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Becker, Ann Joy

Sophia Maier Garcia
Fordham University, smaier2@fordham.edu

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Sophia Maier (SM): Perfect. And if you just want to start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

Ann Joy Becker (AJB): Okay, so let me see. I come from two different sides of the Jewish track. One is the Sephardic and Ashkenazi, and the other is the Litvak [Lithuanian], and the poorest section of town. So my grandparents, from my mother's side, were Polish and Russian. And my father's side is German and Polish. So my father's side was more of the snottier version, my mother's was more of the poor version. My grandparents were peddlers on Pelham Parkway, they peddled tomatoes and things like that. And my grandmother was the business woman, and my grandfather was not, and if a tomato was bruised, and he wants to throw it away, she says, "No, we'll sell it for a penny, they'll make sauce." So that was kind of like the grandparents end of it. As far as my mother and father, not a very religious upbringing. Definitely knew I was Jewish. My brother was bar mitzvah'd, my father was bar mitzvah'd, both circumcised, obviously. That's, I guess, that's the telltale sign right there. And I was not bat mitzvah'd, I had an argument with the rabbi and was basically kicked out of Hebrew school.

SM: I thought my father was the only one, but it seems not.

AJB: Well, let me let you know that I'm pretty proud of how I got kicked out. I asked my rabbi, "if Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel, which were sons, who did Cain and Abel procreate with?" And he looked at me, and he was like, "they probably had, like siblings," and I said, "but that's still incest." I was 12 years old. And I got kicked out of Hebrew school. And to this day, no one has answered that question.

SM: I never thought about it before, but now that I have, I'm gonna have to start posing that question to people.

AJB: There you go. I'm like, so who were the ones, who did they fool around with? Because honestly, it was either their mother or somebody else, but who was the somebody else? So that was how I got in trouble, and that's kind of, like, defining me, even at the age of 62. Like that story should be my eulogy. You know, it kind of gives you, Sophia, an idea of who Ann Joy Becker is. And I moved out of the Bronx, probably, let me see --- I turned 18 October 6, I told my mother that I'd be moving out after Christmas. And on December 26, I moved to Manhattan. My mother said, "I thought you meant AFTER Christmas. You know, like after, like, you know, a few months, maybe a year?" Nope. December 26 I moved out. I moved to Manhattan. I moved in with this woman, Sharon Wellesley, who was 15 years my senior. She was a roommate, who actually passed away last year, I was very upset about that. COVID really did hurt a lot of people that I know, in reference to --- you know, it's 62 years old, your friends now are not just moving away, they're passing away. And it's very, very difficult at this point in my life, but I digress. So anyway, so I moved to Manhattan, I finished up going to college. And that in

itself is an interesting story. Since I lived on 77th and Second, and I went to Queensboro Community College, if you take your car somewhere and you try to park the car when you come back, there's no parking. So I had a gentleman, who I was very good friends with, who did a thesis in art, and he made a paper mache fire hydrant for me that was weighted down with sand. This is no --- I'm not kidding around --- right in front of 315 East 77th street, where I used to live, there was a synagogue next door and next door was like a hydrant a little further down. I put the hydrant in front of 315 East 77th Street and when I came back from college, I put it back in my trunk to park my car.

SM: Oh my god, that's hysterical.

AJB: And back then --- isn't that great --- back in 1978, I paid back then \$35 for that fire hydrant. And that fire hydrant saved me thousands and thousands of dollars in parking tickets.

SM: Oh my god, I'm sure.

AJB: Yeah, so that's my story in reference to living in Manhattan. I lived in Manhattan for several years, met a relationship that I was in for 19 years, moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and then I lived in Medford, Massachusetts, and I lived in Chester, New York, and I've lived in Hackensack, New Jersey. I'm like, I'm like a *balaboosta* from all over the, you know, the New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts area. I never really settled down with either jobs, cars, or places to live, only friends in my life, because that is what's more important.

SM: That seems like a good way to do it, I'm not gonna lie.

AJB: That's what I'm saying. People go, "Oh, how many jobs have you had?" It doesn't really matter. It's how many friends have you had in your life. And like I said, my friend Yvette, I've known for 52 years. Michelle --- who sent me the link to you, Sophia --- I've known since we were born, our mothers were best friends. So 62 years I've known her, she's 26 days older than me. I said, "Do you want to be on the phone with me?" And she was like, "No, that's why I sent the link to you. I'm not doing that."

laughing

SM: Well, so what neighborhood did you grow up in, in the Bronx?

AJB: I grew up on the outskirts of Parkchester. I grew up on Thieriot Avenue, which is like near White Plains Road, or PS 102 was literally across the street from me, which was the public school. And I went to Christopher Columbus High School, instead of James Monroe, because even back then, when my mother went to James Monroe, it was bad. And my mother was 33 years older than me. So she said, "You're not going. You're a white girl. You're not going to James Monroe. I'm going to make believe you live with your grandparents on Bronx Park East and you're going to Christopher Columbus High School." And that's exactly what happened. I still wear the Christopher Columbus High School ring,

which I bought with my own money. I graduated high school when I was only 16. I didn't turn 17 until I started college.

SM: Wow. So were you in the SP program?

AJB: No, I was not. Actually, I'll tell you, it's really funny that you even said the SP program. My friend Michelle was definitely in the SP program. I, in sixth or fifth grade, I had a great teacher in fifth grade, and my reading level was maybe third or fourth grade reading level. I didn't really like reading books and my teacher --- his name was Mr. Dellapisi (sp?) --- he said to me, "tell me what you do like to read?" I said comic books. I loved Archie comics, I loved Superman, all that. He goes, "Okay, I want you to read an Archie comic, take one of the stories, and then write a paragraph about the story you read so that I can understand what you read." And he did that for about six months. And in six months, I went from a third-fourth grade reading level to a sixth-seventh grade reading level in fifth grade. By the time I got into sixth grade, he said to me, "if you do not increase your reading level, you're going to go into a really bad class in Junior High School 127. And I don't want you to do that, you should learn a different language," you know, Spanish, French, whatever. And because of that, I went into seven-two --- instead of seven-SP-two --- I went into seven-two, which is one step down from the SP classes. But I skipped third, and my mother also got me in --- my birthday, like I said, is October 6 --- so she got me in in September when I was turning four October 6. Well, turning five October 6, I should say. So I was still four years old when I started kindergarten. So, not only did I start earlier than I should have by a year, but I also skipped third.

SM: Okay.

AJB: So if that makes sense.

SM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, it makes sense. The math work out. I think.

AJB: Yeah, it does.

SM: And so, I guess more about, your public school experience or the neighborhood you grew up in: Was it a predominantly Jewish area? Was it a mixed group?

AJB: See, the two-block radius --- 1475 Thieriot Avenue, there was 1425, 1450, there was like four different buildings in the Archer Stratton Co-op, which was on the outskirts of Parkchester --- was all Jewish. But, of course, I found the Italian boy to have as a boyfriend, you know. There was like Germans around the corner, the Spanish and the blacks were really on the other side of the highway, of Cross Bronx Park. I was on one side, and, like I said, PS 102 was right across the street from us. So Thieriot Avenue, the Archer Stratton area, was all Jewish and Italian, predominantly Jewish.

SM: And were there any kind of tensions between the groups?

AJB: There was tension between the Germans, believe it or not. We had more problems with the Irish and the Germans than any blacks or Hispanics back then. I was born in 1959, so we're talking like 1969. You know, segregation, all that stuff that was going on, we didn't really know about that, because I didn't care whether you're black or not. I mean, we were from the Bronx, that was all that mattered to us. We didn't really see color, like I had colored friends and I never went, "Oh, wow. You know, you're black." *laughing* Like, it never mattered. It didn't matter to us. And it's really weird, there was --- my first boyfriend when I was five years old was Raul Walton, who ended up becoming a very famous bass guitarist in Germany. Like he ended up moving to Germany, like, Germany? What the hell are you doing in Germany? But he was my first boyfriend. And I remember going across the street, holding his hand, and bringing him upstairs. My mother would smoke cigarettes at the time. And she was on the phone, and she had a cup of coffee and she had a cigarette, and here's this little *schvartze*, walks in with, you know, her little girl. I'm holding hands with him. And I didn't know --- I just thought he had to take a bath, what do I know. And she dropped her cigarette, and she has to explain to me that I can't be boyfriend and girlfriend with him anymore. I said, "Why? Because he's not Jewish?" Like I didn't understand. She says, "No, it's just he's not from the same tribe that we are." And I didn't know --- I just didn't understand what that meant. And I broke his heart. And I recently got a hold of him, maybe about the past five years, I remember he's the same age as me so he's 62 like me. And I said, "Raul Walton, do you remember little Ann Joy Becker?" And he said, "Ann, there's not a day that doesn't go by that I don't think about holding your hand and going upstairs with your mother smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee." Him and I speak, like we stayed friends, but it had to be secret. It had to be secret, and we just didn't get it. You know? What do we know?

SM: And so what other kinds of things were going on in your neighborhood? Like stores? Or what did you do for fun? Things like that.

AJB: Um, what we did for fun was we had Parkchester Bowling, so we all belong to a league, of course. Every Sunday, we would go to the Evergreen Garden, which was a Chinese restaurant, because Sunday was typical of having Chinese food in the Jewish religion. I mean, that's what it was. We didn't really go --- like my father would take two week vacations or whatever, he worked for the transit authority, so it was big for him to go to like Disney or to Canada, you know, to Niagara Falls. And we used to have triptychs, so he'd have the highlight pen out and he'd show exactly where we were going to stop like every stop. You know, there was no Mapquest or GPS or cell phones, it was like, he would sit down --- my mother would have the cigarette hanging out of her mouth, he didn't smoke --- and he would go, "we're going to stop here, this place and fantasy place." And it was like, it was a trip to do the trip. Yeah, that was part of the vacation was planning the vacation. And we did. We went to Canada, we drove to Florida, Georgia, all these different places, but we never flew, like to California. We would fly to Florida, maybe but not cross country. He stayed in the eastern coast and that was it. That's what he was comfortable doing, and that's what we were comfortable doing.

SM: And so you said your dad worked for the transit authority. Did your mom work?

AJB: My mom worked, believe it or not, for Lerner's as she was a key punch operator, which back then the punch operators were basically the original computer programmers. It was basically you punch on a data card. *breaking up* And she was 52. So in 1948-ish, 1949, my mother was already a supervisor for Lerner's stores and she was making about \$40 a week, which was a tremendous amount of money back then. My father was a Navajo --- that's the best way to call him --- but a very innocent boy. Like the only person he probably ever had sex with was my mom. I can't imagine him --- he would be very proud of himself, the fact that he went into the war. He fixed planes in the Army Air Force because they didn't have an Air Force. It was called the Army Air Force. My father died a few years ago, he was 92 years old. My mom was 76, so she died about 18 years before my dad. And then she finally came for him and said, "Norman it's time to come." So he did. But my mother stopped working when she married my father. And my father, actually, he didn't want her to work, obviously, he wanted her to have a family. Typical male --- and not in a chauvinistic way at all --- my father was a very quiet, loved his mother kind of a mama's boy but not a mama's boy. Not that he was defiant, he totally respected my grandmother, his mother, but he was a different type of mama's boy, a very gentle man giving, warm simple, simple minded. And not in reference to having mental incapacity --- everything was very black and white, there was no grey. And totally was very clear with what was right and what was not. And not, maybe it's right. It's like, "This is wrong" or "This is right." Whereas I'm more grey, I'm more like my mom, and I have more tolerance for grey. It's okay to change your mind. You know what I mean? It's okay to be wrong, and then maybe make it right. And my father was never like that. He was like, "No, wrong is wrong." And that's it. There's no making it right because you already did it wrong. You know what I mean? There's doing it again, but there's no doing it right. You did it wrong. And now you did it again. You didn't do it right. If you did it right you would have done it the first time. So yeah, that's incredible standards. You know what I mean?

SM: High standards for you to grow up with.

AJB: Yeah. But I was okay with it, because, you know, since I'm a great person, I kind of understood his black and white. Whereas he couldn't understand my grey, but I most certainly could understand his black and white. So I actually had the advantage over it. You know, more education, a lot of different things happened to me and just life. Just life in general. I'm just not a typical heterosexual feminist Jew, I'm a lesbian feminist Jew. Do you know what I mean? I've been with my wife of 23 years. And I'm pretty proud of that, because I'm just very blessed.

SM: Yeah. Sounds like it. So what was it like growing up in a co-op kind of setting? Did that set you apart from other apartment buildings?

AJB: It totally did, because we had a Mr. And Mrs. Club. You have to understand that in a co-op setting, where all the children are basically my age group or my brother's age group --- my brother was five years older than me, so the he had his own set of friends, I had my own set of friends --- you had 17 mothers and you had 17 fathers, and they had the right to smack you as much as your mother did. And there was no DYFS, you wouldn't call DYFS on them, or whatever. It was like, "You know what, I got caught doing something by my Aunt Helen. I better tell my mother before she does, because otherwise, I'm really going to get my ass kicked." So it was great growing up in a co-op because it was a village bringing up the children. And when we had --- when one of the kids had measles, and it was the summertime, we were all exposed to the measles where the parents would actually take rounds of taking care of 15 kids with measles, so they wouldn't miss school in September. They made us all have freaking measles in the middle of July and August --- or chicken pox or the mumps or whatever the hell it was. If one of the kids got sick in the summertime, we all got sick in the summertime. We were exposed to it. Like think about that for a second. I mean, not that you would do that, obviously, with COVID because it's a deadly thing. But measles, it wasn't a deadly thing. And then the parents were able to sleep in sections, because if my mother took a four hour shift, then she'd be able to sleep. And then my Aunt Hellen would take a four hour shift, and then my Aunt Ruth picked up where she was. So you had 24 hour care by 17 different mothers. It was great. It's like a commune, but without the commune.

SM: Yeah, wow, that's fantastic. I mean, I feel like that. I've been doing a lot of recent reading about Rochdale Village in Queens --- I've been I was reading a book about it --- it's a lot about the co-op and what the idea, like I guess the philosophy behind it is and like, it's exactly that, like that is exactly what it was meant to do.

AJB: It's without being a commune. Like it's a commune mentality without being a commune. Like, you know what I'm saying, we all had our own apartments, obviously, our own fire escapes. So whatever we did was super crazy. But, you know, all the women played Mahjong and the guys went bowling and they were in the bowling leagues, and it just was like this incredible world within the world. It was just incredible. And, you know, people talk --- I live one town away from Lakewood in New Jersey, which is basically kind of like Williamsburg, it's like the Brooklyn community --- people go, "Ann, you're really Jewish?" And I said, "Do you think that all Jews are the Lakewood Jews?" I said, "Didn't you ever hear the 12 tribes of Israel?" Like, just think about even just about the terminology of the 12 tribes of Israel. I said, just thinking about even in your religion where Jesus Christ is God, do you really think he had red hair and blue eyes if he came from Israel? You look like a *schvartze*, that's what he looked like. He was dark skinned. He had brown hair and brown eyes, not blue eyes and freckles. I mean, he was Jewish, for God's sakes. I was like, his last supper was a Passover meal. Like why aren't you Jewish? I don't get it.

SM: No, I'm from Monroe. So I you know, I'm more than well aware of the "you're Jewish?", coming from the Hasidim too. I'm not even --- you know, I'm a paternal Jew, I hardly count for most people, let alone them.

AJB: I know Monroe really well, because I had a house in Blooming Grove.

SM: I was in --- well, so I my parents' first house was in Blooming Grove, actually, on Mangin Road, and then we live now in Highland mills.

AJB: Okay, so I was on Evergreen Drive. And the reason why my address was Monroe is Blooming Grove is too small to have its own post office.

SM: Yeah, that's what it was for them. I mean, we moved out of that house when I was five years old, but my mom has said it. I know that's how it was.

AJB: That's how small the world is. And actually your name even, being Sophia Maier, it's like really funny because as I'm looking at you, you look like my cousin. I had a cousin Debbie Samuels. Her first husband was Jerry Meyer. And she had a daughter, Melissa, and her daughter looks like you Sophia.

SM: Really?

AJB: Yeah, really.

SM: We'll get into this, we'll get into this after I finish recording. But I wonder if you know, my grandparents. So let's go back. So you touched a little bit about your school experience and that teacher that really changed your experience. What kind of other memories stand out to you from either public school or junior high school?

AJB: High school definitely would be the next best experience I had. Robert Folchi (sp?) --- who ended up becoming the District Superintendent of Schools --- was originally the principal in my school, a really nice Italian guy. And you got to remember that I graduated high school when I was only 16 years old, so things like getting even my high school ring and things like that I had to make my own money when I was like 15. I used to call bingo for the synagogue. They used five different synagogue names, so that they could make extra money for the synagogue, and I was running bingo at 15 years old. And every time the cops came in, they had to hide me because I wasn't even 18 to be gambling. It was craziness. It was crazy. It was like a Jewish thing. It was run only during the summer, like telling you crazy stuff. But this guy, Mr. Folchi, I went over to him like almost the first day of high school --- and I was like this really little *nebach* girl --- and I said to him, I said, "Are you Italian?" He goes, "Yeah," and I shake his hand and I go, "Smart people." And him and I were like the best friends for the three years that I was in high school. And I had a very bad experience with my math teacher, his name was Dana Levine. He was --- let's put it this way --- he was such a bad teacher that I drew devil ears on him in my yearbook. He wrote in my yearbook, "Dear pill, it was great having you transferred." And so I was in the chorus. And when you graduate from high school, you don't physically have your diploma, it's in the mail, they give you like a booklet or something. But yeah, it's just like a piece of paper that

goes, "Yeah, you're really graduated." And he was sitting next to Mr. Folchi --- and this is going to be some cursing on the on the on the thing, so I'm just letting you know ahead of time --- but so Dana Levine was sitting next to Mr. Folchi, who made my life miserable. And it was geometry, it was it was trigonometry --- we're talking about hard math, not like, you know, algebra --- it was trig and geo. And he's sitting next to Folchi. And I said to Mr. Folchi, "Principal Folchi, are we really graduated? Because I know that I'm up here singing and we're done singing the song and I'm about to get off the stage, but I don't physically have the diploma yet. Is it like in the mail? Is it definitely? I definitely graduated?" He goes, "Yeah." I said, "Are you positive?" He goes, "I'm positive." I turned to Dana Levine and I go, "You are the biggest fucking asshole I've ever met my whole life. And if I ever meet you again, it'll be too soon." I said, I wish you *tsuris, tsuris* and festering boils." And I turn around and Folchi's laughing like you are right now, and I get off the stage. And he wasn't coming back the following year, and Folchi knew that, but I didn't know that. He was the worst teacher, and it's a shame because I'm great at math. And I took math in summer school because I failed the algebra regents in math. And I went to Fordham University for summer school for --- excuse me, Roosevelt High School, which was next to Fordham University, I'm lying when I said Fordham, it was across the street.

SM: Yeah, no, I've been there.

AJB: Okay. And I had a great teacher, he had nice like coke bottle glasses --- because when you had cataract surgery back then they gave you coke bottle glasses, they didn't have like contact lenses or implants --- and I got an 86 on the algebra regents that I took the second time around. And he sent me a postcard that said, "Cherub, you're my cherub. It was a pleasure having you in my class." Do you know how tortured I was by Dana Levine? And it helped me to graduate high school.

SM: Yeah. Oh my god.

AJB: I've been very blessed with these different teachers when it was really at the cusp --- I could have gone either way. Had I not met Delapizi in fifth grade, I would have been in a bad class in junior high school, who knows what would have happened to me? Had I not met Mr. Alessi for my summer school, and I didn't graduate high school and I was left back where I wouldn't be with my best friend of 62 years, never would have gone to Queensboro Community College, I never would have moved out of my house. Like, when I think about all these different things, I go, "God had some intentions for me. And it's my job to figure out what those intentions are."

SM: Yeah. That's a good way to look at it. Do you have any memories of the 1967-1968 teachers' strike from when you were in school?

AJB: No, what I have memories of is 1969 Stonewall where a gay bar in New York had a major brawl with the police officers in New York City. It was more --- I was already, even at 10 years old --- I was already looking more towards activism in feminism and --- even a 10 --- more of the Carole King kind

of. I had a Jew fro, I had frizzy strawberry blonde hair. I looked like Carole King from Tapestry. I was very hippie, like very aware of more than the teachers. Because I figured the teachers as kind of like a female role, there weren't many male teachers. It wasn't something --- it's really funny that it's not something that I wanted to get into and I ended up, in 2015, getting my bachelor's degree in education and becoming a teacher for a couple of years. And I went, "I'm not doing this shit." I said, "Talk about politics. Like, you can't even teach the truth." You gotta teach that Christopher Columbus was a hero. Are you kidding me? Like he raped and plumage and stole land from the Indians. Like why are we closed on Christopher Columbus Day? So I had a hard time being a teacher, again because of that gray part of my personality. I'm like, "This is bullshit. I can't lie to my students." You know, and they loved me. They call me "Mrs. B from AT&T," because I worked AT&T also. They knew that I had a hard time biting my tongue. You know what I mean? So it didn't last long, especially when Trump became president, then I was even more outspoken. I just couldn't shut up. It was really impossible as a Jew, as a gay Jew, as a woman. I was like, I had such a problem. And you know, it's very scary just what's going on. And I'm gonna say this, which has nothing to do with growing up Jewish, I guess, in the Bronx. But I think, in reference to being mandatory, they should have reversible vasectomies for males. And this is what I think, because it's reversible. You can't really reverse a tube tying but you can reverse the vasectomy. And when the man is financially responsible, where he's married and is ready for children, then it can be reversed but he has sign that, but it's mandatory. He has no right to choose one way or the other. Then I'll be okay with it. But in reference to anything else --- and, you know, I'm kind of torn because I'm not okay with *Roe vs. Wade* being full blown either, because I don't believe that after five months, you should have an abortion because to me that baby can live. And so I have a hard time with that also. I go, "They really are formed. Like even if they're little, they really are formed." So it's not okay to be full blown that way either.

SM: That grey area, like you said.

AJV: So it's hard. It's very, very hard for me. But vasectomies, yeah, so I want to go on the road. I want to get a Partridge Family bus. I want to get a 401C, I want to become a nonprofit organization because I have my ministry. I actually am an ordained minister. And I want to go around the country talking about mandatory vasectomies.

SM: I'd support you. I'd donate to your nonprofit.

AJB: You know what I mean? What do you think? I mean, this way, a woman doesn't have to worry about --- because it's really affecting the minority women. It's women who don't have a voice, it's black women who are poor. It's not a rich Jewish Long Island woman who's going, "Oh, I need an abortion." Okay, we'll call it a DNC and put it on your insurance. That's not what *Roe vs. Wade* is hurting. So that's why, because I'm one of those rich Jewish Long Island women. Even though I'm not, but I represent that.

SM: Yeah. That's funny. Like I said, I would donate to your nonprofit.

AJB: I'm gonna take you on the bus. We'll go we'll talk. And you'll promote your book. You're gonna promote your book.

SM: Yes, of course.

AJB: You'll meet different Jews. You'll meet different Jews along the way and ask them what they feel about, you know, what's going on, from their lives from the Bronx to now?

SM: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So we're gonna get back on topic.

AJB: Yes, I'm sorry.

SM: No no no, no apologies. This is great.

AJB: And I say you're related to me. I'm telling you right now. I think that you are related to me.

SM: Look, you play Jewish geography, I'm sure that somehow some way we are. That's always my favorite.

AJB: Is the name Samuels sound familiar? Like when I said Samuels, or Meyer is more of the connection?

SM: Yeah, is it spelt the same name as mine? Is it spelled the same?

AJB: I'm not quite sure if --- Melissa is like my fourth cousin, my third cousin Debbie Samuels --- who became Debbie Meyer, and then Debbie Storiali --- she passed away when she was 30 years old from a brain hemorrhage. She was a director for Letchworth Village, which was for the criminally insane in upstate New York. And was working like crazy, like 110 hours a week or whatever, and had horrible headaches, a lot of signs before she passed away from a brain hemorrhage. But Melissa has got to be about 35 years old, very young woman. What are you about, 22?

SM: Yeah.

AJB: You're 22, right?

SM: I'm 21. Yeah.

AJB: Okay. I was pretty damn close. But you look that.

SM: Still at an age where a year older is still a compliment and not an insult.

AJB: Yeah, that's true. But I still could be your grandmother at 62 years old.

SM: Well, actually, my mom is 62 years old. So, because she had me later.

AJB: Right, when she when she knew she wanted the kid.

SM: Yes. Yes.

AJB: That's the way to look at it. My mom had me when she knew she wanted a kid.

SM: Yeah. So back to a little bit about Jewish life growing up. So you said your family wasn't religious? Did you keep kosher? Did you attend a synagogue or anything?

AJB: Didn't keep kosher. Our synagogue was Orthodox, but really more on the reform. It wasn't where the men sat downstairs and the women sat upstairs --- yes, there was a separation of the two, but we didn't really follow it. I mean, I sat next to my family during the breaking of the fast, all that stuff. I didn't really --- I wasn't really brought up like that, we didn't really have Passover meals every year, we were invited to family members who celebrated Passover. My mother never really had the Passover in the house. It was from going to our families. And that means that my grandparents, my father's mother was very religious --- Vice President of Hadassah, I'm a lifelong member of Hadassah based on my grandmother --- she was extremely religious, but I wasn't very close to her because my mother didn't like her. If that makes sense. I wish I would have known better, because she was just a brilliant, warm nurturing. Just very, she was very --- not strict Jew, but really appreciated the Jewish religion. Whereas my parents didn't really have that appreciation that my grandmother had. And my grandfather, my dad's father, was not religious at all. He was like, "Yeah, whatever. What's to eat?" and fart and go to sleep. I mean, that was like his whole life. But my grandmother just loved talking about the Jewish religion and celebrating who she was. And she wore a wig. I mean, she was religious, very religious. But my parents kept me away from that, because I wouldn't have been accepted by, I guess, the rest of the 17 couples of friends, because we were not religious. Like we didn't grow up in a religious neighborhood. I kind of wish I did, but I got a hold of that later in my life, like anything that I didn't do when I was younger, I did when I was old, because you're responsible for it. You can't keep on saying "because you didn't do this for me, I didn't do that." Well shut up and do it, then. You know what I mean?

SM: No, it's funny. A few people I've spoken to as well --- that I've done interviews with --- its very, you know, the kind of culture, especially in the co-op's at the time was not very --- everybody was Jewish, but not religious. And then people found, kind of once it was their decision, found a little more religiousness later.

AJB: Correct. Correct. And, you know, I've even delved into the Jesus concept and stuff like that, because a couple of things that happened to me on like a Sunday, and I go, "Well, it should have been a Saturday." Like, I wish it would have been *shabbos*, why is it happening on Sunday? Maybe there is something to this, you know, Jesus thing. So, I have looked at all this different stuff. And I'm kind of like --- let's put it this way, I know that there's something bigger than just you and me on the phone. I mean, and I know that I'm very blessed, because too many things have happened that I'm still here. You know, everything from blood clots where I didn't even know I had blood clots to not even getting COVID. Like, you know, people have died around me with COVID. Whether it be underlying conditions. Yeah, I get underlying conditions, but they shouldn't have died. Like, you know what I mean, it's like they should die with, not from, something. You should be like --- even prostate cancer --- you should die with prostate cancer, not from prostate cancer, because it could be avoided. So, I didn't appreciate the fact that people died from COVID. And it's really changed my appreciation of how blessed I am. You know, even where I retired in May of last year --- and now they want to increase social security by like, 11% --- I'm like, I'm making pretty good money, but I worked my ass off for 40 years in retail. I've been a retail store manager, like my whole life, so I made a lot of money. And I worked a lot of hours, and it has everything to do with being brought up Jewish in the Bronx. I really do give appreciation to being brought up Jewish. I think I would have been different if I was brought up Catholic and gone to Catholic school. It just is different.

SM: I agree. I know exactly what you meant.

AJB: Yeah, and people who are not Jewish have no clue what the hell I'm talking about. Just you not knowing what I'm talking about shows exactly what I am talking about. You know what I mean?

SM: Yes, absolutely. I do, I do.

AJB: So how am I doing? How am I doing Sophia?

SM: You're doing great. You know, I love doing this, so this is wonderful. Like this --- it's great.

AJB: You're *kvelling*. Are you *kvelling*?

SM: *laughing* Yes. I'm also *schvitzing* a little bit, but that's because it's hot in here. So did you guys -- did you speak any other languages besides English?

AJB: Oh, Yiddish. Yes, a *bissel*. But let me tell you something, there was a difference even with Litvak and Galician even with Yiddish. But to make people believe and understand Yiddish, I go, "You have to understand that you have to imagine..." Like they talked about Pig Latin. Let's talk about Pig Latin for a second. I said, "People that are living in France and Germany don't know what Pig Latin is, you'd have

to be from the United States understand what that is.” But during the Holocaust, whether you were from France, or Germany or Japan or Israel or United States, you all spoke Yiddish. And when you came to whatever country you came to, you were able to speak to each other. I said, “That’s how much *sechel* we have.” Now what religion or culture can say that they only have one dialect? Not even English has only one dialect of English. When someone from England talks to me, I have no clue what their frickin saying and you’re speaking English. I’m like, “What? What? What did you say?” And they’re like, *incoherent garble* so I have to like smile. But it’s true. But the Jews --- I did a paper, when I was in college, about slangs and where slang came from, and the biggest thing I couldn’t find was kike. And I said, “Where did that come from?” Like I know where nigger came from, Nigeria, and WASP, White Anglo Saxon Protestant. And I worked for Norton’s wallpaper and paint store in Paramus, New Jersey and then opened my own wallpaper business, George’s Window and Wall fashions in Oradell, New Jersey. I still was going to college at the time, and this little Jewish old man came into the store, and he heard me talking about the word kike, and he goes, “I know where that came from.” So I make him sit down, I get my pen, my paper, I roll up my chair. And he goes, “When the Jews came here, they didn’t want to sign an X because it looked too much like the swastika, so they signed circle, and a circle in Yiddish is *kikel*. And the *schmuck* on the other end, who was doing the papers, where he was stamping the paperwork, called them a bunch of kikes. And I said, “You mean that I kicked the shit out of people because they called me a circle? And he said, “Yeah. That’s exactly right.” That’s where kike came from, *kikel* means circle. We didn’t want to sign an X, it looked too much like the swastika. I got an A on the paper, that was the icing on the cake of finally finding out where my heritage, where that word came from. So now did I teach you something?

SM: I was gonna say, you learn something new every day. I’ve learned so much. Yeah, I would have never guessed, to say least.

AJB: Never in a million years. I went --- first of all, I didn’t even know that *kikel* was circle in Yiddish, I had no clue what it is. But it really is. He goes on, “And that’s where it came from.” I’m like oh my god.

SM: Yeah. So a little bit about when you decided to leave the Bronx. Obviously, you said December 26. What motivated you to move out?

AJB: So this is the scoop. When I came out to my parents --- and my mother was like, one of the coolest women in the world, may she rest in peace. I mean, her name was originally Fanny Achberg. And when she was in school, the teacher taught her Francis as her first name. She goes, “if you’re going to learn your name as being Fanny, you’re going to get your ass kicked every day. So your name from this moment on is Francis.” And my mother only spoke Yiddish when she first started school, and she became Francis Achberg. And my mother had paid like \$500 to legally change her name, probably about 20 years before she died, because she didn’t want to be buried, “also known as.” Faggy was her name, I mean, that’s what’s on her tombstone, Faggy. But my mother --- when I told her at 16 that I was gay --- she said, “I’ve known since you were three, you mean you finally figured it out?” And I said, “Ma, can I

get some, like, please get some credit for my own sexuality? Are you gonna take even credit for my own sexuality?" She was like, "Okay, fine."

SM: A good Jewish mother.

AJB: My Jewish mother. So I didn't want to bring my girlfriends home to the house. I just, I wanted to find a place that I can have my --- even though my mother didn't care, she really didn't give a shit. She really didn't --- I was respectful of that. I think that even if I was a straight woman that was having boyfriends coming to the house, I probably still would have wanted to live on my own. I wouldn't've wanted my mother to walk in. I mean, there's a lot of different reasons. And so I moved out as soon as I could, not because I didn't like it at home, not because my parents --- I mean, I'm sure I could have lived there until, my parents died --- but that's not the point. And I wanted to explore and live my life. And if I made a mistake, then come home and say, "mom help me." And believe me, my parents helped me quite a few times, but I never moved back. But my parents definitely were very, very supportive of me. And I'm, again, very blessed. And I think even if they were religiously Jewish, like my grandmother was, she didn't care. I was her granddaughter. I didn't have to worry about carrying my name on whatever. I wasn't responsible for the name of Becker, you know, being carried on. And I said, "but if you're gay, your name does carry on because you don't change it." *laughing*

SM: That's true, and you're more likely to carry it on then. Exactly.

AJB: That is correct. But I just, unfortunately, I didn't meet Carol before Ellen. Had I met Carol, who I've been with for 23 years, I definitely would have had children. Yeah, but I was already 39 years old. I wasn't going to start having kids. The world is tough enough, trying to explain two mommies, it's hard, man. It's hard.

SM: And so at the time of did you --- what did you think about leaving the Bronx? Was that something that you considered?

AJB: Well, I lived in Manhattan and I would call up my mother --- it's really funny because I would call my mom up at 11 o'clock at night --- I'd go, "Ma, you awake?" "Yeah." "You feeling like anchovy pizza?" "Yeah." "I'll come pick you up." I would drive from Manhattan to the Bronx, bring her back to Manhattan, we'd go get anchovy pizza to like two o'clock in the morning, and then I would turn around and drive her back to the Bronx and go back to Manhattan again, because it was that close. Like to me, even though it was a 45 minute drive, I think. So I moved out of the Bronx, but I never really moved out of the Bronx probably until I left Manhattan. When I moved down to Manhattan, and moved to New Jersey, Hackensack, New Jersey, then I was finally out of the Bronx, so to speak. And that was already, I was 21. So 21 years old was really the separation. I never really went back to visit the Bronx anymore.

SM: How did you feel about that?

AJB: Um, it was really kind of hard for me. I was in a very toxic relationship for 19 years. And unfortunately, when you're in a toxic relationship, you sever ties with a lot of different things. The Bronx was just one of the things, you know, tried to sever my ties with my parents, tried to sever the ties with my old friends. When you are in a toxic relationship, that's what you do, you isolate yourself. So the Bronx was just a part of the isolation. But it was very, very hard for me and I wear my --- I'm not kidding around --- I have my Christopher Columbus High School ring. I graduated in 1976, I wear it every day. I sleep with it. I used my own money to pay for that. So I remember, I told you, I had five different synagogues --- even though it was one synagogue --- doing bingo. I made \$350. And \$310 was the ring back in 1974, so I bought the ring for my graduation of '76. And I was only 14-15 years old and then I gave my mother the \$40 difference because it paid rent for that one month in the Bronx. You know, my father was *schlepping* television tubes, he would not only work for the transit authority, but to take care of my brother myself --- my brother is visually handicapped, so he went to a special school --- my father would also fix television sets. And it used to be tubes --- these huge tubes that would go into the black and white TV sets --- come in two big suitcases that would open up on both sides and we'd *schlep* them up the stairs, because people didn't have elevators, and fix their television sets for like 40 cents, \$1.20, whatever he charged to make extra money. So he didn't want my mother to work, like I told you, she gave up a really lucrative job. And my father made sure that we had steak, if we wanted steak. My mother would make a steak for me and maybe make a meatloaf for my brother, if that's what he wanted, chicken for my father, if that's what he wanted. She didn't just make a roast beef for all of us to eat, whatever we wanted to eat, she made it. So again, very fortunate, and we were poor. Yeah, you know, we were.

SM: Yeah. Did you feel like --- I guess growing up as a woman during that time period --- did you feel that you had different expectations than your --- not necessarily your brother --- but like other your male peers at the time?

AJB: No, because I was a tomboy. So I didn't like the same things as my friend Michelle or whatever. You know, they were playing with Barbie dolls, I was playing with GI Joe. I was like, "Fuck Barbie, I don't want to. I don't want to worry about the different bathing suits on the breasts. I don't care about that. I want to know what kind of uniform to put on GI Joe." It was totally different. So I was really more of the boys. And the boys accepted me as one of the boys --- and I wasn't interested in them as a girl, because I was gay --- I was one of the boys. So um, I had more girlfriends than they did. You know? So that's the way it was. Even though I didn't know that --- I don't mean girlfriends like I was having sex or anything like that --- but girls had more crushes on me than they did the boys. You know. So. Anyway, neither here nor there. Like my friend Michelle of 62 years, she's definitely heterosexual, has two children. I mean, we're so close that her daughter Brianna was named after her father, Bernie, and me, Ann, and that's why her name is Brianna. So, you know, she's my sister. Like she is like my sister. So that's the kind of love that we have. It was never, I would never do anything else in reference to that, because I just adore her. She's part of who I am.

SM: Yeah. So I guess you would have --- so do you remember hearing about or seeing, kind of especially in the South Bronx, the arson and devastation that was going on elsewhere in the Bronx when you were there?

AJB: No, because we --- my father read the *Daily News*. The daily newspaper didn't really have --- if my father had read the *Times*, it would be one type of upbringing --- but he read the post in the *Daily News*, which was sensationalistic. It's almost like the *National Enquirer* coming to the house. So anything that was relevant --- in reference to segregation, the uproar, the teachers strikes or whatever --- only if it was a transit authority strike, because he worked with the transit authority, would it matter to him. So even the news being watched, it was really watching what's the weather gonna be like tomorrow. You know what I mean. And when John Kennedy even was shot, I remember that I was taking a nap at the time. He was shot in 1963 --- that was November of '63 --- I turned four years old October of '63, because I was born in 1959. And I was taking a nap. It was like three o'clock in the afternoon, and my mother actually woke me up to tell me that the President was shot and killed. I had no clue what the hell she was talking about. But she was so --- I mean, I clearly remember that, but it's not something that my father would like cut out of a newspaper or make me look at it and understand it and do a report on it. Like we didn't have that type of upbringing. It's like, that's the type of upbringing I would have done with my children. I would've created scrapbooks for them to understand "this is what you were doing when this happened," so they actually have almost like a diary before they're able to write their own diary. But my parents never did anything like that.

SM: Yeah. So when you think about the Bronx today, what do you think about the people that live here? What do you think is going on? Do you think the Bronx is back on the mend?

AJB: I think that the Bronx is really kicking some ass right now. Because what it is, is all the people that were just renting apartments, they became co-ops, where they actually own a piece of it. And it totally changed the look and the feel of the Bronx because now they had ownership. Jimmy Carter became president and then he became key in Habitat for Humanity in the Bronx. I mean, he was just, you know, doing all this different stuff with renovating buildings that were burnt out. And there were heroin addicts inside the lobbies and stuff like that. So the pride of the Bronx is back. The Black Lives Matter movement. There's so many different things going on in reference to New York or New York City. The Bronx is a part of New York City, it's part of the five boroughs. I even know why it's called the Bronx, instead of Bronx. Do you even know that reason why?

SM: I think. Well, I know where Bronx comes from, a Dutch settler, and so it was after a river that he founded. I'm not sure if that's where that comes from as well?

AJB: Correct. Yes. His name was B-R-O-N-K-S was his last name. And so he owned most of the Bronx and sold it. And yes, he was definitely a Dutch-German settler. Like Colonel Tom Parker with Elvis

Presley. No, I'm only kidding. Anyway, I saw the Elvis movie, that's another story in itself. But that's why it's called the Bronx --- and they made it an X instead of K-S --- not the Manhattan or the Richmond or the Staten Island. But yeah, that's why, so a lot of people don't even know that. And I even have Bronx shirts and everything. And I have Thieriot Avenue, like, on the back of it or something. I'm very proud. Like, the first thing when people say "so tell me a little about yourself" and I'm like "a Jew from the Bronx" is the first thing I say. So it is --- I would probably say that it's probably --- the Bronx is probably 70% of Ann Joy Becker. I mean, like, if you were able to look inside my body, 70% of it is made up of the Bronx, like, if I didn't have all those experiences. My good friend Evette downstairs, like I said, of 52 years, who I met at Castle Hill beach club, you know, playing handball. You know, I was the first one to new to know, when she got laid and even her kids were born on my birthday. She still forgets my birthday. And they're like 31 years old --- when I say her kids, they're 31 year old twins. But that's what I'm talking about like, we're from the Bronx. I mean, Michelle was from the Bronx. Evette's from the Bronx. My wife is from West Milford, I mean, New Milford, what can I tell you? But it doesn't matter. 70% of who I am.

SM: Yeah. That's great. Have you been back in recent years?

AJB: Yeah, I go back because of Hawaii C's --- I have a little soft spot for this really good Asian place on Williamsbridge Road, right off of Pelham Parkway. It's Hawaiian C's, and they make the best poopoo platter. There's this chicken that comes like it's chicken giblets inside a tin foil over the poopoo platter. It's so good with a pina colada, and I'm good to go.

SM: Fantastic. I just wrote it down. That'll be a spot.

AJB: Hawaii C's on Williamsbridge Road in the Bronx. Oh my god, it's great.

SM: I'll be there. Sounds good to me. So my last question, and you kind of already talked on this, but when you think about the Bronx today --- and this time, I kind of mean like, when you think about it and your experiences --- what kind of emotions do you feel? I mean, you said proud but ---

AJB: I'm *kvelling*. It makes me smile. Like there's nothing that ever happened --- and again, I'm very, very blessed. I was never mugged. I was never, you know, molested nothing --- and no one I know was mugged or molested in the Bronx or shot. You know, we did drugs, whatever we did, my group of friends must have had like God just hovering over us because we never --- we lost one person who actually was hit by a car when he was 12 years old. It was maybe about six months before his bar mitzvah. Matter of fact, his parents got the invitations to send out that night. So the day that he died, that night, they got the invitations to send out for his bar mitzvah. And the last thing he said to his mother was, "F you, I'm going," and he went to Noble Field to do a Little League game, that she asked him not to walk along where the highway was where the Cross Bronx Expressway was. There was a Mobil gas station that's still there. And he did go that way and this woman put her foot on the gas instead of the

brake when she saw him, and she pinned him and killed him instantly. And he was 12 years old --- he was my boyfriend at the time --- it was the first time my mother ever gave me she gave me a quarter valium, believe it or not, when I was 12 years old, because I lost it. That was the biggest tragedy that ever happened, other than grandparents dying, you know, just the normal of your family passing away. A 12 year old boy passing away --- his name was Jeffrey Young --- and, you know, that was the biggest tragedy. But there was nothing. There's nothing, when I think of the Bronx, that I don't just *kvel* about because I'm just so proud to be from there. Even at 62 years old, when I go back, I show off different places that I stayed on Lydig Avenue. My grandparents were peddlers on Lydig Avenue, Pelham Parkway area. They had a fruit stand, you know what I mean? The Achbergs are actually written in journals about the Bronx. And his name was Lewis Achberg, my grandfather, and they're talking about my grandfather, my mother's father. So it's just a very proud --- it's almost like the Bronx is part of my family. It's not even just the borough. It's like, I'm part of that Dutch family. It's like, I'm part of the Bronx. You know what I mean?

SM: Yeah. Well, do you have anything you'd like to add before I end the recording,

AJB: I don't know. But if anything happens, where you have to do follow up or whatever, please keep my number handy because I have no problems with follow up or whatever, or any questions.