

ORAL HISTORY OF: Nancy Grosfeld
INTERVIEWED BY: Sharon Alterman
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Community Archives
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SHARON ALTERMAN: Good morning. Today is February 7, 2012, and I am delighted to be here in the Leonard N. Simons Archives with Nancy Grosfeld. Nancy, we are interviewing you as part of our leadership oral history project. You are one of our stunning leaders of this Jewish community. You've had such an interesting path and interesting history that led you to be the second woman president of the Jewish Federation, which is such a high honor.

So today we want to speak about you and your personal life, so that we understand who you are, and talk about your role as a professional volunteer. We always start right at the beginning. Where were you born?

NANCY GROSFELD: I was born in Detroit at Harper Hospital.

SHARON: And who are your parents?

NANCY: My parents are Sofia and Sam Babcock.

Sylvia

SHARON: Where did you live as a child?

NANCY: I grew up in Detroit. We lived in a flat. My maternal grandmother lived upstairs, and we lived downstairs. So I was always very close with all my aunts and uncles and cousins because everybody was always coming to visit them. So I saw a lot of all of them.

SHARON: It was a nice family life.

NANCY: It was a wonderful family life. My mother was the youngest of 13, or should I say is the youngest of 13, and it was a very close family. Everyone got along. We had a lot of wonderful times together. We had a family cottage in Pontiac, and some of us would spend the summer, some of us would just go for a weekend. And I remember sleeping in a big dormer with my uncles and my cousins. It brings back great memories.

SHARON: Thirteen children. What a remarkable family. Are many of them still in this area, the descendants?

NANCY: My mother is the only who's still living.

SHARON: Any cousins?

NANCY: Yes, I have lots of cousins, lots of first cousins. Holidays include a lot of people. We have big celebrations.

SHARON: And what was your Jewish education like as a youngster?

NANCY: I went to Temple Bethel through eleventh

grade. I was confirmed there. I was not Batmitzvahed. I'm not sure if they did Batmitzvas at that point in time. But we belonged there, which is a little strange in that my father came from an Orthodox family, my mother came from a Conservative family. However, my mother's family belonged to Shaarey Zedek originally. There was no synagogue in Pontiac. But I think the girls switched to Temple Beth El so they could be confirmed.

SHARON: Were both your parents from Pontiac?

NANCY: My father was from Detroit. My mother was born in Pontiac.

SHARON: I know that there's been some history of your family written in the Journal of the Jewish Historical Society. Do you want to speak of your father's special interests in sports?

NANCY: Sure. My father was a star athlete at Central High School. He played football and basketball, and then he went on to play football at the University of Michigan. In fact he played the first team in the new stadium. We went to many football games when I was a kid. We had very good seats, right on the 50 yard line.

SHARON: And what were your mother's interests?

NANCY: My mother was always at home. I remember her being at home all the time when we got home. However, she was involved with Federation, with JCC. She was a vice-

president there. With the Jewish Historical Society, Temple Bethel, and National Council of Jewish Women.

SHARON: She was an active woman.

NANCY: Yes.

SHARON: I remember that she even was involved with the Philip Slamovitz collection of his documents, and she did some archival work. So she's a very talented lady.

NANCY: Yes, she is. She's a very special lady.

SHARON: And well loved by this community.

You have siblings?

NANCY: I do. I have a brother, Robbie, who lives in Ann Arbor. He's an attorney and he has two sons.

SHARON: And where did you go to school?

NANCY: I went to Halley School for elementary school. Then I went to Liggett for middle school. And then when I was 14 we moved to Huntington Woods, and I went to Dondero High School in Royal Oak.

SHARON: And there were probably few Jews in that school.

NANCY: Right. There were not a lot of Jewish students there.

SHARON: Did you take some leadership roles when you were in high school?

NANCY: No, I did not. I didn't take any leadership roles until I was in my late 20s.

SHARON: What were your interests as a young person?

NANCY: Animals. I had a great passion for animals. And I would say that was my primary interest.

SHARON: We're going to speak more about that because I know of your great interest in the Michigan Humane Society, in that you took a very large role at that time. But I don't want to skip over your family, the family that you've created. That's such an important part of who you are and what you're doing in this community. So tell us about your husband and your family.

NANCY: My husband and I have been married 32 years. He had a son, Jason, who was four when we met, and I had a daughter, Rachel, who was five. Jimmy was CEO of Pulte Homes at that time. Now our daughter Rachel is married to Mark Schwartz and lives in Birmingham with three adorable children. They are two boys and a girl: six, four and one-and-a-half. And our son Jason lives in L.A. He's married to Jenna. They have three children also: Alex, Jay, and Janie. They are seven, five and two-and-a-half.

SHARON: And you are an active grandmother.

NANCY: I am. Unfortunately we only get to see so much of our California grandchildren. I'm glad we have at least one family in town. It would be nice to have two.

SHARON: I understand. So you said that you started your leadership roles in the community when you were in late

20s. How did that happen?

NANCY: Well, my first volunteer experience was with Michigan Humane Society, and I served as president for ten years and I was probably on the board for 23 years. My first involvement with the Jewish community was with JARC. It was a natural progression from my education and my work experience. I remember going to a JARC fund-raiser and seeing an extremely moving video and seeing the JARC clients, so that was a perfect place for me at that time.

Then I got involved with Federation when one of my friends invited me to help for Super Sunday, and I prayed with every phone call that no one would answer. Then I got involved with the Women's Department, and we went on a tour of JVS, and I think that really sold me on Federation. We also visited Fleischman, which touched my heart. When I realized the scope of what the Federation did and all the lives that it touched, I became very interested and got increasingly involved.

SHARON: You spoke of your work experience, and we skipped over that. So tell us a little bit about how that connected to the Jewish community. What did you do?

NANCY: I got my BA in social work, Michigan State University. I got a summer job in a hospital as a nurse's aide, first at Sinai and then I worked at Pontiac General Hospital, and I loved being a part of the medical team. I was

in the emergency room. So rather than get my master's in social work, I went back and got my RN. And then I combined these two schools and became the head nurse at Fairlawn Center, which was a part of Pontiac State Hospital. I worked on a unit with children and adolescents who were emotionally challenged and were placed in a residential setting.

SHARON: You are known for your great compassion, and that translates in so many things. Let's talk a little bit more about the Humane Society, because to be president for ten years is rather remarkable. That's your passion, too. What were your goals in that particular organization? What did you do?

NANCY: Well, my goals to improve the quality of life of the animals and find homes for as many animals as possible, and to help the public to understand the importance of spaying and neutering their pets and to bring to the forefront animal cruelty that took place in our community. As I mentioned earlier, animals and animal rights issues have always been something that have been very important to me.

SHARON: Are you active at all at this point?

NANCY: I'm not active with the Michigan Humane Society, although I am very involved with some animal organizations in Michigan, and I also participate financially with some national animal organizations.

SHARON: That's so important, especially in these

times. Animals are really affected.

So moving on to your Federation role, as you got involved in the Federation, did you have mentors? Were there certain people that really helped you become involved?

NANCY: Well, I would say there were maybe five or six people that played a leading role in my involvement in Federation, although there were certainly a lot of wonderful women in Women's Department that were great mentors and role models. I first received a call to make a gift to Federation in my late 20s, and I was called by a woman that I never liked. And I immediately called my friend Bobby Slatkin and told him how appalled I was that this woman called me at home to ask for money. So he explained to me what the Federation did and why the Federation fund-raises as they do. So I guess that put my foot in the door as far as being a donor.

Also my former mother-in-law, Belle Kukes, encouraged me to become a Lion of Judah, and I went to many Women's Department events with her, and being Jewish was so important to her, and it really rubbed off on me.

Then of course Doreen and David Hermelin, David of blessed memory, being friends with them, they were wonderful role models and really connected me to my Jewish roots and being involved in the Jewish community.

And lastly, Penny Blumenstein. We met when she was chairing the Lion division and I was one of her workers, and

we really hit it off. We introduced our husbands, and they have been best friends since. Penny is someone who has always pushed me outside my comfort zone. I probably would not have become Women's Department campaign chair or president, or Federation campaign chair or president if it weren't for her telling me I could do it, and pushing me beyond that comfort zone.

SHARON: Of course she was such a role model being the first president of Federation.

NANCY: Yes. Absolutely.

SHARON: And she probably didn't expect to get to that point either, as you told me off camera that she certainly didn't expect to take this path.

NANCY: No. I never expected to be asked to assume any of these leadership roles. I was always very surprised because I really enjoyed what I was doing, and I never looked beyond that.

SHARON: Did you go to Israel often? Was that an important part of your decision-making to become involved?

NANCY: When I was Women's Department Campaign chair, I went to Uzbekistan and met with a number of people there who were going to make Aliyah to Israel. In fact we flew with them on the airplane and then landed in Israel. And I think that particular mission was probably the most impactful to me and so solidifying my involvement with Jewish

peoplehood around the world, and connecting me to Israel.

SHARON: So what were the conditions like in Uzbekistan?

NANCY: Very poor. We stayed in a wonderful hotel. If it weren't that it was in Uzbekistan, I would recommend people go to that hotel. But now I'm not sure if people would go to Uzbekistan. It was very poor, but the Jewish people we met with were so receptive to our visit and to meeting us, to welcoming us, to telling us about their Jewish community. It was very moving.

SHARON: Was the Joint Distribution Committee very active in that?

NANCY: Jafi was involved with those that were making Aliyah, but also the Joint Distribution Committee was very active there, in both taking care of vulnerable populations and building Jewish communities.

SHARON: It must have been quite an experience being on that plane.

NANCY: Oh, it was. It was. When we landed in Israel and the music was playing and the flags were waving, it was an unbelievable experience. Something I will never forget.

SHARON: We as a people do so much for those vulnerable populations.

NANCY: We do. We really do.

SHARON: So getting back to Women's Division, Women's Department as it's now called, that was a place where you said you really got your feet wet so to speak.

NANCY: Right. I not only got my feet wet in Women's Department and became connected through Women's Department, but I learned so much in Women's Department. It is a great training ground for young women. And I know when I got involved with the general campaign, what I learned in Women's Department was very helpful to me and sort of gave me a jump start in my other roles.

SHARON: Because Women's Department really exposes you to the entire Jewish community, doesn't it?

NANCY: Yes. Yes.

SHARON: So from Women's Department you took on some leadership roles in the general campaign.

NANCY: Yes. I was a general campaign co-chair with Larry Lax, who is a wonderful, wonderful man, and much to my surprise I was asked to be president.

SHARON: And you were surprised.

NANCY: Very surprised.

SHARON: But had you been on the Executive Committee?

NANCY: I had, but I had never thought in terms of ever being asked to be president. And I did not have those kinds of aspirations.

SHARON: Was Penny a big supporter and mentor in that position?

NANCY: Yes, she was, because I had certain trepidations. It's a big job, it's a big responsibility, and she really pushed me to do it, and gave me the confidence to do it.

SHARON: Who were the professionals that worked closely with you?

NANCY: I worked most closely with Bob Aronson for the first two years, as our CEO, and then with Scott and also our executive management team, Dorothy Benyas and Howard Niestein, who was my right hand. Or was he my left hand? My right hand.

SHARON: What were the issues that were of most importance to you and the community during your time as president?

NANCY: Well, let's see. During my first year we celebrated Israel at 60, and it was a very exciting year. And I guess what stands out in my mind regarding that was a Fair to Remember, the Michigan State Fair that brought thousands of Jews together. Also we had a wonderful family mission to Israel, which was very exciting.

Then during my term as president we created the Pillar campaigns, one for Jewish education and one for our older adults. We also during that time had the merger of

Jewish Home and Aging Services and Jewish Apartments and Services to form Jewish Senior Life. Some new programs were initiated. Community Next, the Jewish assistance project, and Jewish Housing Association, the latter two because the economy was in such terrible shape.

Also we created the Urgent Needs Bridge Fund. Six families contributed about \$6 million, payable over three years, and we used those dollars -- and the Urgent Needs Fund is still active in helping to fill some gaps because of increased needs in our community, and then on the other side decreased dollars. And also we implemented a number of recommendations from Peter's 20/20 Visioning Committee. Marcie Orley co-chaired it with him. And from the Jewish Education Visioning Committee.

SHARON: You spoke about Community Next and Young Leadership, and I know that you and your husband have really been involved in trying to promote young leaders in our community. What is the Grosfeld Leadership Fund? What is it trying to achieve?

NANCY: Well, this all began before the upheaval in the economy and young people started to leave. In fact the program's in its tenth year. But Jimmy and I realize the importance of attracting and engaging young people in Federation, our agencies and in the Jewish community, and the importance of developing new leadership and young leadership.

And we really worked with Bob Aronson on this concept.

The program involves many pre-programs and post-programs that include information about our agencies locally and overseas, and about our community. And the high point is mission to Poland and to Israel. And it's so interesting because we meet with a group before they go on the mission, and some of them agree to participate because they're really interested, some it's peer pressure, some it's a friend maybe chairing the mission or they've been involved in Jewish leadership and wanting to get new people involved.

When we first meet with them, you know, they talk about why they agreed to participate, but when we meet with them after they come back, it's like the light has gone on, and it's like it's a whole different group. And it is so exciting to see that. And when they come back, our staff meet with them individually to try to find a place for them in the community or in Federation that will get them even more connected to Federation and our agencies.

SHARON: And your rate of retention in this group is pretty high, isn't it?

NANCY: It's been very, very good. This has been a very successful program.

SHARON: Did you ever go with them on any of the trips?

NANCY: No, we did not go with them on any of the

trips. They stay up too late.

SHARON: They're too young.

NANCY: No, we've never gone with them on any of the trips. We thought we might inhibit the group and their conversations, so we have not gone.

SHARON: But this has been a real plus for our community to have this kind of leadership.

NANCY: It has. The first group, I remember Matt Lester was a participant, and since then he's had leadership roles with our Israel Overseas. He's now a vice-president of Federation. So he's one of our most exciting success stories. Among others.

SHARON: Now, are these people obligated to participate in certain ways after they return? Are there certain demands that are made to be part of the program?

NANCY: They are encouraged to assume some kind of a role in an area of interest to them within the Federation or one of our agencies. They are also asked to make a campaign gift at whatever level is comfortable for them.

SHARON: So it's been a really remarkable program for this community.

NANCY: Yes.

SHARON: They learn so much.

NANCY: Scott was the original volunteer who really helped us create this program also, and he went with a group

for many years, and he really got them excited.

SHARON: And as a CEO, that's a nice way for him to know so many of these people.

NANCY: Yes.

SHARON: So there were many challenges in your ^{career} career, and you spoke of some of them, and because our economy is so dire. Were there challenges to you personally as a woman in this role that would be different than a man sitting in that seat?

NANCY: Well, I don't know that I was challenged because of gender. I think the thing that was most challenging was that the women who worked and were involved with Women's Department knew me and knew the kinds of things that I did. When I got involved with the general Federation, the women who were not involved with Women's Department and the men really didn't know me as a leader, and so I really had to prove myself to get their respect and their confidence in me.

SHARON: But your manner is so positive that I'm sure you bring people along, and that's what leadership is all about, people following you.

NANCY: Well, I guess you can't be a leader without followers.

SHARON: I know that you haven't stopped your role in this community, your activity. You are still very active.

And I understand that you're part of the leadership of the Centennial Fund.

NANCY: Yes, I am. When I was president, and especially with the economy the last two years being so poor and our campaign dollars going down, I realized due to demographic changes with a lot of our young people leaving, a lot of our older people passing away, and the economy here in Michigan, I realized that our annual campaign and our challenge fund, and even the agency fund-raising programs could not raise enough dollars to support our community in the present, and for sure not in the future. So I met with Bob, and also Andrew Echt and Scott Kaufman, and we talked about the concept of a Centennial Fund. We worked also with Stacy Crane because the Centennial Fund is both an endowment campaign, both lifetime and testamentary, and we hope to raise \$250 million at the end of four or five years.

I agreed to chair the Centennial Fund Committee, and we have put a committee together, and we are in the process of meeting with our agencies and talking to them about their programs, and what they see as their priority needs, and sort of asking them to come up with a wish list for current needs and for future needs in the community as they see it.

SHARON: Who will be doing the solicitation? Will you be involved in that?

NANCY: Yes. Thus far Bob has been in the forefront

of raising the dollars we have received thus far, but I'm sure that I will be involved in that process. Andrew, Scott, also agency leadership. We want them to help us network with some of their donors, and help us solicit them or solicit them themselves. So yes, I do see myself doing a lot of soliciting.

SHARON: And the fact that all the agencies are so involved with their needs assessment is such a positive thing because everybody's connecting, working together.

NANCY: Right. We want it to be a partnership, and we want it to be something that we're all working together for the community.

SHARON: It's a lofty goal, but we have so many generous donors that really understand the needs here.

NANCY: We are very fortunate. We are a very special community, a very giving community, and I feel blessed to be a part of it.

SHARON: And the fact that you are giving this message to the next generation is so important, too.

NANCY: Yes. Our next generation are our community leaders, and we have a lot of new programs within Federation. We have Next Gen, which is kind of a new department that includes YAD, Community Next and Birthright, and we're doing a lot of things out in the community, and it's all very exciting.

SHARON: And we are hearing that young people are deciding to stay here, or coming back.

NANCY: Yes.

SHARON: So it has an impact.

NANCY: Yes.

SHARON: Nancy, we're coming to the end of the interview. I want to talk a little bit about Scott Kaufman, because during your term he became Federation's chief executive.

NANCY: Yes.

SHARON: And you were involved in mentoring him?

NANCY: Let me just first say a few words about Bob Aronson. Bob has great vision. He's creative and he has such a passion for the Jewish community, and I learned a tremendous amount during my first two years with him. He really inspires you. He is a very unusual man.

Scott has a real passion for the Jewish community, and he's done a particularly great job in getting young people involved, and developing programming to attract and engage young people. I think he's really making his mark in that area. Also of course, when I was president, we met often, and we talked about a lot of things that were going on within the Federation and we talked about his vision moving forward.

Being the CEO of the Federation is a huge job, and a big responsibility. And I think he spent the first year

learning about the Federation and all that it encompassed. But I think that he also tried to meet with a lot of different people to hear what they had to say. And as I say, he'd done a great job in the area of young people and helping them get connected to the community, and hopefully want to stay in the community or come back to the community.

Some of that also depends on jobs because unless there are jobs, young people are not going to stay here or come back here. There are certain things we can do, providing some kind of a network, but we as a Federation cannot be a department that helps people find jobs.

SHARON: You've covered a lot of ground and really given us a sense of what you've done over the years from that first telephone call you made. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you'd like to speak about?

NANCY: I'd like to speak to young women in the community. I would encourage them to get involved with Federation and to get involved in particular with Women's Department. As I mentioned earlier, it is a great training ground. You learn so much about the community, you learn about the campaign, you learn how to fund-raise. It's a wonderful starting point in the Federation. So I guess I would like to make that point to young women.

As far as how I am feeling at this point in time regarding my presidency, I guess I would have to say being

Federation president was the most rewarding and enriching volunteer experience of my life. I really learned so much more about the Federation and all that we do in the community, and the thousands of lives we touch here and Israel and around the world. It makes me feel very good.

Also, I have met so many dedicated volunteers who have become my friends and worked with so many committed hard-working staff, that it has really been an experience will stay with me the rest of my life.

SHARON: And we want to thank you for all that you've done because you've done a remarkable job. And you're moving us forward. The new campaign is a step forward, and on behalf of a grateful community, we thank you.

NANCY: And I thank you.