

Transcript – Meryl Smith Raskin, class of 1966

Narrator: Meryl Smith Raskin

Interviewer: Whitney Pape

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Track 1

Whitney Pape: [00:00] It is September 8th, 2016, Thursday, at 2:03 p.m., and I'm Whitney Pape, a project archivist, here at the Pembroke Center Archives. We are in Pembroke Hall, Room 202, one of the former library locations. And I'm interviewing Meryl Smith Raskin. [laughs] And she is from the class of '66 and missed her reunion interview this year, so she's come in on her own to record some of her memories. And why don't we start with just a general description of your childhood and family background.

Meryl Smith Raskin: So I grew up in Providence, born and raised. Both of my parents had lived in Providence my father's whole lifetime, and my mother spent two years in Holyoke, Massachusetts before moving to Providence. And I grew up at the corner of [01:00] Brown and Bowen Streets, 134 Brown Street, which is two blocks from here, two short blocks. And I had previously lived at 124 Congdon Street, another two blocks away, so always right here. So Pembroke, especially, and Brown, a little less so, was always, you know, in my upbringing. So that was it. And it was always known that I would probably try to go to Pembroke. That was it. Actually, if you want to get to this, I was given a choice of only two colleges to which I could apply by my very protective parents. I could either apply to Pembroke, which was across the street, and I would commute, or I could go to the Stern College for Women, the Women's College of Yeshiva University in New York, where I would not get much of an education, but the goal, then, in the '60s was to find a husband from the men's college. It was no problem for me [02:00] to choose Pembroke, and I was an early-decision applicant. I had three brothers: two older, one younger, and one – my oldest brother and many of my family members had gone to Brown, fewer to Pembroke, mostly because there were fewer women in the family. But I had a

few Pembroke relatives and lots of Brown, and so that was it. I was early decision to Pembroke. Applying, I didn't realize it until I located some correspondence from the Admissions Office from 1961 that I submitted my early decision application in June of 1961, and I got my letter of rec – of acceptance in October. So these days, you know, you apply in the fall, and you find out by December 15th or something, but it used to be earlier.

WP: And you obviously had quite a presence in your mind of [03:00] Pembroke and Brown before you came here. What was different about being at Pembroke and Brown than what you were expecting?

MSR: Well, it was pretty much what I had expected. We'd grown up with babysitters from Pembroke for the years that we had babysitters, and, you know, some relatives. And so I was pretty well-prepared for what I was getting. I had gone to Classical High School in Providence, which was a very rigorous academic program. Lots of homework, lots of memorizing. Not really devoted to thought or, you know, thinking – not so much abstract reasoning, but memorizing. So I was used to many hours of homework a night. And when I came to Pembroke and Brown, I had much less homework. It was really [laughs] much easier, [04:00] because instead of being in school all day, classes all day, and then home, and four hours of homework each night, and a longer commute than I had going to Pembroke – at Pembroke, I had 12 hours of class a week, from Monday through Friday, and so, you know, the homework could fit in and left me plenty of time for other activities. So not much of a surprise. And I thought when I applied that this was the best of all possible worlds, with a women's college, with – you know, separate things, you know, for women, but the co-ed academic environment. And, you know, so I thought it was perfect. And it was my most idyllic four years. I think I can [laughs] say that now.

WP: Oh, that's wonderful.

MSR: Idyllic might not be the right adjective. But anyway, it was a great four years here. It was pretty much what I expected, but better.

WP: Oh, that's wonderful. [laughs] I think admissions is going to want to use the recording.
[laughter] [05:00] You mentioned that you participated in a lot of activities because you had so much free time on your hands all of a sudden. Do you want to talk about some of those?

MSR: So, to start with, one thing that was not necessarily Brown or Pembroke-related, but I did it here, was play bridge. I had learned to play when I was a child. My mother had taught me. But I hadn't played for many years. And then, when I started Pembroke, I found out that there were lots of bridge players here. In the '60s – '50s and '60s, there were Brown and Pembroke. And in just – in every dormitory, there would be groups of people looking for a fourth, because in – for bridge, you need four people. So the – you know, somebody hollering up the stairway, "Fourth!" meant they were looking for somebody to fill in, in the bridge game. So I learned to play again. The – I was at West House, the commuters' dorm. I would, you know, walk across the street two blocks and plunk my books down at – [06:00] in West House, and sit on the floor, and play bridge. Not the best way to spend my time, but it actually was very good. I improved my bridge game. I made a lot of friends who played bridge. And eventually, I – with the help of my mother, who was a bridge player, and who had connections to bridge directors, we had what may have been the first ever Pembroke bridge tournament, as part – under the Athletic and Recreation Association, we had a bridge tournament, I think, my junior year. And I continued to play. And then, after I had left and moved to Philadelphia, I met my husband playing bridge. So he was an excellent player. And he thought that – I played against him, and I happened to play a hand correctly, and the thought I knew what I was doing. And by the time he found out that it was a fluke, it was too late. So, anyway, I still follow the game of bridge, but I have not played actively for [07:00] many years. So that was one of the things I participated in was way too much bridge, and way too much smoking cigarettes. And actually, there was a contest, sponsored by Marlboro cigarettes for collecting the most empty Marlboro boxes. I'm not sure if it was over the summer, or over the year, or whatever, but then a prize was given to the dorm that had collected the largest number of boxes of – empty boxes or Marlboros. And West House was the obvious winner because we had access to all our friends and family who lived in Providence. So we had I don't know how many thousands of boxes collected, and we won a television for the dorm that was not previously a TV in West House, and we won one, and I think it was my sophomore year. It might've even been freshman year. I'm not sure.

But it meant that there was a TV in our dorm on that fateful Friday, November 22nd, 1963 when I was a sophomore, [08:00] that we all gathered around the TV in the living room or – I’m not sure. I can’t remember the layout of West House. But there was a room there on the first floor, where we had the TV and everybody was gathered around it. I didn’t have that much to do with people in the dorms. I mean, I knew people in the dorms. I was over there occasionally, but mostly I was at West House my first couple of years, anyway. And I’m not sure whether they had TV – they must’ve had TVs in the other dorms, probably bigger ones, but there wasn’t such a competition for large screen TVs back then. But that’s the way we spent that weekend. That’s probably the most memorable event of – for sure, of my four years, was that weekend in November, 53 years ago. I still have pretty vivid memories of that. It was a dreadful weekend. And classes were supposed to start again – I think – I can’t remember [09:00] how long they were cancelled for, but I know I had a Tuesday class, Classics D1 or D2, which was the way to get through the history requirement. It was two semesters that consisted of reading, in one semester, Herodotus, and in ano – the other semester, Thucydides, and that was it. That was all the reading we had to do. And the instructor was a young graduate student who came in the day that he was supposed to start teaching again, after the assassination. And he walked into the classroom, and some of us were there, and he went up to the front of the room, and he said, “I can’t do this.” And that was it. That was the end of class. So trying to remember how many days it was postponed for. Well, it probably – just the weekend. Well, that was the week before Thanksgiving. So it may’ve been a – when we came back after Thanksgiving. That might’ve been when things were supposed to start up, but he [10:00] wasn’t up for it on Tuesday.

WP: That’s quite a memory. That’s interesting. I don’t think any of your classmates talked about that?

MSR: Really? Being here for that event? Yeah.

WP: Yeah. Or only briefly.

MSR: That was more memorable than – another thing was a blackout in – I think in ’65, in the spring of ’65. The power went out in – I’m not sure if it was the whole Northeast, or where. But

there was a fairly lengthy power outage. And, you know, that changed things a bit. You hear about that?

WP: [laughs] No.

MSR: No? I think it was '65. Yeah.

WP: And wasn't there a birth spike nine months after? Isn't that the fa –

MSR: Was it that one? Or there were, you know, other blackouts. I'm not sure. There may well have been. Not in my personal life, so –

WP: Well, congratulations on that. [laughs]

MSR: I was being a good girl. And [11:00] I did have a story. I mean, you can ask questions, or I can just be – do my –

WP: Please go.

MSR: – rambling in my way that I've prepared some – you know, wanted to remember to talk about some stories. And one was – so I was involved in a fair number of activities. I mean, smoking and bridge were just two of them, not so much – but one thing was I was an Orthodox Jew, and my brother was four years ahead of me at Brown. He had graduated in '62. And he had never had a problem doing things like requesting changes of exams, exam – if an exam was scheduled for a Saturday, our Sabbath, he couldn't do it, and they would, you know, change it for him without any question. And so I think it was till I was a sophomore that I had my first Saturday exam scheduled. And I went to Dean Tonks, the Assistant Dean of the College, Gretchen Tonks. And I told her that I needed to, you know, have the date of my final changed. [12:00] And she told me that Pembroke was no place for an Orthodox Jew. So that was, you know, kind of shock to me. And so I did what I would be inclined to do, which was to go across the street to my father and cry. And my father was well connected. He was Brown '29, and he

knew Chaplain Charlie Baldwin, who was the Chaplain of the University at the time. And, you know, he called him and told him what had happened.

And the next thing I knew, I was taking a makeup exam on a different date, and Dean Tonks wasn't smiling at me at all. [laughs] And, in fact, at the end of that year, they were choosing junior counselors. All the dorms had two junior counselors for – to oversee the freshmen each fall. And there were two women chosen from West House, also. And [13:00] because of my involvement, you know, in a variety of activities, it was assumed that I would be one of the junior counselors. But I wasn't. And I felt that it was probably because Dean Tonks was choosing them, and she wasn't about to choose me. So she chose someone else, plus a friend of mine. And over the summer, the person who had been chosen got married and pregnant, and dropped out of Pembroke. So then, suddenly, there was a need for another junior counselor, and I got the call. So I was a junior counselor. I'm not sure what happened to Dean Tonks. I did not follow her career. I mean, I'm the only person I knew who had a terrible experience with her, and it was pretty terrible, but, you know, she was definitely there, through the rest of my time, I think. I was friendly with – there was Dean Dewart, my senior year, Anne Dewart. Her husband had a position on the Brown [14:00] staff, I think, or faculty. I'm not sure. And her title, I think, when I was a senior, was sh – let's see. Dean Tonks was the Assistant Dean of Students. I'm not sure what Dean Dewart was. Dea – but I had a lot of contact with her my senior year when I was Senior Head of House at West House, which meant that I got a room on the first floor there, a private room to myself, and had meetings with the – with Dean Dewart. I knew Dean Pierrel. She knew me.

But my senior year, I was – had a lot of contact with Dean Dewart. And I remember telling her at the end of the year – hadn't gotten an official notice that I was graduating, and I had some concern about one of my exams. I can't remember which one, you know, but I was supposed to be a Class Marshal because I was in – Question Club was this group of 10 of us, [15:00] I think, who were – you – who were Class Marshals that – supposedly, we did some other things, but mostly, I just remembered being Class Marshal. I think, if I read what Question Club was supposed to do – they had something to do with planning Freshman Week activities. I don't remember that. But I remember being a Class Marshal and checking with Dean Dewart whether I was definitely graduating, and she looked it up and said yes. So that was how I knew that I passed whatever I needed to pass, I guess.

WP: Quick question. What did it mean to be a Class Marshal?

MSR: So it meant that you marched in the front of the procession. The 10 or 12 of us, however many, were at the – were in the front of the line. And it was – you know, I mean, I felt great about it. It was an honor. And my grandmother, who was born in 1892 – so in '66, she was – well, she was only 74. She was not that much older than I am now. But she [16:00] marched the whole way – the whole procession alongside me. You know, there were the 10 or 12 of us Class Marshals and Grandma [Bell?] going the whole route, because then we marched down and up. And she did the whole thing. And people were saying, “Look at Meryl’s grandmother. She’s still with us.” [laughs] “She’s doing it.” So, I mean, that’s what a Class Marshal meant. And I was told fairly recently that Question Club continued one more year, but that the – after the class of '67, it – somebody complained that it was too elitist, so they did away with it. So I don’t know who the Class Marshals were after that, but that was it. I remember there was a picture in the Pembroke yearbook of all of us, members of Question Club, standing on a stairway, all photographed, lovely. [17:00]

And I think, you know, once they digitized the *Pembroke Record*, which I thought was the most fabulous thing they could ever do, I didn’t realize how much I would appreciate it, but besides just having access to all that print material, all the ads were the ones that had appeared, you know, in those days: Arthur Palmer, Jr., the store that’s now Starbucks, and all those ads were really pretty impressive. But in one of the *Pembroke Records*, they had a picture of us, the Question Club people, and a few other things. So that was it.

Another great thing that happened at Pembroke was that I found the field of linguistics. I went in as probably a French major. I loved foreign languages. And I realized, after maybe two semesters, that being a French major was the same as being an English major, but it was in a foreign language. And I thought, that’s not really what I like. I like language, grammar, structure, [18:00] and all of that. And lo and behold, there was a subject – linguistics – that was what I liked about foreign languages. And a lot of colleges didn’t have linguistics courses. And I was told at the time that only Brown and Georgetown had undergraduate Linguistics majors. I don’t know if that’s East Coast schools, or over the country, or whatever. But it was not such a popular major. And it was an all-honors major here. So it means I had to be accepted into the Honors

Program, and I was playing a lot of bridge. So my grades weren't stellar, but I – and I think you had to have a 3.25 to get into it. And I think I was a bit below, but I was close enough that they let me in for other reasons. So I did get to major in Linguistics, and ended up being a computer programmer, which was actually related, because they were doing computer science – computer uses [19:00] of grammar, and language translation, and things like that. It was really fairly popular in the '60s, and Brown was doing a lot of it. And so when I – I went to graduate school for a semester at Penn, but it was not nearly as good as Brown – or I didn't like it anyway. That – I was definitely biased. So I dropped out after a semester, but I got a job as a programmer trainee, hired by a company that would – you just had to do well on an aptitude test, and then they would send you to IBM school and train you. So that's what I did, and that's how I got a career that lasted many years. So that's some of that.

WP: I was wondering what the transition was between linguistics and computer programming. But now that you lay it out like that, it makes perfect sense.

MSR: It really is. It does. And the reason I didn't like Penn – actually, it's nothing so much against the school, but I like Providence better than Philadelphia, whatever – [20:00] very few of the students in the graduate program were undergraduate Linguistics majors, because there were so few schools that offered it. They were coming from different fields and studying linguistics. And I really wanted to concentrate on the computer and mathematical applications of linguistics, not so much on the historical or comparative linguistics. But to do that, I needed to take a lot of undergraduate math courses that I didn't really feel like taking, because I had not taken much math in college, and so I would've needed to do that. And I didn't want to, so I ended up just taking courses that were basically repeats of ones that I had had at Brown. And why pay tuition for that? And I did want to say something about math.

I loved math in high school. I was a good math student. And the first math course I took at Brown was a calculus course, [21:00] which I'd had a little – I'd had advanced math in high school. Classical was a very good school, but it didn't have any AP classes, and it had a pretty fixed curriculum. You were either a Latin student or a non-Latin. Everybody had to have two years of Latin, but the Latin majors had to have four years of Latin. And it didn't leave that many extra courses. So, anyway, I took this calculus course, here at Brown, that was taught by a

foreign graduate student whose English was very difficult to understand. I had a terrible time in that class, and I thought it was me. I didn't see other people complaining. I don't know. I didn't talk about it too much to anybody. It was not good. My next semester, I took another math course that was actually both in the Math and Philosophy department. It was Math D1 – I forget what the Philosophy number was. But it was Probability and [22:00] Statistics, Symbolic Logic. Something like that. And I aced that. I was like – I got nothing wrong in that class, the whole semester, so I thought, whew, that calculus experience was an anomaly. But I decided I didn't need any more math courses, so I didn't take anymore. So that was it for my math. If I had, you know, had a better calculus course, maybe I would've gone on to do more in graduate school with what I wanted to do. And the story could be all different, but this is what it is.

And also, I don't know if people have mentioned to you that our sophomore year, we were overcrowded. Every year, pretty much, there were 225 students in each entering class. And there were in my class, in the fall of '62. And in the fall of '63, but I guess we knew about it in the spring or summer of '63, there were, [23:00] like, 350, or something. They were way over-enrolled, over accepted. So they had – were – you know, making triples out of – you know, out of singles, and we had an overcrowding situation. And then I think it evened out the next two years with the smaller classes. But that class of '67, which was really a great class, and I had a lot of friends in that class – because once you have, you know, a few hundred more people to choose from – you know, I had friends in all the years around me. And I just, today, attended a high school alumni luncheon that they have at Classical for people who have been out at least 50 years. And I thought I'd like to go to it because you get not just your classmates, but the ones who were there at the same time, you know, in different classes. And we don't have that at our, you know, Pembroke Brown reunions. It's, you know, just the five-year classes. And you usually don't overlap your time in college with somebody who was five years ahead or [24:00] behind you. So except that this past spring, there was a West House luncheon. I think they may have had one last year, also. But it was – again, it was only the reunion classes, so '60s – there were four of us from the class of '66 over there, and several from the class of '61. But it's nice to have an event that brings together the people from the period, the – you know, the whole four-year period that we were there. So I don't know if there's anything that does that, but anyway, that's one thing I wanted to remember to mention. [24:38]

WP: I just wanted to ask another point of clarification. Being a commuter, and being based in West House, had the term “city girls” gone away by then, or did you consider yourself one?

MSR: No, it was ci– I guess so – city girls and townies. But one thing is I didn’t drive to school because I walked across the street. [25:00] I parked in my parents’ driveway. You know, the car to which I had access was in the driveway. So I probably was referred to as a city girl or a t – although townies actually, I think, were the high school kids from the area. They were – the local kids, but not the Pembroke students. So I guess I was a city girl. And there were some who started out as commuters, who, you know, wanted to move into the dorms, but didn’t start out right away in the dorms, but eventually got in. So some of those had, you know, started in West House, and then, you know, moved into the dorms, and still, you know, retained their, you know, friends from West House and all that. So it was okay. I didn’t mind commuting. But I’m – I had very overprotective parents, so there really wasn’t much choice for me. I just did what I had to do, even though I was two blocks away from home. I mean, they could see everything that was going on. They knew what was going on. There was no chance for me to misbehave. And that’s the way it was for four years. So I looked forward to getting out of the house and coming to Philadelphia [26:00] or wherever I happened to go.

WP: How did you wind up in Philadelphia?

MSR: So I didn’t have anything else to do with my linguistics degree except go to graduate school, and Penn had a good program, and I got in. And I had a couple of great linguistics professors at Brown-Pembroke, and one of them was Henry Kučera, who died a few years ago. He was the Head of Slavic Languages and Linguistics. And he was sort of a mentor to me. He was not my thesis advisor. I forget who that – I think that was Mr. [Mescal?]. But Henry Kučera had encouraged – he thought I was great at what I was doing. He was very proud of me because I did very well in a couple of linguistics classes, where I feel that I really did well [27:00] because of some previous classes I had taken that not everybody in my – in these classes had taken. So he thought I, you know, did a great job, (inaudible) just because I had, you know, Linguistics 158, I think, or something like that. That was it. But anyway, he was proud of me, and he said that Penn had a good department, and whatever. And I thought Philadelphia’s a nice place, and I had a

friend from Pembroke, who was a dorm resident, who was from outside Philadelphia, Margie Satinsky, who was – she was here briefly for this reunion, but I didn't actually even see her. So anyway, she was going to graduate school at Penn, also, so we roomed together there, and her parents lived a few miles away, so my parents felt a little more comfortable about letting me go. And so that's how I ended up in Philadelphia. [28:00] And I stayed there. I didn't like graduate school at Penn, but I liked Philadelphia, and then I got a job that I really liked. And then a few years later, I met this guy, and he has never lived anywhere but Philadelphia, so we're still there. That's what happened there. And we have four sons, and our second son went to Brown, and is coming next spring for his twentieth reunion. So, [laughs] which –

WP: How's that possible? [laughs]

MSR: All right. It's all very scary to me when I see this, just from this high school reunion, hearing about the people who didn't show up at this luncheon because they're having various ills, you know, so I'm doing just fine, thank you, but I might as well record when I can.

WP: One of the things that you mentioned in your questionnaire was that all the students who were keeping kosher would actually eat at your family's home. I would love for you to talk about that a bit.

MSR: Sure. So that started before I came. In the fall of 1959, [29:00] a student came from New York to Brown who kept kosher. His family was from New York, and he could've gone to Columbia, but he didn't want to go to the local college. He wanted to go to Brown. And his parents went to the Hillel director at the time, Rabbi Rosen, who was the Hillel Rabbi for many years. And they went to Rabbi Rosen and said, "Our son wants to come to Brown, but he needs to have kosher food. What can you do?" And he said, "Call Mrs. Smith down the street." So [laughs] he wasn't doing much to help himself, so they called my parents, and my mother offered to feed – his name was Richard [Hirsch?]. So the class of '63, the guy who came to Brown. He was the first one my mother fed. And the university wasn't set up to give any refund for not eating the meals. So you had to pay full [30:00] room and board. It was not a problem for his family.

But he came every night for dinner at our house, and Jewish holidays, also, and it was fine. So I was a high school freshman then. He was three years ahead of me. So if he was a freshman – I was a high school sophomore, I guess. And so I had this guy coming to dinner at our house every night. It was awkward. [laughs] And I was very shy. And my three brothers who liked to torture me, you know – it was not ideal, but it was fine. He was a very nice guy. And my mother wouldn't take any money for the meals. She was happy to serve more people. She was that kind of person. So the next year, people found out that there was kosher food available at Brown, so she was feeding more people. And there was a guy from Bryant College, also. And there were a few more from Brown. And the next year, there was a Pembroke, also, who came. [31:00] And then, the year after that, there were more still, and another Pembroke from the class of '65. And then, I mean, my mother wasn't complaining, but the students felt it was, you know, outrageous to have my mother doing all this work, feeding all these extra meals. I think there were about seven or eight extra kids coming most of the time. And my mother never ran out of food, but it wasn't necessarily always the best.

So anyway, the students arranged that the Hillel House should have kosher food there. My mother shouldn't be having to prepare it all. And so they got a caterer, at first, I think. A caterer came and prepared the meals. And then they – there – at other times, they got the meals delivered from some outside caterer. So there were a variety of configurations including, at one point, the students cooked themselves, [32:00] and they invited my parents over to have a meal after my parents had been feeding them for so long. So it was really a very nice relationship, and the students remembered my parents for years afterwards. And on the Jewish holidays, they'd get a lot of extra kids, not just the ones that they'd been feeding. There would be others. And so when my mother died almost 12 years ago, I had emailed two of the guys that she had fed: that first one, Richard Hirsch, and another one Mark Shapiro, because I had their email addresses, and told them about my mother passing. And my mother had been in touch with their mothers over the years, but I'm not sure – I think they might've both been gone by then. Anyway, Richard Hirsch, after hearing about that, made a donation to Hillel so that there's a plaque – there are actually two plaques in Hillel, in the main dining room and also, I think, in the kitchen, honoring – sort of an interesting verbiage there, but honoring my parents and Chaplain Baldwin. I'm not sure what his role exactly was, but he's on – his name is on the plaque, too. And it's from Richard Hirsch, class of '63.

So the memory lives on. And there was something written about it. There's a Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society notes, or something. And there's an article about that, you know, that – I have copies of it somewhere. So that was the story with the kosher food. So – but interestingly, nobody had come to Brown before the class of '59, from outside of the area, who cared about keeping kosher. I mean, the local kid – there may have been some other local kids who were kosher, and they just ate at home. You could not have a refrigerator in your dorm room, either at Brown or Pembroke, so I do know that Richard Hirsch had a little refrigerator [34:00] that was covered with a tablecloth. [laughs] But it was not convenient to be providing your own meals or anything, so it was about time. I mean, in Boston, you know, Harvard and MIT and other schools, they had kosher, you know, food available for the students. And New York and Columbia, I'm sure, did, also. But we were a little behind the curve here. So it wasn't until about '62 or '63 that Hillel actually provided any food. And I came back a couple years ago for something or other, and came to services, and – oh, it was my high school fiftieth reunion, which was downtown. And a group of us came to Hillel for Friday night dinner. We had dinner at Hillel, and showed everybody my parents' plaque, and very proud of that. And they had a great crowd. So – because Hillel didn't really thrive when I was an undergraduate. [35:00] I was not involved with it. My parents didn't push me to. I'm not sure why not. But anyway, I wasn't too involved with it, and that was it. But they've, you know, got this beautiful new facility. It really is – it's very nice, so I've been happy to be in there whenever I can.

WP: Oh, nice. And for people keeping kosher in Providence, was there – were there a lot of options for markets that were providing kosher meat and all that?

MSR: Not so much markets, then. There was a kosher butcher, I think, maybe two. There was a kosher deli, which is actually still – or I think it's still there – Davis's on Hope Street. And, you know, so some food could be found. But it was, you know, not much. But an hour away in Boston, you know, you could find something.

WP: I'm trying to think of – with our limited time, what you wanted to – do you want to talk about any of your [36:00] student activities? Because there was the Question Club. There were a few other things.

MSR: Yeah. And so, you know, Answer Club, which came before Question Club – that was – and we were sophomores. There might’ve been juniors in it, also, but we were the ones that gave the tours to the visiting high school students. That was called – that was Answer Club. I was in that. But one of the – so I gave a – you know, a fair number of tours. One of the things that I did every summer was the Blueprint, which was the freshman Pembrokers’ album with pictures of everybody. And they were looking for a local student – I don’t know who did it before me – but somebody to type up all the information. So I did it, I think, for three – after freshman year, sophomore year, junior year. I don’t remember who I handed it to after senior year, but at least for three years, I did this under the direction of Ms. McPhee – Ms. McPherson, her name was, who was something in the housing office, [37:00] I think. Sally McPherson.

But as I say, she was called Ms. McPhee. She had a dog named Tori. And I remember, I went over to her unit in one of the dorms. A couple of us went over and she was giving us some background on this. And I was very much afraid of rodents. And it was one of the newer Pembroke dorms. It wasn’t completed, I think. And a mouse scurried across the floor. I got very hysterical, and Ms. McPhee said to Tori, her dog, “Oh, Tori, look, it’s our little friend.” So [laughs] that’s the kind of thing that stands out in my memory. But what I would do – they would have the pictures, and I would type all the information: name, address, high school, so that before all the freshmen came, I had already seen all their pictures, and addresses, and high schools. I got to know all the high schools that Pembrokers came from. You know, it became familiar to me, [38:00] to know the private schools, wherever. When Jean what’s-her-name, who was accused of shooting Dr. Tarnower, the Diet Doctor. She had been the head of the Madeira School, Greenway, Virginia. I could just recite it, “Madeira School, Greenway, Virginia,” because there were many Pembrokers who had been there. And so it was a year later when her name came out. And I know that school.

WP: What was her last name?

MSR: I’m trying to remember that. Jean Harris, I think. Jean Harris. She was the – I think, you know, the head of the Madeira School, and she had – you know, had some kind of relationship with Dr. Tarnower, or Diet Doctor. And I forget whether she did or didn’t shoot him. I think she

did. I think that may be known. It matters not. So that was an activity that kept me busy in the summer. I also – I had summer jobs. And I worked at Brown. I worked in the John Hay Library [39:00] after the Rock opened. I don't remember what I did in the John Hay, but for one semester, I had a job there. It was an unpleasant smell. I'm not sure what it was.

So one semester was about all I could put up with for that. We also had jobs of bell duty, which was – you know, there was only one phone. I'm not sure how it was in all the dorms, but definitely in the house-type dorms, there was just one phone on the first floor. And somebody had to answer the phone and then locate the person for whom the call was coming in. So that was called bell duty, and I had that sometimes. (inaudible) paid something for that. And that was about it for actual paid work. I continued to do a lot of babysitting because I – you know, I still lived near my clients, so I could do that. By the time I was a senior, I wasn't doing so much. But [40:00] I – you know, I stayed every summer. I did not go away. And after I graduated that summer, I worked at the Providence Athenaeum, which was the private library that my family were members of. From the time I was a kid, that was our library was the Athenaeum. And then I had a job there the summer after my senior year as – what it showed me – because this was, you know, the last time I get to see it – handwritten card catalogue cards, or hand – beautifully handwritten. Not just handwritten, but beautifully. And, I mean, a very archaic system. I haven't been there in many, many years. I don't know the status of the Athenaeum. I'm wondering if they ever came into the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. I don't know. They were very nineteenth-century when I was there.

But another classmate of mine worked in the Athenaeum after we graduated, also. And after my junior year, I had a grant [41:00] from the Ford Foundation to do some – it was some project for linguistics. And I don't think I did a great job, but I got whatever credit I was supposed to get for it, and it had something to do with my thesis. [It was?] something about machine translation of languages, machine – or generating grammars, something like that. It's all over my head now. And I remember that when I had to defend my – you had to defend your Honor's Thesis – that one of the comments from one of the professors was that how beautifully typed it was. I think you know you're in a little bit of trouble when they're commenting on the typing, but it was beautiful. [laughs]

WP: Do you think that was some sort of chauvinistic dig, or was it –

MSR: I don't know. I mean, they had some good things to say about the thesis, also, but it was very well typed. I certainly didn't know the word chauvinism back then, although I could've figured out the derivation from all my good Latin, French, and everything [42:00] background. And actually, another thing. I just want to mention a couple of important professors in my time besides Professor Kučera. John Rowe Workman was a Latin professor. You know, I'd had four years of Latin in high school, but I didn't take it my first two years at Pembroke because I had, you know, a full schedule without it. And somebody said, "You know, you can take Latin again without having studied it for two years. It's really not that hard." So – and it turned out to be true. It all came back to me. I mean, I'd had it for four years of high school, plus, actually, the s – last semester of eighth grade, I'd had it, also. And you don't forget your Latin. So – [laughs] I can still recite those things I had to memorize in high school. And so he taught two popular courses, one in Plautine Comedy, and one was Satire, Horrors, and Juvenile, I think. So there were Latin courses that – [43:00] I think, actually, I may have taken one my junior year and one my senior, as opposed to two my junior year.

But, you know, it all came back to me. It was good. And I really enjoyed that. And he was a very popular teacher. And I enjoyed it. You know, other than the math teacher who couldn't speak English, I had mostly pretty good professors. And thinking about whether there were any women, there was a French – she was just a graduate student, I guess, and – but she was an instructor in one of my – in a French class that I took. I remember her. So there was a female. And then, interestingly, when I was here, Arlene Gorton was a Phys Ed teacher. And there was another person with her. I forget the name of the other one. I meant to go back, and look in my yearbook, and see who it was. But in – the Phys Ed teachers were mostly famous for the posture pictures. So – you've probably heard all about that already, [44:00] so we won't go there any further. But, however, 31 years later, when my son, Eric, came to Brown, his freshman English course – he had to take a freshman composition class of some kind. And he took Sport in American Society. And I looked in the course catalogue and see that it's taught by Arlene Gorton. And I said, "Woah." I said, "When you take this class, you go tell her your mother went to Pembroke many years ago." He tells me that she remembered me. Who knows? But I never thought of her teaching anything. You know, she was a gym teacher. But, you know, he liked

that course. He was very interested in sports, and still is. And anyway, who knew that she would become that? But you have heard more than you want to know about posture pictures, probably.

WP: I really can't hear enough. [laughs] Frankly, I find it such a bizarre thing.

MSR: So I was the only girl in my family, with three brothers. [45:00] I was as modest as they come. I never stayed at anybody's house. Mostly the Orthodox thing, the kosher thing, whatever. I never went to overnight anything. I come to col – oh, and I had had one terrible experience in junior high. We had to take showers after gym. And you – there were – you had a private side of the shower, but there were two sides, you know, for each shower, and half the girls would go in once, then they'd go out, and the other half would go in. And the gym teacher would be standing on the top of a stool, making sure that everybody got into the shower. I was not being naked in front of anybody. So, I mean, how I survived that, I think I claimed to have my period, regularly. And I'm not sure what happened there. But anyway, then I got through that, and then I find out about posture pictures. And it was a – such a mortifying experience, really. And I still remember the conditions they were looking for: hyperextended knees [46:00] and forward pelvic tilt. If you had either – and that would show up in the posture picture. So if you had hyperextended knees or forward pelvic tilt, you would have to take remedial gym or something like that. There was some course that they – that you had to take. I don't know if they retook the pictures or anything, but they at least checked for those conditions. But it was an embarrassing experience. And do you know when it ended?

WP: I don't know the year.

MSR: I don't know.

WP: It was in the '60s that it ended, but –

MSR: Really? Okay. And the other thing was the swimming test. Well, that wasn't so embarrassing. But I've since found that, apparently, some people did get out of – or they were passed when they shouldn't have been passed, or something like that. I dreaded that, because I

grew up in the ocean where I didn't have to swim. I didn't go to camp or take swimming lessons. So that was it. And then, when I found out I was going to have to do this, I said, "Well, I'm not going to put this off till senior year," because there were stories about people taking their swimming test the morning of commencement. So I took Swimming my sophomore year, as a gym class, [47:00] or something. I took swimming. And then I took the test and got it out of the way sophomore year. And I still remember having to tread water for 30 seconds, I think. And you had to swim the length of the pool or something. And I think I did actually cheat a spec, and kick the side of the pool at one point, and that didn't get noticed. But it was okay with that. Do you have any idea when that ended? Because I don't –

WP: No.

MSR: They don't need to do that anymore, either.

WP: I bet it's similar, too.

MSR: So – it could be. And my father, actually, was class of '29, was the only person I had heard of who he got out of taking the swimming test because his father didn't want him to have to take the swimming test. And somehow he got out of it. So there you go. We're – [laughs] he got out of it; I took it.

WP: Congratulations. [laughs]

MSR: Anything else you'd like to know?

WP: Well, I'm sort of interested in male-female student dynamics. What was the percentage of female students in linguistics, for instance?

MSR: Linguistics was probably more women. I can't think of the men. There were only a few of us linguistics majors [48:00] in my class. Yeah. There were not many men. The professors were men. But students were mostly women. And I was not socially active, popular, anything. I had a

lot of friends, and I also had some friends because – “Oh, you live here and you have a car?” So – [laughter]

WP: Let’s not minimize that.

MSR: Right. So I did get to drive some men around places that they wanted to get to. I did get to house girlfriends from other schools, rather than have them stay in a dorm and have to keep whatever the rules were there. They could stay in my house, where my parents were, with no rules at all – well, no. Not true. But whatever. I did, you know, put up some people, and things like that. So I had a lot of friends at Brown, but dated minimally. There was this Plantations House, also known as P House, which was the male commuters’ dorm. [49:00] And so there were – we were friendly with them. There were some joint events. And my high school had sent a bunch of kids my year to Brown and Pembroke. I forget how many, but lots. So there were – you know, there were kids I knew from high school here. And I was pretty shy, and I was mostly just involved in bridge, smoking, [laughs] and making friends. I had lots of friends, and I did – you know, there were some people here at the same time that I was, like Nancy Buc, class of ’65, who was a wonderful person. And she and I were friends back then, and I saw her at something a couple of years ago. She remembered me. And from the class behind me – so Charlie Bakst’s wife – if you know – I don’t know if you know Charlie – M Charles Bakst from the *Journal*. So he married – she was Liz in my day, but Elizabeth [Kogel Thoreau?]. [50:00] And she – so she and Nancy Buc, and I, and Janice Cooper, from the class of ’67 – we were friends. I mean, they were in dorms. And I can’t remember the connection so much, but Jan Cooper actually tells me that it was bridge, because I would be in the Gate, which was the cafeteria in alum – in the basement of Alumnae Hall, is – what’s there now? Is there still a cafeteria of some kind there?

WP: There is no longer the Gate, I’m told. And – but that’s a relatively recent development. There were students that were graduating last year, when I mentioned the Gate, and they were like, “Oh, the Gate.”

MSR: Oh yeah, the Gate. Yeah. So I hung out there a lot. I would – I think I would bring my lunch. I don’t remember paying a lot of money. But – and we would play cards there, too. And

so there were a lot of friends that hung out there. And then I got involved in the ARA, Athletic and Recreation [51:00] Association, and made some, you know, more friends from – you know, from the dorms. And then what was the other thing? Oh, and I ran for Class President, senior year. And if you came in second, you were Vice President, I think. And so that's what I was. [Lydia Briggs Pool?] was President and I was Vice President. And so I had – you know, I had made a lot of friends through those kinds of activities. I occasionally wrote letters to the editor of the *Pembroke Record*. I found this from, you know, just searching my name. Well, I would just actually search 'Meryl' in the *Pembroke Record*, and I found that there was actually another Meryl sometime before me, because it's a fairly uncommon name. But anyway, I – so I had a great time. I mean, there were bad things that were going on. And I'm also remembering before I came – like, I think a year before, [52:00] there was this stabbing at Pembroke. Stephanie Stilwell – does that – have you heard of Stephanie Stilwell?

WP: Yeah.

MSR: I think she was class of '63, and I think this happened in '61. She was stabbed walking maybe from the library to her dorm or something. And she survived, but she had multiple stabs. And I'm not sure when she graduated. I think she eventually did. But that was the beginning of "don't walk alone," because before then, people did. And then they started making all the Pembroke be in – at least in pairs, and so forth. And then a girl who was, I think, supposed to be the President of SGA, the Student Government Association, had been – this was maybe from the class of '64 – she had been in Europe the summer before, or the year before, for – I forget if it was study abroad, or what, but she was killed in Europe. [53:00] Blank on her name. Anne – I think something – and she was supposed to be Student Government President, but she never came back. So these are some events that I remember from – you know, from my time. And I don't – didn't know whether they'd been documented. First you've heard of them. [laughs]

WP: First I've heard of them.

MSR: So, yeah.

WP: Yeah. Interesting. Wow.

MSR: And, you know, political involvement. So when I was in high school, JFK came to – in the fall of 1960, he came to Providence, and we were allowed to go in late to school that day, go see him. I went downtown and I saw him. I was, you know, swooning. I was very happy about that. I was not so involved in the Civil Rights Movement because – I mean, I believed in it, but, you know, my parents wouldn't let me go to anything like that. You know, so that just – no crowds like that. I'm not sure how they let me go downtown when JFK was here, but they may not have known. So – [laughs] I'm not sure. But, you know, I couldn't do anything [54:00] on the Sabbath. I – my weekends were sort of tied up. So they didn't, you know, like me doing anything like that. But I, you know, got more involved, you know, as an adult, in, you know, politics, and social issues, and so forth. And I'm – I was a volunteer for the Democratic National Convention that was just had in Philadelphia, and I'm working on the Clinton Campaign now. And we're registering voters first. And we register any party. We have the forms. And actually, I've spent many hours doing it, and so far, have only registered Republicans, I think.

WP: Oh, no. [laughter]

MSR: That's it. We'll see if that – if there's any impact to that. But those are the things I'm involved with now. And my kids are grown, but I have grandchildren to take care of, and I retired nine years ago. And I – you know, busy ever since. But Pembroke is very special to me. From the moment that I had babysitters from Pembroke as a kid, [55:00] through, you know, everything after that. So anything else, before you have to leave?

WP: Any final thoughts on how your life would've been different if you didn't go to Pembroke, or what it has meant for your career and life?

MSR: So it was harder to get into Pembroke than it was to get into Brown. When I came to Philadelphia, most people didn't know from Pembroke. I mean, maybe at Penn they did, but not, like, once I went to work. They didn't know Pembroke. They didn't even know Brown. Then, a few years later – and I started doing the alumni interviewing in 1984. When my youngest son

was four years old, and I had some time free, I started doing that. And I found out how – and I guess I knew before then how prestigious it was and how competitive it was. And so fairly early on, I realized that I would not be getting into Pembroke now. I should be glad [56:00] that I went in the '60s. So – but just knowing that I had one there, to this school that people sort – “Woah, she must be really smart if she went there.” Okay, fine. So it did definitely improve my self-esteem.

And I just – you know, the friends, the values, I can't remember the convocation speakers, but I remember I went. And they were good ones. The things that we did – I remember sherry hours, but I don't recall drinking any sherry. And just learning to be ladies, you know, which we did learn – the tea, and things like that. Not eating in the dorms, I didn't have the dress dinners that they – you know, there were, I think, two meals a week that they had to be dressed up. But pretty much every meal, they were wearing skirts. I mean, there were not much in the way of slacks in those days. But – so it definitely gave me self-confidence and it's something that's carried with me [57:00] through the years. Whenever I'm traveling anywhere, if I see a Brown t-shirt or any – or a Rhode Island license plate, you know, I'm always making connections. You know, if I hear a Rhode Island accent on the phone, because I can still recognize it, you know – so, and this happens. I hear Rhode Islanders and we bond. So, you know, I have a t-shirt that says, “I may live away, but I'll always be a Rhode Islander.” And that's it. And because there are so many people in my family that went to Brown and Pembroke and, you know, it's our school. Tuition now is, you know, so exorbitant. I don't – we're saving for our grandchildren's college, but I think – you know, my daughter-in-law at least thinks, like, it couldn't possibly be worth it. [laughter] But even the state schools are so much more expensive now. It may not be out of sight, because if my granddaughter Olivia were to go to Brown, she would be class of 2029, [58:00] which would be 100 years after my father, class of 1929, so isn't that special?

WP: It has to happen. [laughs]

MSR: We'll see. And she's visited, and she likes it, you know, but she's visited Penn State, too, and she likes that, too. So whatever. But it was a great four years. I learned a lot. I really did. I mean, it seems like I didn't spend that much time on the academics, but I did. There were some

courses I really liked and really made an effort to do well in, and some that were really very challenging, and wore me out. And I'm – you know, still have the friends, and the fiftieth reunion was fabul– I mean, I was here for the reunion. I couldn't come to whatever the event was, for which I now have the DVD. Is that right? Or is it a DVD or a CD?

WP: It's a DVD.

MSR: I can actually see people.

WP: Yes.

MSR: Okay. This is just sound, isn't it? This is just audio.

WP: This is just audio.

MSR: Audio. Yes, okay. [laughter] [59:00] All right. But anyway, okay. So – and you have to get onto Worcester. Is that right?

WP: Yes, yes. That's too bad. That's too bad. But I thank you so much. I'm so glad you came and took the time.

MSR: Oh, it's a pleasure. I'm sorry you'll probably have a lot of editing to do, but you're up to it.

WP: That's all right. Well, thanks.

MSR: OK, so –

WP: I just want –

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