Ruth Rothstein Transcript

DAVID JOHNSON: This is an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive Women Who Dared project, an interview with Ruth Rothstein, conducted on March 3rd, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, by David Johnson. (pause) This is an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive Women Who Dared project, with Ruth Rothstein, on March 3rd, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. And the interviewer's David Johnson. Can you just say an int--

RUTH ROTHSTEIN: Pardon?

DJ: Say your name --

RR: My -- OK. My name is Ruth M. Rothstein. And I'm the Chief of the Bureau of Health for the County of Cook. And Mr. Johnson is here to interview me, and probably will ask many questions. Is that how you mean to do it?

DJ: Well, that -- Yeah. Yeah, if you could --

RR: This is [Rendy?] --

RENDY JONES: Hello.

RR: -- Rendy Jones.

DJ: Hi.

RJ: Hi, how are you? Ooh!

RR: Somebody's going to break their neck on that one day. I really mean that. Yeah, they really are.

RJ: I didn't realize it was doing that.

RR: Yeah, it's been doing that. (laughs)

RJ: They're going to have to put something down there.

RR: Trendy. (laughs)

DJ: If we could just start, if you could tell me about your early life, where you grew up --

RR: OK.

DJ: -- and your parents and background.

RR: Sure. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in an area called Brownsville. That was a very interesting area. It was a fairly low socioeconomic, working class area. And I grew up at a time when the Depression was in its full flower and full bloom. Wasn't wonderful. But in terms of the Depression, everyone where we lived was all -- everyone was in the same boat. There was a large unemployment. Most people were on welfare -- or many people were on welfare. And it was a Jewish ghetto. And it was an interesting place, because, if you never learned to speak a word of English, you could manage to get along very well. So it was very interesting.

DJ: And you were born in what --?

RR: I was born in -- Pardon?

DJ: In what year?

RR: In what year? 1923. I will be eighty, on April 5th.

DJ: And tell me about your parents.

RR: My parents were interesting. My father worked in a shoe factory. During the Depression he worked with the WPA, because he couldn't get work in shoe factories. Nobody needed shoes -- right? Particularly, if they had them, they didn't get rid of them. (laughter) They put paper or cardboard inside, if the soles were going. But my father was born in Russia, in Minsk, came to the United States when he was about probably eighteen years old, interestingly enough had great difficulty learning to speak the language, learning to speak English. And he always spoke with a very, very heavy accent. Worked in shoe factories, worked in many of the good shoe factories. And that's what he did for a living. And he was just a great guy and he was smart. And --

DJ: What were their names?

RR: His name was Kiva Merson, M-E-R-S-O-N -- was my maiden name -- K-I-V-A. And my mother was born in England. She was born of a Romanian mother and a Russian father, who met in England. She was born there, came to this country. Well, actually they went to Canada. They came to this country through Canada -- interesting, rather than through Ellis Island, where my father came through Ellis Island. My mother's family came through Canada.

DJ: And her name was --?

RR: Her name was Beatrice Silverman. My father was socialist, and actively so, I think almost until he died.

DJ: Almost --?

RR: Until he died.

DJ: Ah.

RR: (laughs) Believed in it, acted upon it. And was instrumental in organizing the shoe workers' union in New York. So, you know, I'd go on many demonstrations with him. And it was good, even though it was poor and it was hard. But from the sense of a good house, it was a good house -- not a religious house -- but a Jewish house, very culturally Jewish. He did not get involved in religion.

DJ: But you celebrated --

RR: All the holidays. We celebrated all the holidays -- but not religiously. We celebrated them secularly.

DJ: Mm-hmm. So you didn't go to synagogue.

RR: No, we did not. But I went to a Yiddish school after school -- to a shule. I did that. I learned to speak the language. I learned to read, write, speak Yiddish.

DJ: In addition to public school? That was --

RR: Mm-hmm, in addition, in addition, after school -- almost through high school. And --

DJ: Every day after school or --

RR: Pretty much, yeah, pretty much. Yeah. I have three siblings.

DJ: Good.

(laughter)

RR: Under --

DJ: On your other list.

RR: I know the drill. I have three brothers. I had three brothers. I have two brothers now. One died. They're all younger. I was the oldest of the four of us, the only girl -- three brothers. Felt I needed to take care of them, and I did. Was a pretty tough kid. (laughs)

DJ: Were they involved in the union --

RR: Not at all.

DJ: -- activism as --

RR: Not really.

DJ: Just --

RR: Not really. Really not. It was really my father and me. And because he took me and because he -- That's how I became more involved and more interested in things socially than my brothers. They were not. They grew up kind of traditionally. I did not. More involved with what was going on in the world and what was going on -- In fact, when I was about eleven years old, I was already speaking on a street corner, because in Brownsville everybody had a street corner meeting. You always had street corner meetings, particularly during the Depression. So I'd do that. (laughs)

DJ: And speaking about --?

RR: Well, you speak about the conditions, about the welfare system, about people being on relief, about not getting enough to eat. You know, when I grew up there were food lines on almost every corner. People would get on line to get food, to get bread, to get stuff that you could take home. I would no sooner see a line but I'd get on it. (laughter) Because I didn't even know what they were giving at the other end, but it didn't matter! I figured, something. So I'd get on a line, even when I was a kid, you know, growing up. If

there was a line, I'd get on it. Because that's one way of, you know, getting food.

DJ: What about your Jewish identify? So did you have bar mitzvahs in your family or --?

RR: No, we didn't. We really didn't. I think my oldest brother, one behind me, may have been bar mitzvahed. But nobody else was. And my own grandson was bar mitzvahed. I don't remember -- bat mitzvahs were never even -- even the --

DJ: That's --

RR: At that time, you know, who even talked about that? Who ever said a girl should get anything? I don't -- No, only one of my brothers was bar mitzvahed, as I remember. And that wasn't even a very big thing.

DJ: And you went to public --?

RR: Public school?

DJ: Yeah.

RR: Yeah.

DJ: And then after?

RR: Public high school.

DJ: And then after high school?

RR: Work -- went to work.

DJ: Where?

RR: Work. I went to work for a -- it was called the Greenwich Village Association. It was a settlement house. That was the first place I worked. And I used to work on the desk.

And I also played the violin. So that's where I got lessons -- was in exchange. And then I went to work for a union. I went to work for the Communications Workers' Union -- was Western Union and Postal Telegraph. And they merged. And I worked for a number of years in their office. And then I left New York and I went to Cleveland, Ohio to live. And went to work for -- union. Really, what happened was I didn't have a job and I just looked in the phonebook for a union that I would know. And I found United Electrical Workers' Union-CIO. And I went up there -- and really went up there to ask for an office job. But when I went up there and I looked around, there were no men there. And it occurred to me they must be all in the Army. So if they were all in the Army -- It was in the '40s, you know. They were all in the Army, fighting a war, and maybe they need organizers, not clerical work. I wasn't going to do clerical work if I could avoid it. And I said I was a union organizer and did they need help? And they said, yeah, they did -- come to think of it, yes, they did. So if I could write a leaflet and I could show them what I could do, they'd be glad to hire me.

DJ: So this was at the beginning of World War II or --?

RR: It was World War II.

DJ: And you sort of had done union organizing, on --

RR: Well, I'd worked in the office --

DJ: Right.

RR: -- in New York.

DJ: But I mean even before, when you were with your father?

RR: I was always in a union. I was in a union too. I used to belong to the United Office and Professional Workers' Union, Local 16, because I worked in the office of Western

Union Union -- the union of Western Union. So. But when I went to Cleveland I became a union organizer. And that's where I worked on General Electric and Westinghouse, primarily General Electric. So I worked the whole state of Ohio, at one point, although I lived in Cleveland. But I worked the whole state of Ohio. I was, at one point, the Education Director for the region that we worked in. And mostly on General Electric, because General Electric was light assembly work, and they had mostly women working. And so it was easier for me to be a part of that and to work with women and handle grievances and deal generally with the issues and the problems.

DJ: You actually went around organizing?

RR: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

DJ: And what was that like?

RR: In front of plants. Oh, sure. What was it like?

DJ: I mean --

RR: Well, I believed it. I thought it was good, thought it was right. I participated in strikes. I had, you know, any number of different incidents. And at one point there was a general strike. And I forget the year. It was in the '40s. It was right after the war, I think. And I was in Cleveland at that point, working in Cleveland. And there was a general strike in the whole country. And we, United -- or the union I worked for -- also went out on strike. And I must have done something -- and I don't even remember. But I must have irritated the policeman on a horse. And I did something. And I can't remember what the heck it was. But he chased me. And they started to chase me. And I didn't know where to go, where to run, so I ran into what I thought was an alley. And son of a gun, I couldn't go anywhere. It wasn't an alley. It was like a storage place, and you couldn't go anywhere. And the horse came right up against me, with his backside right in my face. I was scared to death, scared to death. But the guy was teaching me a lesson.

(laughter)

DJ: Yeah, that can be very dangerous --

RR: Mm-hmm.

DJ: -- union arguments, and certainly.

RR: Very dangerous. But I was OK. I thought it was the correct thing for me to do. (laughs) I probably did something to the horse.

DJ: (laughs)

RR: I don't remember. That was, in retrospect -- But I imagine it was like a pin or something. I don't know what I did. But anyhow, that was, you know, union experience. I worked in Ohio for a number of years. Spent thirty days in jail, on a picket line issue. And that was an experience, all in itself. Only one in the whole jail. Because it was a two-story wooden-frame house, and the men were on the bottom and the women on top, except there were no women except me. I smoked like hell at that time. I smoked a lot. But you couldn't smoke up there, because they were afraid, if you had a fire, everybody would die -- I would die. Downstairs, you can get out, so. And I had an experience -- an interesting little experience when I was there. After having been there alone for a number of weeks, maybe a week before I left, they brought in a kid, all -- She was all painted up, and with makeup and all this kind of stuff. In the middle of the night they brought her in -- turned the lights on, brought her in. And I looked at her and she looked -- I couldn't figure it out. So I finally started to talk with her. And she was kind of a snippy thing. What I ended up finding out was that she was really a prostitute. She was about thirteen or fourteen. And it was really a shocker, really shocked me. Which, I tried to help her. When I left there I came back, a couple of days later, with comic books and candy and -- you know. And when I came there, (laughs) the place was full of prostitutes! And she said to me, [in sullen voice] "What the hell are you doing here?" "I

came down here -- I just came to help you a little bit," you know? So it was an interesting experience. Lots of interesting experiences.

DJ: And then how did you end up --

RR: Hm?

DJ: -- in Chicago, and after --?

RR: I came to Chicago because I -- I think I got tired of Ohio. And I wasn't sure whether I was going to go back to New York, or go on. And someone offered me a job here, with the union. And the job was -- When I got here I discovered that the someone was already in the job -- a woman was already in the job. And they wanted to fire her. And so therefore they were going to use me to fill her job. And I wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do it. And I turned it down. And it was kind of a tough thing to do, because I didn't have a lot of money. And I went to work for a union. I went to work in the office. Went to work for the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers' Union. And I was on the switchboard. Until I could figure out what to do, and how to handle it. And I worked there for a little while, until I was able to negotiate a job with the United Packinghouse Workers' Union, where they had, you know, Swift & Company and Wilson and all of the packinghouses in the city. And so I ended up being an organizer for the Packinghouse Workers' Union. Somewhere along the line I guess I got married -- and decided I didn't want to do that, because it was too hard to --

DJ: In Chicago you --

RR: I got married in Chicago, married a union lawyer. He had most of the unions -- the CIO unions, not the AFL -- not the trades. And --

DJ: What was his name?

RR: David Rothstein.

DJ: So did you feel you were lucky to get the earlier job organizing, because you said you could do it and during the war --

RR: Right.

DJ: -- there weren't any men around?

RR: Right.

DJ: In other cases, you had to go back to the switchboard?

RR: Well, only because I -- Remember, that was in Ohio. I'm now in Chicago. And it's a whole different set of circumstances and a whole different set of unions. And I went on the switchboard to make some money, when I first came here.

DJ: Right.

RR: I didn't have any money.

DJ: But how did you feel that you were accepted in the union as a woman?

RR: How did I get accepted as a woman?

DJ: Well, were you accepted as a woman? Or how did you --?

RR: Yeah. Yeah, I think so, much more than I was accepted as a woman when I got in to be the president of Mt. Sinai and I would meet with Jewish hospital administrators throughout the country. They had a hard time accepting me as a woman. [Bitter voice]

DJ: Hmm.

RR: In the union, I did not have a hard time being accepted as a woman.

DJ: Interesting.

RR: And I don't remember having incidents of this kind in the union, at all, which is interesting. Yeah, it is interesting. More advanced -- the guys were more advanced. They were. They really were. And remember, they were organizing women and they needed to have a much more positive position. Seriously, when I became president of Mt. Sinai and I went to a group which was called Jewish Hospital Administrators -- or Administrators of Jewish Hospitals, I guess -- that was probably a better name for it -- they had a terrible time accepting me. They had never seen a woman organizer like me, a woman in an executive position. They just didn't have it, even though they had many women working in the industry. And it took a couple years before they learned that this was the reality and that I was only the beginning of what was going to happen to them, in terms of healthcare -- and that they, as a matter of fact, had many people in their hospitals, the, you know, nurses. Yeah. And they never put it all together. But what was interesting, my being there, even though it took a while before they accepted me, they finally came to admit that as a result of my being there they were able to change the way they saw and the way they dealt with women in their own hospitals. So it was very interesting. And as a result, a number of other women did become integrated into the administrative staff of these Jewish hospitals.

DJ: Just takes someone to show the way.

RR: Yeah, well, kind of, you know, make them see the reality. And they did. That was a more difficult struggle. And they had trouble with it. They really had trouble with it. (laughs)

DJ: So how did you get from union organizing --

RR: To that?

DJ: -- to public --?

RR: To hospitals, you mean? When I came to Chicago in 1949, I didn't have any money. I really didn't have any money. And I needed to find a place to live until I could figure out what to do, since I had turned down that union job. And I sought a person who I had met in Cleveland. And he had said, "Any time you're in Chicago, come and say hello, come and visit us." So I did that. I knocked on the door. And his wife came to the door -- as she used to tell the story -- (laughs) she said, "And I looked up and there was this very tall person (laughter) standing in front of me." And she said, "Yes?" And I said, "Well, your husband said that if I ever came to Chicago I should look you up. And here I am. My name is Ruth Merson and I worked in Cleveland and I'm a union organizer." And she said, "Oh, I know that." And she says, "Come on in." So I came in. She had a little baby. The baby had just been born. And she said to me, "Do you know how to bathe a baby?" I said, "Of course!" She said, "Well, if you bathe the baby, I'll make dinner. And then you could stay and have dinner. Easy. That's easy." So I did what I had to do and moved the thing around. And so -- Well, afterwards, sitting down, she said, "How'd you know how to do that?" I said, "I didn't. (laughs) I never bathed a baby in my whole life." She said, "You took my baby! (laughter) You took my baby?" But anyhow, we became very close friends. I stayed there and lived there, until I got married. And it wasn't very long. I only stayed six months. I got married. And my friend-- Irene, well, her husband was a union organizer. She worked in the laboratory, in a healthcare laboratory, Union Health Service. Right now, they're on the West Side here. They used to be downtown. It was the Janitors' Union. And Irene worked in the laboratory.

DJ: They had their own -- That's a --

RR: Pardon?

DJ: The union had its own --

RR: Yes, and continues to have it, the Janitors' Union. And she needed help. And she called me and asked if I'd come down and help her answer the telephone. Everybody quit. Would I come down and help her answer the telephone, so she could do her work? And I felt, yeah, I owed it to her. I said, "Sure. I have a housekeeper that comes in, and when she comes I'll come down and I'll help." So I did, I helped her, answered the phone once a week. And finally she says, "If I pay your housekeeper, would you come two or three days a week?" I said, "Oh, I don't know. I don't know how Dave will feel." But she says, "I'll pay. I'll pay." "But I don't know if it's the money." And she did that -- I did that. I did that. And I went down there about three days a week. And then she said, "How would you like to learn to be a lab technician?" I -- "Of course. That's -- Of course!" (laughter) She taught me, on-the-job train-- I'm on-the-job trained, everything. And she taught me. She quit. I took over the laboratory. And from there I went to work at Jackson Park Hospital, in the laboratory, on stuff that I had been taught, on-the-job stuff. And worked there for a while -- got kind of tired of it. It was boring. And I convinced the administrator that what he really needed -- because he didn't have a human resources department -- or a personnel department, at that time. And I said, "Who better than me? Hey, I'm a union organizer. I know all about this stuff." And we established a personnel department. And I did that for a while -- and then left, when we moved to Evanston. I moved to Evanston. We moved to Evanston. And didn't work for a little while, for about a year -- when I got a call from Mt. Sinai. One of the doctors knew me, because he worked with me when I worked at the Union Health Center. And Dr. Abrams was the Medical Director. And he called me and wanted me to come to Mt. Sinai to help him. And I did. I went down there -- didn't know where Mt. Sinai was, but got there somehow, got a ticket on my car, was furious. I was furious. And I need to tell you that Herb Abrams -- Dr. Abrams was the Medical Director of the Mt. Sinai clinics, that were onsite at that time. They don't have them any more. And he wanted to help him administratively. Because Mt. Sinai had a clinic under the Equal Opportunity Act. Rush had one and Sinai had one. Rush had Miles Square. Sinai had Martin Luther King

Health Center. And Herb was in charge as the Medical Director and he wanted me to do the administrative work and help him. But the problem (laughs) that took place was that the guy who was the head of the hospital, who interviewed me, said he couldn't hire me because, A, he -- rather have a man -- number one --

DJ: He said that.

RR: He said that?

DJ: (laughs)

RR: Oh, yeah, he said that. And I should tell you -- I'm not going to tell you what I said to him!

DJ: Well, why not?

RR: And I'm not going -- (laughter) what I said to him. And also I didn't have a degree. And he wanted somebody with a Master's degree. And I said to him -- one of the things I can tell what I -- I said, "Well, if I sit here until tomorrow morning, I ain't going to have a degree." I mean, so -- And I got up to walk out. He called me back. And he says, "But I do have a job opening." And I said, "Oh, what is it?" He said, "I have a secretary's job." I said, "Well, like Golda Meir, I can't type."

DJ: (laughs)

RR: So I left. They called me back about a week later and I said, no, we were leaving for vacation, couldn't be dealt with this. The day we came back from our vacation, the phone was ringing. So I ran to answer the phone and it was Herb Abrams. He said, "Look, Ruth, I know this jerk won't hire you, but come and work here anyhow. There's a job in the Admitting Office. Just come here. If you work here, anything could happen." And anything (laughs) did happen. I became the president of the hospital.

DJ: (laughs)

RR: Anything did happen. And --

DJ: Now you said --

RR: I went to work in Sinai in 1966. I became the president -- Well, at first it was just Chief Administrator and then we changed the bylaws, in 1972.

DJ: So six years later. Wow.

RR: I was the assistant to the person they had hired. When he left, they started to interview people and I said, "I ain't going to work for somebody else. That's crazy." You know, "I've been doing this now. I've been running it." So (laughs) just out of self defense, they gave it to me, (laughter) just to shut me up or something.

DJ: That's amazing. You said you felt who better to do personnel than a union --

RR: At Jackson Park.

DJ: -- organizer? What did you learn about -- [through your?] (inaudible) --?

RR: Well, remember, because I had been a union organizer, I knew what the elements were, in terms of human resources or personnel, in terms of the laws, you know, the legalities of it, in terms of treating people in a very decent way, and also dealing with unions. I knew all that. And I do here. I mean, here everybody's organized. Almost everybody's organized into a union -- except her and me.

(laughter)

M: That's true.

RR: So -- and I have, you know -- I start out with a basic premise. I'm not anti-union. And people who run the unions understand that. They know that. And they know that I'm going to deal, to the best of my ability, in a fair way. Mt. Sinai wasn't always easy. And I -- You know, to do that, because, you know, money was always very scarce. And so it was kind of, you had to be able to dance your way through it. But I was always fair. I still am. I'm fair. Rendy, am I fair?

RJ: Mm-hmm.

RR: Yeah, I'm pretty fair. I handle people pretty evenly --

RJ: In those days.

RR: -- pretty evenly -- for good or for bad. I handle it pretty evenly.

DJ: No, I wasn't doubting that. I was just trying to see what you learned from being an organizer in the union.

RR: Auh! Well, exactly what I said. I learned to be fair. I learned that people have rights, that the union isn't always correct, but neither is management. So I think that's generally the key to the relationships.

DJ: You've told, in a lot of your stories, how you just, you know, came out and said you could do it, whatever it was. You have this --

RR: Right. Right.

DJ: -- self-confidence.

RR: Pretty much.

DJ: Where'd you --?

RR: And I learned that at home. I learned that at home. My mother and father truly believed that I could do anything. They really believed that. They didn't quite believe that my brothers could do everything. But they believed that I could do anything. They treated me that way. And so, yes, I was fairly confident. Now, it's true I didn't go to college. That is true. I did not do that. But again, remember the period and the time. We're talking about 1940.

DJ: Not many women did.

RR: Pardon?

DJ: Not many women did.

RR: And not many women did. And in retrospect, when I've thought about it over the years, I thought to myself, "Well, I suppose, if I really wanted to go, I probably could have. I must not have wanted to." And I think part of it may have been because I really wanted to go to work, because that would enable me to get clothes, it would enable to get things that I couldn't have gotten had I gone to school, because I didn't have the money. So I think it was a tradeoff -- and was truly a tradeoff.

DJ: Well, what about your mother? Was she --?

RR: My mother was a homemaker. My mother was a very quiet woman, a good lady. Wasn't political. More religious than my father, but didn't act on it. For a long time she lit candles every Friday night. And kosher. We lived in a kosher home. They were kosher. My mother was kosher probably until the day she died. My father wasn't but my mother was. But the house was kosher.

DJ: But she didn't try to -- she didn't object to you --

RR: No.

DJ: -- and your father (inaudible)?

RR: No, she just didn't want us to keep arguing so much. (laughter) It made too much noise. It kind of disturbed her.

DJ: Oh, you and your father?

RR: Me, my father, people who came over. It didn't matter. (laughs) We argued all the time, about everything! Father and I didn't always agree. Even politically we didn't always agree -- we would argue.

DJ: You were at Mt. Sinai. I read about how the neighborhood at Mt. Sinai sort of changed.

RR: Oh, change.

DJ: Can you tell us --?

RR: When I got there, it was already in the process of changing, when I got there in '66. When I got there in '66, the neighborhood was in the process-- You meeting Larry?

RJ: Yeah. I'm into (inaudible).

RR: OK. OK. Don't let him talk you into a whole big --

RJ: Well, I'm concerned about that, because I think that that's -- you know.

RR: Yeah. I mean, I don't want a whole big --

RJ: I'm thinking short --

RR: Yeah.

RJ: -- and up.

RR: Larry doesn't think short.

RJ: Yeah --

(break in audio)

DJ: OK.

RR: Call me later.

RJ: Yeah, I will.

RR: All right. So where were we?

DJ: Mt. Sinai.

RR: Mt. Si--

DJ: The neighborhood -- Tell me about the --

RR: The neighbor--? When I got there in '66, it was already changing. And when I got there, in '66, not only was the neighborhood changing but the patient population was starting to change, from -- I suppose until I got -- Jewish. It started to become black. The neighborhood was getting to be black. Northern --

DJ: Had you lived in that neighborhood?

RR: No. No, never. North Lawndale was black. South Lawndale was Hispanic. Originally, South Lawndale was Bohemian and Polish and so on, and it started to become Hispanic. And North Lawndale, which was Jewish, probably Italian, just started to become black. And that created, for Mt. Sinai, question of financial viability and how to deal with that. And also, it wasn't easy for the board, which was made up primarily of Jewish men -- not primarily -- it was made up of Jewish men -- (laughter) not primarily --

to understand what was happening around them. They don't live there either. Some of them may have lived very ear-- years, when they were kids. But now they lived in the suburbs, and they were businessmen. It was hard for them to fathom that this was happening. And how do you deal with it? It's hard to deal with. There was, I suppose, some fear, because of the change. Not understanding, how do you deal with this? What do you do? I suppose there were them there that -- When I had an opportunity to say something, I always put on the table, "You don't have to stay here. If you don't want to deal with this, then you've really got to leave -- and move. But if you stay here, then you have to deal with this -- to deal with the public aid system, to deal with the change in ethnicity." You have to be able to have doctors who want to deal with -- Remember, many of the Jewish doctors had left Sinai and gone to St. Joseph and to Weiss Memorial and so on. And now we were left with really not such a wonderful physical plant and a change in the population. But as time took -- you know, time went on -- and time has a way of healing and so on, which is marvelous. That's the good thing about time. Was that the board changed. Some of the more younger people came on the board, people of my age. And we grew up together. And we learned -- She's going to see a frie-- He was on the board at Mt. Sinai. He was the chairman of the board at one time. And the reason she's going is that I'm going to be 80 on April 5th and we're going to have a party. So she's going to talk with him about the program. But I don't know. I mean, it makes me nervous. But --

DJ: But you stayed.

RR: Pardon?

DJ: But you stayed. You didn't --

RR: At Sinai. Oh, yeah! I stayed. I helped to reorganize. And we got these new board members, young board members, who were on what was their Associate Board and now they became what they used to call the big board. And they were my age. They were in

their 40s, a little younger than me, and so on. And they were more risk-takers. And they were more inclined, you know, in terms of being able to accept the population and accept the changes that were taking place. And now the question became how can we survive in that environment, and can we survive in that environment? And the question was put on the table, you know. And if you want to stay, then we have to face the reality that the neighborhood has changed, the ethnic group has changed, the payment resources have changed. Can we make it work? I don't know. We'll try. We'll do it together. And we did. And we did. It was not easy. It was never easy, never easy. But -- But it worked. And Mt. Sinai became an important -- From an institution that intellectually put a moat around itself -- hm? -- it became a beacon for the community, that we opened it up. And we said, "If we're here, then we've got to deal with the people who are here. And we've got to deal with the organizations that are here. And we've got to become a very integral part of it." And an important part of it, so the people who are here say, "Nothing can happen to Mt. Sinai, because we won't let it happen." And that's exactly what happened. That is what happened.

DJ: But your --

RR: And it's still there. (laughs)

DJ: Right. But you were behind that kind of opening --

RR: I like to believe I was, yes.

DJ: What do you think --? Was it sort of your union background that enabled to do that?

RR: Mmm. I think so.

DJ: What would you --?

RR: I think so. I think it was my father's -- my upbringing, where I came from, and what I did, and what was important to me as a human being and what was my value system. I could have gone to work in industry. I was offered a job at an oil company, before I went to Sinai. I was offered a fairly good job, to work for this oil company, be their business manager. Would never do that. I would never do that.

DJ: Because --?

RR: Well, because it wouldn't be what I would want to do. I didn't care about the oil. (laughs) I mean, I cared about people. I cared about the welfare of people. I cared about social values. And that's where I came from and that's what I believed in. Oh.

DJ: Do you think your Jewish background is part of that?

RR: I think that was a piece of it, of course. I think that's a piece of it. I think my father's socialist values. But that was also Jewish. Because many Jews were socialists, at that point. And they came out of factories. They came out of the garment workers' factories. They came out of the shoe worker factories. And, yes, I think it's a piece of it, big piece of it. Indeed.

DJ: Can you talk a little bit about --? You talked about your role as a woman, dealing with other men in the business environment. But in kind of mixing your family life as a woman and your professional life --?

RR: Tell me what you mean?

DJ: Well, you were married. Did you have any children?

RR: Yes, I have two children.

DJ: OK.

RR: I have two children, two grown children.

DJ: Now --

RR: And they're very grown. (laughs) They're very grown.

DJ: And balancing your family life and --

RR: OK. That's fair enough. The question, you know, that you're really asking me is, can you have it all? Can you have a family? Can you be in the workforce and work as many hours as is necessary to do the job? And I think, for many women, having it all's very difficult. I think many women who go to work in factories, are single women parents, have some very difficult times. Life's very difficult. It's not an easy way to live. I was more fortunate. I had a husband who was a lawyer. If I didn't work, it wouldn't have mattered. We would have the same house. We would have the same clothing. Now not that he made a lot of money. But I didn't have to work. It wasn't a part of -- We didn't count my money, is really how it started out. We didn't count my money. So I was able to have full-time help. Now at first, what I did was I went to work for Jackson Park Hospital. I only worked from 9:00 to 3:00. And I would leave when the kids went to school. And I would have somebody come in about 11:00 to give them lunch. Then I would be home by 3:00. That's how I started, at Jackson Park. And when I started to work full-time, then I had someone come in at 11:00 -- because I was there to send them off -- and stay through dinner. So, for me, that was easier than most women have it, because I always had help. So that was -- And also, I had a husband who, while he was considerably older -- he was 15 years older than I was -- for a guy, he was very enlightened, when it came to women. And he wasn't a male chauvinist. Although he had said, "If you want to go to work and you want to work full-time, then you need to know that you'd better get help, because I'm not going to do it."

DJ: (laughs)

RR: You know? "I have a career. I have a life of --" you know, "a law practice and I'm not ready to give it up. So -- but I think if you want to do it, I think you should do it. But use your money (laughs) to get help." That's how we started out. It ended up I made more money.

(laughter)

DJ: But you went to work not for economic reasons but because you --

RR: No, no.

DJ: -- wanted to.

RR: I went to work because I wanted to.

DJ: Because you wanted --

RR: I went to work because I wanted to. I stayed home for a year, after I left Jackson Park, when we moved to Evanston. And I stayed home. Because that was something Dave said to me, "Why don't you stay home? If you don't like it, you don't like it. Don't get rid of the help. Keep the help. And let's see what happens." And I did that -- we did that. And one day I was -- I had been going to a lot of luncheons with a lot of women. And one day I went into the bathroom (laughs) before I went out and I looked in the mirror and I said, "What the hell am I doing here, every day, just --? This is so boring! I can't stand it." So that's when I went over to Sinai -- and I made the decision to do that.

DJ: Did the women's movement have any impact on it?

RR: Yes. It did.

DJ: Or did you know that or --?

RR: It did, although I was already --

DJ: Right.

RR: -- more enlightened than most women. The impact it had was that I was able to put into focus the things I was already doing, the things I was already thinking. It just helped to do some focusing for me. But I was already enlightened. I was already there.

DJ: It just meant there were more people like you. But --

(laughter)

RR: That there were getting to be more people like me. Right.

DJ: How do you think your career and your work has been accepted in the Jewish community?

RR: That's a good question. I think, in the Jewish community, I probably was unique. I think, if you spoke to some of the guys, I think I was different than a lot of women, early on. Yes, now it's not -- But even when I was working at Sinai, and a Jewish community, there weren't many women in leadership roles -- and took some time for that to happen within the Jewish Federation.

DJ: Which, you did serve --

RR: Pardon?

DJ: You were on the board.

RR: I was on their board. But that was certainly later on.

DJ: So.

RR: And I think women who were involved were really volunteers, but not paid functionaries. And I think it took some time for that to happen. I think I helped -- whether

directly or indirectly, I helped. And I think, directly and indirectly, I helped in many areas, not just in the Jewish community here, but in the Jewish hospital movement. So I think, in many places where I went, because of who I was, because of what I did, I think it made a difference. And it made a difference to women -- to young women, particularly. And I had a theory, you know. And I used to say, when I'd speak, "You know, always look back and take another woman with you."

DJ: Hmm.

RR: And I really meant that. And I did that. I did a lot of mentoring.

DJ: How did --

RR: And I still do.

DJ: Tell me about it.

RR: Pardon?

DJ: Tell me about that. How did you --?

RR: Well, I have a lot of women -- and even today -- who come and talk about what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, what are some of the ways to get into, you know, one or another fields and should they do this and what does it take to do this, what will it mean for them? And while it's easier and it's better -- But remember, women who make it make it because of people like me in the past. [Chuckles] And I truly believe that. I truly believe that.

DJ: And you're saying you had an impact in these different communities --

RR: Mmm hmm.

DJ: -- the Jewish --

RR: Jewish community.

DJ: And --

RR: I think the African-American community. I think even in academia, and in the nursing community. So I think that the impact was manifold -- not because of anything I went out consciously to do but just the things one does. And remember, I always felt that I had to be better than a man. I had to work harder. I had to be smarter. I had to make sure that I didn't get into a snit over things -- huh? -- even though I'd like to have. Hm? But I had to work harder and smarter to be recognized.

DJ: And you did.

RR: And I did. And I did. No, I did. I really did. (laughter) That's true, I did.

DJ: You mentioned the Jewish hospital movement.

RR: Mmm hmm.

DJ: Tell me -- I don't know that.

RR: I used to belong -- There was, at one time, an organization called Administrators of Jewish Hospitals. And they'd meet once a year. And I joined that group when I became -- You could only be the chief executive officer of the institution. And there was about -- Oh, there were Jewish hospitals all over the country. And we'd meet once a year. But it took a couple years before they recognized that I was sitting there. (laughs) It took them a little while. But I told them off one day and they learned quickly, you know, that -- They were terrible. (laughs) They were terrible when I first came there. They were terrible. But subsequently they became my friends. And they understood and learned that I was as good as they were, and maybe, (laughs) and in some ways, I was better. Because I lasted longer than they did.

DJ: So we didn't cover how you went from president of Mt. Sinai --

RR: Here?

DJ: -- to your current --

RR: Oh, here? You mean here?

DJ: Mmm hmm.

RR: I was approached by a Sinai board member who had worked for Dick Phelan when Dick Phelan became president of the County Board in 1991. She had asked me, would I meet with Dick Phelan, that they were looking for -- He was looking for somebody to run Cook County Hospital. I said I wasn't sure I wanted to do that, run Cook County Hospital. And she said, "Well, at least, you know, meet with him." So I did. I went down and met with him. I had told him that I really didn't want to run another hospital -- I had already done that -- but that I could be interested if we could put together all of the healthcare under one rubric. And if we could do that, then I might be interested. Also, at the time that I did it -- And he agreed to that. But at the time that I came here, Cook County Hospital had lost its accreditation, on the Joint Commission, which was the body that approves hospitals. I came here in January of 1991. We lost accreditation and we had to -- We spent a year trying to get it back. And we did get it back, of course. And we put together, in 1992 -- started to put together all of the facilities under one heading -- and called it a bureau. And we put together, at that time, Cook County Hospital, which is now Stroger Hospital, Oak Forest Hospital, which is in the southern suburbs -- Provident was not opened yet; that was one of the things we were -- our goal -- the Jail Health Services, Department of Public Health for the county -- And at that time, there were only six clinics. Today we have thirty. And so this then became the Bureau. And we opened Provident Hospital. We started to build an ambulatory system of care -- and which, we now have thirty clinics. And we built, down the street, an HIV, AIDS, infectious disease

building. We raised the funds, $30 million. None of the money came from the county. And Rush. Rush and the county joined together to open an HIV, AIDS, infectious disease. And it's down on Harrison and Polk. It's called the Core Center. I raised it, together with a couple of other people. Christie Hefner, for one, was terrific, wonderful, wonderful. And so that's another part of the Bureau.

DJ: Amazing, especially at a time when a lot of public health hospitals were closing.

RR: Yes, were having trouble.

DJ: Or closing or -- Yeah.

RR: And cl-- Yeah. Well, we developed a very -- I'm not going to get into it because it's too damn complicated. But we developed a very interesting funding mechanism --

DJ: Well, you obviously --

RR: -- which helped us.

DJ: -- believe --

RR: Pardon?

DJ: -- believe in public health.

RR: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I mean, you know, it's not just inpatient facilities. All of the -- It's public health. It's public medicine, is really what it is. It's public medicine. And it's worked. And I've been here for twelve years. And it's been a good show. It's been a good show. And being a Jewish woman, I think, in the political milieu, I think was very important -- that this good work was done -- and that I was, at one time, probably the highest leading Jewish woman in politics. Of course, now there's Jan Schakowsky, who is wonderful, terrific.

DJ: She's my congresswoman.

RR: Dynamite gal. What?

DJ: She's my member of Congress.

RR: Oh, is she really? (laughter) She's dynamite. She's a real dynamite lady.

DJ: Yes. I met her.

RR: And there are others now. So it's -- But I have never made a speech where I haven't told everybody that I was Jewish -- ever, ever -- and of any major consequence -- and why that was important.

DJ: And why did you do that?

RR: In terms of -- Well, I wanted people to know that we had a value system and that women were able to do this within our community and that we make important contributions. And I wanted everybody to know that.

DJ: Of all these many awards here, is there one you're most proud of or most --?

RR: I don't know. (laughter) I don't know.

DJ: There's too many to --

RR: I don't know. I think the one I like the best is I got an honorary degree. I got two honorary degrees, one from Kenyon College and one from Rush. And that's over there. Yeah. And I don't know, they're all important. And one of the thing that was very key -- that's not here at all; but Rendy has it -- is a magazine that I have. I went into the Swift & Company plant, because Swift & Company was discriminating against black women. And in order -- The Packinghouse Workers' --

DJ: When was it?

RR: In the early '50s, '50, '51 -- '49, '50, some-- And Packinghouse Workers' Union was discrimina-- They had an equal opportunity clause. And it was being violated. They couldn't prove it, that it was being violated. In order to prove it, I went into the plant. And clearly, it was being violated. And clearly, we won. But I went into the plant. I worked in the plant for a while, to prove that they were discriminating against black women but they would hire me, and some Polish immigrants, who were hired on the same day that I was, who had to come with an interpreter. And they would hire them but they wouldn't hire these black women. And they'd tell the black women, every day, "No jobs today. Go home. No jobs today." And I went too. I'd leave. You know. And about the third or fourth day, I figured, "Wait a minute. There's something crazy here. There's something wrong with this thing. Here are these other women there. I don't get this." So I decided I wasn't going to leave. And I decided I was going to make eye contact with the guy who was saying this. And I did. And I stood and I kept looking at him. And he went --

DJ: (laughs)

RR: So he said, "Everybody leave. No jobs today." And I stayed. I didn't leave, clearly. Everybody left except the Polish women and me. We went into the office. We filled out an application. I went to work the next day. This was in 19-- certainly 1950. That was before I married Dave.

DJ: And were there --

RR: Pardon?

DJ: -- was there --?

RR: A grievance? Filed a grievance and we won. And we forced the company to hire black women -- who had experience. I didn't. (laughs) That's for sure.

DJ: And you were the proof of the --

RR: I was the proof. Yeah.

DJ: How has your work like that, for others -- We've talked about how it's impacted other people. How's it affected you?

RR: Me? Oh, that's a fascin-- (laughter) that's good que-- that's a wonderful -- Made me very proud, to have made a contribution -- but also made a contribution to myself. Because remember, I don't have a college degree. This is my college degree.

DJ: And --

RR: And it's an advanced degree.

DJ: Yes.

RR: So it gave me a lot. It gave me a lot of pleasure, gave me a lot of joy. It was important work. It is important work. And I think, as a woman, I have the respect of many. And I'd like to believe that, anyhow. And -- but I think it's true. And I think it's true. I think people think I'm tough. I'm sure that people will tell you that, that I'm very tough. And I probably am. I don't take a lot of crap from a lot of people. And I'm very confrontational. You can't say anything and think you can get away with it, that I won't pick it up. Because I will. But again, I'm very fair. I truly am. And I have a lot of compassion for people, and I have a lot of understanding. And I don't push people around, unless they have to be pushed around. I really don't go out of my way to do that. But I want to respect people and, conversely, I want them to respect me.

DJ: What would you say to, you know, women today?

RR: Well --

DJ: What is the difference now?

RR: I'm not sure that you can have it all. I'm not so sure. And I think you have to be able to -- The one positive thing, I think -- If the women's movement did anything, it enabled women to have options. It enabled them to decide whether they wanted to stay home or go to work. It enabled them to decide, "Do I want to be a doctor? Do I want to be a lawyer? Because I could do that. I could do that." Because the fact of the matter is about, I would say, 60% of the lawyers are women. Over 50% of doctors are women. So the world has changed. And there are options. And my biggest thing is to take those options and weigh them. And you do whatever it is you want to do. And you be anything you want to be. But you decide that. Nobody decides it for you. So that's what I think.

DJ: Like you did. You decided.

RR: I decided --

DJ: Or --

RR: -- at a time when it was hard to decide, (laughs) when people didn't decide those things. And people didn't decide those things. I decided -- that I was going to do something. And it wasn't always that I decided that. Things happened. You know, things happen. Doesn't always -- You know. Don't always make a calculated decision. Things happen. And you take advantage of what's happening.

DJ: But there is an amazing, sort of, continuity from your --

RR: And you would think I planned it out. I really didn't. (laughter) I really didn't. I wish I were so smart as to have planned it all out, but I really didn't. It was, I suppose, in a sense, like going to college, huh? So you went. You got a Bachelor's degree. Then you got a Master's degree. And some people got a PhD. Huh? So that's what I did. I didn't go the conventional way. I went a different way. But I did the same thing.

DJ: Oh. Yeah.

RR: I did exactly the same thing -- as if I were doing that.

DJ: Besides your father, who you already talked about, any other role models?

RR: Yeah. I worked for a couple of people that I felt were -- Remember, again, my role models weren't necessarily women, because they weren't there. They weren't there. So, people that I worked for. When I first came to Sinai I worked for a doctor. I convinced him that I should be his aide-de-camp. I didn't even know what the hell it meant, but I convinced him anyhow. And he accepted that -- see? -- and I became his aide-de-camp. That's how I was able to move into the next level. Because he left. And so, again, took advantage of that. So he was a role model, because he taught me a lot, about administration and -- And he gave me an opportunity to do these things. He gave me the opportunity to be a staff person and to be all over the place, so I knew everything about Mt. Sinai. So when he left, there was nobody who knew it as well as I did. So in that sense, he was a role model. And you learn from everybody you work with. You take away something from everybody. And if you don't, you're a jerk --

DJ: (laughs)

RR: -- you're a jerk. So I learned from everybody -- learned from my husband. Trust me! (laughs) He taught me a lot! He taught me a lot. I couldn't write until he taught me. He taught me how to speak, taught me how to write a sentence with appropriate grammar. (laughs)

DJ: Mostly men.

RR: Yes. Yes. Yes. Remember, I'm going to be eighty. How many (laughter) women were around? Hmm?

DJ: Is there anything we haven't --

RR: No. Huh?

DJ: -- we haven't talked about --?

RR: I think you've talked about everything -- (laughs) everything, including my health. I have good health.

DJ: You look fabulous.

RR: Thank you.

DJ: (laughs)

RR: Thank you.

DJ: That's why I keep forgetting, because you're --

RR: That I'm eighty?

DJ: (laughs)

RR: A lot of people forget I'm going to be eighty, a lot of people do.

DJ: And no desire to retire?

RR: Well, that's a different question. (laughs) I'm not going to even work on that one. That's very internal. That's internal.

DJ: But --

RR: Huh?

DJ: -- most people would have retired long ago, so.

RR: Oh, a long time ago. Exactly, exactly, exactly.

DJ: But you enjoy what you do.

RR: Yeah, I do. You know, it has its moments -- has its moments -- has its moments.

DJ: Well, thank you, very much.

RR: Well, thank you. It was a pleasure. Hope you --

[END OF INTERVIEW]