Darryl Bloom Transcript

Sandra Stillman Gartner: Everything should be rolling.

Ann Buffum: I'm going to start with an introduction. This is Ann Buffum and Sandy Gartner, meeting with Darryl Bloom to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is August 15, 2005. We are at Darryl's home in Montpelier, Vermont. Darryl, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

Darryl Bloom: Yeah, sure do.

AB: Okay. Well, Darryl, we'd like you to just start by talking about your grandparents and your family. We know they were immigrants to the United States, if not your grandparents, your great grandparents. We'd like you to tell us a little bit about where they came from, where they settled, and maybe some interesting stories about them.

DB: Okay. As you know, my great-grandparents were not Jewish. I'll just start with a joke that somebody told me that slips me into being Jewish and also tells you something about my paternal great-grandfather – I think. Yes, my paternal great-grandfather. The story, according to the joke, is that he was in the line in immigration, which he was, and was practicing his new name because he was told that the immigration folks wouldn't remember his name as it was or wouldn't be able to understand it as it was. He was practicing and practicing. He got up to the line and was asked his name. He said, "Shoyn fargesn [I've forgotten]." Sean Ferguson. Sean Ferguson is indeed my great-great-grandfather. [laughter] So, who knows?

SG: Are you serious?

DB: Sean Ferguson is the name of my great-great-grandfather.

SG: It's that old Jewish joke.

DB: Yes, exactly. I just laughed and laughed when I heard that joke because there it is.

SG: [inaudible] That's fabulous.

DB: I'm in. I'm in in ways that I didn't even know about.

SG: That's very funny.

DB: Let's see. He was from Scotland. All I know about him is that he was involved in racing greyhounds because my father had from his father some kind of a trophy, which was like this great, big, enormous – well, it wasn't an enormous – this great big – it was like a chafing dish with a top that rolled up or back down. It was a dish with a top on it. When it was closed, the top said Sean Ferguson, and now I've forgotten the dates, but it had to do with greyhound racing. That was my great grandfather …

SG: Can we stop this one second … [Tape paused.] You were talking about the Stable Gallery.

DB: The Stable Gallery, yes.

SG: Where was it? In New York City?

DB: It was in New York City up on the Upper East Side.

AB: As you were growing up, can you tell us about your early years? Well, actually, this question is a little further back. Did your family, when they came here – and your parents – did they maintain their religious identity?

DB: No. Maybe my grandparents did, but I didn't get any of that from my father or my mother. My father was an engineer and remarked that he did not need God. That was that as far as he was concerned. "I'm not a people person, Darryl, and God doesn't figure in my thinking." That was my father's take on life. I am pretty sure that my mother's background was either Presbyterian or Episcopalian. Then, as far as I knew, we went to the Presbyterian Church because it was the one that was across the street. That was that.

AB: Were they sending you to Sunday School?

DB: Yes, they were sending me to Sunday school. My mother was involved as a volunteer. She's a floral arranger and was and is somewhat now – doesn't do very much anymore – very artistically talented. She always did the flowers for the church. That was a big part of my awareness of church growing up. She would go over on Saturday and do the bouquets that went around in the church.

AB: The neighborhood? What kind of ethnic character did the neighborhood have?

DB: It was old. The town is called Sewickley. It's an old suburb of Pittsburgh. We were in the valley. It was, in some ways, a little bit like Montpelier. We were in the valley not too far from the Ohio River. The Heights had been settled largely by Carnegies, Mellons, and steel folks. So they were up in the Heights. Then the valley was the merchants and all of the stuff that it took in the town to support the people who were living up in the heights. We lived in the valley close to town. At that time, I would say growing up, that was kind of the professional class largely who were living there. I was very aware that there was a Black neighborhood about two or three blocks away. When I went to school, I went to the public school for a while, and I would walk from my house. The neighborhood would change. On one side of the street were the houses where Black families lived, and on the other side of the street were the houses where white families lived. On one side of the street was the AME, African Methodist Episcopal Church. And

on the other side was a different Methodist Church. This was not the main road, but just a block down from what would be Main Street on my way to the public school. Life was very much categorized by ethnic group and income. That was the world. When I was in third grade – we moved to that town when I was in third grade, and I was a new student. I was walking home. Because of the way I was walking home, I was walking home with a classmate who was Black. We were having nice conversations walking back and forth from school in our innocence of not really knowing how closely divided life was and how carefully packaged it was in its separate places. I came home and told my mom that I wanted to invite a classmate for lunch. Then I told her that she was Black. I'm sure I said she was a negro. My mother explained to me that that would not be okay to have her come for lunch. That very much defined the way the compartments of life were explained to me growing up.

AB: Was there a Jewish community?

DB: Very small. Yes. That I was aware of, there were three Jewish families. One of those families had kids, who were slightly older than I, and two of them – the two brothers sometimes – when I was in probably middle school or junior high school – it would have been junior high school – I belonged to some kind of a youth fellowship. There were the (Greenes?). The two (Greene?) boys would come to the Presbyterian Church and take part in discussions at that youth fellowship. I remember meeting and knowing them a little bit. One of the guys was a friend of my older brothers. And one of the doctors in town – Dr. Selkovits was Jewish.

AB: Of course, you converted to Judaism at age twenty-five. So you must have an interesting story to share with us about what your education was and how you finally came to this decision. We'd like to hear you tell us that story.

DB: Okay. The impetus of it certainly was that my husband is Jewish. But his background is curious, too, because he's Jewish by way of personal identity and also his

father's family. He grew up in a very Waspy town also, in Xenia, Ohio, which had a small Jewish community, but his father was no longer – his father's family were not particularly practicing Judaism. But when Barney went to college, everybody assumed he was Jewish, and he did too. That was the beginning of his self-identify as Jewish. When we met, he told me that he was Jewish. I think my response was, "Oh." I didn't know any more than to say, "Oh," because what did I know? [laughter] Soon after we were married, we went to Israel, and we lived on a kibbutz for a while. That was my first introduction, really, to being Jewish was being on this kibbutz. It was kibbutz Hulda, which was an old Polish kibbutz. So the people who were on there had come just before and after the war. They were moderately interested in the volunteers. There were a lot of volunteers, and a lot of the kibbutzniks just left us alone. We were passing through. We were good for labor, and kind of crazy kids, and not really going to be staying, and not involved in the politics of how the kibbutz was –

AB: Is this in the '60s?

DB: This would have been –

AB: '70s?

DB: Early '70s. Right. Early '70s.

AB: Had you already converted?

DB: No.

AB: Not yet.

DB: Not yet. No, no.

AB: Were you married?

DB: Yes.

SG: You had married.

DB: We were married. Yes, yes. We were married. We were on a kibbutz for about six weeks and spent a little bit of time visiting in Jerusalem. We didn't live in Jerusalem, but we did visit in Jerusalem. I was very moved by the ancientness of being in this city. I don't think I had ever really contemplated ancientness quite the way I did there and was able to there. The Wailing Wall was fairly newly opened up. It was quite a deal to be able to go down to the wall. The energy around all of that was very, very strong. Even though I didn't know what it was, I knew it was big. I knew the energy was big. I knew it was extremely important, even though I didn't know a lot about why it was important. I certainly knew something about the Holocaust, but not very much. My public school and then private high school education were just awful when I think about it in terms of what I did and didn't know about the history. Were I to be living with a group of Polish Jews now, I sure would have a lot more questions and seek more opportunities to talk with people than I did in my innocence and ignorance then. I was interested in the social aspect of the kibbutz, the socialism aspect of it, and how it ran. I worked in the kitchen. I worked in the kitchen with – I'm sort of tall – women who were probably about chest height or shorter, and they were just about as round as they were tall. They didn't talk to me. I couldn't speak Hebrew, and they couldn't speak English. They didn't talk to me much.

SG: You didn't try Polish, did you?

DB: No, I didn't try any Polish. Man, were they hard workers. Then, they started liking me because I was a hard worker. I had a position. I was okay because I was a hard worker. Barney used to say to me, "Don't be a good worker in the kitchen because you'll never get out. If you do a good job in the kitchen, you'll never get out of the kitchen." Well, I couldn't conceive of doing a job and not being a hard worker. So I spent a long

time in the kitchen. My visual sense of them is that they were like little bulldozers. They just went – if I was in the way, I just moved out of the way because they were on a mission, man, going from one place to the other. I became one of their favorite pot scrubbers. I would have these three-foot-tall pots. At the end of the day – I worked in the kitchen at the end of the day because the scraps and the daily soup had been brewing and brewing. It would have a good three-inch layer of gunk at the bottom of the pot that I'd climb in, [and] be inside the pot, scrubbing the pot. But even though we weren't talking, I liked it. I liked the camaraderie of working there with that group of women. We didn't talk, but we still worked together. I did a little bit of outside work, but not very much. I think I did a little bit of work in the grapes. I can't remember. I really did spend most of the time working in the kitchen. Then, we came back to the States. We lived in Xenia. We lived with Barney's parents. We went to a Reform synagogue in Dayton; that was the closest synagogue that we could get to. We were probably the only or one of the very few young couples who didn't have children who went regularly to Friday night services. So, people were very interested in us and very welcoming and very hopeful that we were going to stay around and be a part of the shul and everything. I got this really warm welcome. People, I assume, knew that I wasn't Jewish, and it was alright. They were very welcoming to us. They wanted to know, "Would we stay? Would we join?" That was for about a year. All we did was go to services, and I think I read a little bit. Then, we went to Hawaii. [laughter] While we were living in Hawaii, we belonged to a little synagogue that was much more of a chavurah. We met in the basement of the Friends Meeting House. There were several people who were Reconstruction Jewish who led the services and led the discussion groups. That's where I started studying. I studied as a part of the chavurah, and then I studied with the rabbi who was Conservative, and he was there with the military.

SG: Wow. Quite a difference.

DB: Yes. There were some interesting contrasts between the Reconstruction folks and the conservative military rabbi. By then, it was clear that being Jewish was an important part of Barney's identity, and he hoped that it would be family identity when we had kids, even though we didn't quite know when that was. So, for those reasons, I just started studying more and more and saying to myself, "Okay. This is something that I can be a part of, that I like, that I want to be a part of." What I remember – a couple of the things that struck me, which aren't terribly profound, but – oh, well – they were the things that grabbed me was the first time hearing the story about Moses arguing with God. I thought, "Well, this is cool. This is a God who you argue with. I like this. I am definitely interested in this." And learning about Tikkun Olam and the concept that creation is something that's ongoing and that it takes people's participation and action in order to make it really keep happening. That's part of the role. And that it was a religion in many ways about how I live my life now. It wasn't about being good, so I get rewarded in heaven, which was a part of the standard adolescent line about, "Oh, my parent's religion is so hypocritical." I wasn't particularly interested in becoming Presbyterian because there was nothing very exciting that had happened in relation to that at all. It wasn't a big part of my life. Sometimes, giving up holidays is very hard when people convert, and I was really glad because I had such conflicted feelings about my own holidays. The little bit that I told you of how little I knew about grandparents – we didn't have lots of family coming and celebrating Christmas. I mean, it was a big deal, but it was a big deal in an intense, small way for a small family with one other person who sometimes came. There were lots of things about it that I was happy to go away from.

SG: Ready to leave behind.

DB: Ready to leave behind. Yes. The more I studied about Judaism – and then we went, and we went very regularly. There was a Yemenite Jew at this chavurah and the Reconstructionist havurah in Hawaii. (Tuki?) was his name (Tuki?) and his wife – they had kids. They invited us over a lot for Friday evening. We were learning his Yemenite

approach to Judaism and studying with the Conservative rabbi, and having these Reconstructionist discussions regularly Saturday morning. I just got all these different pictures that kept intriguing me.

SG: What did your family and your friends think about this choice?

DB: Well, by then, most of my friends were there. Most of our friends said, “That’s great. You’re joining us.” They were friends there in Hawaii, who were members of the Reconstructionist havurah, or who weren’t religiously identified. Either they were a part of that, or they weren’t identified [and] didn’t make any difference. My father never said anything. The relationship that my parents have with my husband is difficult to say the best.

AB: Continues?

DB: Continues, yes. My father passed away about eight years ago. My mother knows. On the one hand, she will say it makes no difference. And then, finally, maybe about only three or four years ago, maybe five years ago at the most, she said, “You know, Darryl, I can’t think of you as Jewish. When I think Jewish …” and then she talked about her stereotypic impression of New York Jews. She said, “That’s not you.” I said, “Well, that makes sense because that’s not me.” At the time, she was so much more upset about the fact that I was married to Barney that converting to Judaism was minor in the list of things that were happening. I don’t know how much she regrets not having Christmas with her grandchildren. But again, the truth is the relationships between the family is so tense that even had we not, I think she knows that it never would have been the perfect grandchildren are home for Christmas kind of relationship [laughter] because that just has never been in the cards.

AB: Did you ever try having a Christmas holiday with them? With your children?

DB: No.

AB: Just didn't make sense?

DB: It didn't make sense. Nope. We tried one year trying to combine the traditions and having a Christmas tree. We did that one year, just Barney and I, and had the presents from the grandparents under the Christmas tree and said, "This is really weird." Neither one of us liked it. But my parents weren't there. It wasn't with them. It was separate from them. But it was sort of exploring, "Well, is this possible? How do I feel about this? This is the tradition that I grew up in? What do I want to do about it?" The one thing that I held on to for a long time was when I was young, my mother made Christmas cookies. My brother and I would go around the neighborhood with Christmas cookies. She made cookie-cutter cookies with really fancy icing. I did a lot of Hanukkah cookies in my memory. I don't know whether my daughters would say I did a lot or not, but in my memory, [laughter] I did a lot of Hanukkah with fancy decoration. We would make cookies with fancy decorations. So that was my mother-daughter tradition that I held on to and reinterpreted into our family's tradition.

AB: Thinking about foods like that, have you now established Jewish traditional foods in your life and favorite recipes? And if so, how did you learn them?

DB: Well, we've been very lucky to be able not so much – somewhat with foods, and more just with traditions, we've been really lucky to have friends with whom we celebrated a lot. We celebrated a lot with Judy (Chalmer?) and her now ex-husband Bruce and their sons because they lived right down at that corner. We would get together for the holidays a lot here. Barney and I moved here when our kids were three and six. A lot of our Jewish celebration life has been here in Montpelier in terms of with the family. So foods, yes, around the holidays. Anna and (Cy?) Bloom – I inherited Anna's compote recipe for Pesach. So I always make Anna Bloom's compote. I'm often calling Judy for a recipe now and then. "How did you make that?" I'll consult with Judy for recipes. But that's mostly it.

SG: We were thinking also about – since part of being Jewish, to us, often – you think about all this long, long history and tradition. How does the person who's converted absorb that into their own history? How do they adopt that?

DB: Yes. I think you don't. I think there's always either a tenseness, or there's a difference, or there's a lack. There's a something there that, for me, just doesn't go away. It plays itself out in terms of being a member of a community. So that being a member of the Jewish community is much more about what I am up to, what I am thinking and feeling, and what I'm doing, and how I'm wrestling with issues and how my identity is Jewish, and how that plays out in terms of current politics or ethics or involvement and things and interest. I don't know whether you've talked to Joyce Kahn or not. But Joyce lives in Montpelier, and she's a member of the synagogue. Her son is currently in Russia, and he's getting back this weekend. One of the things that he did was to go look up the towns that their great grandparents came from and look for the cemeteries and see what he could find out about towns in Poland, which both of them – one is still there, and the other one was gone completely.

SG: The cemetery? The town?

DB: No, one town was gone completely. One town is still there. He found two cemeteries. Joyce was talking about that and telling about that. I'm interested, and I'm curious, but I don't have parallel stories to tell. That difference is always there. To a certain extent, I can adopt Barney's father's family, and somebody in his family did do some genealogy study, but that's still adopting somebody. I don't know how it will play out in terms of my daughters because I think not having that long identity and not having become Orthodox – I think if you convert and you become Orthodox, you are living tradition pretty intensely. If you're Reconstruction or unaffiliated as we are over here at Beth Jacob, your daily life isn't as imbued with tradition.

AB: Tell us a little about your daughters and the kind of Jewish education your family is providing. Talk about Beth Jacob synagogue and your role in it.

DB: Yes. When we moved here, Deborah, the older one, went to the synagogue school, and I went with her that first day. I thought, "Yuck. This is not education." This was a young man from Norwich University, lecturing kids and trying to teach Hebrew. What had happened is the school had been thriving up until the year before when the couple who were running the school decided to leave. There were all kinds of involvement and anger and disappointment. It had been on the heels of some kind of an argument. It was all very tense that the couple had left. Last-minute, they had been able to find this guy, and he was willing to teach the kids. I became involved with kind of the last bits of the synagogue sisterhood – Lillian Goldman, who is still alive and in a nursing home in Burlington. I don't know how with-it she is, whether she's somebody who you'd be able – she'd be really interesting to talk to. Lillian was wonderful. She would have us over for tea and lemon poppy seed cake. There were myself, Sue Steinberg, and Jamie O'Hare. Sue Steinberg, who also converted, whose husband is Jewish, and Jamie O'Hare, whose husband is not Jewish but was thinking that she was going to bring her kids up Jewish – and Sue (Oreck?), except she's not (Oreck?) now; she's (Steinhurst?). Sue (Steinhurst?) and Sue Steinberg. We met with Lillian regularly and reinvented the school. There were a couple of other people involved. Eventually, Bruce became involved. We created a school that was based on the concept that the school is a community. We created a new Sunday School that started out with a community meeting and then included breaking up into different age groups and different ability groups for language and for history and study. We regularly pored over the curriculum and what should it be. How much can we get away with? How long will parents bring their kids on Sundays? What do we do about kids during the winter, who are on the ski teams and not coming on Sundays, and finding people who could teach Hebrew well enough for kids to really be able to –? Bruce obviously was wonderful but didn't want to do all of it. So who else can teach? I, from having studied my aleph-bet, was [the] beginning Hebrew teacher over and over and

over again. So I kept doing it. I kept not getting beyond the first book because that's what I would teach. We pretty much had a small cooperative school. Most of the teachers were volunteers. Eventually, we started being able to pay the teachers, and we paid them whatever we could pay according to how many students were there and just kept working at it and working at it. Then, I guess I was the director of the school for – well, Deborah was six or seven when we started. It was certainly through Hannah's bat mitzvah, which would have been nine or ten years, and maybe a little bit longer than that. I was either teaching or director of the school for ten to twelve years, I think, very much involved with it. Bruce Chalmer was a big part of it. He did most of the bar and bat mitzvah training. Then, Sara Lisniansky and Bruce moved to town. Sara is a fantastic educator, has been a Jewish educator probably since she was a teenager in one way or the other. Sara started teaching, and the school really started growing both in numbers and in the knowledge base from which the teachers were working. So Deborah and Hannah's experience growing up was that of a community, a cooperative community school with a sort of different curriculum every time and lots of wonderful community support. We had very, I guess, alternative bar and bar mitzvahs. It's a tiny little building, and few people hired the hall. Oftentimes, the reception afterward would be potluck; we'd organize potlucks for each other, so the bar or bat mitzvah family didn't have to do any cooking. But everybody else did all of the cooking and was a potluck. Bruce always loved teaching, even while he was leading a service. There would be kind of a level of discussion [and] explanation going along during the service. We were a pretty tight community, so even though, for example, in Deborah and Hannah's experience, we were the family, there were very close friends and lots of uncles and aunties.

AB: Did you sometimes bring a rabbi in from time to time?

DB: From time to time. But very soon, we started – when we became active in the synagogue, Barney and I, and Bruce and Judy, and other people at that time – and this all would have been in the '80s, there was a relationship with a rabbi who would come for

high holidays. He would come, and he would tear through the service. We were very much participatory in every other aspect of our lives. So we stopped hiring him and had enough people who sang really well and who knew enough and knew enough to start learning more so that we grew our own. We were more like a chavurah in many ways than we were a traditional synagogue. Then, eventually, we started having visiting rabbis. So we would have rabbis visit regularly. But that usually wasn't for a bar or bat mitzvah because oftentimes, it was Bruce or it was Sarah, who had trained the student, so that was the person who you wanted leading the service.

AB: Does the congregation have a Torah?

DB: Yes, we have three.

AB: Good.

SG: Wow.

DB: Yes. The congregation had had a rabbi long before. Maybe the last rabbi had been there in the '50s, but I'm not sure about that. There had been student rabbis and part-time rabbis. The Torah, there had been a Torah in the Barre congregation. That's how come we have three, is one or two came from the Barre congregation when they disbanded from above Lash's Furniture Store and came to the synagogue over here at Beth Jacob,

AB: Let's back up just a minute. Did you have a formal conversion ceremony? [inaudible]

DB: I did.

AB: Can you tell us about that?

DB: Sure. When we were in Hawaii – that happened when we were in Hawaii. There was a fellow who was a part of the Reconstructionist havurah synagogue group that we were in, had a good friend who was a Conservative Rabbi, who would come and visit the shul in Hawaii every once in a while. Len Goodman – that was the guy. I can't remember what the rabbi's friend's name was. If I searched up my conversion document, it would have his name on it. So he came, and he trusted Len, who said, "They've been studying." There was a group of us. There was myself, there was a woman of Japanese American heritage, and there was somebody else of European American heritage. So there were three, and maybe there was a fourth person. We went to the ocean for our mikvah. We went to an area called Hanauma Bay, which is just perfectly beautiful, in Hawaii. He asked us some questions, and we dunked in the water and said what he told us to say, and he signed the paper. That was that.

AB: Let's talk a little bit about the work that you've been doing as a diversity trainer and those issues. Why don't you tell us about that? Did you say you were a diversity trainer?

DB: Yes. Let's see. Where to start with that? The position is defunct at Vermont Institutes. Vermont Institutes is an organization that originally was from Eisenhower grants funding, and a lot of it was for equity in education in math and technology and sciences to get a good education for girls. A lot of that was the Eisenhower grant. They grew into being concerned about equity in general. One year, somebody working there contacted the folks at A World of Difference [AWOD], which is a program from – help me. Why am I not remembering? I know who it's from.

SG: [inaudible]

DB: No, no.

SG: Was it ADL?

DB: Yes, the Anti-Defamation League. It's from ADL. Phil Fogelman in Boston is the head of it.

SG: [inaudible]

DB: What?

SG: I think I've met him.

DB: You've met him?

SG: Can we stop for one second? [Tape paused]

DB: The World of Difference has a training program and a curriculum that's useful in upper elementary school. The training program is good for elementary-age teachers. They have a really nice peer leadership program that's based in the high school, and high school students come and teach in the middle school. I'm an elementary school counselor. So, I took the training and became very involved with Kathy, worked hard with Kathy in trying to spread A World of Difference training to Vermont schools, as a bias awareness, anti-racism training for Vermont educators in general. We got some support from the Department of Education, not quite as much as we wished, but we did get some, and for a while, there was really growing interest among the schools to have people come in and do training. So the World of Difference trains people to be trainers. So, I and many other people were trained to then take these workshops into the schools. This would have been maybe four years ago. I think 2000 was the first AWOD training. I'm pretty sure it was 2000. From that summer really through last summer, we had – and there was another training this summer, only I wasn't a part of it. We had groups come in, groups of people connected to schools, elementary through high school. Then, I have done a fair amount of work being the local nudge about diversity stuff in the local school district and have also done some work as a trainer in other schools. I went to Hartland Elementary School, and I've gone to some other elementary schools and middle schools

when they had an in-service and wanted somebody to do some workshops on diversity and bias awareness, using the World of Difference materials because it's a good, straightforward, easy-to-use, excellent program. Then, in my particular school, in the elementary school, I worked long and hard with a group of people on our statement about religion in the schools and our policy about religion in the schools. I'm not sure what your kids' experiences in the public schools here were, but certainly, a lot of New England Christmas tradition and a lot of Easter tradition were in public school life. I had a really interesting experience [with] that because I nagged at the superintendent to – because I was not wanting Christmas trees in the hallways and Christmas carols. One of our daughters came home and said that her teacher said they were writing letters to Santa Claus, and she said, "We're Jewish. I don't have Santa Claus." The teacher said, "Well, just write to Mrs. Hanukkah." What?

SG: What?

DB: What? She also came home once, and she said, "I wasn't allowed to play Foursquare at recess." One of the kids in the class had proclaimed herself the determiner of who could play and said Jews couldn't play Foursquare. That was the most obvious and surprising experience, that story that she came home with. It was just real straightforward – Jews weren't allowed to play Foursquare when so-and-so was in charge. From the synagogue, I knew a lot of kids who were in school, who were in the elementary schools – a lot of families. I convinced the superintendent that we needed to review our policy about religion in the public school and called together a committee. He didn't make a committee; he just put it out that people who were interested [in] this could join the committee. So, of course, the people who joined the committee were the people who were most concerned about it. We had some Jewish parents. We had some teachers with very strong Christian fundamentalist beliefs.

SG: Oh, my.

DB: Yes. And some people from the community. We also had different people from – somebody from the Catholic Church, a Methodist from the Methodist Church, and an ex-professor of religion from the University of Vermont. We had some amazing, good discussions. It took us fifteen months to craft our own policy using the department – I mean, the feds give you a model policy. There's something that we could have said, "Oh, yes, we'll just use this." But it was clearly a very important thing to talk about. A lot of the talk was about losing traditions; what we're responsible for teaching; what's the difference between teaching something, teaching about something, and celebrating it; trying to get some awareness and empathy for what it's like to be an outsider; bumping up against all sorts of prejudices on both of our parts. The training from the World of Difference was really good because it helped me with some concepts and some vocabulary to introduce into this group so that we were able to eventually recognize when we had stumbled into our own stereotypes and were projecting those onto each other. It didn't always hold; it wasn't perfect, but it was still a level of awareness that we all had at the end of this fifteen-month process that we hadn't had before. Consequently, I think my Montpelier School District has a really good policy about religion in the schools, about what's teaching and what's not teaching. When is it celebrating and not teaching? There are some real changes in the way that Christian symbols – we had this big long discussion about signs and symbols and is the Easter Bunny Christian? No, the Easter Bunny doesn't represent Easter. Well, it does if you're Jewish. But it's not connected to anything that's Christian about Easter. Yes, but to the outsider, it has all the trappings of being about Christianity, even though you don't see it that way. We talked about these things. We now have a good policy.

AB: Just to clarify, would you say now that children in the Montpelier schools are learning about different people's religions?

DB: Yes, yes.

AB: But they're also understanding – the children themselves as well as the teachers are hopefully understanding the difference between celebrating and learning.

DB: Yes. Largely, I think that's true. There are still times of loss and sadness when someone will say to me, particularly how sad it is that we're not singing Christmas carols, how wonderful it used to be when we would get together as a community and sing Christmas carols. There are still things that are hard to let go of because that was a strong community. For some people, that was a strong community bond to sing Christmas carols all December together before school started.

AB: Just give me a second here

DB: I've continued to do more stuff in the school as we are slowly becoming more diverse. There's things about placement, for example. There's lots of opinions about placement. There's just tons of stuff, as you know, in education to get into in terms of diversity awareness and looking at what you're teaching and how you're teaching and how you're grouping kids.

AB: You mentioned on the questionnaire that 9/11 had a tremendous effect on you, as it did on all of us, I'm sure. Would you like to talk to us about that event and perhaps other historical or cultural, or social movements and events that have had an impact on your life and the choices that you've made?

DB: Well, certainly way before 9/11, I'd say a major part of my life was the Civil Rights Movement because I grew up during it, although my family life was not connected to the Civil Rights Movement at all, little by little in college, I became more and more connected to it. I think that was the beginning for me, that and remembering my story about the girl in third grade, who I couldn't have for lunch, and have been an essential part of who I am, being aware of my position of privilege growing up and what sense to make out of that, how to deal with that. It's been an important part of my life. I worked in a Quaker

organization. I went to Antioch College for a while, and I worked in a Quaker organization – one of my work experiences at Antioch. I worked in Philadelphia at the time when – do you remember the studies of the dolls? Somebody did studies about dolls with Black children and asked them which dolls they preferred?

AB: They preferred the white dolls.

DB: They preferred the white dolls.

SG: The white dolls were prettier.

DB: Yes, the white dolls were the pretty ones. I read about that and was involved with this Quaker group in the public schools in Philadelphia as that study was being known and talked about in terms of what did it mean. We used to go into the classrooms. We, being myself and another student – Charlie was from Antioch – another Antioch student who was Black and from Florida. He and I would go together into third, fourth, fifth-grade classrooms and read some stories and talk about race and try to talk about differences in race and similarities. I don't remember too much specifically about the content, but I remember it was pretty amazing to the kids, largely Black. The schools that we were in were largely Black population, and they just stared at me. I don't know if they really understood what I was saying, and I don't know if I understood what I was saying. But the fact that Charlie and I were there together, trying to talk about this, was pretty interesting and surprising to them. I think the one important context for 9/11 for me to talk about is the group that I belong to here, which is called Sojourner.

AB: [inaudible]

DB: Judy may have mentioned it as well. Have you talked with Judy Chalmer?

AB: We'll be talking [inaudible]

DB: You're going to be talking to Judy.

AB: We met her briefly. At the Planting Hope [inaudible] –

DB: Planting Hope is different, but yes – two separate things. Planting Hope is very big on my mind because this is the organization that we're having a big fundraiser next Saturday. That's Nicaragua. Sojourner got started around the same time as the World of Difference training. So it's almost five years old. It's a group – was six and now five women – were three African American women; one woman dropped out, an African American woman. So there's two African American women, two Jewish women – white, and one white woman who is Christian. We have a nice mixture of people. At the time of 9/11, the Black woman who had since left the group was still there. We talked a lot about prejudices and stereotypes and fears after 9/11, and how we tried to make sense of it, and what was scary about the liberal American standard kneejerk, if you will, liberal response in support of the Palestinian perspective as a global perspective, and the scariness of that for Jews, and the difficulty of speaking up to maintain your position as a liberal politically and socially, and maintain your position in the right for Israel to exist, and position of skepticism as to what a specific Palestinian movement might stand for, what [Yasser] Arafat stands for and believes in, and what may have been said, and what may be true. All of that became a very intense conversation among this group of women – Black African American women, Jewish women, and a Christian woman. Hard and scary, but also nameable, so that in other political situations, where it may have been hard to speak up here in Montpelier, with that group of women, we could talk about it and talk about those fears.

AB: Did you go out to the public?

DB: No. Among ourselves. Yes. [It was] disturbing that we can't have those kinds of conversations in the synagogue. We are, as a community, so fearful of political divisions, and people get so emotional. I think too many people in the community are afraid of the

emotional fights, the damage that may be done from differing perspectives –

AB: On Israel?

DB: Yes, on Israel and Palestinians, what that would bring about. I guess, a kind of growing up, maturity, in that – people say that about the country as a whole in response to 9/11 in terms of being so frustrated with an easy liberal gloss or response to 9/11 – things like, “It’s kind of our fault that that happened. Because we have been so awful in the world, it was due.” And not agreeing with that at all but being disappointed at the number of people who weren’t willing to have more than a knee jerk response to that –

AB: Nuanced or complex.

DB: Yes, more complex.

AB: Can we just stop for a minute?

SG: Sure. [Tape paused]

AB: – you think of yourself as a Zionist. I guess that’s the question.

DB: Israel is hard for me because I feel like I don’t pay enough attention to it because I’m so busy paying attention to many other things that are in front of my face that I managed to not put a lot of energy into figuring out about Israel because it is so damn complex. It’s so easily overwhelming. Certainly, having spent time there and now identifying – I am a Jew now. As much as it sometimes is complex for me, and as much as it is sometimes difficult to know how I really am a member of the community, I am. I am. I believe fervently in the right for Israel to exist. I believe fervently in the need for a peaceful solution. I believe in the need for a two-state solution. I have no idea how to get there. I haven’t been back to Israel. It was now a long time ago since we were there. I mean, when we were there, there was not much political activity among the Arabs, then the

Israeli Arabs who were identified as Israeli Arabs, that I was aware of – that was in the media or that I was aware of.

SG: [inaudible]

DB: It was just the one time that we were there, which was 1971.

SG: Right. It's a different world now.

DB: Yes, it is a different world now.

AB: Are you thinking you might like to go back?

DB: I don't know. I think I would. But that is more theoretical than I am actually involved in it. If I see myself traveling anytime in the near future, it's more likely to be Central America.

AB: Why don't we move on and talk about your work in Central America? Nicaragua, you [inaudible].

DB: Yes, it's in Nicaragua. I had an opportunity in February to go with a group to a barrio of Matagalpa, Nicaragua. Barney and I were in the Peace Corps together in Colombia. That was in '73 to '75, and I haven't used my Spanish since then. But I learned it pretty well while we were there. I heard about an organization that's being supported by central Vermonters that has built a library and a preschool in two different towns of Matagalpa, which is a district in Nicaragua. The woman who founded this organization grew up in Central Vermont. Her name is Beth Merrill. I met her in front of the library about a year ago. I said, "I hear you might be organizing a trip to go." She said, "Well, I'm thinking of organizing a trip in February. Do you want to go?" I said, "Yes, I do." I started brushing up on my Spanish. We went in February during school vacation, which was maybe ten days and had a homestay, stayed with a family, not in the

poor barrio where the library is, but in a small rural town that is less poor, certainly not well resourced, but certainly also less poor, and stayed with families. I stayed with a delightful young family. We had a very moving experience being there. We took down with us tons of stuff that was donated by Central Vermonters. I was really worried. We're going to be coming in and just have all this stuff to give away – clothing, school supplies. How are we going to do it? I don't know if I like this. I was getting antsy about it. Because we had tons. We each had two enormous suitcases. I had a suitcase, this size, full of school supplies from the school and two more full of clothing that was actually raised by the kids who were going to Thailand at the same time, and they got more clothing than they could possibly handle. They gave us some summer clothing to take with us to Nicaragua. Well, Beth had arranged the trip and the process so that we had a big locker full of soccer balls and all kinds of sports equipment. What we did is we went to places – Beth kept defining it as a solidarity trip. It wasn't a service trip; it was a solidarity trip. We went to schools. We went to the library. We had parties, and we did things, and we played with the kids and the families. We used the stuff that we brought, and we left it behind after we left. It was so much about getting together with the people. It was so much an equal exchange in terms of the time that we spent together that the stuff was, for us, not very important. The process of giving was downplayed. The process of exchange was very important. The stuff is important to them. We were bringing something, but nobody had to make a big deal out of it. The really big deal was the pleasure that we had in doing things together. We also did a little tiny bit of service work. We painted the inside of a preschool. There were local folks who came and worked with us. There were so many of us; we all had about this much space to paint, and we're all busily painting our little space or cleaning up the floor or something because there just wasn't enough space. There were so many of us wanting to do this. Then we toted water from the river to clean the paint brushes because it's a preschool, but there's no running water there. We had high school and college-level guides, who were studying English, who were our guides when we went places. So we were never in a group of

eight; we were usually in a group of four. I got to know the young woman who was the guide often for the small group that I was in, and we spent a lot of time talking. I got to know my family well. I was the first person my family had had who speaks English. They get a lot of people from nonprofit organizations, and people come a lot to Nicaragua. It's the poorest country next to Haiti in the Western Hemisphere. There are lots of nonprofit organizations working there. There's lots of fundamentalist evangelical organizations working there, which we were not. We were very strong about not being religious-based. I was one of the first people they had who could speak Spanish. They had had lots of houseguests, but people who were barely speaking Spanish, so they were full of questions about the United States. We talked about – the father in the family was an agronomist who'd studied in Cuba, and we talked about university and talked about wealth and poverty in the United States, and education and what's free education and what isn't free. They were very, very concerned and very proud of the number of things that they grow that are organic. He grows organic coffee. Every time somebody comes down there, they send me a pound of organic coffee from his farm. So, the group of us came back very connected to the people who live near the library, use the library, work in the library, and the kids for the library. We are committed to raising – what do we need? – twelve-thousand dollars to build a second floor and furnish books for the second floor for the library. About three-quarters of my summer work has been working on fundraising activities for Planting Hope.

AB: Do you think you'll be going back?

DB: Yes, I'm sure I will. I just don't know exactly when. [laughter]

AB: That's really exciting work.

DB: It is. It is.

SG: Did your husband go with you?

DB: No, he didn't. I came back very interested and excited about developing something that has to do with service-learning, solidarity, and international experiences. We were an intergenerational group, and it was really neat. I really liked that fact. The effect on the group dynamics was very, very good. We had a thirteen-year-old and a fifteen-year-old – a family with a thirteen-year-old and a fifteen-year-old. We had two high school kids, a mother and a daughter, a father and a son, two high school girls, young women on their own, maybe four women, [from] different professions, one being a nurse, who were in their thirties and forties, myself and another teacher, in our – she's a little younger than I am – early fifties, or late fifties for me, and woman who was seventy-two. That mixture of ages really added a lot to the dynamics of the group and how things went while we were there. I would love to pursue that in some way. I don't know exactly how.

AB: We could talk for hours. We'll just end with [asking], first of all, what are some of your hopes for the future? You've really said that, that you hope to continue this work.

DB: One of the things about this – my family had never met a Jewish person before. They didn't quite know what that meant when I said I was Jewish. They didn't know what it was. A member of the shul, Sara Lisniansky – I don't know if you have Sara's name, but she'd be a neat person to talk to, too. She'd be a really neat person to talk to.

AB: We'll write it down.

DB: – had been to Nicaragua with a Jewish group in the '80s. She said one of the reasons they went down is because they had heard – what was it she said? There was something in Central America about – there was a lot of antisemitism, or it was that nobody Jewish paid any attention or cared much about Central America. So, her group was a very political group and went down specifically as Jews to say, "We're here. And we're Jewish." It was interesting.

AB: Are there other stories you'd like to share with us about your work or your family, or your Judaism?

DB: I don't think so. Nothing jumps right into my head.

AB: It's been very interesting. I guess we can turn off the tape recorder.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 1/14/2022