Transcript – Donna Zaccaro, Class of 1983

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Interviewer: Mary Murphy, Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist
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Mary Murphy: Okay, so welcome to another interview that we collect for the Pembroke Center Oral History Project. My name is Mary Murphy and I am the Nancy L. Buc Pembroke Center Archivist. Today is January 31 and I am in Pembroke Hall today with another Brown alumna who's going to be sharing her story with us today. I'm going to ask her to introduce herself now to listeners.

Donna Zaccaro: My name's Donna Zaccaro. I'm class of '83, 1983 from Brown, so it is almost, what is that, 37 years since I graduated, and I'm also a member of the Pembroke Council.

MM: So how I like to run these interviews is chronologically as I noted before we started recording. It helps our listeners learn more about you, [1:00] your family background, especially their connection to education, and any thoughts they might have had or have felt about the education of women. And then we're going to turn to your time here at Brown and your life thereafter. So let's go ahead and start at the beginning. If you could introduce yourself to our listeners, and tell us a little bit about your family background.

DZ: Okay, so, my, I guess I should start really with my grandmother.

AK: Yes.

DZ: Because my mother's mother's husband, or my mother's father, died when she was eight years old. And he was an immigrant from Italy and a businessman. And his wife was left without any money. But she was someone, so she actually had to go work as a garment worker, she was a crochet beader, in order to support the family. [2:00] But she felt very strongly about education. Because she had to leave school when she was eight years old. She came from a poor immigrant

family. She was born in New York. But her parents were born in Italy. And they lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. And she had to leave school after eighth grade in order to support her family. And she always felt she had been a very good student. And actually even the principal at the high school came and begged her family to let her go to high school. And so she always felt that education was very important and that she had missed out on an education and she wanted to make sure that my mother in particular had an education and, both my mother and my uncle. So she sometimes, she figured out a way to send them to boarding school, because she really couldn't take care of them, she was working really long hours and [3:00] she thought they'd get a better education but also, you know, they'd get room and board. And always stressed to my mother how important education was and that was the key to get out of their situation. At that point they were living in the South Bronx. They had, when she got married, they moved to Newburgh, New York, and then when my grandfather died, she had to move out and move to the South Bronx.

So anyway, so my mother went to private boarding school, run by nuns. Catholic boarding school, called Marymount in Tarrytown, and then, and did very well. And in fact, they're, the nun that ran it was almost like a second mother to her, is how she described her. But she, you know, tutored her in Latin over the summer so she could skip a grade so that they [4:00] could save that tuition. And she went to college very young, she got a full scholarship to Marymount in Manhattan.

MM: Okay.

DZ: She had gotten into Barnard, wanted to go there, but they wouldn't give her a full scholarship and she needed the full scholarship. So education was always key and her, her mother said to her when she came home, you know, with a 98 famously on a report card said, you know, "That's fine for your temperature but what happened to the other two points?" So I was raised similarly. My mother always really valued education, and not to jump ahead, but she would say the same thing to me jokingly, but not so jokingly. But anyway, so my mother when she graduated from college, in the '50s for women, the options were, either being a teacher, [5:00] a nurse, a secretary, or a nun, pretty much. And so she, she actually thought about becoming a nun, but then decided that she didn't want to do that and became a teacher. So she

was a teacher and, of second graders, and then decided that she wanted to go to law school at night. Or go to law school, and the only way she could do it was to go at night. And she went to Fordham Law School, and when, she was one of two women in her class and the head of the law school had said to her, you know, "Before you come, Jerry, you're taking a man's place. So are you serious?" She graduated from law school and really couldn't get a job. Much like Ruth Bader Ginsburg actually. And she also got married. She took the bar and then got married two days later and [6:00] made a deal with my father who wanted her to stay home when they had, she had kids until we were all in school. So she ended up doing that. I mean, she, she worked in law more as a volunteer in the community until I was born, which was about two years later, a year and a half later. And, and then she stayed home until I was 12 and was very involved in our school work and, and all our activities and, and then she, at that point, decided that she wanted to go back to work. And she ended up going and becoming an assistant district attorney.

So she actually had to re study the law again because it had changed so much since she graduated and she became a district attorney and [7:00] created the first special victims bureau because she was handling all the crimes against women, senior citizens, children, and felt they were special victims that needed to be treated specially. And then she started speaking out on battered spouse legislation and, or for the need for battered spouse legislation, and then decided to run for Congress as a result, because our congressman was nowhere. He didn't live in the district anymore. He'd been there for 44 years. And so that's how she originally got into politics. She then was a member of Congress for six years and then was nominated by Walter Mondale to be the first vice presidential nominee on a on a major party ticket. So I was raised with a really strong sense of the importance of education. The sense that you could do anything you wanted to do with effort, with [8:00] hard work, persistence, and determination.

MM: Do you want to say for our listeners what your mother's name is?

DZ: Oh, sorry. My mother's name is Geraldine Ferraro. So she used her maiden name, which was Ferraro, professionally because again, she passed the bar exam two days before she got married. But she also asked my father if she could keep you know, use her maiden name and keep her maiden name, which was very unusual at the time. So this was 1960 because she

wanted to do it as a tribute to her mother who had put, really worked herself and sacrificed to such an extent so that her daughter could get an education and get ahead.

MM: Something I want to ask before we go on in the story that I learned from watching the documentary, which is skipping ahead a bit, sharing about your profession, and the documentary that you made about your mother's life and run as VP – [9:00]

DZ: Called *Geraldine Ferraro: Paving the Way*.

MM: Which is fabulous – is about the story of your father and what I would describe as a viewer as a feminist man, though traditional with roots in Catholicism.

DZ: Yes.

MM: So can you share about your father a little bit?

DZ: Yes. So he was second generation Italian American. His parents were both born in the, in New York as well, actually Brooklyn. And he was raised very traditionally, Catholic, Italian Catholic. Most – they moved to Queens when he was little. And you know, his mother was a homemaker, his father was the breadwinner. He started a real estate business, my father joined him in the business.

My father is more intuitively a feminist. [10:00] I mean he, and he's someone who had, is just, he's always he has a real sense of what he feels is right and wrong, which I guess he's instilled in all of us as well, or that's, you know, shared values with my mother. And when he was asked about, you know, whether she could keep her maiden name in order to honor her mother, he just thought that was the right thing to do. And that was a, you know, a really nice tribute. So that was considered very progressive and forward thinking.

MM: Absolutely. It still is.

DZ: Yeah. And he, he was asked, you know, over the years, certainly as she became more of a public figure, why he was okay with, why he let her do that. And he always said, you know, "I don't have a problem with it so you shouldn't," you know, to anyone who questioned it. He's, he's just always had a real sense of compassion and equality, but he also has a real sense of family and [11:00] loyalty. So he was just very supportive of whatever she wanted to do. Now, he also said that he made a deal with her that she would stay home and that he would support her in anything. And as you see in the film, he says he had no idea that she was going to run for public office. So he actually got the worst end of that deal. But he, when, when she first started running, you know, opponents started talking about or, you know, in, intimating that there, politicians have a lot of events at night and on the weekends, and she would, she had a male staffer accompanying her, driving her, accompanying her to events. People started, you know, a whisper campaign that she was having an affair with the male staffer. So then she had a female staffer start accompanying her and then they were, there was a whisper campaign about her having an affair with the woman, [12:00] that she was a lesbian. And so my father started accompanying her to evening events and on the weekends and learned that he actually liked it. So he, you know, he was always by her side, throughout her years in Congress, and then, and then afterwards as well.

MM: So I want to step back a little bit and put the focus, I want to turn the lens towards, towards your, towards your experience of the, in the home as you are coming up in school and begin to have, of course, a mother who is becoming a public figure, but then you yourselves are, you yourself are suddenly a public child in some ways. Do you want to share about being in your home at that time –

DZ: Yeah.

MM: Or how that affected you?

DZ: So again, she stayed home till I was 12. So she was very involved, very [13:00] active at school and in the community doing a lot of volunteer work and very involved in our schoolwork and lives and everything else. But she was a, you know, she was essentially a homemaker. So

she wasn't a public person at all. She then, when she became a prosecutor, that was different because she, she would actually, I'm the eldest of three children, so she would read her briefs to me. And they were very disturbing and they were disturbing to her, too. That, I started seeing her speak and speak out. And I saw her trying to protect people and to do what she was, she felt was right for people and she started becoming an activist. She didn't run, you know, she didn't run for Congress until almost my senior year. It was the summer before my senior year.

MM: In high school?

DZ: In high school.

MM: And now tell us where you were at that time. [14:00]

DZ: I was in Manhattan. I commuted, actually, my father drove nine children in a station wagon every day for 17 years. Sadly, no one ever took a picture of this man in a station wagon with nine kids in the car. But I went to, you want to know which schools I went to?

MM: Yeah.

DZ: Oh, okay. I started out at Marymount for kindergarten and first grade and then there was some sort of incident. My mother yanked me out of Marymount and put me in Sacred Heart and I was in Sacred, Sacred Heart from second through seventh grade and then I went to Spence for eighth through twelfth. I graduated from Spence before coming here to Brown.

MM: And Sacred Heart, are these women's –

DZ: Yes –

MM: Only education?

DZ: Yeah, yes, all three of them are. Marymount and Sacred Heart were Catholic schools, private schools, and Spence was nonsectarian.

MM: Can I ask you a question before moving on about gender politics in your women only education? I too went to [15:00] convent, Catholic school and so I – did you feel it was a feminist educational environment or did you find – Tell us about that? What was it like – was Spence an all-girls school?

DZ: I would say, Spence was more actively or feminist I'd say. Marymount, I mean, you know, an all-girls school the, because it's just women, defacto every leadership position is, you know, held by a woman and, and we were always encouraged, actually at all of them, to speak up, speak out. I mean, I you know, I think there's real value in an all-girls education just for that reason. But I never, because I was getting the same message to home as I was at school that you could do anything you want to do, [16:00] even though it was also religious, you know, we were taught by lay nuns and, and, and or lay people, lay teachers and nuns who were not wearing habits and you know. And all the nuns, I still have a relationship with Marymount because of my mother's relationship with Marymount, with the nuns there. That's a whole different story, but and these are some of the most can-do, you know they're really active as people.

MM: Did you, as you, so as you come through your high school years, just focusing on your own education at the time, did you consider continuing on –

DZ: All-girls? No.

MM: Yeah, onto an all-girls college environment?

DZ: No, because I wanted, I wanted, I never did. [17:00] I, I wanted to have, you know, more of a social life with boys.

MM: Tell us about your thinking about learning about Brown. Let's kind of turn, let's turn to that.

DZ: Right.

MM: And maybe if you could tell us what you were interested in maybe in high school a little bit, maybe why Brown I started to –

DZ: The only the only thing I want to add that I didn't answer in your last question was the notion of growing up with my mother being public. She didn't, she didn't because I didn't want, I was trying to explain, she wasn't actually a public figure until I was here in college, and she had a different name than I do. And so no one knew that my mother was a member of Congress. My closest friends, obviously, I told, but even Billy Mondale, Walter Mondale's third child, his youngest, was a year behind me here and we were friendly, but not close friends at all, but we knew, we knew each other. And he didn't know that she was my mother until I walked into his house after she had been chosen as the vice presidential nominee. [18:00]

MM: Oh no!

DZ: Right. So there was no, I didn't get a sense, you know, she, she wasn't really a public figure, the fact that I was connected to her in any way, wasn't something that I ever dealt with until she was, you know, till she ran for vice president.

MM: Do you think – that's fascinating. Thank you for sharing that anecdote. And that was, were you at his home in Minnesota?

DZ: Yeah, yeah.

MM: Is that where you were?

DZ: Yeah. The families got together.

MM: Being from Minnesota I love that.

DZ: Right.

MM: And I love to see that the, the announcement was made at the State House.

DZ: Yes.

MM: In St. Paul, which is a delight.

DZ: And their first stop was actually to his childhood home.

MM: Oh, that's just, it's just wonderful.

DZ: Yeah.

MM: And so do you, just to pause then, do you feel that the fact that you have a, you have a different last name than your mother did, do you feel that that protected you in a sense –

DZ: Yeah.

MM: Or allowed you space?

DZ: It still does. I mean, people don't make the connection actually, people don't. If you're under forty you tend to not know who my mother [19:00] was to begin with, which is what part of the reason I made the film. But, you know, when, when she was very much in the news, my name wasn't until there were issues with my father. And that's a whole different piece of it. But so my experience was actually different from my brother and my sisters. Because my brother was in, was in college when she was nominated. And my sister was still in high school. My sister actually is a Brown grad, too. She's six years, six classes behind me, she's five years behind me.

MM: Okay.

DZ: So I mean, she grew up with, first of all, my mother working. I mean, you know more than I did and down in Washington, and commuting, so she was with my father more during the week. I mean, initially, my mother commuted every day back and forth because we live pretty close to the airport. And, [20:00] but then, but then she started going down on Mondays and coming back on Thursday nights. So her experience was different. And people, you know, because of that situation people knew more.

MM: At a certain point you were your faces were in images.

DZ: Yes, well, that was just for the vice presidential. Yeah. And we all campaigned. I mean, I took I was in my first job. It was my, this, I had been there a year. And so I took a leave of absence. And my brother, my brother was in college. I don't know, I guess he took, he probably took off a semester. I don't know. My sister, definitely. She was supposed to come to Brown. And she took a gap year to be, in order to campaign. So she came afterwards.

MM: And where did your brother end up attending college?

DZ: He was at Middlebury.

MM: Okay. Okay. So just to pause and focus on your time here at Brown. [21:00] So again, tell us, tell us why Brown.

DZ: So I actually looked at 12 schools.

MM: Did you apply to all twelve?

DZ: I did not. I applied early to Brown, early action, and I got in. And then I applied to Williams and Amherst just to make sure because they were in my second and third choices. And you know, and I decided on Brown. But actually, I meant to bring up to you, I have a copy of my application.

MM: Oh!

DZ: Which I should, I don't know, I should give it to you.

MM: Yeah.

DZ: But because what I did was I had trouble writing about myself in the first person so I treated it like I wrote about myself in the third person. And the question was about, was "Why Brown?" And what I did was I created a newspaper, and I did calligraphy and it was *Not the New York Times*, and I had a picture of myself shaking hands with President Carter at the time, [22:00] and the headline was, "Student discovers utopia Brown University" and then I had the story. I mean, it's sort of obviously a little bit corny and a little hokey.

MM: I love it.

DZ: But you know, so this way I could talk about why Brown was utopia. So I really bought into the really the open curriculum, and just what it meant, which, which was that I would only be taking courses that I wanted to take, that I could explore lots of different areas because I was interested in lots of different things. And that's just what I did. I mean, I took courses in I think 10 different departments and I cycled through, I think five different majors before, or concentrations before I decided on Comparative Literature. And the reason I decided on comparative, comparative literature was that I could apply, use or apply, English literature classes, French literature classes, Italian, you know, all different, Russian literature, Italian literature, [23:00] all of which I took, as well as some history, and I took some philosophy and I took, you know, I took law, I took myth and identity, which was one of my favorites, and some religious studies. And because of the way that Brown works, it was an interdisciplinary sort of way to study and I, I, I just knew when I walked on the campus that people were so excited about what they were studying, and I, I didn't get that same sort of sense in other places. And I think that's still true. I mean, my daughter just graduated last spring and she had the same experience. She took five classes a semester and double majored just because she couldn't, she wanted to take so many classes, she would, she would shop 10 classes, you know, so she took way more

than she had to, just because she wanted to, and that, that was a distinguishing factor. Everybody, my best friends were really interested in whatever they were studying, and we were all really supportive of each other and it didn't really matter as long as you were [24:00] interested in something.

So we tended to go to the Rock until midnight, the Rockefeller library, which is our main library, which actually was somewhat social too, because I we'd all take coffee breaks, you know, like every other hour so. But, and, and then we, we'd go to the Graduate Center Bar at midnight, and stay there till 1:00, 1:30 you know, just for an hour, an hour and a half and then go home and go to bed and get up and do it again. So.

MM: Can you tell us, let's hear some Polaroids like some snapshot memories. Can you tell us about your first memory on campus? Do you know what that was?

DZ: When I came on campus, well talk about a different time too, because as I said, I visited 12 schools and I think I only went to two with my parents because they drove me. I, growing up in New York City, I didn't have a license at that point so I went to everything else by public transportation by myself. [25:00] Which isn't necessarily what, you know, my kids, I mean, my kids were taken by either me or my husband to visit schools anyway. So I came here by myself and I went into at that point, they were still –

MM: By train?

DZ: By train. They were still interviewing on campus. So I went to, and it was in, I believe, Alum, it was Alumnae Hall. It was called Alumnae Hall, but it was in a different building.

MM: Okay.

DZ: And I remember the building because there was a red brick building and it's across the street from the lower green. I have to go see what the name of it was. And I had an interview with a very nice guy. And I had walked through campus and it just felt, I don't know. People were

sitting on the green and talking to each other and I can still remember it. In fact, I can even I know this is crazy, but I can even remember what I was wearing.

MM: Yeah. What were you wearing?

DZ: I was wearing a sort of peasant-y skirt that was blue with like a [26:00] white shirt and you know like espadrilles, so.

MM: Yeah, yeah. Other snapshots? Do you have other snapshot memories that were important to you or really struck you?

DZ: I remember freshman year. I remember spending a lot of time hanging out with people on my hall, my freshman hall, who I'm still close to. Some of my best friends are still from my freshman hall. I had lunch with my roommate last week. I am seeing another person from the hall next week. I'm seeing a third person from the hall tomorrow because I'm up here. I'm going to have breakfast with him and his wife who actually, as it turned out was a professor who was a residential professor on our hall.

MM: Like an RA? Yeah, yeah.

DZ: Yeah, no, she was a professor.

MM: Oh, okay.

DZ: But anyway, so I still have all these close friends from my freshman year so I, I just remember spending a lot of time [27:00] talking to people and hanging out. And, you know, that wasn't something I ever did. In high school I went to school, I came home, I had dinner, I did my homework, and I went to bed. And that was sort of it. On Fridays and Saturdays maybe I went to a party or went out, but really, I hadn't really had those sort of social interactions and they weren't as intellectual other than at school.

MM: Right. And what about, so as you're here on campus, you're working hard, you're socializing. Do you, are there times did you have any blips? I know some students kind of go through ups and downs and things like that, or where are there any moments – It sounds shiny your experience of Brown sounds shiny.

DZ: Well, as I said, I start I started out, I was concerned that I went through a bunch of different majors. You know, I started out thinking I was going to do engineering because I was particularly good at math and science [28:00] in high school. I had two years of calculus and so I placed into a higher level math class. And anyway, I, engineering, I went the first couple of days and then I, I don't know why I didn't know this beforehand, but then when they said that I'd only get one elective a year, I said, "Well, that's the end of that." And then, in math, I started in this higher level math class, and it was abstract for the first time. And I liked complex concrete. And now suddenly, there could be an answer, or there might not be an answer. And then I had a TA who made mistakes on top of it, which makes it even harder if you don't know if there's an answer or not. So that was the end of I was, you know, I momentarily I thought, well, maybe applied math economics so that lasted about two weeks. And then I was political science and economics for like the rest of my freshman year. And then I thought, actually, I don't really like political science so much because it's very data driven. [29:00]

MM: Yes.

DZ: Not so much, I think it's evolved now with the Watson Institute and I think it has more history into it and political theory and more politics. I maybe would have liked that more. But anyway, so it took me a while to come to. And then I just started taking other classes that I was remotely interested in. I had never taken art history before and that was like a new language. So I ended up actually getting enough credits for the second concentration in that and taking history and as I said, all these different courses. So I mean, there was some confusion about what I was going to focus on. I didn't feel real pressure though. I just felt a little badly that I wasn't quite as directed as I thought I was. I always thought I was very academically directed.

MM: The open curriculum can be kind of –

DZ: Right.

MM: Loose, too, for people. Were, you said that you were interested for a time in political science. Were you political in nature? Would you – [30:00]

DZ: Yes.

MM: Identify with –

DZ: Well, I mean, I had worked on my mother's first congressional campaign. I was the only one of the three kids that did and I worked –

MM: And how old were you at that point?

DZ: 17.

MM: Okay.

DZ: So I had worked from, you know, we worked from 6am to midnight for months. So, and I was very into it. So I thought at that point that I would ultimately run for office too. I mean, I came thinking, well, maybe I'll be a lawyer, you know, I'll follow her footsteps. I'll be a lawyer, and then I'll run for office. But the vice presidential campaign experience ended my interest in being an elected official.

MM: Do you want to share any more about that?

DZ: It was really hard. I mean, we were each of the kids, including the Mondale's, so there were six of us, out. We campaigned as surrogates for the ticket separately. So we had a staff person with us, and we went, we would go to the state [31:00] and we would do maybe five events a day. We'd speak separately so we were all around the country.

MM: You were 22 at the time? 21?

DZ: Yeah. I was 22. My, my brother was 19. And my sister was 17.

MM: You were just finished, for you, you were said it, you were a year out from college.

DZ: Right.

MM: Okay.

DZ: I had never spoken publicly before. I gave one speech in high school. I was, I ran for the president, co-president of a club, which we won, but –

MM: Was this terribly nerve wracking for you?

DZ: At first, but then you learned, I learned, you learned pretty quickly when you're doing it five times a day, and when there, you have to, how to do it. And then it starts becoming fun, actually.

MM: So they sent you out on the road, five different events a day. And –

DZ: We had briefing books, you know, you'd go into a state, you'd have local issues. You know, and they actually, they would give you sort of a stump speech. But often you didn't, you weren't reading a speech. Often you were just speaking [32:00] off the cuff.

MM: And was it, I know for a myriad of reasons from viewing the documentary why that was a struggle. But was it also just simply grueling?

DZ: Well, yes. I mean, it's a combination. Being elected official is a 24/7 sort of job. And I'm not willing, I'm willing to work hard, but I'm not willing to work that hard. I'm not willing to work every night and every weekend and plus, I think, you know, what I recognized at that point was that you actually, in order to be very effective, you have to have several different skill sets.

You have to be a good campaigner, you have to be a good fundraiser or salesperson, and then you have to be responsive to your constituents. So I guess four, four things. And then you have to be able to build compromise or build coalitions. So, and I don't know that I have all those skills. And also, I didn't like being so much [33:00] in the public eye. So, you know, the campaign as my mother was the first she was attacked like no one was attacked before. I mean, obviously, the attacks actually haven't changed so much over the years. Hillary Clinton was attacked in many of the same ways as my mother was attacked and women do get attacked in all the same ways. But –

MM: Your mother had, you can see in the documentary how she had deft touch with people.

DZ: Yes.

MM: She was incredibly personable.

DZ: Yes.

MM: And even still, the landslide.

DZ: Yeah, well, it was a, it was a strategy. I mean, they had to, as the polster in the film talks about the head to knock her off the pedestal because her joining the ticket provided momentum to the ticket and gave a second look to Mondale. Now, Reagan, President Reagan would have won anyway. The economy was doing well, [34:00] you know, one of the people in the film, Al Hunt, says, you know, "Jesus Christ could have been on the ticket, and they still would have lost." But, and a vice presidential candidate can only do so much. Usually they don't have more than a 1 to 2% impact on a ticket. But my father was also attacked. And that was a strategy. And what you see is that you can make things up. And what we're seeing just today is that you can lie about things, you can attack people, you can be a bully, you can, and I, you know, I just wouldn't want to subject myself to that or my family. Again.

MM: Yeah.

DZ: So I know we're a little bit off course. Sorry.

MM: Yeah, I just have one more question about that because I know your, your mom kind of communicated in the documentary about carrying on guilt, in essence, about the toll that it took on her family.

DZ: Yes.

MM: Did you and your mother, [35:00] if you wanted to share, ever have a conversation about that woman to woman? Like did you ever –

DZ: Yeah, I mean she felt, she felt heart, she felt terrible about what my father went through. The good news about my father is that he felt that whatever attacks he had to undergo or be subjected to, were worth it because she was making history, she was changing a perception of what was possible for women, and he knew it was important. He also is the most comfortable with himself person and the most self-confident person I think I've been, in a in a humble way, that I've, that I've ever come across in my life. I mean, he really doesn't care what other people – I mean I'm, you know, I'm now 58 years old and when I turned [36:00] 50 really was when I started realizing that I don't care so much about what other people think of me. I only, I care about the people I care about, you know what they think about me and my family. But, but he's always been that way. And he only cares about his family and his friends. So he said, you know, tag me, in fact, the first interview we ever gave was for my documentary. And it was just because it was me because he never talked to the press. He didn't care what people thought of him, that he just wanted them to like his wife. And he didn't want to bring down my mother. So he, you know, he weathered the storm.

MM: It's so interesting how often men come up in these interviews, good men, and I think it's just absolutely fascinating throughout various different interviews, people talking about their fathers, many of them, not all of them. We've got some really wonderful stories of great dads [37:00] and good men. It's wonderful.

DZ: Well, I think in order to run for office, or actually to be in any sort of high powered position to be as a professional, you need to have a supportive partner. Whether it's, you know, or, or when you're younger, obviously a supportive parent. But when you're an adult, you need, you need someone else, especially if you want to have children. And in my parents case, my father, you know, just took, he was home every night for my sister for dinner, and he managed the household while she was traveling and, and working. And the friends of mine who – and, and my husband's supportive of my work too. You know, you need, you, you can't, my mother always said, "You can have it all but you can't have it all at the same time and you need help." [38:00]

MM: So that's a good transition. So as you exit college, you're a Comparative Literature concentrator, and what do you do with that? Tell us the next chapter.

DZ: So, as my career is not linear in any, in any way.

MM: Tell us about your relationship, if you can.

DZ: Yeah. Comparative Literature and art history as the minor, I went to Wall Street. So I, and I, that happened because I had thought as I said, I thought I was going to be a lawyer. I came in, and then eventually a politician, but I still thought I was going to be a lawyer when I left school until my the summer after my junior year and I had an internship with a law firm, a corporate law firm, a pension fund lawyer and a real estate tax lawyer, and I did not like it at all. And, but there was a partner at that firm who was a Brown alum who became sort of my Rabbi and he, [39:00] he was a mentor to me. And he said, "So what," at the end of the summer, "So what do you think?" And I said, "I don't want to be a lawyer." And he said, he said, "Well try a different type of law." So he actually suggested my, the first semester of my senior year that I get a, an internship with a superior court judge here in Rhode Island. So I looked at criminal law, I liked that a little bit better, but it was the process that I decided that I didn't like. I didn't like sitting and reading briefs and, you know, solitary and alone. And anyway, so I went back to him at Christmas. And I said, "I don't like it. I don't, what should I do?" And because my parents didn't have really other ideas, and or, you know, know how to advise me and he said, "You should go to Wall Street. They're these two year programs. You can be a financial analyst at the, at one of

the investment banks and you'll learn how to conduct yourself in a corporate environment. [40:00] You'll work really hard, but you also get an introduction to the financial services business." And so that's what I did. He actually put me in touch with the heads of all the major investment banks, I got interviews and I ended up going to Salomon Brothers where I worked in corporate finance, in a, in the utility group for two years. And it was a great experience. And then I, it's just a two year job, though I was then offered to go to the next level, which was become an associate. And I decided when I was in corporate finance, I actually wanted to go into sales and trading. And, but then I was concerned about the fact that I had a comparative literature and art history undergrad, and that I thought maybe I needed a formal business degree. So I decided to go to Harvard Business School and get an MBA, which I did for two years. And talk about the antithesis of Brown.

MM: Please do. [41:00]

DZ: Well, I have some wonderful friends from Harvard Business School. And the degree is, I guess, impressive. And I, you know, I did learn some things, but it was not –

MM: It's brutal. I've heard the program can be very challenging.

DZ: Well, it was definitely boot camp. At that point there, it was only 20% women.

MM: Right.

DZ: The professor in my section, the head of my section, told me that the professors for our section decided that I needed to be humbled because of who my mother was. So I was basically crucified, I was cold called all the time, and it was, it was really terrible. But also, half your grade is class participation and quality was equated with quantity. And that's not how Brown worked. You know, so that was, it was not the right choice, I would say. I mean, I made it through, but I did not like Harvard Business School. But then I went back to, I ended up going back to Solomon Brothers, to the same job that I was offered before I left. So [42:00] I didn't actually need the degree though it gives you some mobility, whatever.

MM: Right.

DZ: And, you know, I can, it's helpful in my business now. But, but anyway, so. And, and my timing was really bad because I left in 1985 when the markets were screaming and I came back and there was the crash of '87. So that wasn't so good. So anyway, so the rest of my career, it goes all over. So then, and I was there until 1989. I worked on the government trading desk and sales. And my entire class was essentially fired. And I was interested in other things, but I was also very concerned with it being national news that Geraldine Ferraro's daughter had been fired from an investment bank. As well as, I mean everybody else in the class was fired too, [43:00] but –

MM: Literally it made –

DZ: Yeah, like there were only a handful of people that were left.

MM: But like literally, it was like, newsworthy?

DZ: It would have been. And so the people I worked with did not, what we said was that I decided to do something else. And I had been, a friend of mine, actually from Brown, had started a, or gotten funding to start a marketing communications consulting firm and I had gone, you know, I'd worked in my mother's campaign so I want to do more public affairs type marketing. And so we built this marketing communications firm called the Bedford Kent Group. And then my mother decided to run for the Senate, because this was 1992. So I took a leave from my company in order to be her political director on that campaign. And in the meantime, a bigger company [44:00] came and acquired our company. And so afterwards, I didn't want to, after my mother's campaign was over, I didn't want to start another company. So I was looking, you know, for firms to join. And to make a long story short, Tim Russert, who was the political director for NBC at the time, recruited me to do politics for NBC. So I went to NBC News, and became a producer, originally to do just politics, but then I ended up doing more of the civil rights and all the civil rights anniversaries and human interest stories. And then I did arts and education. So those were sort of my beats.

MM: What was that like working for Tim Russert?

DZ: I didn't work for Tim Russert. I worked for the Today Show.

MM: Oh, okay.

DZ: He had recruited me and then I ended up going to the Today Show.

MM: Okay. I heard he was –

DZ: A lovely guy.

MM: A good man.

DZ: Really, yeah. [45:00] Who died really young, tragically have a heart attack.

MM: Yes. This kind of clutch moment.

DZ: Yeah.

MM: So you're at the Today Show then –

DZ: Yeah, I was there for a decade.

MM: Okay.

DZ: And then I left to do longer form document, you know, to do documentaries because I had both my kids while I was there, it was very flexible, I got to do, basically produce pretty much whatever I wanted. I actually worked for Jeff Zucker who is now the president of CNN. And he was great, very flexible, but I wanted to do more in depth pieces, and I wanted to get credit for them. And it was a very flat organizational structure there and even though I was running the

whole, you know, whole shows or month long series or whatever. I wasn't running the show. And there were only a couple of people in management and you know, they weren't hiring [46:00] from within and it tended to be men who were put in senior positions. But anyway, so I left to do longer form. And then I got a little bit sidetracked because a friend of mine had started another a nonprofit called whatgoesaround.org, which was a little bit ahead of its time and it was a turnaround situation, but it was an online giving site that where you would create, it was the first one like this, where you could create a registry of, of charities that you cared about. And so for your birthday, rather than just when someone dies, you know, and in lieu of flowers give to, this is for your birthday, for any sort of occasion, even a hospitality gift you can make a donation to a charity in someone's honor. So I worked on that for it was supposed to be one year and ended up being closer to three until it was acquired by Network for Good. And then I was able to really focus [47:00] more on my documentaries.

MM: So I think, as I studied, studied you before doing this interview and watching your documentaries, you had this seat, you had a view of these very historical moments. And I think it's quite telling that you then circle back into that in your documentary work. Creating two just outstanding documentaries. I have to say I loved them both.

DZ: Thank you.

MM: And I was first of all curious about how you engage the folks that you interviewed, and it was like Nancy Pelosi. I think that moment with Nancy Pelosi about the announcement of your mother's campaign at the convention was outstanding. And so the connections that you maybe had in your life or maybe some vignettes, you could share with us about these outstanding women [48:00] in American history that maybe you had a connection to or run-ins with or –

DZ: Well, you know, again back to my childhood, we were always taught that we were to give back and that we could make a difference and there were lots of different ways you could make a difference. So when I was at NBC what I learned was I could make a difference by telling stories and bringing attention to subjects. So the nonprofit production company that I started is called Ferrodonna Features. Ferro being on the periodic table iron, but also iron in Italian. And also,

you know, it, it is reflective or whatever, it speaks to my mother, or refers to my mother – Ferraro. And then Donna is woman in Italian, or, and also me. So it's strong woman, iron woman. So the mission of the nonprofit, it's a [49:00] 501C3, is to do films about women, women's issues and social justice. So I feel that there's a paucity of stories about women leaders out there. And so that's what I'm focused on telling because ultimately, I always look for a personal story that tells a bigger picture. And, and I want them to be used in the educational market for the next generation to be inspirational. But, you know, my mother's story, even though it's my mother's story, I think it's pretty balanced. I mean, I come at them more as a journalist, and I tell sort of the good, bad, and the ugly, but so it's her personal story, but it's also a very American story. It's the story of, I'm able to weave in women's history and women in politics, [50:00] and then raise all the issues around that. The Windsor, the one on Edie Windsor, who's another incredible woman, icon, civil rights icon, and the, her case was a pivotal, pivotal case in the marriage equality movement, because she was 81 years old and a gay woman who really I could tell the whole story of the gay rights movement, or gay history in this country, gay rights movement in this country and the marriage equality movement in this country through her story.

MM: Can you tell us also, if you could just, *To a More Perfect Union* is the name of that second documentary that you made. And could you tell us, and I'm going to ask you just a couple of final questions that are even more contemporary than that documentary, but what was that – Your first documentary is of course about your mother and almost a genealogy, or family story, in addition [51:00] to her run, and so what was it like turning your lens to the next subject that was outside of your family unit and taking on another person's story.

DZ: Right. Well, I had done that so much at NBC. And actually, it's easier for me, it was easier for me. The hardest thing I've ever done was the documentary on my mother because it was so personal and I was also grieving. It was done in the year after she died. And I had interviewed her a year before she died, but I hadn't looked at the footage because I knew I was going to do it after she died. And so looking at footage of my mother every day was really hard. Especially since I still, it's been almost nine years and I miss her every day. But you know, actually, when I interviewed President Clinton for that –

MM: Yes.

DZ: He sat down, he was only going to give me you know, 10 minutes whatever and, and I he sat down and he said, "So you having [52:00] fun with this?" And I looked at him and I said, "No, this is really hard, you know, to focus on my mother." So I also had a friend of mine, from the Today Show, from NBC, serve as a co-producer to serve as a second set of eyes because I was so close to it. When I'm doing other stories, I'm more objective and actually the way that I pitched doing the Windsor story to the lead lawyer in it, a woman by name of Robbie Kaplan – and just to briefly explain that story, it was an 81 year a woman, Edie Windsor who, when her spouse died, her partner of 44 years ,was, was hit with a huge estate tax bill, which she wouldn't have had any tax bill if her spouse wasn't a woman. Because at that time the US government, the federal government, did not recognize same sex marriage. [53:00] So she sued the government at 81 and won. And her lawyer was Robbie Kaplan. But it's the whole story of, I was able to tell two different parts of the gay, well, just gay history or gay rights history through their two different lenses, because they're both lesbians who are married, living in different times of two different generations. So Robbie was 40 at the time, and, and Edie, you know, was in her 80s. So Robbie's in her 40s. And yet Robbie experienced discrimination as well in New York, you know, in New York City in 2006. You know, so I, what I said to her, and, and sometimes, you know, when I did screenings, and there were Q and A's people would say, "Well, why were you interested in this story, you're not gay?" And I said, you know, "First of all, [54:00] these, these women are heroes. And I believe that they did move our country closer to the ideal of what the constitution is about, equality for all, you know, to a more perfect union. But there's a love story. I mean, it was a story of women leaders. It's a David and Goliath story, you know, taking on the government, these two women taking on the government and winning, but it's also just the story about our country and what is right," which is why, you know, when we were talking earlier about the, the events that are going on, right now today in 2020, January 31st –

MM: Can you explain for our listeners, what's happening today?

DZ: So the impeachment trial of President Trump is, is continuing today, or did continue today and today was all about whether or not the Senate would hear [55:00] witnesses, would call

witnesses and hear witnesses or allow witnesses, which it doesn't look like it's going to happen. One of the senators that well, one senator last night put out a statement and one that was generally thought to possibly since he's not running for reelection, Lamar Alexander, and is retiring would allow for, vote against not allowing witnesses, or vote for allowing witnesses. And he put out a statement last night saying that the House had proven that Trump has done what he's accused of doing, but so there's no, no need for further witnesses. And then Lisa Murkowski from Alaska who we also you know, people also thought would vote in favor of witnesses, she had intimated that, and she tends to be a little bit more independent, voted against it. So, [56:00] for me, that was just devastating.

MM: Did you think of your mother today as you, as the news unfolds?

DZ: She would be apoplectic. I mean, I've thought of her through this entire thing. Because, you know, I was raised to believe in this country and what this country stands for. And I just can't believe that these senators don't have a conscience or any sort of sense of responsibility to the Constitution, and that they're all worried about having their heads put on pikes as supposedly the President has said he would do if they voted against him. Fortunately, they've, there has been some criticism, but I don't know that anything will amount to it. And I just think it's so shocking. So and, and, and really, you know, when I, when I watch *To a More Perfect Union: U.S. v. Windsor* again and I see Obama speak and how inspirational and uplifting, [57:00] and he is about what this country, I believe, is about. And then you see the contrast. And it's just, it's, it's very dispiriting.

MM: I also was struck by that in the last day, I also was struck by President Obama's willingness to see reality and to progress with the nation as it moved forward on the issue of gay marriage. And I think that's to his credit, just simply that he's human in that way. And I thought that was lovely that you capture that in the documentary as well.

DZ: Well, I had to, you know, I felt that it was really important to explain how the country passed – we had to explain the history of how the culture and the country was so opposed to the notion. Well, they were anti-homosexuality. The fift – I mean, [58:00] homosexuals were

considered criminals in the ’50s and then the ’60s and you had, I had to explain how the culture evolved and how it evolved politically. And, you know, all the different milestones for that happening. So he, his opinion evolved the same way that the country did.

MM: Are you thinking about tomorrow, the fall? Are you thinking about your mother’s legacy as the Democratic Party tries to move forward? What are you thinking that, what are you thinking about in terms of the coming election? In the light of all of this and the sort of tragic moment that we’re in? How do you even wrap, I’m having a hard time wrapping my brain around it. How are you wrapping your brain around it?

DZ: Well, I mean, obviously I, I feel really strongly that a democrat [59:00] needs to be elected president and that this current president needs to be defeated. I mean, I just have such a hard time understanding how these senators could say, “Well, we shouldn’t remove him, even if he did what he did. We shouldn’t remove him because we should let the voters decide.” And yet the voters overwhelmingly in the polls today and the past couple of days have said that they wanted to hear witnesses. They wanted to hear the full truth. So that’s sort of inconceivable, or they don’t, it doesn’t jive. It’s inconsistent. You know, we’ve got, unfortunately, there are so many great candidates actually, I mean this time around. And we, already a bunch of great candidates have dropped out of the race. What’s I think the *Times* really, *New York Times*, did a very interesting thing when they endorsed both [1:00:00] Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar because they said that there are two paths for the democrats either the left very, you know, the far left or the more moderate. So, you see the candidates line up that way. I happen to be helping, working for and helping Amy Klobuchar.

MM: Oh, are you?

DZ: Yeah. I was just actually in Iowa last weekend.

MM: Oh, a Minnesota connection. I love it.

DZ: Yes. And I can tell you all the reasons why but you know, not that I, I don't like Elizabeth Warren or Pete Buttigieg or Joe Biden. I'm not a huge fan of Bernie Sanders, I have to say, but I actually believe that, that it should be someone who has won a purple state, statewide, you know, several times. She's done it three times, she's won Trump [1:01:00] districts, and she's also been she's from the Midwest, which I think is really important in battleground states, as we saw what happened when Hillary Clinton won the popular vote and but did not win the electoral map. So you can't have that happen again. I'm also just I think that moderate republicans, the republicans that don't want to vote for Trump will be more likely to vote for one of the more moderates and the centrist so that's Biden, Klobuchar, and Buttigieg. And so I mean, the reasons that I just mentioned about, I like the fact that Amy has won these states and that she's from Minnesota, but then I also she's been the most effective senator of all senators. In fact, she's got 100 bills that she's had passed in her time, her three terms in the Senate, which the others can't come anywhere close to that that are running. And [1:02:00] within the Senate itself, she is the most effective senator. So she works in a bipartisan manner. I think she can unify the country and I think she'll be really effective.

MM: Do you have – I don't want to take too much of your time as we run just over an hour. So I have two questions left.

DZ: Well, and I hope you edit it down, because nobody wants to hear this much from me. And we've been sort of all over the lot.

MM: Yeah it's, you know, it's really quite lovely for our listeners to drop in and hear, hear these vignettes. Do you have any advice for the families of those who are running this year for president? For their spouses or children? Do you have any words of wisdom that you would like to share with them? And then just the last question of anything else that you'd like to share to get on the record before the end of this interview?

DZ: I guess the, you know, I, at this point, I would have hoped that all the families, it was a family decision to run because I think it's really hard if your family [1:03:00] isn't supportive. And to just make sure that you stay strong and you know, work together. I, I think it's, at this

point in the race, I don't know. I mean, it's only going to intensify. So I don't know what sort of advice one could give at this point. They're either in it or they're not in it. But, you know, just to focus on supporting the, you know, their, their mother or father who are running, or spouse to the extent that they can and how important that is.

MM: So, my final question for you, you carry the legacy of Brown University with you, [1:04:00] your education, your college education, and carried it into your professional life and in the work that you do today and that's why you're here with us for this interview. So is there anything, anything else that you maybe you came here thinking about that you wanted to share that I maybe passed over, we didn't get to a question about the you just want to get on the record about yourself or your time at Brown or anything else that you want on the record?

DZ: I think that Brown did such a great job of nurturing what was already there. I think I was raised with very similar values that Brown espouses. A thoughtfulness and a responsibility to others and to give back. And I think you see that but also, just [1:05:00] a love of learning and trying to make a difference. I don't know. I, I still have, I guess I'd say that, that one of the other, I mean, I just I love Brown. And the reason I love Brown, it's not just academics I have, you know, my best friends in life who I still have, and it's been 37 years and I am in really good touch with a lot of people who I went to school with. And they're just really good people who care about each other. And I don't know that that happens at other places to the same extent. I think people have good friends from college. But I just think there's a love of the school and a love of the people from here that, you know, I'm, I'm just really happy and proud to have been a part of.

MM: Okay, I think we'll end there. I want to [1:06:00] thank you for taking the time to go on this journey with me –

DZ: My pleasure.

MM: The Pembroke Center Oral History Project. So I'm going to stop the recording now –

DZ: Okay.

MM: But thank you.

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