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Suzette deVogelaere '69-Ellen Steinberg Kerch '69

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Connecticut College

Ellen Steinberg Kerch

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Suzette deVogelaere: So, here we go. So, for the record I am Suzette deVogelaere class of 1969 and today is June first and if you would state your name and ...

Ellen Kerch: Are you- the fact that we're the same class isn't why you're doing the interview.

SdV: No, no, no.

EK: Just a coincidence?

SdV: Just a coincidence, because I just interviewed someone who graduated five years ago, 2019. So, I just want you to state your name for the tape and, yeah, your class.

EK: I graduated in 1969 and my name is Ellen- I use my maiden name as my middle name, so Ellen Steinberg Kerch.

SdV: Okay. And Ellen, what made you decide to come to Connecticut.

EK: I grew up in Pittsburgh of very modest means and as far as I knew I was going to live at home and attend the University of Pittsburgh. But the the summer- the summer, I guess, between the junior and senior year of high school, my synagogue in Pittsburgh sent me to a national -- you're going to think it's not related, but it's very much related -- sent me to a national camp institute a, you know, camp situation outside of Atlanta in Cleveland, Georgia. And it was amazing to me, I mean, that I went on this long trip. I traveled there by bus by myself and I got myself there and I was absolutely thrilled. And a a- woman- a girl, I guess, a couple of years older than I who was one of the leaders of the camp -- I was just a person attending it, but she must have been a leader in the National Federation of Temple Youth -- got- she- she got it in her mind that she wanted to tell me all about the college that she loved and went to and thought it would be absolutely great for me -- I never heard of it - - and it was- her name was Carol Friedman and she told me about her college, Connecticut College for Women in New London and she really thought I would be perfect for it and I would love it and I should apply. And it- so it's that much of a fluke. It's that I went to that Camp Institute. This person who was a student there was there and I, you know, I had two other places I was applying: one where my cousin went and one where I could go by bus into the city and now I- I got the information and applied to this college. I had no idea how I would have gotten there if I were accepted. It was just something I did, not thinking anything would come of it. And one of the first days of April, I believe it was I -- so this would have been April of 1965 -- I opened the mail- I came home from school and opened the mail and it was an acceptance letter from this college and it offered me a full, complete, tuition-room-and-board scholarship. And here I am.

SdV: Nice. And did you come and visit the College before you applied?

EK: I accepted it, but that summer- alright I accepted it, sight unseen, I- but this woman had told me all about it and I wasn't- and my mother said "How are you going to get there?" and

I learned I could go on a Greyhound bus, which was, you know, looking back on it I think they could have figured out how to- they could have gotten me there, at least the first time, but -- don't put that in your report ...

SdV: So, when you got here, how did ...

EK: So, I didn't answer your last question. What was your last question?

Unknown Participant: Had you been here before? You had never been to here before you came.

EK: I, well, okay. That summer I had a job in this camp in suburban New York City and my parents came up there and we went to -- I was already accepted and accepted it -- but they- we went there to visit it, just to see it. So I saw it after I was accepted and visited it, but just so I would see what it was like, they took me for a ride -- just for the day -- and came back.

SdV: So when you got here, how did your first impression or reaction compare to what Carol had told you about it?

EK: Very similar. It was very similar. Everyone was incredibly welcoming and nice and I met lots of people and I was- I mean I couldn't believe that this had happened to me. I never dreamed that I would do anything like this and here it was. And just because of this sequence of events.

SdV: Right. So, were there any surprises, anything that you weren't expecting?

EK: We're talking about something that happened a long time ago. I was placed in a cooperative dormitory. That was part of my scholarship, so it- I- I don't even know if it's open any more. It was Lazrus House on the edge of the campus. Do you think it's still open?

SdV: I don't know myself.

EK: I think it may not be, where it was a co-op and that meant we did all the cooking, menu planning, shopping lists -- oh, no, not shopping lists; that's wrong -- cooking. You know, we did everything ourselves and I was placed in that dorm. So, I had those duties, you know, as part- as part, the whole, you know -- everybody did that lived there -- but I was- I was one of those people.

What did you say? How did I ...

SdV: What was that experience like, to be in the co-op?

EK: It was wonderful. It was fine. It was like being in a- you, know we had a very strong sense of community. I- I'd say very- I don't know how- I don't know how compared to others, but we were- the Complex was new then and we were only 28 people in our dorm and I think we were pretty close. And we- you know, you had a- let's say you had a- it was your

turn to cook dinner, but you had a test the next day, you could find somebody to trade with you. You- it was pretty- it was a pretty nice connection with people and I did like it.

SdV: Okay. And you lived there all four years?

EK: Mmmmhmmm.

SdV: Okay. What was your major?

EK: Sociology.

SdV: Okay. Any particular classes or professors that stand out?

EK: Well, a couple of the sociology professors: there was one that was- that- Miss Macklin, June Macklin, was a sociology professor that I had a very good connection with. And I'm really embarrassed, there was another teacher that I liked real well and I can't- I can picture her, but I can't ... I mean I liked- there were only five or six people in the sociology department and I- I really liked that. And don't forget, it was the late Sixties and sociology and the study of, you know, society's problems and the potential fixes for them and it was very much what the late Sixties was about and I really, really loved it. And in those years, I decided I would go to graduate school in social work, which- which wasn't the same as sociology, but they were connected and it kind of sent me on a path, you know.

SdV: And then ...

Unknown Participant: When you came, you were not a sociology major to begin with.

EK: Oh, no. I think I was going to major in French. Is that what I told you? Yes, I adored French in high school and thought I wanted to major in French, but once I got to college and realized how relevant to the world sociology was and I didn't know anything I would do with French, except be a high school French teacher -- now, ironically, I chose sociology, but many years later, many years later, I actually became a high school English teacher. So, became a high school teacher at the end of my career- not the end of my career, but ten or twelve years before the end of my career, but- so I revisited the teaching part, but I- I went- I forgot, what did you ask? What was the last question?

SdV: Just, we were talking about classes and professors, things like that. Did you have Dr. Glassman?

EK: No.

SdV: Oh, okay. I thought I ...

EK: He wasn't there in Sociology when I was there. There were about five people, I think Kennedy might- Dr. Kennedy, maybe, I'm not sure, but Miss Macklin was one that I really liked. June, I think her name was June Macklin.

SdV: Were there any other classes outside your major that you particularly enjoyed or influenced you?

EK: I liked a philosophy course. And I can't remember who taught it, actually, but I did like philosophy. I did take French just for one or two years, continued with that. I liked that.

SdV: What was it about philosophy that you liked?

EK: I guess- I think it was just tossing around ideas about life and, you know, what different noted people had said about it.

SdV: Did philosophy and sociology relate in any way in ...

EK: You know, you're talking about it a long time ago. I don't have an answer for that. I get- you know, I think I was interested in what makes people do the things they do, but I- I can't tell you any more details. Are you recording it or are you ... Oh, you are. Hello, recorder.

SdV: Right there. Were you involved in any groups or activities on campus?

EK: I was always involved in what they used to call Jewish Student Group, because there weren't the affiliation, you know, you know, with Hillel or other religious organizations. But I always participated in that.

SdV: What kind of activities?

EK: Oh, they arranged where you could- they made arrangements for you, for example, if you wanted to go to services at one of the synagogues in New London, they worked that out. They made introductions for you. They made sure that you had plans for the High Holidays. I mean, it was pretty good. You know, they advertised different things that were going on and- but I did I tell her about- okay, I didn't tell her about the New York Hilton. Okay, this is very important. I- eventually, the different student groups affiliated with the large organization, okay, so eventually, our Jewish student group affiliated with Hillel. I don't think I'm telling you what I just told you. The thing I was just at, it came up, just in a discussion group. Okay, so there was a sign in the campus post office that the United Jewish Appeal, a national Jewish philanthropy group was -- and now I'm telling you what it is, now what the sign said -- it was going to a United Jewish Appeal convention at the New York Hilton at Rockefeller Center and then Hillel asked to send several representatives to it. So they wanted university, or college, I guess, students to be there as observers and the College -- I mean, I think if I'm right, the detail of this, I'm not sure -- the College would pay the bus fare, Hillel would pay the cost of your hotel in New York and the cost of the convention. Between the different groups, whatever it was, it would all be paid for and it sounded like an interesting opportunity to me. And I was doing that because I was part of this new Hillel group. So I did that. I took the bus down to Manhattan and I went in -- I must have talked about this at the thing we were just at, I wonder why she didn't recognize it, because ...

SdV: So, yeah, I'm interested in what part of the College was involved in that, that was getting you to the, you know, paying for your ...

EK: Well, they were- the whole thing was supported by them, okay? So, okay, so I got- I got into New York. I took the taxi to the hotel and I walked into the hotel lobby and I saw a way over to register to sign in and I saw a young guy standing there registering. He looked nice. He was- when I walked over, you know, he was there and we got to talking and to make a very long story short he was my first husband. He was- he was killed in an accident in 1988, but we had almost 20 wonderful years together.

SdV: That's great. So, I'm just- I know we have a short time, so I'm trying to bring you back to the College experience, because that's what the archive is about. Well, of course we were both here in the 1960s, but I'd like to hear in your words what you felt the climate was like. Any particular events or controversies that stood out for you.

EK: I don't- I- I don't think I experienced on the campus lots of stress about- obviously it was Vietnam- time. I- see I don't know how to tell you what's me, what's my family, what's this, what's the College, but one, a strong memory I have is that during Vietnam, which was during that time, it was a little -- I didn't know how to react, for this reason -- my father was a very, very proud World War II veteran, and he was very negative about the Vietnam war protesters. Not because he knew a whole lot about the details of Vietnam, but the idea that you wouldn't want to serve your country was very hard for him when he interrupted the beginning of his career to go serve in France during World War II. So that was very confusing for me.

SdV: Did you experience any other- any of that on the campus?

EK: No.

SdV: I'm trying to bring you back to Connecticut.

EK: But I'm telling you I don't know what to tell you about that.

SdV: So you really didn't feel that on the campus?

EK: I didn't- it's really funny, because I don't- I may have, but we are talking about quite a long time ago. I can't tell you there weren't any stresses about it. I guess there were- there were things that had seemed very opposed to the war, but I don't remember the details and I was- I wasn't sure how to react to all of it, as I say, because of my own father's experience. So, it was a confusing issue. I- and also, different people that I dated in, like, high school and college were all trying to not go to Vietnam and that was confusing and there were some awkward moments when the people would come to pick me up and it was clear that my father was thinking very differently than they were.

SdV: So, you said, you eventually became a college- a teacher ...

EK: High school teacher.

SdV: After. And then went to graduate school in social work.

EK: No, but it's the wrong order. After college -- I graduated from Connecticut College with a sociology major, following fall I went to University of Maryland for social work.

SdV: Right.

EK: Work, social work, had a- I had various jobs: part-time, full-time. Had my three children, who- in '72, '75, and '78, had various part-time jobs, but later on had the idea, really got the idea that I would pursue education, some of it was just practicality: that you- the hours were, the summers off, the vacations. It was just many things about it that I thought would work and I joked, but there was truth to this: I would say, being a classroom teacher is kind of like being a group worker as a social worker, but your group of clients are your classroom and there's something to that and I think having that social work experience helped me manage the classroom.

SdV: Can you say specifically how your experience at Connecticut helped you with those ambitions after transitions after ... anything specifically about Connecticut?

EK: I think it just- I- I don't know what to say to that because I think it was part who I was and my education and my I had a confidence, I guess, about making my way professionally that I think the school was part of and I don't- I don't have anything more specific to say about that. Sorry.

SdV: Okay. That's fine, that's fine. Have you kept in touch with your classmates and how have you done that?

EK: Well, I'm in touch with my freshman roommate, who's here this weekend, and with a few other people for holiday cards, but not a lot. On the other hand, though, there are a couple connections I have reignited this weekend, in particular one I think I will pursue. So, I haven't- I think because of geography, you know, that I haven't been in a lot of touch except for just a couple people.

SdV: How many reunions have you come to?

EK: I think this is just the second. I don't know if I went to one other.

Unknown Participant: I don't think you did.

EK: He thinks I didn't. If I came to one, it's one other at the most.

SdV: Okay. It isn't like the last one is the 50th.

EK: Oh, no. I- I feel like it's possible that somewhere a long time ago and I came to one and I'm- what- what makes it kind of confusing was there were a couple times in my life that I

happened to be in this area and I came to just see the campus and I might be mixing those images up. I'm just- I know it sounds easy to list, but I'm not sure.

SdV: Not at all. Not at all. Is there anything that you are aware of that's happening on campus now that you wish you had experienced 55 years ago?

EK: On campus now? I don't know what you mean.

SdV: Well, I mean changes you're seeing anything about the campus, the curriculum ...

EK: You mean here? I don't know enough about the curriculum. I have- one of my- two of my grandchildren -- that's right -- have been in college- well, two have been in college or- well, two have been in college ...

Unknown Participant: You wish that you had the Hillel that they have now.

EK: Yes,

Unknown Participant: You wished- you wish you could have had that when you were here.

EK: Yeah, that's true. Well, my two- my grandchildren go to giant- a giant university that has a Hillel that, you know -- well, it's like practically having a synagogue on campus and that- that wasn't the case. It was a whole different college experience, sohis was a much more personal one, so there were advantages, but the Hillel was- didn't offer as many things. Again, where my granddaughters go have a kosher dining room, you know, it's University of Maryland, which is a huge university.

SdV: What was something I wanted to ask about? Did you go to the presentation about the changes that they are making to campus?

EK: No

SdV: So, they're taking this road, Cro Road or whatever they call it, and it's all going to become pedestrian so all of that hard surface in front of the chapel and up here in front of the Plex will turn into a pedestrian walkway and then they're going to be putting any parking out on the periphery. And then they're updating Cro and redoing the ...

EK: I don't know anything about that.

SdV: I mean just the idea that- what does that- what do you think about that?

EK: I don't really have any deep thoughts about that. I'm just hearing about it. It's hard to- it's silly for me to- I mean I live half the country, a third of the country away. They have to do what works here for them. But, I don't have any thoughts about it that, is that okay?

SdV: Oh, sure. There are no wrong answers, to start with. It's just how you feel. If you were meeting with a new incoming student to Connecticut, what advice would you give to, now, him or her?

EK: Yeah! I guess, when you- if there's something you don't understand or you're not sure why something works a certain way or classes are organized, ask questions. To be open to, you know, have an open mind, be will- be willing -- excuse me-- be willing to ask and pursue what you don't understand.

SdV: Did you find that something when you were here, that you needed to ask questions about something you didn't understand, or ...

EK: Yeah, I think I was- I think I was, like, incredulous that I was here and I- I don't remember- I think I was fairly accepting, I don't know I didn't really have questions that didn't get answered. I don't think that- I think I just- I think I was probably pretty accepting because I had nothing to compare it with. I didn't, you know- here I am on a college campus where everything is being paid for me, and if it weren't, there's no chance in a million years that I would be here, so I was very thrilled to be here and I think I was pretty awed by it.

SdV: Anything else that I should ask you about your experiences that I haven't?

EK: Let me think about that. I- Can you think of anything? I can't think of anything. No, I think you've been very complete. I mean, I think- I it- you know we're talk about how many years ago, so I can't- it's not like I know what happened- I can't compare it to, say, volunteer work I did last year, in terms of my ...

Unknown Participant: You've said that the education you go here really prepared you for when you left and went on to graduate school. You really owe a lot to this school.

EK: Oh, yeah. Now, I- like I, as I say, one- two of my granddaughters have been involved with college and I think- now, they- I don't know- I won't get into the details of the the different colleges and all of that, but I think that my time was more rigorous in terms of amount of reading, you know what you were responsible for, but is that because this was a private small school and they go to a large, state university or -- one has gone for two years to a community college -- I don't- I have no idea.

SdV: But what- what's interesting is you think that what- what you experienced was very rigorous.

EK: I think it was more rigorous. I don't- but, you know, I don't- we're talking about something I did I don't know how many years ago and I'm observing what my grandchildren are doing. Now, maybe I'm making this stodgy old grandmother and, "Oh, I had to work much harder!" There could be an element of that. But, I- that is my observation. I think it was pretty rigorous here.

SdV: Okay. Great.

EK: Just out of curiosity, do you remember it being rigorous too, or ...

SdV: Oh, definitely.

EK: I think that it was.

SdV: You know, I interviewed- I told you, I just talked to the gal who just graduated five years ago and she mentioned the Honor Code and I asked her questions about the Honor Code. Fifty years ago- 55, you know, when we were here, what do you remember about the Honor Code and how that has influenced you in your life?

EK: The- wait, did you say she asked you or you asked her?

SdV: No, no. She just mentioned it in talking and so I followed up with her about the Honor Code.

EK: But she was a student from our time?

SdV: No, no, no. She was the gal I talked to before and she only graduated five years ago, so it was interesting that the Honor Code still ...

EK: Present and working.

SdV: Right.

Unknown Participant: Do you remember anything about that?

EK: I- I actually think that I knew -- you mean like the Honor Code about not cheating, not doing this, not doing that -- I think it was so foreign to me to ever think if cheating that I don't think I dwelled on it. I think that- I never- you know, I did all the work and I knew I was lucky to be a full-scholarship student and I wasn't raised to think that cheating had anything, any place, anywhere, so I just don't think I have a connection to that. Is that okay?

SdV: Of course. I was just curious because, you know, 55, 50 years later there's still- the Honor Code is still here. It means something to the graduates.

EK: Sure. That being that they would do their own work and not cheat, and all that.

SdV: However, they're applying it now and whatever it means to them now.

EK: One thing -- I do notice- I do notice one difference -- I think that- but now, okay, if you are- you assigned a novel to me say and you don't want to read that novel, you go on the computer and you type in summary of, you know, whatever, summary of *Fences* by August Wilson, you'll- you can spend ten minutes and you'll know what the play is about. There's no way that occurred when we were in college, so it's a different thing, it's a different thing. So, I- now what did you ask me? What did you ...

SdV: Oh, we were just talking about the Honor Code.

EK: Well, I mean, it never went through my mind to cheat. It just didn't. I mean, I don't mean to be patting myself on the shoulder, but I- I don't think it was something I struggled with because it wasn't my intention.

SdV: That wasn't on my list of questions, it just something I brought in from another interview. I thought it would be ...

EK: That's alright! Oh good, so did the person- thought about the Honor Code?

SdV: She just mentioned it in the conversation and I kind of followed up on that.

EK: But she remembered that there was an Honor Code?

SdV: Yeah.

EK: But, was she my age?

SdV: No, no, she was- she graduated in 2019.

EK: Oh, so that's a different time. I- I- I can't tell you that I remember how that was discussed or applied or ... I mean obviously you were forbidden to cheat, but how it was all written up, I don't know.

SdV: Oh and it does. And that's all the time that I have.

EK: Well, I very much enjoyed this.

SdV: Oh, good.