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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

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

Andrea Brecker (AB): Well, from the maternal side, my maternal grandmother, they came over in the late 1800s. They were escapees from the first pogrom in Russia. And she was actually quite young. And they came before Ellis Island. They landed in Castle Clinton. And they lived of course on the Lower East Side. I still remember my grandmother telling me how she met my grandfather, who died before I was ever born. I never met him. And so one day, they're on the Lower East Side, and her mother said to her, "You wear this waist today and I'll fix your hair. We're having someone come today to meet you." So they were from — you know, in the old days, they were both *landsmen*, from the same community. And so she met him, and I guess they hit it off. And my grandmother said to me, "We would kiss like two little lovebirds and I was only concerned I would have a baby before we were married." [Laughs] They went on to have eight children. Apparently my maternal grandfather, I think his family had poultry farms in the old country, so when they came here, I guess he had a kosher butcher. So that was sort of the family business. My grandmother worked alongside him. I don't know the evolution of when they moved to the Bronx. My father used to joke that my mother's family moved every time they had another baby, they would just skip the rent to go to a bigger apartment. So that was my mother's side of the family. We always lived very close to my grandmother. My parents lived with my grandmother right after the war, after my sister was born, and then when I came, about four years later, we moved to the next building. And so two of my mother's brothers also had kosher butchers in the Bronx, and one famously in the Pelham Parkway area. I wish I had a shopping bag from that, because it was Dave Stein and Stanley Frank, my uncle Stanley Frank, it was Frankenstein's Kosher Meats.

SM: Oh, my goodness.

AB: Wouldn't you just love a shopping bag from there? I did a little web search, I can't find any remnants of it. So that was my mother's side of the family. My father's family. His father came over, I think, in the early 1900s and I think he was escaping the Tsar's army, that was the deal. And he came over — I think he married my grandmother and they set sail. He was an iron worker. And so when I went — I was told that he did the iron work for Temple Emanuel, I was always very proud. When I went there as a child, and I saw the inside — I haven't been there in years — but you know, the *magen david*, and I thought that's what my grandfather did. But no, he was the one on the girders, the beams. So he made a good living. And they bought a house in the East Bronx, 1145 Ward Avenue. My grandmother had nine children, seven survived to adulthood. My father was next to the youngest. My mother too in her family of eight was next to the youngest. So that was my background. My mother and my grandmother were totally fluent in English, my maternal grandmother spoke English without an accent. But the familiar language was Yiddish. So I grew up hearing it but my mother, being modern would say,

“Speak so the girls can understand you.” So unfortunately, I know some, but I didn't hear as much as I would have liked to learn. My mother, of that generation, you know, first generation, they wanted to be American. My mother's given name was Shulamit. But she called herself Shirley.

So that was it. I grew up in the Bronx. My father was a house painter. So we had modest income. And we lived in a blue collar neighborhood in the Bronx. It was very mixed, but there were definitely Jewish families. One of my uncle's had his kosher meat market close to where we lived. There was a kosher deli, Spivak's kosher deli, where we went the night before Passover began, because my mother would kosher our kitchen. So we went to Spivak's. So obviously, I grew up in a kosher home. I mean, we were observant, but we didn't go to shul. I mean, we'd go for the high holidays. And we went to my grandmother's — it was a very old orthodox... It was a very sad place. And I realized as I got older, I realized why it was such a sad place, because it was filled with survivors, and people who had had devastating loss. Everything was in Hebrew, the women upstairs behind the lace skirt. So my mother started sending me to — they didn't have a Hebrew school, there was a more conservative synagogue close by, and they had a Hebrew school. And my mother sent me there. And I wasn't learning very much. Again, I think because, in retrospect, I think it was a survivor, and the man was just holding on by a thread. So then I was homeschooled by my grandmother, that's how I learned my Aleph Bet, I was homeschooled by my grandmother. But I remember the little time that I spent in Hebrew school, the picture books about the history and all that, but most of my learning was homeschooled Hebrew. I went to public school, but I was homeschooled in Hebrew. And I learned, we celebrated all the holidays, a Kosher home, Passover, my mother lit candles Friday night, we had chicken. So I grew up very much in a Jewish way. And my parents were very, we would say now, *tikkun olam*. That word was not used then in my household, but they did a lot of work with the Jewish War Veterans. I remember my mother would — I was very young, but I remember the stories — she would come home feeling very sad because they would go like to the VA hospital, and they would have parties. And so my mother was always heartbroken by the men, not only the men who had had physical injuries, but the ones who had mental or emotional issues. But they did that. They went on a regular basis. My mother was always volunteering a lot for — not Hadassah. What's the one? ORT. O-R-T I think was it. I don't remember the details. But it wasn't Hadassah, it was ORT, Jewish organization. And I don't know if it was Zionist, that I don't know. So she did a lot of work. And then she went on to volunteer with a cancer group. Of course, she died of cancer later in life. So I learned always about giving back. My father always went to help my grandmother do stuff. So that's how I grew up, you do for other people, you give for others, it's not all about you. And even in our modest means household, I learned that. My grandmother would take me to the shul, with — the word she used was *pushkas* — the metal boxes for the yeshiva in Jerusalem, and she gave me nickels and pennies to put in the boxes. I learned that very early on. So that was my experience.

There was a branch of the YMHA in the Bronx closer to where we lived, and I went there. They had like a tween — they didn't use the word tween then — but like middle school or junior high school, they would have social evenings Tuesday and Thursday nights. And they would have, I think they had a pool

table, but they would play music and we would dance. And every time I hear Peppermint Twist, I am back in that room. I'm back in that room. And I worked, if I remember correctly, I worked at the Y camp, a day camp. I worked as a counselor a few years through the Jewish Y. And I remember going to those campgrounds with my son who went on to go to Camp Yomi, it's a Y camp, but through the Manhattan connection. We lived in Manhattan. And so he went to Camp Yomi and they had an event, a family event, when we went to the campground. I had all this nostalgia, right? So we went to the campgrounds which looked different, but I could remember.

SM: Where were the camps? Upstate?

AB: Pearl River.

SM: Okay.

AB: I mean, I wasn't really involved with a synagogue as an adult. I rejected the whole gender based thing and I couldn't relate to a lot of the things. But when we got married, we joined a synagogue in order to get married in a synagogue, which someone recommended. It was a reform synagogue, the Village Temple on 12th Street, I think was West 12th Street. And so we joined, we got married there. And then after a year, we stopped going because it was totally inconvenient to go all the way down to the village. We lived on West 110 Street. And then I wasn't connected at all. And then when Noah, our son, was born — he's named after my mother. His name is Noah Shalom Brecker-Redd, because I thought, you can't give a black kid the name Shalom for a first name. [Laughs] He's named after my mother. So I went back to work right away. I was out for like, I don't know, two months after Noah was born. We had a babysitter who would come to our home, Maribel, who was wonderful. She was from Colombia. She was wonderful. And then one day Noah was, I don't know, maybe about four or five. And The Weather Channel was on television. My husband is a real weather person. And Noah turns to us and says, "Yehovah makes it rain." My head spun around like Linda Blair in The Exorcist. Okay. So then I told Maribel that she's wonderful, but leave the talk about God and all that to us. And then I started to do a synagogue search [Laughs]. And so I did a synagogue search, thinking this kid's got to go to Hebrew school. And so what I found was a Reconstructionist synagogue, West End Synagogue.

SM: Yeah, I'm familiar with.

AB: So we've been members since the kindergarten days. My husband is very active, I'm not as active anymore in the synagogue. But that's our synagogue. And that's now how I have a strong connection through an established religion, because of the community. And obviously, at this time in particular, it's good to have that connection.

SM: Absolutely.

AB: So what else can I say?

SM: So tell me a little bit more about maybe the neighborhood. So what neighborhood did you grow up in?

AB: Our address was 1997 Davidson Avenue. We lived in apartment 3F which is a walk up. The building had five stories, and I know the rule at some point became any building with six or more floors needs an elevator. So I always used to walk up and down stairs. Apartment 3F and it's funny because my son lives in an apartment 3F, which is a funny coincidence. Anyway, that's between — did I mention this? — Burnside Avenue and Tremont Avenue. That's the area used to be called the West Bronx. I don't think it kind of qualifies as the West Bronx anymore. It's not that far from what used to be the NYU Bronx campus with the Hall of Fame. Do you know about that? It's not that far from there. And I went to public school not far from there.

SM: And would you say it was a predominantly Jewish name?

AB: No, I'd say it was mixed now, where I became aware of, I guess, the race differences. I mean, there were definitely Jewish families, there were Italians. Now remember this is blue collar, right? So blue collar. So I remember that there were Irish families, because the public school I went to was adjacent to a Catholic church that had a parochial school, and I knew kids who went to that school. And the thing that I noticed is — as a young child, very aware of racial profiling — there were some black people who lived on the block, but they tended to be the supers who lived in the basement. I was well aware of that. But I, going to elementary school, who did I become very friendly with? The black girls. Because I had so many cousins. Like I know what it's like to be a young Jewish person, but I was attracted to the differences. I was always attracted to the differences so I became friendly with someone in my class, Linda Simms, who actually — her father was a business owner, was actually quite prosperous in those days. They owned a house on Loring Place or something in the Bronx. And then I became friendly with Deborah Stelly. See, Linda Sims had a mother and father, Deborah Stelly, I knew, only had a mother. And we all became very friendly. And I just was reminded of this recently, I went — because I'm down here in the basement [of the Museum of Natural History] I say it's like the upstairs-downstairs, like, I'm friendlier with the downstairs people. When I go to the mailroom — and pretty much everyone who works downstairs has brown skin. That's just the way of the world. So I went to the mail room this week, I think it was Friday. And the door was locked, it was kind of early for the door to be locked. And they were having a party. So it was one of the people who I work with, Michelle, her birthday and they had all decorated for Halloween. And I could smell the fried chicken. And it was like so much food and music. And it brought me back to going to Linda Simms birthday party, probably about fourth grade. And that's when they had this house. What I noticed right away was the food, like the food was different. Fried chicken, hamburgers that were not cooked to be leather. Right? You know. [Laughs]

SM: [Laughs] I've heard a lot about that.

AB: And the other thing was, there was music. And the adults, the grownups were dancing with each other. In my household, my father, they had a family circle once a month, they would alternate homes. Once a month on a Saturday night, they would get together. And the host family would have food. And the men would play pinochle, the brothers would play pinochle, and the wives would play mahjong. I mean, they talked together when they ate, but other than that, no music, no dancing. And I was like, this is pretty cool. So I was attracted to it. So when I went to this party, I said, yeah! Forgive me for this, but these black people know how to throw a party. Now I'm much more outgoing than my husband. I'm a jazz enthusiast, he knows everything about classical music. We're a strange bunch. What can I say, we're strange. But so I was just like, yeah, just like that day when I went to Linda' Simms' party. I have a lot of those memories stored up. But I knew there was a difference. And I knew that people were afraid of black people. I mean, I just knew that this was the way it was. And then when I went to junior high school, there was a group of black girls who were rough. I mean, in those days they were rough. And so luckily, I had friends who sort of knew me — I was not picked on. And I went to high school across the street from Fordham University in the Bronx.

SM: At Roosevelt. That's where I teach now.

AB: That's where I went to school. And let me tell you, it was rough, because in those days — I don't know if you know the history in the neighborhood, but it was still strongly Italian. And in the 1950s, in particular, when Puerto Ricans came over and then blacks started to move into that neighborhood, there were turf wars. There were turf wars. Luckily, now I graduated in January of 1968, because I graduated early. Because I went there the first day and said, came home and said to my mother, “Any chance I can go to private school?” So I found out you can accelerate and get out of school a half term early, which I did. So luckily, guns were not prolific then. It was knives and chains for the gang wars. But I remember days when they'd be over the loudspeakers — this is the 60s — lock the doors. I remember somebody, some girl, once scratched one of the principals. I remember he had blood dripping. Well, that's how I grew up, so I was like, let me get out of dodge. Plus the education was crap. I was in an English Honors class, which was probably regular English class in other schools. But because I had to double up and finish eighth term English to graduate, it was regular English class. And I remember we were reading Ethan Frome aloud. And these poor students couldn't read out. I mean, there were guys with mustaches in this class, and I thought, they're going to be let out into the world and not be able to read. So, you know, obviously, I've been a very sensitive person who takes in a lot of information and processes it. So that was my experience then. Then I wound up going to Lehman in the Bronx, so I'm so totally Bronx. And that also, the education was also not very good. So luckily, I've always been very inquisitive, and so much of my knowledge has been just supplemented by being — before the internet, I used to go to the library a lot. That was my sanctuary. I went to the Francis Martin? Francis-something library on University Avenue. That was my sanctuary. I always felt comfortable around books. Bookstores, and in those days, mostly libraries. So that was my experience. And I always felt very much... like a bit of an outsider. I wasn't like the others. My mother would say, “Why don't you go out with those girls?” And I

thought, they were like the equivalent of today's mean girls. I had no interest in being with them, they were not nice. They would push people, they would make fun of people. So I just kind of made my way. And I started working while I was in college. I was always very independent. And I remember asking my mother — because some of the girls at Roosevelt would come from Riverdale. Some of them. And they dressed really nice. I said to my mother, “Can I get leather boots?” And it was like, I don't think so. You know, boots were for the snow. So then a friend of mine from high school, not a Jewish girl. Her family were from Estonia. She started working at Macy's. And so she said, “You should work at Macy's. They're hiring people for the holiday season.” Christmas. So one morning, Saturday morning, I got up early. I said to my parents, “I'm going to get a job.” And they said, “Good,” thinking, what is this girl thinking? They let me go. So I went to Macy's on 34th Street. And I said that I was 19. And I was a sophomore at Hunter College. This is in the old days —

SM: Where you could just say that.

AB: — I didn't have to show anything, I did give a social security number. And so I came home and I told my parents, “You what! And to their credit, they didn't say you can't do it. And I was coming home on the subway at night, they must have been so nervous. But they didn't stop me. To their credit, they let me go. So that was an experience. And then several years later, not that long, maybe I was 19. I don't know. My mother had a friend who worked in the offices of Macy's. And she used to hire her niece and her niece's friends to work on Saturday in the office. So she said maybe Andrea wants to work there. We were called Saturday only. So I followed her instructions, I go to the HR at Macy's, do what I do, I fill out the forms. And then they call this woman, and they say, “You know she worked here before? Social Security bounced.” So I had to fess up, she had to make up some story. I know my employee number, don't tell me why, but I know that it's 1691392. That was my Macy's employee number.

SM: Of all things to remember.

AB: I have these things in my head. So that was an experience. I used to work on Saturday. I was very independent to make my way and just take care of myself. So I'd go from the Bronx to 34th Street. And then as soon as when I graduated, you know, my mission was to move away from the Bronx. And that was it. So I wound up on the Upper West Side.

SM: Yeah, that's great. And so do you remember, if you graduated in 68, do you remember anything about the 67-68 teachers strikes that were going on in New York City?

AB: I do more so that my sister had become a teacher. She went to Walton, and she went to Hunter on 68th Street. No, maybe she went to Lehman in the Bronx when it was still Hunter, but I'm gonna say Hunter.

SM: Yeah, Hunter uptown was around '68, a little later when they left.

AB: Yeah, so I'm a little fuzzy. And she also, they had in those days, I don't know if they do it now called SP, like special. So my sister graduated early, and with a birthday in November she was quite young when she graduated college. And so she became a teacher. And, well, my sister is different than I am. You know, we were very active in the anti-war, Vietnam, we were very much not mainstream the two of us. And so she was troubled by the strike, she was troubled by the kids not getting [educated]. I don't remember the details, but I remember it more through her situation than actually. I don't remember if I went to school, I honestly don't remember.

SM: No problem.

AB: I remember that. And I remember the blackout happened during that time.

SM: '65?

AB: Is that when it was? I just remember there was a blackout when I was in high school.

SM: I know one of the more famous ones, like everything went out was in '65.

AB: I might be mixing up a blackout with a transit strike. Maybe I'm mixing up transit strike. But I know there was something that happened when I was walking to school instead of taking the bus. I seem to remember that. No, I'm well familiar with blackouts.

SM: Yes, my mom's family left the Bronx after '65.

AB: Did they move to Co-op City?

SM: No. [Laughs] Jersey City.

AB: My parents didn't leave until after I left. They were there.

SM: And did they move Co-op city?

AB: They did not. They were very much not into the Co-op City thing. They had friends who moved there. And although, not quite sure what the reason was, I mean, obviously you could get a nice apartment at a very good price. And so that was appealing. But you know I honestly don't know. Maybe it was — I just don't know. Maybe they felt it was inconvenient.

SM: Yeah, it's far.

AB: I mean, maybe that was it. So they wound up moving because — again, you know that not a lot of money here — but they wound up moving to Yonkers. Interestingly enough, their zip code was Scarsdale and their mailing address was Scarsdale, New York. It was definitely Yonkers. [Laughs] If you're familiar, you know Central Avenue goes up that way? And there used to be — if you go on the Cross County Parkway, if you're familiar with that — there's a shopping center that you pass. The main store back in those days used to be Gimbel's, believe it or not. But that area, it was a big shopping mecca for people in the Bronx to go there. I remember sometimes we would go up Central, it wasn't that far. We went through the Bronx, we had a car. A used car, but we always had a car. And we would go. There was an Adventurers' Inn on Central Avenue. They had Nathan's hot dogs, and they had a game room. They had pinball machines. So that was a big treat for us to go on Friday night. We would go up there, that was a big deal to go there.

SM: And what other things did you like to do for fun when you were younger or as you got older?

AB: Well, we did the Jewish thing, we went away for the summer. You know, the bungalow crap. But we used to go to what's now a totally developed area, but which was kind of farmland, Rockland County. And we went to a place that had bungalows, and it wasn't — who knows how my parents found us. But I'd say a lot of the families were Jewish. I don't think all of them were Jewish, but a lot of them were Jewish. My mother did not want to go to a place where my father could only come on weekends. She didn't want to be in a place where he was alone in the city during the week and then only saw us [on the weekend]. This was drivable. So this was drivable, even though, back in the day, there wasn't traffic like there is today. So we went to a place in Rockland County for several summers. I'm a little bit fuzzy on the dates, but I remember being there very young. And I remember there was one summer — I can't remember if this is how we wound up there or this happened while we were there. My mother's youngest brother Stanley's wife Rose, had breast cancer. And unfortunately, she went to a doctor at some point. [Speaks outside interview] Oh, you are here. It didn't look like anyone was up there. [Returns to interview] They're putting up the tree for the holidays. So the thing was, we would go there because Stanley wanted. He had two young daughters without a mother. So I remember it was a very difficult time. And my mother's attention was very much diverted to them, which at first I felt jealous about. But anyway, I'm a little fuzzy, but I remember that Karen and Anita were there. It was just a difficult time for the family. And I don't remember, maybe they closed it? They must have sold it to a developer. That was gone. And what my parents found for summer activity was a beach club in the Bronx called Castle Hill. There were two places that people went to from the Bronx: Shore Haven and Castle Hill. We went to Castle Hill, which again was a day trip. And I'm trying, you know, my mother worked in those days. So I don't know if we went in the afternoons with my mother. I guess when I was old enough, I went by bus by myself. It's a little fuzzy. But I remember I really liked playing paddle ball and swimming. And, of course, it was very white. I was aware of this, like, having done my study, of course, they would never let a black person go, even though they were in a close by neighborhood.

SM: Sounds right. And I mean, you talked a little bit about some gang violence. Was there a lot of you know, racial or ethnic tension you experienced?

AB: In the high school I felt it. In high school. Not so much in our neighborhood that I remember. And certainly where I went to elementary school — that was the other thing, and I mentioned this at the day in the Bronx, I mentioned this about the racial profiling in the classes. It's very obvious to me. Like, why are all the black kids in the six class? Funny that. Interesting, because my husband, luckily for him, and he grew up in Ohio, in Cleveland Heights, the black part of Cleveland Heights. But because he was very smart, they picked him up and put him in some specialized school. And he said, if they hadn't done that, he said, I probably would have been in trouble. Because, you know, when you're active kid — like, I was in trouble in school — people say, Andrea? No — because I was bored. So I acted out and I did. The boys get away with it, I'm going to shoot rubber bands too. But I remember kids who probably wound up in jail at some point, you know, they were rough guys. And I remember in third grade, a boy came into our class who didn't speak English. He learned very quickly, but where was he from? Israel. Interestingly enough, I remember that. Came from Israel. And I remember there was a girl in the class who came from an ultra orthodox family. Who knows, like there weren't a lot of them in the neighborhood, but she clearly came from one with the cotton stockings. And she smelled terrible. I mean, it was just, and everyone would make fun of her. It was very sad. But she studied a lot, how she wound up in public school, I guess her parents were poor.

SM: They must have been.

AB: How they wound up in that neighborhood when they really did not have a community. But I never knew her story, but she was a sad case.

SM: And so, what about music? I know we were talking a little bit about music earlier. What kind of music did you like to growing up?

AB: When I was a teen, of course, you know, like I said, Peppermint Twist. I listened to that music. Between my sister and I, we collected records. And of course I liked the Beatles, but I was a little — I wasn't like a Beatle like screaming that. I was older. I remember seeing them on The Ed Sullivan Show. Of course I remember Elvis Presley. My sister liked Elvis Presley and I remember going and buying, for one of my sister's birthdays — the Alexander's department store at Fordham Road had a record department in the basement — and I remember going there buying, as a present, for her Blue Hawaii. Elvis Presley's Blue Hawaii. So we would listen to that. And it wasn't really until I was older and working and I met people who were really into the jazz and into that world music. When I was a young adult. So I really developed. I went to so many music things. You know, New York City's been wonderful for outdoor music and places I used to go. I mean, I went to Fillmore East. I saw Jefferson Airplane at The Fillmore East. Nina Simone at the Fillmore East.

SM: I love Nina Simone.

AB: I mean, I had a lot of those old, back in the day New York experiences. I went to Max's Kansas City, if you're familiar with Max's Kansas City. Max's was a restaurant near Union Square, but I think it was a little further north, but it was close to that Park Avenue South, that area. And it became a hangout for some, like, bold faced people. I knew someone who knew someone and we'd go to Max's Kansas City. So I had a lot of those experiences of things. And of course, I smoked a lot of pot in those days. So I remember going to NYU downtown. NYU had something called "a be-in." And I remember they had — those are the days of the communes — and I don't remember the name of the commune, but they were a big thing at the party. And they had a huge vat of chocolate pudding was one of the attractions. And everybody, myself included, was like, just walking around, stoned out of their head, right? And I remember walking into this one lounge area at NYU. And there was a couple lying on a couch, he was on top of her, and they were obviously having sex. And the thought, in my mind, I sat down, and this is happening in front of me, right? And I remember hearing her say, "What's your name?" And what was freaking me out was his underwear was so dirty. [Laughs] Your face is showing how I felt when I was there. It's all in a haze. So I have a lot of those. When I think back on it, now I was... I wasn't afraid of anything. As I told my son, once I had him, I started to be fearful of things I never was fearful about. Not only for him, of course, as a mother, myself. Like, I used to do a lot of risky things. Hop on the back of a motorcycle? No problem. I used to do things like that. And then after he came, I was like, I better watch out for myself. [Laughs] So I had a kind of hippie lifestyle.

SM: And you said you were involved in some of the anti war protests?

AB: Definitely, definitely anti war. And, you know, I've had thoughts thinking back to those days that I didn't know anyone, personally, because most of the people I knew were in college, or had graduated college. So I didn't know the people who were ripe for the draft. It wasn't until later on, I knew someone when I was working. Just before — I think I hadn't graduated college yet. There were two men who worked there who had come from Vietnam, and they were wackadoodles. They had definitely used a lot of drugs. Used a lot of drugs and their minds were blown. But I remember one particular instance, it might have been at the time that I was working with these two guys, because I worked at a place, the address was 53rd Street off of Madison Avenue. I think the address was 515 Madison, but the entrance was on 53rd Street. And I remember going — because I would go to school and go to work — and I remember crossing Madison Avenue at the time and it was like stopped traffic. They were filming a movie. I don't remember what movie it was, but it was a Woody Allen movie. And someone, one of the ADs or whatever the people are who like corral the people, said, [Exaggerates voice] "We're filming a movie here." Like, screw you. But I remember thinking to myself it was weird that I'm walking along Madison Avenue, they're filming a movie, and guys are getting their heads blown out. And that's the feeling I have now. It's very much the feeling I have now: I'm here talking to you, I'm going to work, I'm going about my life and... what's happening over there. It's very hard for me to reconcile that.

SM: And so were you also involved in any of the women's liberation or feminist type things?

AB: Oh, definitely. Yeah, definitely. I remember in college, I wrote this — because I was a Communications major. I had these thoughts that I was going to go on and get a Master's. Never happened. But it was a speech or like presentations giving speeches that I remember. And what I talked about was, in news articles when you're reporting about a woman, it always talks about what she's wearing. Not so, you don't say, "He's wearing a blue serge suit." But it was always about that. So definitely. And I remember thinking like when, as a teenager, when people started to date — I was not much into the dating scene — but someone said, "You're jealous." And I said, well, I don't understand this idea that a boy pays — he's just the same financial situation I am, right? Maybe he gets an allowance, but he's not like a high roller. He pays for the movie and then that gives him a chance to touch me or kiss me or something. Like that just made me uncomfortable because I understood that kind of ownership thing. So I definitely. Then I was an avid reader of Ms. magazine. One of my highlights was — I was working at an ad agency — and when she was, Gloria Steinem, of course, was out doing the ropes to sell the magazine ad space, that was a big thrill for me to be there and meet her. The other thrill I had once — who were the people I've been excited to meet? Gloria Steinem. Who was the famous poet from the Beatniks? Allen Ginsberg. And Stanley Crouch. Do you notice that the name Stanley Crouch from jazz?

SM: It sounds very familiar to me.

AB: He's written a lot about jazz. I don't know that he's an instrumentalist, but he's written a lot about jazz. I had a friend, may he rest in peace, Dale Hardman, he was so into the music scene, the jazz scene. He knew everyone. And we were down at the seaport one day, on a weekend, it must have been some festival. And he said, "Hey, Stanley," so we sat and talked. Those are the thrills of my life, meeting those people.

SM: That's awesome. I'm jealous.

AB: I've seen since — I mean, not as intimate, but I've seen Gloria Steinem. I go every year to the — at Barnard. Are you familiar with their festival, their film festival every year? It's worth checking out. It's usually in the winter. The Athena Film Festival. It's held at Barnard. It's usually like February or March. And it's a weekend of movies. And it's all about women filmmakers and women subjects. And I always go to that, and she spoke at one of the events related to a film. You should check that out.

SM: I definitely will. I've got a friend over at Barnard.

AB: Athena Film Festival.

SM: That's great. Okay. And what about food? I know you talked a little bit about exposure to different foods. What kind of food were you eating when you were growing up?

AB: We rarely ate in restaurants. It was just not part of our lifestyle. And when there was a celebration, like a graduation or something special, my grandmother would go with us. So that ruled out a lot of restaurants, so we would go to only kosher places. So that limited my exposure to food. And, you know, my mother was an adequate cook, but it was nothing special. I mean, she did great blintzes. Could never make blintzes like my mother could pop those things out. I've tried it, I can't do it. And she had this cheap aluminum little frying pan. She would be able to make the blintzes and she would put up out a dish towel and she popped them out. I've tried. Useless. And I'm a trained cook. I couldn't do it like that. She made chopped liver, it was a famous stuffed cabbage, all those things. She would make a coffee cake from Bisquick. She had the settlement cookbook, which all Jewish women seemed to have. I even have a copy, because I have a huge cookbook collection. Useless in this day and age, but I have that. So I don't remember — when I was, I think, 18 or 19 I went to visit a cousin of mine who lived in California, Los Angeles, my cousin Judy. And I don't know what triggered it when I was there in California, but I decided to stop eating meat. Because I knew like these hippie people who were not eating meat. You know Diet for a Small Planet? They republished it a gazillion times. I think it's Diet for a Small Planet, which was ahead of its time in terms of agriculture and environment and food and so forth. So Diet for a Small Planet, which also advocated not eating meat. So I thought, well, what's gonna happen if I don't eat — I would eat chicken and a hamburger maybe once a week — see what happens if I don't eat that one hamburger and chicken for a week. And I felt good. Try that again. And I never ate meat again, which I always joke is coming from a long line of Kosher butchers.

SM: [Laughs] It's a betrayal honestly.

AB: And so when I went to cooking school, often what you learn to do then is taste and spit. So I would taste and spit. And even now, I cook. I do not eat meat, my husband, he eats chicken and fish, I don't eat that. My son eats everything. So I've cooked, like my son's girlfriend loves this beef stew I make. Do I know what it tastes like? I haven't a clue. So I'm able to — I use scent a lot. And I cook with a lot of spices, but the two of them, especially my son, could eat spices with a spoon. But salt is always very hard for me to gauge. And so I'm able to cook things. Every once in a while, I'll take a little taste and spit, but not the meat itself. A little bit of the liquid, but I don't eat that. But it's weird that I cook it, I've never eaten this stuff and I cook this stuff. And I just ordered the Thanksgiving turkey from a farm.

SM: And what was it, I guess later, like why did you end up going to cooking school? It was just something that —

AB: How did I wind up? It always interested me for some reason. At one point, I really wasn't happy doing what I was doing. I worked in market research, because that's what I did when I was in school. I had a friend whose sister worked for a market research company, because in those days, back in the 60s,

with market research companies, they would hire — there was no MBA for people studying marketing — and they would hire like liberal arts graduates because they were literate, they could write. So they would be able to write the reports. So her sister did this. And she said they would have people who did clerical work, they were called coders. Different meaning of coder than there is now. But you know how now they use AI or whatever? So you would say, “Well, what did you like about that cookie?” “Well, it had a sweet taste, and it was crunchy.” You had to put that into a way that could be coded into the old IBM cards. The punch cards. So everything had to be put into a punch card. So coding then, you would create a sampling of what people said, and you would create the statements. So then they could say like, 36% of the people said it was too sweet. Because I was always a fast reader, I was really an ace at this. And so that's what I did. And what was my point? I lost my track.

SM: How you ended up at cooking school.

AB: Oh, so that's how I wound up in market research. And so when I graduated with a liberal arts degree, I thought, well, I'm gonna go to school, but let me make some money for first so I can move and whatever. So I thought I would leverage my experience. And so I kind of, you know, like anyone does, I kind of spiffed up my resume a little bit to make it look like I did more than I actually did in market research. Not too much. And I would get interviews, and he said, “Well, have you done this?” No, I haven't done that, but I could do it. And then I realized, I'm not getting hired. [Laughs] Because I was never fearful, I started to say, “Yes, I've done that.” So I knew that I had watched people do this in the office, when I worked this. I worked for a small company, I would see what the people with private offices did. So I observed what they did, and I always paid attention and learned. So I got my first job lying my way into a job saying I could do this. Before computers, everything was on paper. So when I had to do things that I said I knew how to do, I said, “I know how we did it at X company, but can I see how you do it here?” So once again, I was self taught, and I would ask a lot of questions. And I've made my share of mistakes. But I learned. And I worked hard and, because I was making money, it's like the thought of being poor again and a student, so I never went back to school. But I wasn't thrilled with what I was doing, and I thought, well, maybe I could try something else. And then if I remember correctly, I worked in an ad agency that wasn't doing so well. And I lost my job. So I said what do I do now? I think it's time for me to go back to school. My parents were willing to help me a little bit financially, so I wouldn't worry about the rent. Not that my rent was, you know, back in the day, I could live and have my own apartment, believe it or not. So I decided I was interested in nutrition, but I had to go back to school to make up science credits. And I went to City College. I had taken a chemistry course. And I was useless, totally lost. I could not. It was beyond me. And so I said, this is not going to work. I couldn't keep up with the kids. I couldn't do it. So I said, what's next? So then I decided to go to cooking school. So that's how that came about. And that was a whole other set of experiences. But then, and the reason I went back to market research was I was working at Sarah Beth's, and initially she had a little place on Amsterdam Avenue across from where the current places. She had a little place. I started there, and then I worked in the new restaurant that's on the east side of Amsterdam Avenue. I baked there. And I went early in the morning, six o'clock I would open up. And I lived on 92nd Street between Columbus

and Amsterdam. I walked down Amsterdam Avenue, since the early 80s. And people would offer me crack cocaine. [Whispers] I had no idea what that was. I would see the little vials on the street, I had no idea. And I asked someone in the kitchen, and they told me what it was. So that was my education. And so one morning, I go. And I had a key to open up the restaurant. And they had someone who worked overnight, the porter, who would clean. The one person who was there overnight. I come in, and he didn't speak English, so I probably nodded at him or something, and I went down. Have you ever been in that restaurant? Sara Beth's?

SM: No, I'm familiar with it but I've never been. So the downstairs — unless they've changed it — there's the main floor and then downstairs is where the bathrooms are and the kitchen. So I went downstairs, and I think I was going to change my clothes. I turned on the oven, had my uniform. And I stepped out of the kitchen. The ladies room was right in this little vestibule. There was a staircase and a little vestibule. And there were two men standing there coming down the stairs. And they were dressed like pimps, they had suits on but they were like, one was purple lamé. You know, it was like holy cow. And I said, "Yes. Can I help you?" And they said, "We're here seeking employment." And I thought to myself, [whispers] are they gonna lock me in the walk-in refrigerator? You know, my thought was like, I hope they don't hurt me. They were not there for a job. Luckily, just then — you know, on the sidewalk, there's the doors that open to the basement? — the meat purveyor came in. Luckily. They decided they weren't interested in a job anymore. And they left. And I was so scared about the fact that I was so vulnerable. Sara Beth was not a very nice person. And I spoke to her about it, but nothing was ever done to make me [feel safer]. So then, coincidentally, I got a phone call from someone who I used to work for. And he said, "We need to hire someone. Do you know anyone?" Blah, blah. I said, "Me." So that's how I came back. Working in the kitchens was tough, I didn't make much money. I had no health insurance. It was a bad thing. So I said, what am I doing? So I went back to work. I just grit my teeth and bear it. And then eventually, I mean, I had a little bit of a rough time adapting to the different changes, but I actually ascended to be a vice president. [Speaks off interview] Hey, hello. I forgot to say I was going to be here. Thank you. So I got to be vice president of a global company. I did pretty well. I had a team of researchers that I supervised, and I handled millions of dollars worth of client business, had to have a certain percentage profit. I was doing well. And then came the big recession. I was out of a job. And being in my 50s, I wasn't going to get a job again. So that's how I wound up here [at the Museum of Natural History]. So what I did, I used to volunteer when I wasn't working at our synagogue. I would help the executive director answering the phone, doing stuff. So what I decided is I am not going to get a job in market research again. The young people, they're much more internet savvy than I am, they pay less, it's not going to happen. What can I do? I still have to work. So I parlayed my executive office experience to become an administrator. So that's what happened. And I first started out, I don't know if it still exists, but there used to be a website, jewishjobs.com used to be a website. So I thought perfect, I could leverage my synagogue office experience. And that's what I would do. And it was a painful time in my life, because I was diligent about looking for a job and showing up for interviews. And I wasn't getting hired probably, you know, it was like, I was too old. And I was too experienced. And overtime, I would watch the same job, they hadn't filled it or it's back again, they fired

someone. So I went to four interviews at the JTS, which is like a block from where I live. It would have been perfect. And so I thought, this is good. They asked for references. And then I didn't hear from them. And then I contacted them, and they said, "Well, sorry, we offered the job to someone else." And I was like, it just... I had a lot of anger in those days, because, to no fault of my own, I'm out of a job. That's a forgotten generation of people, who lost their jobs in their 50s. No one ever talks about that. I tried everything to get a job. And I was certainly qualified. And the fact that somebody couldn't just send me an email and say, "we hired someone else." I mean, the fact that people didn't pay attention to other people just reinforced for me that I have to try harder to acknowledge people. You don't have to say yes or no, but you have to acknowledge someone. If you don't agree with them, say, "I hear what you're saying." End of story. So in any case, it's bringing back memories because I just answered an email to go to an event at B'nai Jeshurun, the synagogue on 88th Street. These memories. They're having a talk with NIF next week, so I signed up to go to that. And I thought I hope it doesn't bring back memories. So I went to work there as like an administrator. I went to work there. And I had two bosses, which is never a good situation. There was one of the rabbis and someone who was, I forgot what she did, but she was a bit of a bitch. And nobody liked her. And the rabbi was also a princess. My life was hell. But I stuck to it. And I would come home and say to my husband, "I don't think they know the *midot*. I think they don't know the *midot*." And then after four months, I got fired. I've never been fired for a job. I mean, other than like, economically, I've ever been fired from a job. Then I realized it was a revolving door, no one could do it. So that was my experience at B'nai Jeshurun, but I kept at it. I have to get a job. So then I didn't pursue so much the Jewish jobs, because forget the Jews, I can't deal with them. And so I used the — what's the other nonprofit? I forgot there's a name for the website. It's all nonprofit jobs. So that's where I found the job for Origami USA, which initially was a part time job. I'm about to spend my 10th year, this would be my 10th anniversary in December. Can't believe it. So I wound up here, and it's been an experience. I've never experienced anything like this. And it's not in a good way. Because obviously, I'm a smart cookie. I have a lot of experience and know how to run a business. I also understand how to manage volunteers, because I've been a volunteer a lot. So I just decided — I call it social security. I started when I was 70, when you're 70 you could work, you don't have to worry about work. So I started collecting social security thinking yeah, because obviously my pay is not that big. But I call it my dental plan, because I'm having a lot of significant dental work. It's so expensive. [Laughs] Anyway, so I've been working, and I was thinking that I would maybe, 2024, I'd give it up. But of all things — and I couldn't deal with it today, I have to start dealing with it — my bank account, in one month in October, I have three deductions for student loans. It's my son. I didn't have student loans, I went to free college. And I said, "Noah, I thought I had finished paying." And I said, it makes no sense. First of all, I got no notice —

SM: Yes, they said they were resuming the student loans.

AB: But the thing is, I stopped getting messages — I was paying, because I looked back at my bank account. We had a thing with our computer, so I don't have a lot of my electronic files. But I looked at my bank account from 2018. And I was paying once a month, once a month. And these three different

amounts on three different dates in one month. I thought it should be once a month. So I don't know if I've been hacked. I contacted Chase. And I found — it's a different company that's taken over the company I started with. I'm sure it's gonna be hell for me to get through, but something's wrong. Why am I getting three? Like one was \$600. One was \$300. One was \$100. This is not right. So hopefully it can be fixed. I couldn't deal with it today, but I got some information. And I keep going. But I thought oh my god. Noah's on the hook for his Fordham University Law School thing. So I'm here for a while. It's not hard, I work mostly at home.

SM: And so, I guess to get towards the end of the questions, did you notice — I know that you said you left the Bronx — were you aware as things started to get worse in the Bronx or in New York City? I know you talked about it more broadly.

AB: I was held up at knifepoint when I still lived in the Bronx with my family. At this point we had moved, and we lived on 182nd Street, just west of the Grand Concourse. And it was a Saturday in the spring and I left — I was going to go out with a friend who lived in the village, the East Village, and I was going to sleep over with her — so I went out and you know the spring weather? Like sometimes it's different? I walked outside, and I said, my jacket's too warm. I'm gonna be warm tomorrow. And I went back in. Somebody followed me. I wasn't paying attention. Somebody followed me in, because it was a locked door. And he followed me and then he said, "Your money or I'll cut you." This preceded my meeting the two guys looking for employment in gold lamé suits. [Laughs] I don't know how I had the presence of mind to do this, but I took my wallet out of my bag and handed him all the cash, as opposed to my whole wallet. And that seemed to satisfy him. But clearly, I was aware. [Laughs] So yes, I knew it was rough.

SM: Yeah. And were you aware —

AB: And when I was a child — I'll just say this — my mother's sister, one of my mother's sisters, was babysitting my sister and I. That's how young I was. They went to a wedding or something, my parents, and we heard a commotion in the street and it turned out that somebody was shot right in front of our building, because the blood stain lasted for years. I don't know if it was a robbery. I don't know if it was a spurned lover, whatever. So I was aware of that violence way back when, when that wasn't common in those days. But I used to be concerned when I walked home from the Y at night, that I can tell you. I was aware that it wasn't all that safe.

SM: And were you aware — I mean, you know, your neighborhood was already very mixed — but were you aware of Jews and most of the other like white ethnicities leaving and moving out?

AB: Definitely. I mean, I was aware of the whole Co-op City thing. Definitely. I definitely saw the turnover. Now, when I go to the Bronx, it's so... I don't know how to explain it. I mean, I know I lived there. And I recognize a lot of landmarks. But it's just so different. I always think of Fordham Road as so

bright. The signage is just so bright. I'm not saying it in a derogatory way, it's just so different. And I'm definitely aware of the difference. I mean, I used to go to Orchard Beach, I used to take the crosstown bus. And I think, when I was at Roosevelt — obviously, I didn't go to graduation — but I remember I think there was a senior boat trip. And I remember it was some Latin band that actually became quite popular. We didn't know it. You know, when I hear the name now, it's like, yeah, I missed that one. I knew the neighborhood, and it was dangerous. It was definitely dangerous. Unfortunate. Now, unfortunately, I feel the same way. I live north — I don't know if you know the neighborhood — I live north of Columbia on a street called LaSalle Street, but it's actually equivalent to 124th Street. It's a wonderful place. It's a nice six buildings on nine acres. It's a co-op. And it was created in the 1950s as slum clearance, quite honestly. But it's across the street from NYCHA housing. And there's been a fair amount of shootings. So I always feel like I don't want to be in the crossfire. There's that. And then you read about it all the time. A woman on Amsterdam and 63rd Street got robbed at 10 o'clock at night. And I'm also concerned about getting hit by a bike. And I try to tell Noah, who rides a bike, my son, and he said, "Mom, trust me, people know what they're doing. I know this doesn't help you feel safe, but people know what they're doing. They're not going to hit you." But I said, what about the time I got off the back of the bus up by Columbia Presbyterian. And because he couldn't get over, it was so crowded, the bus parked in the street. And as I'm getting out of the bus, there's a bike coming. And I said, Noah, I don't move like I used to. And my vision is not what it used to be. I feel tense when I'm in the street when I used to enjoy walking in the street. And this is sad to me. This is so sad. I always feel myself like this. I'm sure you hear this from other older people.

SM: You know, I mean, even generally. I mean, even as a young person, I lived in the Bronx for four years when I was a Fordham undergrad, now I live over here and I go up there every day. But it's like, I walk the street by myself. I finish my grad classes at nine o'clock at night.

AB: So how do you go home? Do you take the bus to the subway?

SM: I just walk up Columbus from the Lincoln Center campus.

AB: Oh, so you're at the Lincoln Center Campus?

SM: Yes, for my classes. When I go up to teach in the Bronx — because I'm a student teacher — so I teach at Roosevelt during the day, and then I take my classes at the Lincoln Center campus at night.

AB: Because what happened to this woman is — because immediately I was thinking Amsterdam Avenue and 63rd street? I said, that's right by your school.

SM: Yes, it is. I just walk up Columbus after I finish my classes at night. And usually, I mean, there are a lot of people out on Columbus around nine o'clock even during the week, but it's still it's like, I'm used to living in the Bronx. I'm used to, you know, I have one headphone in and I'm not on my phone.

AB: I would never. Even when things were a little bit better, I never wore headphones. I need to hear what's around me. You know, I need to be on my toes. Having had a few experiences, shall we say? But I don't do things that I used to do. I mean, sometimes I second guess, like, I wanted to do something in Brooklyn. But I said, Andrea, you're gonna be coming home at night on the subway alone. Do you want to do that? I really don't go south of — my son lives on 54th Street — I rarely go further south, just because traveling can be such a pain in the neck, the subways and buses on the weekend. I don't do a lot of stairs very easily. And so I do a lot of my going out in the neighborhood. I thought about like sometimes I go to — they have great programs at New York City College. The Harlem stage. I was going to go to some Latin thing. My husband's not as crazy about Latin music like I am. And I thought Alfred's not going to go, you want to stand on Amsterdam Avenue after the concert by yourself and wait for the bus? And I've been censoring myself about things that I do and don't want to do. And I don't necessarily think my husband's — okay, he's a black man, but I don't think necessarily that we're safe from any harm.

SM: But he's also a man.

AB: He's a man. I have the opposite from when, back in the day. I've suffered. I'll never be in brown skin, but I'm black adjacent. And I know how hard it is to get a cab. You know what my worry was when I was pregnant? Getting a cab when it's time to go to the hospital. Imagine having that on your mind.

SM: That's horrible.

AB: Living in Manhattan. And luckily, as we were leaving, we had a bag and a pillow, and a woman in our building was walking to the door. She said, "Are you going to have your baby?" I said yes. She said, "I'll get you a cab." So I've lived in both of those worlds. So I'm very wary, I'm very wary on the street. I take the subway at 125 Street to come to work, but more often than not, I've been taking the bus. When I saw how many minutes to the bus, I think I'll wait for the bus.

SM: And so my last question for you, when you think back about your time growing up in the Bronx, what kind of memories or emotions do you associate with it?

AB: That I learned to be independent. That I learned to live in a mixed neighborhood. I mean, like young people, old people, Jewish people, not Jewish people, people with brown skin. That I just was exposed as a natural way of life of just being among other people. Shopping, walking to stores. Again, I didn't grow up in a car culture, so I had the independence of being able to, as a young person, use public transportation. And I think that's really what I think about so much that it really, in so many ways, prepared me to be an adult. And I think the Bronx, I think the city life in general, I saw that with my son when he had a friend in elementary school, the family — he was very friendly with him — they moved

to Westchester in I think the second grade. And Noah went to John's first birthday party [there], and I saw the difference already between Noah and his peer group for the kids who are growing up in the suburbs. Although now I tell Noah, you're not gonna have kids in that city. I couldn't believe that came out of my mouth. I couldn't believe I said that.

SM: Well, thank you. Is there anything you would like to add before I end the record?

AB: No, except this has been my pleasure.

SM: Oh, absolutely. It's been mine.