course I had in medical school. I mean, I went to that course, I didn't have to study. I knew everything beforehand. He was good.

Other than that, there's nobody that I really remember right now. Probably when I walk out the door, I'll think of three other people [laughter] and I'll fill it in later.

SI: In general, would you say that the courses were very rigorous, prepared you well for medical school?

MB: Yes, I thought it was great. I was ready for it. The interesting thing was--I can't even think of the name of the course now--"Comparative Anatomy." It was a course where you dissected all these animals and they compared how their organs went over the evolutionary thing. The first exam, okay, he put up a question, "This is an animal..." he described this animal. It was like half duck, half something else. It wasn't a "yes/no" or "true/false" exam. It was you had to write a paragraph about it. I basically said, "I don't think this is real."

Okay, so, we walk out of the exam and everybody else in the exam, my friends, also taking the same course, are saying how, on that thing, they decided it was a mix-hybrid and everything. I'm saying, "Oh, my God, I said it wasn't real." Well, it turned out, the answer he wanted was that it was a hoax. [laughter] I did great in the thing and everybody else--I was feeling miserable when I walked out--everybody else did horribly. [laughter]

Then, the other thing was, there was a course called "Quantitative Analysis." It was a chemistry course, where they would give you a sample and you would do chemical [analysis]--put it in a

beaker, cook it, do whatever you were doing, and, at the end, weigh it. We had to determine how much of a given mineral or whatever was in the original chemical.

The woman that was our graduate assistant, that ran it, her name was Eva Smith. She was like something out of the [past], like she hadn't come into the twentieth century. She had long dresses and this accent. I can remember her saying over and over, "Don't use Piscataway Township water," [laughter] because, if you used the water, it had chemicals in it. You had to use distilled water.

The course took place in these Quonset huts up on Busch Campus. I doubt that they're still here. Things would catch on fire. [laughter] It was a very interesting course. With the acids I had to-- it was actually my second Rutgers T-shirt, sweatshirt--by the time I finished that course, it had holes in it from all the acid eating at it. [laughter] So, I did have a second Rutgers sweatshirt during my time there, now that I think of it.

SI: Are there other aspects of the campus that stand out, like the Quonset huts? People talk about the crowding. Does anything else come to mind?

MB: Well, I had a room freshman year, because I got in so early that I was able to reserve a room, but there were a lot of kids who didn't. Some of them were put up in Davidson. They had to live like in a barracks-type thing. They didn't even have their own room. Some of them were over at Douglass in Corwin, in those little houses.

Then, I guess by the second semester, enough people had flunked out that there was enough housing that people got out of there, but I was pretty comfortable in Mettler. It was like the second year of that dorm (or the third year) and it was still pretty nice.

SI: You talked a little bit about the antiwar movement, that you knew about it, but weren't really involved. Do you remember the teach-in in 1965 that became very controversial?

MB: No. The only thing I remember is--oh, now, I can't think of his name; Genovese, okay-- Professor Genovese was notorious. He was against the war. I wouldn't have known him if I walked past him, but there was always things about him going on, so much so that there was one day, my friends and I, my fraternity brothers and I, were going into New York.

[Editor's Note: On April 23, 1965, at a teach-in at Rutgers University's Scott Hall, professor of history Eugene D. Genovese declared, "...I do not fear or regret the impending Viet Cong victory in Vietnam. I welcome it." A firestorm of controversy ensued and became a focal point in the 1965 New Jersey gubernatorial race, but Rutgers University President Mason W. Gross, with the support of the faculty, resisted public pressure to dismiss Genovese, on the principle of academic freedom.]

Somebody had come down to visit the fraternity, had a car, and we drove in. We went to McSorley's. I don't know if you know of McSorley's. It's a bar, but it's an old bar. It hasn't changed since 1900 probably. The bathroom is famous. You could take a shower in the urinals. They were these big, porcelain things. [laughter] So, we drove in, we went there.

Two things that happened [laughter]--we go to pull into a parking space, to back in. This guy and his wife come flying in and take our parking space. So, we got out and we're arguing with the guy on the street in New York.

He says, "Tough," and he walks away. So, one of my friends, when he's gone, he opened up his thing and took his distributor cap off and threw it in the garbage. [laughter] So, then, we did our drinking, and then, we drove home.

Then, we get to the Holland Tunnel. There are these orange cones. One of the people says, "Boy, I could use that in my dorm room." So, he sort of stops the car, reaches in and we take it. [laughter] They give it to me. I'm in the backseat. I put it between my legs.

So, we got two of them, and then, we only had two of them. We pull out of the Holland Tunnel and we're at the top of the hill there. There's more cones. There's not a lot of traffic around, because it's pretty late. So, he stops the car and Jim Kerewski gets out of the car, picks up a thing, puts it in the car. We drive like thirty feet and, all of a sudden, there's this red, blinking light. A policeman had been behind the thing looking for speeders.

He pulls us over. So, I didn't have to get out of the car, just the driver and the other guy in the front seat, because he only saw them take one. I'm sitting there with the thing between my legs. He says, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, we're from Rutgers." He says, "Oh, Genovese's boys." [laughter] That's why I brought that up.

He says, "Okay, give me back the cone." We drive away. Meanwhile, we have two cones in the back and we drove home, but that's one of [the signs of how] Genovese was known, at least among the police.

SI: Yes, I've heard that most people thought of him when they thought of Rutgers in this period.

MB: Yes, well, he was notorious, basically.

SI: Do other aspects of the fraternity house or of your time at Rutgers stand out? It sounds like you were very busy with the curriculum.

MB: Yes.

SI: Did you work at all on campus?

MB: No, I didn't. I wasn't there to get a job. My mother was working. I had a State Scholarship and, eventually, the fraternity was paying for me. I just didn't spend a lot of money. I didn't have an off-campus apartment or anything like that.

SI: Would you go into town often?

MB: Town wasn't a place you really wanted to go. It was dangerous. If you'd try to walk from Rutgers to Douglass, it was thought to be dangerous. The same movie played at the State Theater for the whole year. I think it was *Goldfinger* or something, and one other place was *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Those were the only two things in town. They never changed, so, there wasn't much that you'd want to do there.

No, I just studied. I had a girlfriend at Douglass. One of my fraternity brothers would drive me over there. Sometimes, I would go home. Because I had taught my mother to drive after my father died, I would go home on a weekend by train and pick up the car, and then, come back for the weekend with the car, and then, drive the car back on Sunday, so [that] she could get to work on Monday, [laughter] but, other than that, not really.

SI: Was there much interaction between Rutgers men and Douglass women?

MB: Yes, a lot of people wound up getting married to Douglass women. My wife wound up going to Michigan State, because, at the time she applied, there weren't enough dorms for all the Douglass women. Even though she lived in Bergen County, she was afraid that they would make her live off campus, live at home and commute. She didn't want to commute. So, she just went to Michigan State.

SI: As your time in Rutgers went on, did you start getting information about the draft or seeing what you might do?

MB: Not particularly. I knew that [in] medical school, I would be exempt while I was there. That's not why I was going to medical school, but that was good. I'm getting ahead of myself, but what basically happened is, within days of the time I graduated from medical school, I got a notice to go for a physical, okay.

It was almost like they were putting in your head, "You're going to get drafted if you [flunk out]," because they can't draft officers (or they couldn't draft officers). I don't know about now--well, there's no draft. So, basically, they were putting in your head, "I don't care about your medical education. You'd better figure out a way to go in as a doctor."

So, you went for the physical. Basically, there was a bus in Bayonne. There was like thirty people on the bus, only me and one other doctor, Henry (Geller?), who's my friend in grammar school, who went to what's now the Rutgers Medical School in New Jersey. I think he's an ophthalmologist in Pennsylvania. The two of us were the only doctors on the thing.

So, they drove us on that bus to Newark, where the physical was. For some reason, they gave us bathrobes, because we were doctors [laughter]--don't ask me how they figured out we were going to wear bathrobes. Everybody else is running around in their underwear, so much so that when I went for my pre-employment thing, I refused the bathrobe. I felt that, "Okay." Also, I was planning, at some point, maybe I would write a book about the whole experience, so that I wanted to have experienced it fully.

It was weird because, like, there was a urinalysis there. I swear, all the guy did was, he put a dipstick in, to see if there was blood or anything, but I don't think he even looked at it. He just put the dipstick in. He was just doing his job. [laughter] The hearing test, I have no clue how I passed it or didn't pass it, because all I could hear was noises. We're supposed to press a button each time it happened.

Then, after the whole physical was over--oh, that was the other interesting thing--I'm next to this kid and he's talking to me for some reason. He says, "I don't understand it. I keep flunking my physical." He says, "I tried to get into the Marines, I tried to get into the Air Force, I tried to get into the Navy. This is the Army and it's my last chance. I keep flunking my physical."

I said to him, "Well, maybe if you didn't tell them that you had this and that, you wouldn't flunk." So, he was being honest, "Just tell them it was something wrong." So, that was that physical.

Then, the way it worked is, in your junior or senior year--I guess it was by your junior year of medical school--you got a letter. It told you about the Berry Plan. Okay, I don't know if you've ever heard from anybody else about the Berry Plan. The Berry Plan was a thing where you were guaranteed your residency.

[Editor's Note: The Berry Plan, named for Dr. Frank B. Berry, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health and Medical Affairs from 1954 to 1961, provided deferments for medical education for over 42,000 doctors and medical students from 1954 to 1973.]

You signed up. You went into a lottery. You picked either Air Force or Army. I guess you could pick Navy, I don't know. If you won, you were entitled to either your internship and one year of residency--then, you had to go in--or a full residency. So, I won the lottery [laughter] and I got a full residency with an obligation to the Army; signed up and, six weeks later, they got rid of the draft. So, I was an "obligatory volunteer."

I was going in, [laughter] which was fine. You didn't get sworn in with anybody else. They sent you a thing and, on your honor, you swore yourself in at home. They made me a lieutenant. Then, that was the last I heard of them until January of--no, it had to be at the beginning of my senior year in medical school--where they said, "Please fill out this," we called it a "dream sheet," telling where you wanted to go.

The assignments are made at the Forrestal Building in Washington. You can call and make an appointment with your assigner if you wanted to talk to them. So, I decided I would do that. I put down that I wanted Fort Dix as my first thing. I wanted Fort Dix, Fort Monmouth, West Point, because Nan was working in New York and we didn't want to go anyplace else.

Okay, now, what happened was, I was supposed to go into the Army after one year of internship, two years of residency. That was internal medicine; that's all you needed. The hospital offered me the chief residency at St. Vincent's (where I was). That would be an extra year, and they really needed me. So, Mayor Koch from New York was my Congressman and he was the Congressman for St. Vincent's, where St. Vincent's was located in Greenwich Village.

[Editor's Note: Ed Koch (1924-2013) served New York's 17th (later 18th) District in the United States House of Representatives from 1969 to 1977 and served as the Mayor of New York City from 1978 to 1989.]

So, the Head of Medicine called him up and said, "I need this person. He's supposed to go in. Can you get him an extra year?" Koch got me an extra year. So, now, having the letter, I decided, "I'll go down to the Forrestal Building." So, I went down.

Especially since my father had always told me about the Army, I figured spit-and-polish and everything like that. So, I went down and I'm across the desk, like I am to you, to this guy named (McGarry?). His uniform was on so sloppily, it really disabused me of that notion.

He said, "Okay, I see that Congressman Koch got you a year off." He says, "I know Congressman Koch and his secretary very well. They're really a pain in the ass." [laughter] I thought I might be in trouble.

Then, so, you told him what you wanted and he said, "Okay, we'll see what we can do." Then, in October, they made the assignments, or March, they made the assignments. That was October. In March, they made the assignments. You were invited to call and find out what you had. So, I called.

Now, what had happened, my brother-in-law had had an associate who was an ophthalmologist and happened to be the Secretary of Defense Health or whatever, for some reason. So, my father-in-law said, "My daughter is not going to Korea or anything like that." He told my brother-in-law he'd better figure out a way to do things.

So, my brother-in-law said to me, okay, his buddy said, "Call in, find out where you're going. Then, just say 'thank you,' and call me as soon as you get it, okay." So, I call the gentleman. He remembers me and he remembers the Koch business. So, he's playing games with me.

I said, "It's me." He says, "Well, let me look at the list for Korea," and he goes a little longer, "Oh, no, you're not on that." He said, "Let me look at this," and then, he says, "Okay, you're going to Dothan, Alabama, Fort Rucker."

Fort Rucker is the home of Army Aviation. The Army has more flying things and more boats than the Navy or the Air Force. Now, Nan would've had a hard [time]--she probably would've divorced me with that news. [laughter] The closest thing that even had a department store was Pensacola. I mean, it's the middle of nowhere.

So, I said, "Thank you." I called my brother-in-law. At that point, they must've taken whatever the thing was for some poor person who was supposed to go to Fort Dix--he was going to Fort Rucker and I was going to Fort Dix. That's where I went as an obligatory volunteer.

SI: Before we get further into that, let's jump back to medical school. What was it like that first year, getting acclimated to medical school?

MB: Like I said, a lot of the stuff I'd already had. [laughter] So, that was easy. "Anatomy," I studied my tail off for the first test. I got a hundred on the first test, and everybody else was scratching their head. Then, they announced that that test would not count, because they were just trying everybody out. Then, after it, I didn't do as well. [laughter] For whatever the reason was, I just didn't do it.

It was okay. I really don't have many great memories of it. There was one Rutgers student, Ronnie Hoffman, who became the Head of Ear, Nose and Throat at NYU, who was in my class. Like I said, there were a lot of Rutgers people. So, in those days, medical students wore short white coats, as did interns at St. Vincent's. Then, residents had long white coats.

So, he put on his short white coat. He was so proud of himself walking in, he and Harvey Sasken, who was his roommate, who was also from Rutgers. They walked into a store and he had an immediate put-down. What happened was, somebody asked them to weigh their vegetables, because, in supermarkets in those days, before they had the scales at the end, you got your vegetables weighed, but it was usually a guy who was wearing a short white coat. [laughter]

Other than that, it was [fine], studied a lot and it wasn't bad. What we used to do is, rather than study in our rooms or whatever, a bunch of us would go over to the University of Pennsylvania and study in their library, either the medical school library or the general library, because it was a good way to meet girls and it was a lot quieter than anything else. So, that's what we'd do. We'd eat dinner at a place over there, and then, study, and then, come back.

SI: You had gone through Rutgers on a scholarship. Were you able to get anything for medical school?

MB: No, I got a loan at one point. Now, you've got to understand, medical school now is probably more expensive than Rutgers. My freshman year, the tuition was 1,340 dollars, which was still a lot of money for us, but my mother had saved enough up and my father had had his veterans' death benefit. She had taken the insurance for that and put it into a thing. So, it was able to pay for that.

SI: In your first year, it's mostly just classroom work, is that right?

MB: Yes, it was all classroom, except for they had the Daniel Baugh Institute of Anatomy, which was where the bodies were. You went there to dissect. You could go at any time that you wanted to, to catch up on things. It smelled of formaldehyde and dead bodies. It was horrible, no air-conditioning.

I don't know what they do now. Jefferson no longer has that. They opened up a building, but I'm not sure how much dissecting they do now. Now, with CAT scans and everything, you can probably learn anatomy out of CAT scans rather than dissecting. So, I don't know what they do.

SI: Did you know going in what specialty you wanted to do?

MB: Not really.

SI: How did that develop?

MB: I spent a lot of time my sophomore and junior year, or my junior year (you can do electives), I did a lot of gynecology. I thought I was going to be a gynecologist, but, then, I just got turned off by that and decided it was going to be internal medicine and did that.

Basically, it was a time where, at Jefferson, the medical students, you wrote your notes on brown paper and they removed it from the charts. Now, medical students write on regular charts or in the computer and it's just co-signed by somebody.

There were hospitals in the area, one of which was Cooper, which is now part of the Rutgers down there, [laughter] but, then, it was just a plain hospital and not a very good hospital, but they would let you do anything. As a medical student, you could run a floor. It was a great learning experience. So, I did gynecology there.

I saw that the internal medicine thing, they were really getting a lot of experience. So, I then signed up for shifts there (or whatever they call it, I can't even think of the word). You had blocks of what you did. So, I signed up for a six-week period that I was going to be there, and then, I really liked it.

The only bad experience there was, one day, I get called up and it's one of the gynecologists. I'm the internal medicine (pseudo) intern. He's got this woman, she's really pregnant and she's in florid heart failure. He's sort of poo-pooing it. I mean, I had to really do something. It was really bad.

SI: What does that mean, for somebody who's not in the medical field?

MB: Well, I mean, she's pregnant and she's really sick. She really needs more care than this gynecologist can give her. I got her out of there and whatever, but it was scary. He was sort of just like matter-of-fact, like it didn't matter.

SI: Do any professors or classroom experiences stand out?

MB: At Jefferson, there was a pathology professor named Aponte, who was really good. He was from Puerto Rico, had a little accent, smoked like a fiend and coughed incessantly. So much so that if he had a really bad coughing jag, the whole class would laugh. Then, he would say, "Wait until you get yours." [laughter] He was really, really super.

Other than that, there were other people--I can't even remember names. Barchi wasn't there yet. He was at Penn, although I sent him a nasty email. I'm getting ahead of myself, if you don't mind.

[Editor's Note: Dr. Robert L. Barchi served as the twentieth President of Rutgers University from 2012 to 2020. He served as President of Thomas Jefferson University from 2004 to 2012 and

had spent most of his academic career as a professor and administrator at the University of Pennsylvania.]

Well, basically, Jefferson is an art museum, okay. [Painter and photographer Thomas] Eakins had studied anatomy there. They had like five Eakins. Every class donated a picture of a professor, so that, in the big auditorium classroom, there were professors' pictures all over the walls. Eakins' *The Gross Clinic*, which is the most famous painting by Eakins, which is now in the Philadelphia Art Museum, stood at the top of the stairs in one of the buildings. You could walk in, you could touch it when I got there, as a freshman.

By the time I was a senior, they'd built a new building and they'd put it behind bars in a room, okay. So, when Barchi--and I'm long out of medical school, I'm giving a donation every year--Barchi is the President of Jefferson, they're going to sell *The Gross Clinic*. It was going to be sold to Walmart in Bentonville, Arkansas. When Rutgers played Arkansas, we went to this museum. It's a fabulous art museum. They have unbelievable stuff. It rivals anything.

They were going to buy *The Gross Clinic* for X million dollars. So, Barchi and his people basically held the City of Philadelphia, which didn't want it leaving Philadelphia, for ransom. They had to raise money. Now, it's in the museum, along with the other one, the one that's at Penn, *The Agnew Clinic* [(1889)]. Both of them, I think, are in the Philadelphia Museum, but *The Gross Clinic* definitely is.

[Editor's Note: In January 2007, Jefferson sold Eakins' *The Gross Clinic* (1875) for \$68 million dollars to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.]

So, when they sold it, Barchi's rationale was, "It's now behind bars." He says, "It's behind bars. We have to open it up for people. Nobody even asks to see it. We have to keep it up." I sent him an email saying--I didn't know him--but saying, "I'm really upset. This is something that's important to Jefferson. It's a legacy."

I mean, Gross was a professor there. "How can you sell it? You say that nobody sees it, etc. It's not like your old grandmother in an old-age home who nobody goes to visit. This is something important," and I didn't give a donation that year.

It's funny, because this is Rutgers history. So, I went to Barchi when he came here. We go to all the Rutgers football games. So, we go out to Seattle, and I can show you the picture. Whenever we go, we always go to an art museum, if we can. If there's an art museum in town, if we're at the University of Indiana, we go to the art museum, the Wisconsin Art Museum. If it's a town, if they have a museum, we'll go there.

So, we go to the art museum in Seattle. I walk around a corner and there is a picture of a guy named [William Smith] Forbes who, in the 1890s, had written "The Anatomical Act of Pennsylvania." He was a professor, I think, and Barchi sold that Eakins also.

So, I said to Barchi, I said, "I ran into an old friend the other day in Seattle." He said, "Who?" I said, "Forbes," and Forbes' grandson was in my class, because the other thing Jefferson had,

besides a lot of Rutgers students, none of which had relatives that went to Jefferson, Jefferson had the children and grandchildren and nephews of alumni. If you were an alumnus and you had a kid, unless he was really a disaster, he got into Jefferson. They may have all flunked out, but they let you in. So, Forbes' grandson, who wasn't a great student, was there.

So, Barchi, I swear, didn't have any clue about the fact that he had sold any of these paintings, that this was one of them, etc. I have a picture of it on my phone.

SI: Let me pause for one second.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: This concludes today's session. We will come back later on and talk more about your later career.

MB: Okay, thank you.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 10/18/2024

Reviewed by Michael Blecker 12/5/2024