

Interview: Sharon Alterman

Interviewer: Charlotte Dubin

Date: August 25, 2015

Place: Max M. Fisher Federation Building, Bloomfield Hills, MI

CHARLOTTE DUBIN: This interview with Sharon Alterman is being recorded on August 25, 2015, at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, for the Albert and Pauline Dubin Oral History Archives. Sharon's interviewer is Charlotte Dubin who, for the record, is not related to the late Albert Dubin or to Pauline Dubin. Sharon, do you give permission to the Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives to publish, duplicate or otherwise use this recording for educational purposes and for use as deemed appropriate by the Archives?

SHARON ALTERMAN: I certainly do.

DUBIN: Thank you. Well, let's start from the very beginning. Who were your parents and what can you tell us about their background and their early lives.

ALTERMAN: My parents were Norman and Minnie Levine and a blessed memory. And they were both dear, loving people. And I can go back and tell you what I know about my grandparents as well. My father was born in the United States. He was born in 1909. I don't know the year that his parents came to the United States, but it was probably in the 1890's, late 1890's. My father lived in the area off Hastings Street. And I remember as a little girl going to the home that they still owned on Cameron. So when I started looking at pictures at the Archives, we actually have a picture that I think might be their actual block. So I have memories of that old neighborhood. My father went to Bishop School; and we also have a picture of the Bishop School. He went to Northern High School. He was a businessman; he was in the shoe business. And they married in 1937. My mother's story is quite different. My mother was born in England. Her family, as I understand, was fairly affluent. In fact when we went back to England once, we saw the area that they lived in, and she always told me about the collie dog that she had.

But when the First World War just decimated my grandfather's business. He was importing a lot of goods from Germany. So he went to Canada. He was going to start over again. But the war interrupted everything. And my grandmother and my mother and my uncle stayed in England during those war years. So my mother came to Canada I think in 1919 after the First World War, and eventually.... My grandfather died while they were in Canada. So I never knew him. And they came to Detroit because my grandmother had two brothers there. I did know my father's parents. And my grandfather actually worked—he was a tanner. And he worked in the area that is now Greek Town. And his brothers were farmers, and they went to Ohio. So as a youngster, I remember going to visit my uncles on a farm in Ashtabula, which is near Cleveland. My grandmother was a very old country—my father's mother. She was a sweet woman. I remember all the wonderful baked goods that she made. She learned to speak English, but she could never even write her name. My mother's mother went through high school. And I remember her telling me that she wanted to be a teacher. And so she was a much more educated

woman. But they were both wonderful women that had a great impact on me when I was growing up. As a youngster, we lived in a four-family flat on Leslie. And that was between Linwood and Elmhurst. It was a mixed neighborhood. There were a lot of Jewish people that lived there. And my grandfather and my father owned this four-family flat. So my parents and my brother and myself lived in one flat. My grandparents lived on the first floor right next to us. And my aunt lived above. So it was really...I felt I was living in a mansion because it was a really big house with a huge front porch, an attic with all kinds of fun stuff in that. It was a lovely childhood.

My childhood was so different than my grandchildren's childhood. It was free and open. I remember being able to get on my bike and ride over to our school which was Longfellow School. In the summertime when the Parks and Rec would turn on the fire hydrants, and we would all run through the fire hydrant. I would get on my bike and go to the Parkman Branch Library, which is some distance away. But I felt very free to do it. And I never thought that I was a real independent child looking back. But, you know, I guess I certainly was. And I had cousins that were my age, and we would get on the bus and go downtown to Hudson's. We just...we felt very free. And there were none of the fears that I think families have today in terms of the kinds of things that the young people can do.

Talking about libraries, I always loved libraries. And I loved old buildings. So some of that I think really feeds into what I eventually did as an adult. I've loved the Parkman Branch Library, and I loved my school, Longfellow. I can still remember to this day my kindergarten room at Longfellow School because the school was a beautiful place. It had paneled wooden walls. There was a lot of character to it.

DUBIN: What years are we talking about, Sharon?

ALTERMAN: Well, I was born in 1941. So I started elementary school in '46. And we lived in that neighborhood on Leslie until the early fifties. So I was eleven years old when we moved to northwest Detroit. So there were a lot of years, you know...the early formative years, were spent there in that situation with our family around us. Then when we moved to northwest Detroit, it was different because, although we had family really within walking distance of a mile, it was a totally different environment for me. But I enjoyed that education, you know, that school experience, too, when I went to Vernor School.

But I wanted to tell you a little bit more about my growing-up years in that neighborhood in the Linwood-Dexter area. I guess I was always a joiner, because I can remember when I was ten years old going to B'nai David Synagogue and joining a youth group. And then...I don't know how this happened, but somehow I got involved with Habonim in those same years as a very young child. And I remember walking to their meetings which were blocks away. And as I said, my parents didn't worry about me. They allowed me to do all this kind of thing.

DUBIN: What kind of organization was Habonim?

ALTERMAN: It was a Zionist organization. I went to the United Jewish Folk School. I didn't go to the United Hebrew Schools. I don't know how that happened. We had a very Jewish home

but my parents were not very involved in the community per se. My mother had some health issues. But my dad belonged to Pisgah Lodge of B'nai Brith, and we always belonged to a synagogue. When I went to the United Jewish Folk Schools, I think because my cousins went there as well. And they had a summer camp called Camp Farband. And I guess every child got a one-week scholarship to Camp Farband. I did not want to go. I just told my parents I, you know, I didn't want to leave home, and I would be homesick. Somehow they convinced me that it was a good idea. They were right because I loved camp! And I went to Camp Farband for about four years and developed some friendships that I still maintain. And it was just a lovely...camp was a lovely experience for me, and I really enjoyed it.

DURBIN: And you say it was a Zionist camp?

ALTERMAN: Uh-huh.

DURBIN: So how does that translate into the activities that you had?

ALTERMAN: Oh, lots of singing and dancing. But it was a typical camp scene with a lot of sports activities and things like that. And arts and crafts. It was a pretty typical camp. But I think that they integrated Israel and, you know...at that point it was a very young state. So we did learn about Israel. And I think that there...perhaps if I had been a little older, there might have been more of an effort to get some of us, you know, to make aliyah. Because I know that there were some counselors that were older that eventually did go to Israel and settle there. It was just a part of my life that I treasure. I really enjoyed the camp experience. And I'm glad my parents convinced me to go, because I was very reluctant at first. I think that that's typical of kids when they think about going off for the first time, leaving home.

DURBIN: What was Jewish life like in your home when you were growing up?

ALTERMAN: My mother actually came from a rather observant home in England. My grandmother was, I would say, sort of contemporary Orthodox. We always celebrated *Shabbat*. We celebrated all of the holidays. And in fact, our family always came together at that time. I had an aunt and uncle that lived on the east side. They were the "east side Jews." And on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they would all come to my grandmother's house. So we celebrated our holidays together. And we always had a Seder. And I fondly remember my cousins and I getting under the table; they probably gave us a sip of wine, and we just had such a good time. So we have lovely memories of growing up. And it was...we were very enmeshed in the Jewish life, I think. I knew that I was, you know, part of the Jewish community from early on.

DURBIN: Did you have siblings who joined you?

ALTERMAN: Yes. I have a younger brother, Barry, whom I'm very close to. We've been close all our lives. He lived in Traverse City for many, many years. He's an environmental lawyer. And he's four years my junior. Because there was that age difference, I always felt sort of a maternal, you know, relationship with him. And we're, as I said, very close to this day.

DURBIN: Do you have any special memories of your fellow students at that time?

ALTERMAN: Well, I went to Longfellow School. I told you that. And thinking about that school situation, it was a fairly integrated school. There were a number of African-American youngsters there. And we all seemed to get along with one another. It was a very pleasant environment. And I loved learning. I always, from the time I was a little child, I liked to go to school. So it was just good memories.

DURBIN: And your high school years?

ALTERMAN: I went to Mumford. As I said, when we moved to northwest Detroit, I went to Vernor School, and I went to Mumford. There, too, I had a very positive experience. And was very active in a number of activities outside of school, particularly B'nai Brith and USY. I was in BBG from ninth grade to twelfth grade. And then I liked the organization. There were lovely people that were my friends in that particular group. And I was an officer in BBG. And through Beth Achim Synagogue, I was active in USY. And also in the Councilettes, which is the junior group of National Council of Jewish Women. So as I said, somehow I was a joiner. And our family—I didn't come from a family of parents that were active in a lot of organizations. But I think it just appealed to me because I enjoyed being with people. And I guess I enjoyed taking leadership roles. When people asked me to do something, generally I said yes. I still do. [Laughs] And Mumford High School was a wonderful place. The quality of the teachers was just so high. Everybody was really focused on education. And it was high quality education there. The faculty really encouraged you and challenged you to learn. So I'm very fortunate that I had that high school experience.

DURBIN: Do you remember some of those teachers?

ALTERMAN: Oh, I certainly do. Certainly do. We had one teacher who taught world literature, and she was a world traveler. And so she made that class so exciting. And then we had Mr. Gornbein who was very well known in this community. He taught current events. And we really learned how to read a newspaper, because every week he would quiz us on the events of the week. So we had a group of classmates that would always get together the night before and, you know, speak about the topics that we knew he was going to quiz us on. So it was a wonderful high school time for me. Really enjoyed it.

DURBIN: And then you went on to college.

ALTERMAN: Right.

DURBIN: Yes. Tell us about that.

ALTERMAN: Well, in my generation...except for my cousins, we're the first people in the family to be college educated. And I went to Wayne, and that's where I met my husband, which was one of the highlights of my years at Wayne. And there, too, at Wayne it was a quality education. I planned to be a teacher, and I did graduate and went on to become a teacher. And I found that I didn't like teaching. So much to my surprise, I had sixth-grade students, and I was not—I found out—I was not a disciplinarian. And it didn't challenge me the way I thought it

would. And so much of life is just sort of being at the right place and happenstance. I decided that I did not want to continue teaching. And at that point I was in a master's program in guidance and counseling. So I thought I would just go full time and get my master's and see what I would do with that. But most of the classes were nighttime classes, and I just had too much time during the day. So one of my friends said, "Well, the center is really looking for staff. So why don't you go and apply?" And I had had some previous experience working with youth groups. I had...at that time I was a BBG advisor, and I had worked....

DURBIN: BBG is what?

ALTERMAN: B'nai Brith Girls. And so I had some experience leading youth, and I had also worked at the Detroit Parks and Rec. I worked as a playground supervisor. And I worked with the League for the Handicapped. So there were certain things that led me to believe that maybe when I went in to talk to the center, I'd have something to say. So I went into this interview, and we spoke for a couple of hours. And I felt very comfortable about the interview and thought that I would get the job. And at the end of the interview, the gentleman said, "You know, we'd like to bring you aboard." And then he said, "By the way, do you know Mickey Alterman?" And I said, "Oh, yes, I do. He's my husband." He said, "Well, why didn't you tell me that at the beginning? We didn't need to spend all this time." I said, "Because I wanted to get the job on my own terms." So I went to the center, and it was just...the whole Jewish world opened up to me. I just loved working at the center.

DURBIN: Now this was the Jewish Community Center?

ALTERMAN: This was the Jewish Community Center on Curtis and Meyers. And Alan Gelfand was my supervisor. And he mentored me. And Geli, as we all called him, was supervising social work students at that same time. So he gave me the same kind of supervision that those social work students got. I really learned so much about working in the community. And it was just...I treasured those years. And I actually worked there for twelve years. Four years, full time. And then the rest of it, just after I had children, on a part-time basis. And one of the events that happened at that time... But let me step back a minute. One of my responsibilities was a program called the Thursday Night Social Group. And the Thursday Night Social Group was a group of people that we called "retarded" at that point. (Now the term is developmentally disabled.) And there were probably forty or fifty people in that program, and many very high functioning people. And not only did we get to know the members of that group, but we got to know their parents. And this was in the late sixties. And that was the time when the institutions were starting to close. And the parents who had kept their sons and daughters at home were very frantic because they realized that eventually...the institutions would have been a place of last resort. It would have been there if they'd needed them. And what was going to happen to all these people that were in the community and were really very much a part of the community? One of the things that happened at the center is we had a tremendous amount of programs where we offered social experiences to these young people. We traveled with them. We went to Washington, DC. We went to New York and to Chicago. And then every year we went to camp. And in the city we did all kinds of things. So these people were part of the community, and the families wanted them to stay there.

So they started looking around. There were a group of people that were very significant. They were leadership people. They were people like Sarah Mitteldorr, Sarah and Harry Berlin, that had been very active in the ARC, the Association for Retarded Citizens. So they were connected. And they knew that some people in the community were already starting to develop group homes. They came to the center and said, “Would you be interested—“ or “Would you sponsor us? Would you let us meet here? And could we start to talk about the potential to develop an organization?” And, Charlotte, you know about that because you came in and...when you were at the *Jewish News*, you interviewed me. At this point I also have to mention Irwin Shaw. He was the director of the Jewish Community Center—one of the finest people that was in this community. Irwin loved his staff, and he was so supportive of everyone on that staff. Anytime there was any kind of program that any of the staff did, he would recognize it. He would send you a little note and say, “That’s well done.” So he was the perfect person in that spot, you know, to understand the needs of these families. And at that point in time I was...I had our first child, Aaron. So I was not interested in any kind of full-time work. So we spoke about the fact of these groups of parents were so eager to, you know, develop something that would be there for their sons and daughters. So he said, “Sharon, why don’t you just come aboard on a very part-time basis one evening a week or two evenings a week, and see what you can do with this family, this group of families.”

So that’s how JARC started; it started in the basement of the JCC. And we started investigating the potential for a home within the community. We traveled around a little. We visited places that were in existence. And we started making contacts with people that we knew were going to be supportive...one being Rabbi Gruskin, a blessed memory. Now Rabbi Gruskin went to the institutions every Friday. And he knew the people that were there. He knew the people that were really able to function in the community. He was really an advocate. He really helped us and encouraged us. And then we partnered with the National Council of Jewish Women, a group of very talented women. They understood how to get things done. They had developed programs for the mentally ill. So they were familiar with this field. And of course the parents reached out to others in the community that were significant and could serve as funders. And Norman Wachler came aboard, and he really brought in a group of families that were so interested in supporting this program. We started with one home, and it was actually a home that the Sheruth League had owned on Evergreen in northwest Detroit. And it was a home for girls that had some problems. The home was vacant, and it was a six-person home, and Sam Frankel gave us the \$10,000 to open this home. Can’t do anything for \$10,000 these days! But in those days that was significant money. So that’s how JARC got started. And I’m just very proud to have been a part of that movement. And then I served as president, and I’m still on the board and active. All these years later, in my wildest dreams, I couldn’t imagine that we have an organization of such quality and serving so many people and so many need.

DURBIN: For the record, again, JARC stands for—that’s JARC?

ALTERMAN: Yes.

DURBIN: Stands for?

ALTERMAN: Well, it started out as the Parents' Association for Jewish Retarded Citizens. And now it's just JARC. But Jewish Association for Retarded Citizens. Well, we don't say retarded anymore.

DURBIN: And there are a number of homes, as I understand it, and you're still involved?

ALTERMAN: Twenty homes, and people are living independently in apartments. And there are programs for young people that are still in their homes, and there's a respite program. And there's even a program for the deaf that was established a few years ago. So it's an organization that has grown with the times and tried to meet the needs of many people within our community.

DURBIN: Well, volunteering is in your DNA. I think there's something else that you are interested in, too. For one thing, there's synagogue.

ALTERMAN: That's true. I've been a member of Beth Shalom for many years. And I actually left my job as archivist in '99 to become president of Beth Shalom, which was, in retrospect, I should have stayed in Federation; it was a lot easier. [Laughs] But I enjoyed the two years I was there. And there were many, many supportive people in the synagogue. As always, most of the Synagogues have financial needs, and that was something that was my focus. But it was a great learning experience for me. I wouldn't want to do it again, but it was a great learning experience.

DURBIN: Alright. Now you mentioned you left Federation for that. So let's move on to Federation and all. The whole career there. Okay.

ALTERMAN: I spoke a little bit about the fact that when our children were born, I sort of stepped back and spent time just being a mother, and we have two wonderful sons that are grown men: Aaron and Eddie. But still I needed to be involved in the community. And as I said, I always loved education. So one day a friend called and said, "You know there's this program at Eastern Michigan in historic preservation. And I'm going to go, and you should go too." So I said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "Well, take a class, see if you like it." So here I was schlepping out to Ypsilanti, and it took me about four or five years, and I studied historic preservation. And I didn't know where it was going to take me, but the courses were so fascinating. Because we studied architecture and history of, you know, settlement history.

I took courses that were just...things that I had never even thought about. They were certainly out of my sphere. And I took one course in writing history or historic documents or whatever it was called. And one day the teacher said, "Well, there was a man who was a former student at Eastern Michigan, and he just contacted me. And he would like someone to write a history of their agency and be involved in their 75th anniversary celebration." So who was it? It was Chuck Wolfe, who was the director of the Jewish Home for the Aged. And Chuck and I had worked together at the JCC. So here I go again. I raised my hand and said, "I'll do it." So I wrote the history of the Home for the Aged, was involved with them and their celebration.

And I started thinking that there's so much information about the Jewish community that's out there, and that really there's no formal...those no central place where this information is being held. And that was sort of a kernel that working at the Home for the Aged got me started

to think of what could be done in this community to really have a place where our historic records would be kept and be available? And then, you know, I did a number of things. You'll remember that you called me to work on a project, to do an exhibit on the sixtieth anniversary of the United Jewish Charities. And I remember saying to you: "I don't know anything about this?" And you said, "Don't worry. You'll learn." So that was a fascinating experience for me because what happened at that time was that we were going to do an exhibit that was going to focus on all of our agencies. So my role was to go to the various agencies and find out what kind of historic documents they had and where they were kept. And I soon learned that the person that I had to befriend were the facilities managers. Because those people knew where all the documents were. And where were they? They were in basements and attics, and they were shoved into boxes. And nobody seemed to pay any attention to the history of their organization. I don't want to overemphasize that because, true, there were people on staff that really did care and tried to make an effort to keep documents in order. I remember Carol Kandel at the Federation did a lovely job of organizing some of the Federation papers. And the Jewish Historical Society always had a strong interest in the preservation of papers. But by and large, it was really a treasure hunt or a scavenger hunt, or whatever you would call it, because things were scattered all over. And it was really a challenge to find the history.

DURBIN: What did the Jewish Federation basement look like?

ALTERMAN: Oh, it was a mess! [Laughs]

DURBIN: Where was the Federation at the time?

ALTERMAN: It was at 163 Madison Avenue. And I remember that there was a closet in the basement of the Federation, and it was filled to the top with boxes of photographs. And they were the treasures of this community. And the photographs dated from the 'forties and 'fifties. Some of them were documented with ID, and some of them were not and they were just stuffed in that closet. Well, that's taking it a step further because it's... I'll talk about that when, you know, after...when I was brought on staff, that was one of my first responsibilities. I spent a summer in that little storage closet sorting. And that's the core of about 25,000 collection of photographs. So that's the kind of thing that I was seeing all over the community. There were wonderful treasures. But they really needed to be arranged. But I still didn't...I was just sort of plodding along. I really didn't understand what needed to be done totally, until one afternoon I was sitting at a luncheon next to Judy Lobel, and she said to me, "You know I just got a degree as an archivist." And it was like a lightbulb went off in my head. I said, "Well, first of all, what does that mean?" So she explained to me that an archivist is someone who really organizes the collection: the papers, the historic documents, the photographs, the scrapbooks, oral histories, all of that kind of information. I said, "You know, that's what I should be doing. That would really put me on course."

So I went down to Wayne, and I spoke to Phil Mason who was the guru of the archival programs throughout the United States. And I said to him, "I'd really like to organize the papers of the Jewish Federation, and I'd like to take this course." Which I did. And it was about a year and a half. And I really enjoyed it. Then I started badgering the folks at Federation, letting them know that I was out there and I really would like this job. And they listened to me. And one of

the reasons that they listened to me was that Bob Aronson had just come aboard as our executive director, and he really had a love of history. And he understood that something had to be done. And this was at the same time when the building was about to be moved. So he understood that there was such an archival treasure there.

So after like several starts, you hired me to just do one little project. And as I said, I had done that exhibit previous to this time. So I came aboard. And I started just going through documents, trying to bring order to the various parts of the collection. And as I'm working on some files, I saw there was a file on Reuther Archives at Wayne. So I opened it up, and I saw that Phil Mason had presented a proposal to Federation to arrange the archives. And I'm thinking, what a gentleman he was. Because he could have smiled and said, "Well, I tried them. I didn't get it. Good luck to you." And I think...here was someone who was so accomplished. And I felt very proud that, you know, the Federation had faith in me that they would allow me to take on this responsibility. So it was a twenty-year career. And I couldn't have done it without all of the people that mentored me along the way. And certainly you, Charlotte, you were such a support and encouragement, right from the get-go. And I can't thank you enough for that.

And then there was Leonard Simons. When I first came to Federation, Bob said to me, "You have to go see Leonard Simons." And I said, "Okay." But I remember the first time I met Leonard Simons, he kept me waiting in his office for two hours. [Laughs] So we got off to a false start. In those days (I was interviewing him for something else.) But I went to see Leonard, and we had a love affair. My husband said, "What's with that Leonard Simons?" He was in his nineties at that time. He had been active in every organization that you could imagine in this community, both in the Jewish world and then the non-Jewish world. And he was a treasure trove of information. And what we did was really life review. We sat down. I would visit with him every Tuesday—or every Wednesday. And we would just go through his files of documents. And he would tell me about the various organizations and the people that were involved. And this went on for a couple of years right practically to his dying day. He would sit with an oxygen tank this high. I mean an enormous oxygen tank. And at the same time talk to David Hermelin about what was happening at the Prentis Cancer. And he was involved right to the very end. And he was a tremendous influence on me. He was a great mentor.

When the Archives started, we had no office here. I always felt like I was the Wandering Jew because it took a long time for the archives to really find a home. They were always moving people about. But at the same time, we did start to develop a volunteer corps. Volunteers are such a significant part of the archives. It's just a joy to work with people that are so interested in the history of this community. We just had fun. We learned so much together about the community. And people—without naming names of all the folks that were really involved, I do have to mention Ruthie Broder. Because to watch Ruthie at work is just such a pleasure. She finds kernels of information everywhere. And this became a real communal effort. So of course we had to organize the documents. But first we had to obtain them. And there were documents all over the community. And my goal was to obtain the documents of all of the Federation's agencies. And I think we have at this point. And in order to do that, there has to be a sense of respect for the program. And the people that are giving you their documents have to know that the documents are going to be well preserved. And there has to be that relationship—you have to develop the relationship first. And so that was something that I was able to do because of the fact

that I had...previously I had developed so many different connections with organizations around the community, so that they knew me. I feel that that was a big factor because you have to have that trust. Because giving up your documents is giving away part of yourself. And I understood that.

And from the get-go we were interested in papers of certain leaders, and I think that we have obtained many of them. And one of the leaders that was the most significant in this community was Max Fisher. And for years we spoke to the Fisher Family about obtaining the documents of Max Fisher. And one of the last things I did recently was to work with the Fisher Foundation to develop a website. The website is sort of a portal, an opening to the collection of Max Fisher's documents that are now at the Reuther Library. And it is just a tremendous collection. And researchers from all over the world will benefit from it. So that was something I was very happy to see happen.

DURBIN: For the record, Max Fisher was—

ALTERMAN: The leading philanthropist in this community. It's somebody who was known world-wide. I mean you can go anywhere in the Jewish world and speak of Max Fisher, and people know who he was because he was a leader extraordinaire.

DURBIN: I understand that the archives will be celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. And I think you've seen a lot of changes in the way things are done.

ALTERMAN: I have.

DURBIN: Can you go into that a little bit?

ALTERMAN: Yes. When I started...I mentioned the program at the Reuther Library. We did not have one course at the library on use of a computer. In fact, Phil Mason didn't want to even hear the word. And to think that today the technology has advanced so much in twenty-five years, it's mind-boggling. And I'm a firm believer that we still need the primary documents. I mean there's nothing better than seeing a piece of paper with someone's handwritten notes around the margins. And, you know, they're doodling or thinking about what's going on in a meeting. And I have real concerns, and I'm not alone. I think that everybody in the archival field is concerned about what's going to happen to all that material that's in the clouds? And we've had experiences of we know where a computer has failed and lots of documents have been lost. So I hope in my heart of hearts that people are still saving their primary documents, that paper is not going to go out of fashion. That's a real concern. And as I say, I share it with everyone. People don't write letters the way we used to. This email...well, you know, emails gets destroyed. And it's just a different world, and it's harder to get that material. It really is. And photographs as well. I mentioned that we have a 25,000 photo collection. And that's something that you can access so easily. We have so many photos that now are digitized. And I just wonder how easy it is going to be in the future to find those documents. I know Robbie's working very hard to try to....

DURBIN: Robbie--?

ALTERMAN: Robbie Terman who is now the director of the archives. Robbie's working hard to develop a system so that we can continue to maintain a photographic collection. Because of all the resources that the archives holds, photos seem to be the one that gets the most use. And people love pictures, you know. And they're used widely.

DURBIN: Now you probably have some perspectives on the development within the Jewish community at large that you've been able to observe over time. Any comments about that?

ALTERMAN: Well, to start, I think that this is just an extraordinary community. And traveling the country, as I have, and looking at other communities, I see the differences. There's such a commitment to providing programs of such diversity and really trying to meet the needs of various populations. And I'm just so proud to be from the Detroit community, because I think we do an outstanding job. We still have issues, and we're not going to solve all the problems at this point. But it's a community that's always forward-thinking and looking at new ways and meeting new challenges. So I think that we're on a good path. And that's why I have been so excited about working on the archives, because I think that there's so much information here to be shared. You know it just highlights all of our efforts over the years.

DURBIN: In a few words, how would you explain to your grandchildren what an archivist does and why it's so important to our community?

ALTERMAN: Well, I could talk to the mission statement of the Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives, that role is to collect, preserve, and disseminate the history of this community. And without having that information readily available to you, you're at a real loss. Our youngsters have to understand who we are and where we came from. And it's a beautiful story. And I see...my grandchildren are students at the Hillel Day School. And they are developing an understanding of their history. I have to tell you one story about my two granddaughters and that I'm very proud of them. My daughter-in-law Kari Alterman's father is a survivor. And last May, this past May, the whole family went back to Eastern Europe to his home, to Emory Grossinger's home in Mihályfalva, Hungary. And then they went to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the liberation. And they went to Mauthausen. My granddaughter, my older granddaughter, Noa, came back to Hillel and gave a presentation to the entire school. And what she said to her peers was: "We have to carry forward the legacy of those that were lost. Our generation has a responsibility and to make this world a better place." So I think that they have a pretty good understanding of their history. And it made me very, very proud to read those words.

DURBIN: Do you see an archivist in their future?

ALTERMAN: Oh, one wants to be a dancer and the other wants to be—Adina, with every day you ask her, she's either going to be a graphic designer, or she's going to be an engineer. So I don't know if there'll be an archivist. But I know that they will respect the history of this community.

DURBIN: Tell me about your kids and your grandkids.

ALTERMAN: Well, they're wonderful. [Laughter] We have two sons: Aaron and Eddie. Aaron lives in New Orleans with his wonderful wife, Caroline, and our grandson, Max, who goes to the JCC preschool. And Eddie and Kari, who live close by, with their two daughters, Noa and Adina. And Noa just celebrated her bat mitzvah. And, you know, I spoke of her experience at Mauthausen. Her grandfather was liberated on his thirteenth birthday. So I think that it was very impactful that she went right after celebrating her bat mitzvah because she understood what she experienced here and what her grandfather had experienced. So we're a very close family. My kids from New Orleans were just here last week, and we visit them very regularly because we have to see little Max grow up. And I have a wonderful husband of fifty-one and a half years, who has always been my best fan, and I certainly couldn't have done what I've done in this community in terms of all my volunteer work if he didn't always stand behind me and say, "You can do it." He encouraged me. And so he's been a true friend and supporter and just.... As I say, I couldn't have done what I have without his encouragement.

DURBIN: If you were to leave a message for future Altermans, what would it be?

ALTERMAN: Oh, I think it would be follow your dreams and keep close to the Jewish community. It's a wonderful place to be. And there are so many treasures here. And I'd like you to be leaders. And I think they're on their way.

DURBIN: Thank you, Sharon. Is there anything else I've forgotten to ask you or anything you wanted to add?

ALTERMAN: I just want to thank all those people that have supported me over the years. Because, as I said, I could never have done this job without everybody's support and encouragement. And the one thing that I didn't mention is one of the issues that the archives has always grappled with is funding. And that's something that I hope will not continue, because there are so many needs within this community. I think the archives has a special place, and I would like its funding to be secure. And that's something I've always been concerned about.

DURBIN: Thank you, Sharon.

ALTERMAN: You're welcome. Did I cover everything? I hope.

DURBIN: Terrific!

End of Interview