

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Michael Berke
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Charlotte Dubin
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4 LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:
5 SUBJECT MATTER: Jewish Community Leadership Oral
6 History Project

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8 MS. CHARLOTTE DUBIN: My name is Charlotte Dubin.
9 I'm interviewing Michael Berke for the Albert and Pauline
10 Dubin Oral History Project of the Leonard N. Simons Jewish
11 Community Archives. Today's date is October 3rd, 2013.

12 Michael, do we have your permission to use the
13 contents of this interview for educational purposes as part of
14 the historical record of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan
15 Detroit?

16 MR. MICHAEL BERKE: You do. And I have to say that
17 I'm honored to be a part of the program.

18 CHARLOTTE: Okay. Well, start at the very
19 beginning. Birth date, place.

20 MICHAEL: I was born at a very young (laughter).
21 I'm a Detroiter, lifelong Detroiter, born in Detroit at
22 Women's Hospital, which was then Women's Hospital, and have
23 spent my entire life in the metro Detroit area in my various
24 and sundry careers as a teacher and as Jewish communal
25 professional and as a consultant for not-for-profit

1 organizations in the community, and now as a lay volunteer.
2 And it's been a rewarding and exciting time for me.

3 I raised my family here, and I'm delighted and
4 pleased to say that I'm one of those few people that has his
5 entire family in Detroit. They all went away, but they all
6 came back. I guess they missed mom and dad. I think they
7 really missed their friends, but they missed mom and dad. So
8 we're very lucky that I have my children, grandchildren and
9 everyone in Detroit, and I've been able to have a very
10 fulfilling life and career in the Detroit area.

11 **CHARLOTTE:** Very good start. Let's find out now
12 about your parents, grandparents. Tell us a little about
13 them.

14 **MICHAEL:** Well, it's interesting. You know, I was
15 thinking about this because obviously I knew I was going to
16 have this. I came from a very traditional nuclear family.
17 The fact of the matter is, when I was a very young boy, right
18 after I was born, we lived on 14th and Blaine, in an apartment
19 building, and right next door to us was my aunt and uncle. So
20 there was always family around us.

21 I spent most of my formative life though at Dexter
22 and Davidson, on West Grand Avenue, and we lived in a two-
23 family flat. My mother and father and sister and my zeda
24 lived in our house. As a matter of fact my zeda was my
25 roommate until the day he died. My aunt and uncle and their

1 three children lived above us. So I've always been around
2 family, and family has always an integral and important part
3 of my life and my existence in Detroit, the things that formed
4 me.

5 I was thinking about it. My zeda, who we were
6 roommates as I said, I can't even count the number of nights
7 we spent after we went to bed just talking about things in
8 life, and his talking about being in the Soviet Union and
9 being in the army there and making a decision to leave the
10 army there to get out. Talking about his family, talking
11 about wife, and the love of his children and his
12 grandchildren. It was a very, very important part of my
13 upbringing and existence.

14 Of course my mom and dad played a critical role
15 there, too, but this was an extraordinary opportunity for me
16 to be with somebody who I revered. And he lived with us until
17 I was about 19 years old when he passed away, in our house, in
18 his bed.

19 **CHARLOTTE:** How about your dad? I think your dad
20 was involved in the community.

21 **MICHAEL:** I want to take a step back. My dad, from
22 his very beginnings, was involved in things Jewish. He came
23 from a very observant and orthodox family, but he made the
24 decision in his life -- he came from a family of eight
25 brothers and sisters. And they ran the gamut from observant

1 Jews on one end, and he had a brother who was a lifelong
2 member of the Communist Party and worked for the Communist
3 Party until the day he died. It caused some difficulty when
4 they wanted to go to Israel and other places. But that's a
5 whole other story.

6 But my dad made the decision that being an observant
7 Jew wasn't where he wanted to hang his hat or his kipot so to
8 speak. He really wanted to do it related to the kind of a
9 Zionist movement, and he at a very young age joined the
10 poilatizone in Toronto, and for the rest of his life devoted
11 his life to Israel and to things Jewish, but Israel in
12 particular.

13 He worked as a salesman, and he worked for the
14 Montry family of Highland Appliance for many, many years. But
15 the last part of his life, the last 25 or 30 years, he worked
16 as a representative of Israel bonds and devoted his life to
17 raising bond revenue for the state of Israel for them to
18 continue to move that wonderful agenda forward, and had a very
19 fulfilling life in that regard.

20 **CHARLOTTE:** That made some impact on your decisions?

21 **MICHAEL:** I don't know if you remember when I was
22 fortunate enough and honored enough to win the Berman award.
23 One of the things that I said is that children make a decision
24 to go into their father's business. And clearly the fact that
25 he had such a fulfilling life and did such an important thing

1 in his life was certainly an impetus to make the decision to
2 go into Jewish communal service.

3 I didn't start in Jewish communal service. I
4 started as a special ed. teacher. I taught what was then --
5 and it's politically incorrect right now -- called trainable
6 mentally retarded children. I taught for Wayne County
7 Intermediate Schools for four years. But I then made the
8 decision that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing
9 something that I really wanted to do. And teaching was a
10 wonderful first step because it sensitized me to a lot of
11 things, and hopefully made me a better person in terms of
12 being able to interact with other people. But I wanted to
13 spend my life doing something in the Jewish community.

14 I explored that possibility, and there were two jobs
15 that were available at the time. One with the Jewish
16 Community Council, and Walter Klein of blessed memory, and
17 your husband Harold was working there at the time I think.
18 And the other was working for Sol Drachler of the Jewish
19 Federation. I made the decision to do that, and I worked at
20 Federation for about three years my first time around.

21 Then I made the decision that it was time to move on
22 and went to Hillel Day School and became the executive
23 director of Hillel Day School for about four years. That was
24 also an interesting and exciting and mostly rewarding
25 experience for me.

1 **CHARLOTTE:** We're going to go back to the
2 professional part of your life. I want to go back a little to
3 the beginning and the neighborhood where you grew up, and
4 maybe into your school years in college. Do you have any
5 particular thoughts about that experience and the people you
6 knew and growing up.

7 **MICHAEL:** You know, everything I did was sort of
8 driven by the Jewish agenda and the Zionist agenda. I was
9 involved with Habonim growing up. I was also involved with
10 AZA growing up. That sort of formed my in-city life in terms
11 of my Jewish background and desire to continue Jewish
12 involvement. But the thing that was most preeminent in my
13 life, that really formed me as a human being was not, I hate
14 to say it, the United Hebrew Schools. I'm a big believer in
15 education, I'm an even bigger believer in informal Jewish
16 education.

17 I spent from the time I was eight years old until
18 the time I was 23 years old at a camp called Camp Footsa,
19 which was in Ontario, because my father came from Toronto. He
20 had many friends in Toronto. It was basically a Habonim type
21 camp, although it didn't name itself that. That's where I
22 really got my background and my love of things Jewish. I
23 spent eight weeks every year focused on not only just baseball
24 and basketball and football and all the things that camps are,
25 but also dealing with many, many things Jewish. It really

1 formed me as somebody who wanted to continue that as part of
2 my full life as I moved on from that. That was the most
3 important thing for me growing up, was my camp experience.

4 I see that translated with other people, too, who
5 had that camp experience. We just had a reunion of this camp
6 a couple years ago, and 600 people showed up to it. It was
7 kind of extraordinary. So it was a very important part of my
8 life.

9 **CHARLOTTE:** It's interesting you mention that as
10 part of informal education and how you regard Jewish education
11 as very important and especially informal. Can you just
12 mention that at all? Is there any way that informal Jewish
13 education can be helpful to the community, to our people?

14 **MICHAEL:** I think that the community has to deal
15 with educating our children Jewishly, no matter what venue
16 that happens to be, no matter what venue they happen to be
17 exposed to. And I think different kids react differently to
18 different things, and I think we have to create a panoply of
19 opportunity for kids. For me it was the informal Jewish
20 education. It was the things that I did outside of being in a
21 classroom. But for others it's the classroom. So it's
22 critical, the day schools are critical.

23 Camp Tamarack is equally critical, and many of the
24 other Jewish camps that are around, and we don't realize how
25 many Jewish-related camps there are. I think BBYO and the

1 youth groups and even the synagogue youth groups all play a
2 critical role in getting kids to identify Jewishly. I think
3 it's a challenge. I think there are some things now that
4 don't lend themselves necessarily to that passion for things
5 Jewish, in the same way that my generation and my parents'
6 generation identified. I think it's there for us to be able
7 to cultivate, but I think we have to work maybe even harder to
8 cultivate it with our Jewish youth today.

9 **CHARLOTTE:** Did you have Jewish experiences in
10 college? Where did you go to school?

11 **MICHAEL:** I went to Wayne State University. I'm a
12 graduate of Wayne State University. I'm proud to say that's
13 when Wayne State was the second school of choice for Jewish
14 kids in Michigan, after the University of Michigan. There
15 were a lot of Jewish kids there. And I'm involved with Wayne
16 State again as a vice-president of Metro Detroit Hillel. So
17 I've sort of gone back to my roots.

18 But I was involved in many of the activities.
19 Again, Habonim was a very important part of my college life,
20 you know, the things on campus. There was a growing sense
21 there of Israel, pro and con. Went through a few wars in
22 Israel, and it was interesting to see the dynamism between
23 students from the Middle East and the Jewish community and the
24 dialogues that were created then and the difficulties that
25 were created then, and how they were smoothed over. So I was

1 involved right from the get-go in doing those kinds of things.

2 Most of my activity though at college level was with
3 Habonim and that whole program. At that time it was a
4 college-aged group of kids that I dealt with, some of whom are
5 still my friends.

6 **CHARLOTTE:** Who are your friends?

7 **MICHAEL:** Good question. You're my friend. You
8 know, I've made friends all along the way. And I was just
9 remarking to somebody, I've been married now for 45 years, and
10 the eight groomsmen at my wedding and six of them were at my
11 daughter's wedding. So I've maintained friendships.

12 Friendships are very important to me and lifelong friendships
13 are critical to me. And I've made friendships in every venue.
14 I have camp friends, I have friends from college, I have
15 friends from Habonim, and I have friends from Federation.

16 I just remarked to somebody, too, that I've been
17 meeting with six very special people from Federation for the
18 last 20 years. We get together to talk about things, things
19 Jewish and things Federation, and it's been a wonderful part
20 of my life to have those people around me. And Linda, my
21 partner in life, also appreciates as well.

22 So those are my friends. I have lifelong friends.
23 I think my newest friend is somebody who we were in Lamaz
24 class with when Mark was born, was 43 years ago.

25 **CHARLOTTE:** Well, speaking of things Jewish, we're

1 going to lead up to Federation. Is there anything that you
2 can tell me about the experience at Hillel Day School, your
3 first Jewish professional position?

4 **MICHAEL:** Well, Hillel Day School was a very
5 interesting time in my life because I left Federation at a
6 time when I thought Federation didn't have much more to offer
7 me in the position that I was currently at, and a position at
8 Hillel Day School opened up as the executive director. And
9 that was really to be their fund-raiser and business manager.
10 I was there for four years, but in the four years that I was
11 there, there were three headmasters that were also there. So
12 for about two-and-a-half of the four years that I was there, I
13 also served as kind of a headmaster as well, and coordinated
14 the educational as well as the business part of it. It was a
15 difficult time, and it was a job that was extraordinary in
16 many, many ways, not all of them good. But they finally got
17 somebody who was a very good person to be the headmaster.

18 Coincidentally to that, a position opened up at
19 Federation again, and Sol Drachler asked me if I would be
20 interested in coming back to work with him at Federation, and
21 I said yes, and spent the next 23 years at Federation, doing
22 all sorts of things, from kind of entry level all the way up
23 to being the executive director and vice-president of
24 financial resource development, and was very involved in most
25 of the important activity on the fund-raising side of the

1 ledger at Federation and had some major role in forming those
2 policies and carrying out the programs at Federation. They
3 were some very exciting times.

4 **CHARLOTTE:** We'll go into that, because that's a
5 very interesting part of our conversation, but you mentioned
6 Sol Drachler's name. Would you tell us who and what he was to
7 you.

8 **MICHAEL:** Well, there are two people in my life
9 above everyone else that I consider kind of mentors and more
10 than mentors. One of course was my dad, who was my best
11 friend and my mentor and the person formed me the most. But
12 running a close second to that was Sol Drachler. Sol was the
13 campaign director at the time that I came back, and was
14 really, really responsible for giving me the skill-set,
15 whatever skill-set that is, that allowed me to be a successful
16 Jewish communal professional. He started out as my boss, and
17 finished up as my friend.

18 It culminated when I went out to Seattle actually to
19 interview him for the oral history project, and I'm very happy
20 that I did, because unfortunately he experienced a very
21 profound illness. So the fact that his family has an oral
22 history record of him and the community has an oral history
23 record of him is very, very important, for the community
24 particularly, and for his family of course.

25 He was the smartest man I ever knew. He knew more

1 about more things community-related than anyone I ever knew.
2 And if I picked up just a smidgen of his skill-set, then I
3 considered myself to be very, very fortunate. So I'm wiser
4 and richer for having known him.

5 **CHARLOTTE:** What would you say is the most important
6 less that you learned from his as a professional man, who went
7 on to very high offices as a professional in the Jewish
8 community? What specifically is a privilege or challenge of
9 being a professional?

10 **MICHAEL:** You know, I think that the most important
11 thing that a Jewish communal professional particularly -- I
12 thought about this, and there are a lot of things that a good
13 Jewish communal professional needs to have, but I think above
14 everything the thing that they need to have is good inter-
15 personal skills, being able to manage and accommodate -- and
16 those are two different things -- the whole infrastructure of
17 the Federation, from staff to volunteers to lay leaders. It's
18 an interesting juggling act, and you have to be a juggler.
19 And I think that I juggled pretty good. I think that was an
20 important part of who and what I was.

21 And it was important to get people to understand why
22 we were moving in a direction and to be able to create the
23 apparatuses that would allow us to get there most efficiently.
24 It didn't always work, and sometimes it was the other way
25 around. Sometimes I was driven by lay leadership leads and

1 desires. And many times, most times, those were also correct.

2 It was a partnership. It was really creating that
3 partnership that allowed the community to maximize its
4 potential to the best end result for the community. And for
5 me that was the bottom line, you know, raising the dollars
6 that were necessary to meet the human service needs that this
7 community had to fulfill year after year after year.

8 **CHARLOTTE:** I'm just curious about the unique nature
9 of the Jewish community, and that balancing act that you talk
10 about. Is that unique to Detroit?

11 **MICHAEL:** I think that there are good people in
12 every community. I think there's no question there are people
13 every bit as committed and as driven as the people in Detroit.
14 I think we had an advantage that other communities didn't
15 have. We were not too big, we were not too small, we were
16 kind of just right. And that was something that was very,
17 very important because we knew one another and we knew the
18 avenues and the venues to be able to access one another. And
19 I think that there's nothing that could be underestimated in
20 that. You always knew that you could find somebody who knew
21 somebody who could talk to somebody, and that was an important
22 thing because what it did was it enabled us to be able to
23 maximize the community's potential, to raise the resources
24 that were necessary.

25 Dollar for dollar, individual for individual, I

1 think Detroit is still in the top two or three per capita most
2 generous communities in the world, and I don't think that will
3 change, even with its shrinking population, which is a whole
4 other issue. But the people in Detroit continue to be very,
5 very generous, and I think will be forever. I think we're
6 going to probably have to do something differently, and are
7 doing some things differently, to access those people, but I
8 think Detroit will continue to be at the forefront of
9 generosity in the world and have that well-deserved
10 reputation.

11 **CHARLOTTE:** Can you explain what you mean by doing
12 things differently?

13 **MICHAEL:** Well, that's a good question. You know, I
14 think that if you take a look at the generations, my parents'
15 generation and our generation, I think my children's
16 generation have different needs and requirements. I was
17 talking to Linda about it. Our generation, other than
18 Federation professionals, were basically a nine-to-five
19 generation. We went to work, we came home at five o'clock,
20 and we had the rest of the day to take care of our
21 philanthropic business.

22 I think young kids today have to work a lot harder.
23 I don't think they have the same passion for Israel as we had,
24 and so I think that we have to create opportunities to evolve
25 that passion. I think Next Gen and some of the things that

1 we're doing, taking people to Israel, I think nothing
2 substitutes for taking people to Israel, whether it's the
3 March of the Living or the various programs that are put into
4 place. But I think we have to do more and more of that. I
5 think that we have to bring that more to the fore.

6 That is without underestimating the importance and
7 the need for local service, too. I think it's a balancing
8 act. And I think that we have to work harder to get the same
9 result. I think we were in a different place years ago. I
10 think we're in a place in many ways of more security, but also
11 of insecurity. I think that the whole issue of middle income
12 people is a big challenge for this community now. You know,
13 there used to be a time where you could live a very, very nice
14 life with modest financial resources. You can't do that
15 anymore. And I see it every day at Hebrew Free Loan, where
16 people come from not just the poorer communities, but are
17 coming from West Bloomfield and Birmingham and Farmington
18 Hills, and many, many communities because they have a need
19 that they didn't expect that they would need.

20 So I think that there are challenges out there to
21 meet the needs of the community, and we have to do things
22 differently, and go a different kind of a mile than we did
23 before to meet those needs. And I think that there are a lot
24 of things that are occurring that I'm encouraged by, including
25 agencies working together to try to bring people back to the

1 community. You know, we've had a resource depletion, people
2 moving away from the Detroit. But we're seeing that now
3 starting to turn around, and it's because many of the Detroit
4 agencies are working together to try to get people to return
5 to the Detroit area. I see that as an encouraging sign for
6 the community. But I think that there's more to be done, and
7 I think that we have to do more together to make certain that
8 the resources are here to fulfill the needs of the community
9 for the foreseeable and distant future. You can't take
10 anything for granted anymore. Not that we ever did take
11 anything for granted.

12 **CHARLOTTE:** I'm going to want to ask you more about
13 Hebrew Free Loan. But I want a definition. Next Gen, you
14 mentioned Next Gen as one of the things that community has
15 embarked upon for young adults. Would you explain what that
16 is?

17 **MICHAEL:** Well, I'm not sure that I'm the best
18 person to explain what Next Gen is because I've only heard it
19 by reputation. I think that it is an evolution of our former
20 Young Adult Division. I know at Hebrew Free Loan we have
21 representatives from Next Gen who sit on our board and are
22 involved with us. I think Next Gen is the future. I think we
23 have to make certain that cultivate the next generation of
24 young Jewish leadership in this community to make certain that
25 the security of the community is sacrosanct and that we can

1 rest easy that our community will continue to remain in good
2 hands.

3 I think that there is a passion that I see evolving
4 again from those people. They're very bright, talented,
5 attractive -- and I say attractive in the right sense of the
6 word -- for the community. And I think that there are young
7 people out there who want what's best for this community and
8 are working very diligently to make certain that this
9 community continues to thrive. Even through our difficult
10 economic times, which in some ways may be a blessing in
11 disguise.

12 **CHARLOTTE:** I also wonder if you'd define for us
13 Hebrew Free Loan. You are the president of that agency.

14 **MICHAEL:** That's a good question. You know, it's
15 interesting, I'll just give you a back story. After I left
16 Federation, which is now 16 years ago, I worked as a
17 consultant. I had my own consulting firm, and I consulted for
18 not-for-profit organizations, many of them Jewish, but not all
19 of them.

20 I still tell the story that if anyone would have
21 ever told me that on the one end that I'd be working with the
22 Labovich and the Friendship Circle, and on the other end of
23 the spectrum I'd be working with Affirmations, the LGBT
24 community, and that I would get them together to talk about
25 things that were common to them, I would have said that they

1 were crazy. But I was able to represent, and because of the
2 skill-set I learned at Federation, I think that I provided a
3 good service for the community. So I'm very, very happy that
4 I did that for the next 16 years.

5 Then I made the decision about a year ago that it
6 was time to hang up my spikes as a consultant, but I wanted to
7 do something else. But I don't know how to do anything else
8 other than things in the community. Fortunately, there were
9 people in the community who wanted my service, and I was a
10 consultant for Hebrew Free Loan. I told them at one time, I
11 said, I think it's time for me to move on because I think
12 everything that we set out to accomplish we accomplished.
13 Mary Keene, who was the director at the time, indicated to me,
14 well, I'm ready to do that, but -- and the "but" was, Michael,
15 we'd like you to consider serving on the Hebrew Free Loan
16 board.

17 I always made the decision when it came up, and it
18 had come up a number of times, to say no. But for Mary, and
19 for Hebrew Free Loan, and because I was at a place where I was
20 at, at the time, I said, okay, yes, I will serve on the board.
21 I served on the board, and then they asked me to be the
22 secretary and then the treasurer and then a vice-president,
23 and then they asked me to be the president. So it's been an
24 evolution, and it's been a most rewarding revolution for me,
25 and I am thrilled, as I've said to other people, to be sitting

1 on the other side of the desk.

2 Hebrew Free Loan is one of the extraordinary
3 organizations in this community, and I would safely say, I
4 hope, that its board is probably one of if not the most active
5 board in the community because its responsibility -- because
6 after all what we do, when you get to the bottom line, is we
7 provide loans with dignity, and when you cut everything away,
8 the wheat from the chaff, it's up to the responsibility of the
9 board to interview people who are coming in asking for loans,
10 to approve or deny them, and we deny very rarely but we do
11 deny. I think for them and for me it's the kind of agency
12 that I am so glad that I became involved in because we do such
13 good in the community and we help people, not just for
14 catastrophic things. There are some in vitro fertilization
15 loans that we give out and there are housing loans and there
16 are loans of real need because people can't meet their bills.
17 At the end of the day we can walk away from the activity that
18 we have, knowing that we've done something immediate and
19 something that's good for people in our community.

20 I can cite you chapter and verse of individuals, and
21 I'll name one in particular, whose name is known to the
22 community, who when he was a very young man needed \$300 to get
23 his business started in the community, and his name was Marvin
24 I. Danto. And Marvin never forgot that he got \$300 from
25 Hebrew Free Loan, and always maintained the relationship with

1 Hebrew Free Loan to the day he died, and left Hebrew Free Loan
2 with significant dollars to start the Marvin I. Danto Business
3 Loan Program.

4 So now we're into entrepreneurial things, which also
5 goes back to what we were talking about before, retaining
6 young people in our community. We have given away \$600,000 in
7 loans for young entrepreneurs in the community to stay in
8 Detroit and to build their businesses, and what could be more
9 exciting than that?

10 There are other people who also were helped by
11 Hebrew Free Loan. We just gave -- and I'm naming names, but I
12 think it's okay for this -- Mitch Montry came into our offices
13 not long ago, and we presented him a photocopy of the loan
14 form that his zeda got to start Highland Appliance in Detroit.
15 He was just more than grateful. So here we have generation
16 after generation after generation who have gotten loans, and
17 we've also had generation after generation after generation
18 when they've done well, have given back to the community, not
19 just to Hebrew Free Loan, but the community at large. It's a
20 record that we should all be proud of, and certainly I am as
21 the president.

22 **CHARLOTTE:** Now about those Federation years. Can
23 you give us a little bit of information on each of these
24 extremely important events that took place. The Gulf War.

25 **MICHAEL:** Well, I'll say this about the Gulf War.

1 This community, more than any other community that I'm aware
2 of, rises to crises. We've often said, I think even you and I
3 have said to each other, if we could only get that same
4 passion when there isn't a crisis, although there are crises
5 all the time, we wouldn't have a thing to worry about
6 financially in this community. But this community rose up
7 together to meet those extraordinary needs.

8 I remember we were at Shaarey Zedek, you and I, when
9 word first came through that Israel was being attacked. And
10 nothing's worse than not having good information because
11 there's all sorts of rumors that get started. But once the
12 dust settled and we saw what our obstacles and our challenges
13 were, this community resolved itself to meet those challenges,
14 and as usual raised more resources per capita than any
15 community in the world, and that's Detroit. Detroit rises up
16 to meet challenges every single time they're faced with them.
17 We shouldn't underestimate that, and we should be as proud as
18 we could be that this community has that resolve within it. I
19 don't think that will ever change.

20 **CHARLOTTE:** How about Federation's move from
21 downtown; tell us about that.

22 **MICHAEL:** Well, it's interesting you should ask that
23 because I was a staff person, along with Doug Etkin, that was
24 responsible for making the move from downtown Detroit to
25 uptown, and I was involved in the logistics and mechanics of

1 it, but also in the political issues that faced Federation
2 when they made the decision to do that. The biggest concern,
3 I think, if I can recall back then, and it's the thing that
4 caused the most angst with Federation leadership, was the
5 appearance that Federation, who had spent many, many, many
6 years in the city, it would appear that they were deserting
7 the city by moving uptown to our current location, and there
8 were some interesting discussions -- I wouldn't say battles --
9 about that with leadership.

10 And I think when it finally boiled down to the final
11 analysis of it, the decision was made, and I think absolutely
12 rightly so, that we had to move to where our constituency was,
13 that once you got past five o'clock in downtown Detroit,
14 Federation became a closed shop, people went home, and that if
15 we moved uptown to where our constituency was, this would be a
16 living, thriving building from morning to noon to night, and I
17 think that has been very well founded.

18 And I remember, and don't quote me on the
19 statistics, but I remember we did some statistics related to
20 usage after the first year, and it quadrupled in terms of the
21 number of people that were coming in and out of this building.
22 The added benefit was that the other Jewish organizations now
23 reside here in this building. So it's really a Jewish center
24 in that sense of the word. And I think it was probably the
25 wisest decision that we made. Again, I understand why there

1 was such concern, expressed by many people who had their law
2 firms and other businesses, accounting firms downtown. They
3 felt this would not be the proper move for the Federation.
4 But clearly it was, and I think all of those people who felt
5 that way certainly understand now -- I think they understood a
6 long time ago -- that this was the right thing for the
7 Federation to do.

8 The move was really kind of exciting and
9 interesting, to move that whole -- you know, you were there,
10 Charlotte, right from the get-go. But it was a very
11 interesting dynamic that allowed us to move to this location,
12 and creating the environment that would make this a great
13 workplace for a very devoted and dedicated staff.

14 You know, it's gone through some iterations since
15 then, some remodeling and unfortunately there was a
16 catastrophic storm that caused things to happen here. But
17 basically, the basic nucleus of the building remains, and it
18 remains a hub. And in one day I can go from doing something
19 in the campaign to going up to the Hebrew Free Loan to going
20 over to the archives, you know, and I don't have to leave the
21 building. And I think there are other people who plan their
22 days around what they're going to be doing in this building.
23 And I think that it's a wonderful thing for the community, and
24 I think it's probably one of the best real estate moves --
25 there have been a lot of other great moves -- but one of the

1 best, if not the best, real estate move that this community
2 has made. This is a living, breathing building. It's
3 exciting to walk in here every day.

4 **CHARLOTTE:** Speaking of real estate and centers of
5 Jewish life, how about the Jewish Community Center?

6 **MICHAEL:** How about it.

7 **CHARLOTTE:** Do you recall major changes at the
8 Jewish Community Center?

9 **MICHAEL:** Well, there have been a lot of changes at
10 the Center. You know, with every new executive, there's a
11 different personality that comes to bear. I think that this
12 agency has had enormously strong roots with Erwin Shaw, the
13 first executive that I had anything to do with, and certainly
14 with Mort Botnik, who set the groundwork for a very dynamic
15 center. I think that it's gone through some difficulties
16 along the way, some financial difficulties, but I think that
17 they've overcome that. I think that the Center under its
18 current leadership is doing very, very well. I think that
19 having the Jewish Academy on the Center grounds is a value
20 added for the community. I think that the Jewish Ensemble
21 Theater there, the new Berman Theater, are all enormous value
22 added. So it's really a center in the true sense of the
23 word, culturally, athletically, and otherwise. I think it's
24 an agency that we can be very, very proud of.

25 I think if we were doing it all over again from the

1 beginning, would they be building exactly the same building
2 that they built back then? I'm not sure about that, but I
3 think that they've done enough things at the facility to make
4 it a "modern" Jewish community center that does important
5 things.

6 I think the book fair and all the other things that
7 they do there are first rate. You know, the Marwil Book Fair,
8 the film festival, all are preeminent and are well-known
9 worldwide in terms of the kinds of things we accomplish there.

10 I think everything Detroit does -- you know, I'm a
11 Detroitafile, if there's such a word. I think we do things
12 better than most, and probably better than anyone.

13 **CHARLOTTE:** Great lead into the Michigan Miracle
14 Mission.

15 **MICHAEL:** You know, if I had to put my crown one
16 achievement of mine -- and I don't like to boast and brag too
17 much, I think you know me well enough -- the Miracle Mission
18 was a crowing achievement for me personally, and for the
19 Federation institutionally.

20 **CHARLOTTE:** When was it?

21 **MICHAEL:** A long time ago. Tell me. I don't
22 remember the date.

23 **CHARLOTTE:** 1993, something like that.

24 **MICHAEL:** It was a lifetime and a half ago. But I
25 remember sitting with Bob Aronson and talking about -- let me

1 take a step back. It first started when Stanley Frankel came
2 to me a few years earlier and said to me, I want to take a
3 mega-mission to Israel, and we put together a mission, a
4 koah (ph. sp.) mission, that Stanley led, and we took three
5 buses to Israel, and it was a fabulous, fabulous mission.

6 I had discussions after that that maybe we could do
7 that and more. We talked about the concept of taking one 747
8 to Israel, and having that plane come right into Metro, and
9 flying directly from Metro to Israel. Who best to help us do
10 that? We decided that there were really two people to help us
11 do that: Mrs. Sherman and Mr. Jackier. I was fortunate
12 enough to be included as a staff person to help coordinate
13 that.

14 We created with the UJA, the then UJA in Israel,
15 their missions department, Sika Gerstel (ph. sp.) -- I want to
16 give him a shout out -- an opportunity for a plane to go to
17 Israel. We started to recruit for it, and we had everything
18 in place. Jane and Larry and I went to Israel four times that
19 I can remember before the mission, just to plan every little
20 detail. Then we sent out the fliers to recruit for it.
21 Before we knew it, one plane was filled. And the next thing
22 that we knew, a plane-and-a-half was filled. They we said,
23 well, what are we going to do, we only have one plane. But
24 before we knew it again, two planes were filled. And before
25 we knew it again, long story short, three planes were filled.

1 We ended up, I remember to this day like it was yesterday,
2 walking to the gate at Metro and seeing those three planes on
3 the tarmac waiting for us.

4 We also made the decision, because Larry and Jane
5 were sort of the working chairs -- we hired Jane as a staff
6 member, an unpaid staff member to help us, but we also wanted
7 to have leadership on this mission as well. Who do you pick
8 for something like that? You pick David Hermelin. David, to
9 his credit, became a full partner in this program, and the
10 mission was in a word spectacular without a hitch. And when I
11 say without a hitch, that doesn't mean that there wasn't a
12 broken bone, because somebody did break their leg, but it
13 really -- to this day again, I still remember standing with
14 Jane Sherman after.

15 We had 1300 people on this trip, so we couldn't all
16 be together at once. So buses were going all over the country
17 at different times. But from time to time we would get
18 together and we got together I believe it was in Tel Aviv in
19 their biggest hall, that would hold 1300 people, and I still
20 remember Jane and I standing in the parking lot with 1300
21 people, after this meeting ended, getting on their buses and
22 these buses leaving this parking lot in about 20 minutes with
23 not one difficulty. She looked at me and I looked at her, and
24 I said, "This is it." It was fabulous. So it's a crowning
25 achievement for me. It's something that I will remember for

1 the rest of my life.

2 And we did it again. We actually did it two more
3 times. I wasn't involved in the third time; I was already
4 gone. But the second time we only took two planes, but it was
5 still pretty darn good. It has never been reproduced to the
6 best of my knowledge anywhere in the world, certainly in the
7 country. Nobody's ever taken that many people to Israel at
8 one time.

9 The enthusiasm and what it did to the country in
10 terms of their excitement, Israel's excitement, having 1300
11 Detroiters come to Israel all at once cannot be understated or
12 underestimated. It was extraordinary in every sense of the
13 word. And it was Bob Aronson's vision, too. But David
14 Hermelin, Larry Jackier and Jane Sherman were extraordinary,
15 and I will be forever indebted to them for their work on that
16 program. It was just extraordinary.

17 **CHARLOTTE:** Does it continue to be a part of the
18 agenda of Federation?

19 **MICHAEL:** Yeah, I think it is. I think it has to
20 be. I'm not sure, so I don't want to speak to it because I'm
21 not intimate with kind of the next generation of leadership at
22 Federation. I don't know that it has the same emotional
23 attraction that it did when the country was being formed.

24 My parents used to have people at their house three
25 or four nights a week, talking about stuff, Jewish-related and

1 Israel-related. I loved being there and listening to them.
2 And I think it translated itself to my generation. I'm not as
3 sure that it's translated to my kids' generation. So I think
4 that we have to work harder to get people to Israel.

5 Israel is in a different place, too. They're one of
6 the leading technological countries in the world. Their stock
7 market is doing extraordinarily well. So people say, why does
8 Israel need us anymore? And that's the wrong question. It's
9 how do they need us? Maybe they need us in a different way,
10 but they still need us. And it's still that place, it's still
11 that refuge for us, at least in my 70-year-old mind, that it
12 will be a place for us always.

13 **CHARLOTTE:** Did Partnership 2000 begin when you were
14 at Federation?

15 **MICHAEL:** Well, actually where it began was not
16 Partnership 2000. I was here, but I'll give you a blast from
17 the past, Project Renewal. Project Renewal started with a
18 relationship that this Federation had with ROMLA, and it was
19 the precursor to Partnership 2000, but it had many of the same
20 components. We had a Project Renewal committee that went to
21 ROMLA and YAVNA to meet with their leadership, to meet with
22 their infrastructure, to meet with their committees and
23 politicians, and to do some of the social welfare things that
24 I think are translated into a bigger program with Partnership
25 2000. So really the first major piece of Partnership 2000 was

1 Project Renewal, and I was very involved with that.

2 I don't know if you remember Marilyn and Murray
3 Grant. They were the first people that we hired as
4 consultants to help us translate that information, and they
5 were our representatives on the ground, and they did an
6 extraordinary job for this community. Project Renewal was a
7 very exciting time for us, and we had a lot of people who went
8 to ROMLA and YAVNA and that did wondrous things for an
9 attachment to the people of Israel rather than kind of Israel
10 as a philosophic kind of opportunity. This was really
11 touching the hands, touching the flesh of the people, and it
12 was a very extraordinary part of our existence at that time.
13 It was the right program at the right time, and it evolved
14 into Partnership 2000.

15 **CHARLOTTE:** Do you see major changes in the
16 relationship between American Jews and Israel?

17 **MICHAEL:** I think there are changes. I think change
18 is good. I think things shouldn't stay static. As Israel has
19 become more self-sufficient, there's much that they can do for
20 us rather than things that we can do for them. You take a
21 look at Tefnia and the major universities, and they're doing
22 extraordinary things for the world, and I think that there are
23 real opportunities for that kind of interaction. Sometimes
24 it's given back. And I think there is something that could be
25 developed, and is being developed that way that will

1 strengthen the relationship, too. But it will be a different
2 relationship. But that's the way it should be. I think that
3 relationships shouldn't be only people dependent on other
4 people. They should be partnerships.

5 You know, I go back to that partnership word. I
6 think the relationship between Israel and the United State
7 Jewry is much more of a partnership than it used to be, and I
8 think that that's good and it's in the best interest of both
9 American Jews and Israel per se.

10 I don't know what the statistics are related to
11 American Jews going to Israel. I would hope that the Israelis
12 are still receiving lots of tourists, but I think that has to
13 continue. But I think all of these organizations that have
14 these start-up companies, they're all doing extraordinarily
15 well, and I think it's from the resources of both countries
16 working together.

17 **CHARLOTTE:** You served Federation for 25 years and
18 in Jewish communal professional service for more than 40.
19 Here's how a colleague described you. "At a time when all
20 non-profit institutions recognized the need for financial
21 resource development, Michael Berke is viewed as preeminent by
22 other professionals in the general community." So what gave
23 you the most satisfaction.

24 **MICHAEL:** Well, I want to thank my mother for that
25 quote.

1 **CHARLOTTE:** I think you also have a sister.

2 **MICHAEL:** I do have a sister who lives in Montana.
3 And I want to talk a little bit when the time comes about my
4 family, my kids.

5 The thing that has given me the most satisfaction,
6 and I think above everything else, is the professional and
7 personal relationships that I've made. I can't think of finer
8 people that I've ever worked with than the professionals that
9 I've dealt with at Federation, including you, who I consider
10 -- you may not consider yourself that. Sol Drachler and my
11 dad were mentors to me, but Charlotte Dubin was also a mentor
12 to me in many, many ways. I am forever grateful to you for
13 everything that you provided. You made me look good all the
14 time.

15 And also the volunteers in the community who I have
16 great and enormous regard for and who were very, very
17 important and meaningful to me as I came up through the ranks
18 of Federation. And at the risk of maybe offending someone,
19 I'm only going to name a few because they were the ones who
20 were really most important to me. I've named some of them
21 already: Jane Sherman, Larry Jackier, Stanley Frankel, Bob
22 Naftale. Joel Tauber, who was very, very important to me in
23 terms of teaching me how to be a good professional at a
24 national level, something that I didn't want to do
25 particularly. I like being in Detroit, but he convinced me

1 that I should spread my wings and be part of the national
2 scene, too, and I'm forever grateful to him for that, too.

3 And of course the people at Federation, including
4 yourself and Barbara Sitinski and Alan Galfont, and the people
5 that I worked with right from the beginning. Others came
6 along the way who I won't name because I'll miss somebody, I
7 but I think people will understand those three, the three of
8 you, who were very, very important to me and helped shape this
9 Federation and the Allied Jewish Campaign and the fund-raising
10 effort here.

11 One other thing I wanted to say beyond obviously the
12 things that I said about Sol Drachler and his role with me as
13 the campaign director and then as the executive director. I
14 really am indebted to every executive vice-president that I
15 worked under at Federation. They each taught me something and
16 made me a better professional. So I just want to shout out to
17 them. Starting with Bill Verunnan way back when I first
18 started here, and going all the way through to Bob Aronson,
19 Wayne Feinstein, Marty Krier, they all were extraordinary men
20 who did extraordinary work for this Federation and this
21 community is lucky to have all of them.

22 **CHARLOTTE:** Now, the interview that we're doing now
23 is under the aegis of the Jewish Community Archives, the
24 Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives. Why did you
25 choose the Archives to become involved with?

1 **MICHAEL:** That's a good question, and I'm not 100
2 percent sure of the answer. I've always been interested in
3 history. Actually I started out as a history major in school.
4 I think that understanding your history allows you to secure
5 your future. I think it's a very, very important part of who
6 and what we are. I think the extraordinary people that helped
7 shape this community are a wonderful legacy, and I think that
8 there are lessons to be learned from those individuals and
9 from the things that occurred before now.

10 I think Federation -- and I'm going to say it --
11 needs to do more to utilize those tools to promote community.
12 So I think the Archives are a good primer for the future of
13 the community, and I think that we should be utilizing those
14 skill-sets of the people who are involved in archives to train
15 future leadership, and I think that's an important part of
16 what we do.

17 So it would be my desire to begin to take a look at
18 the composition of the committee to begin to take a look at
19 the agenda for the Archives Committee, now that we've got many
20 of the collections under our belt, to see how those
21 collections and things that we've done in the past can help us
22 move the agenda forward for the Federation.

23 I think the Archives Committee can be an enormous
24 fund-raising tool for the Federation. We have not even begun
25 to utilize it. That's the old fund-raiser in me. I'm always

1 thinking of ways to raise money. What can I tell you.

2 But I think that's one of the reasons that I wanted
3 to be involved in the Archives.

4 And the other thing, from a selfish point of view,
5 you know, now that I'm a volunteer, I don't have to do things
6 that I have to do, I only have to do things that I want to do.
7 So I'm involved in a number of important activities, at least
8 for me, Archives being at the top of the list. Hebrew Free
9 Loan we've talked about. And I'm still involved with the
10 Friendship Circle. I'm on the board of the Friendship Circle,
11 which I think is an important program for children with
12 special needs. And Metro Detroit Hillel because I have
13 enormous concern that our college students are not well
14 prepared for many of the things that are going on on campus
15 related to the whole interaction with Middle East politics and
16 being able to counteract some of the things that are going on,
17 not just at Wayne State University, but in general. So that
18 interested me, and so that's why I am over there working.

19 Interestingly enough, the fact that I'm the
20 president of the Hebrew Free Loan has placed me on the
21 Federation board of directors. So that's kind of a bonus.

22 **CHARLOTTE:** We're so lucky.

23 **MICHAEL:** Well, so am I.

24 **CHARLOTTE:** It's interesting by the way that Hebrew
25 Free Loan is the oldest agency; is that right?

1 **MICHAEL:** 118 years.

2 **CHARLOTTE:** So it fits into the archives.

3 **MICHAEL:** Yes, it does. It fits into me, I'm old.

4 **CHARLOTTE:** Well, to bring back your youth, you have
5 a sister you were going to mention, and then I'll ask about
6 your family.

7 **MICHAEL:** I have a sister who is living in Montana.
8 As a matter of fact we're going to visit her in a couple
9 weeks. She has a wonderful husband and a daughter and three
10 grandchildren, and they live a very lovely life in Montana.
11 You may ask why she wanted to go to Montana, but that's a
12 whole story. And I think Eric doesn't have four or five more
13 tapes, so we won't do that. We're very close and we see each
14 other two or three times a year and talk frequently. She's
15 very, very close to my kids and my grandchildren. She's had
16 to go through some rough times lately. She's had some
17 physical issues which fortunately are now under control, so
18 we're very thankful and grateful for that. And I can't wait
19 to see her.

20 **CHARLOTTE:** Tell us about the kids and
21 grandchildren.

22 **MICHAEL:** Well, let me start with the one who's not
23 most important, but the one who started it all, and that's my
24 wife, Linda. The love of my life, my best friend, and the
25 person who I depend on for just about everything. She is my

1 rock, and I say a prayer of thanks every day for her. I'm
2 very, very fortunate. And I talked about it earlier today.
3 I'm a little bit of an anomaly because I have two wonderful
4 kids, and their respective spouses who are also wonderful, all
5 of whom moved away from Detroit after they got married, but
6 all whom have come back now and both families reside in
7 Huntington Woods.

8 My son Mark has also gone into the family business.
9 He is a third generation fund-raiser. He's now working as the
10 major gift director for Forgotten Harvest. And if you count
11 Linda, it's really three-and-a-half generations because Linda
12 was a fund-raiser, too, for many years.

13 My daughter-in-law is a special ed teacher, actually
14 a department head really at Berkley High School, and is a
15 preeminent scholar really in the whole field of autism and has
16 been an adjunct professor at Wayne State University, teaching
17 programs there.

18 My daughter Stephanie worked for a company called
19 Big Communications, which has now got a different name, and
20 has worked there for many, many years, and has now decided to
21 spend more time with her family, and is doing freelance. Her
22 husband Matt is the head of the whole marketing program at
23 Eprise, and I'm very proud of him and excited that he was able
24 to find such a wonderful job in Detroit and could keep him and
25 his family very close to us.

1 So I have wonderful kids. And the grandkids, what
2 can I say, you know? Cameron is a sophomore at Berkley High
3 School. I often ask him, how does it feel to be at the same
4 school as his mother, but he seems to be managing. And he's
5 doing very, very well there. He just joined AZA, so I got him
6 into that mode. He's on the swim team and is in the band, and
7 is a very good student.

8 Mark's second child, Gabriel, who's going to be bar
9 mitzvah in January, is at Norup Middle School, and is also a
10 wonderful kid, too smart for his own good, but hey.

11 And Steffie's kids, Izzy, who is at Burton in
12 Huntington Woods, is also a force of nature who I love dearly.
13 And Eli, who is three-and-a-half, is in his own way a force of
14 nature.

15 They are all wonderful, beautiful children, probably
16 the most beautiful grandchildren anyone could I ever have.
17 But I guess you get that from a lot of people. But I'm right.

18 **CHARLOTTE:** In brief, what life lessons would you
19 like to pass on to those kids?

20 **MICHAEL:** What do you mean by that, "in brief"?

21 **CHARLOTTE:** A legacy.

22 **MICHAEL:** Give back. Give back. Be grateful for
23 what you have and make sure that you give back. You're
24 privileged, and that privilege has lots of definitions, but I
25 consider privilege having wonderful parents and wonderful

1 values, and it's very, very important that you give back.
2 There are people who are going to need you in the future, and
3 it's very important that you understand that and that you give
4 back. I think that's something that Linda and I have always
5 done.

6 It's a lesson that I took from my father. We were
7 never wealthy people in the financial sense, but I can't think
8 of anyone who was wealthier psychically. The lessons that he
9 and my mother, who we didn't talk about, but she was also
10 unique and loving, a wonderful giving person. They all gave
11 back and they all made contributions. That's the legacy I
12 would like my kids to have. And they're all doing that now,
13 and I have no reason to believe that my grandchildren won't.
14 And we'll continue to do that forever and ever. And their
15 children and grandchildren. I hope those generations will
16 continue and continue.

17 So as simple as that for me.

18 **CHARLOTTE:** Is there anything I've forgotten to ask
19 you?

20 **MICHAEL:** Yeah. The one thing I just wanted to
21 mention, because it was also an integral part of who and what
22 I am and was is my family in Israel. As I said, my dad came
23 from a family of eight. His next oldest brother moved to
24 Israel in 1933, lives on Begunian Bet. Their family was a
25 central force in our love of Israel because we had family

1 there. We visited them all the time and they came and visited
2 us, and are still visiting us.

3 But the one important thing that I wanted to
4 mention, because it was an important part of why I got myself
5 involved as a Jewish communal professional, is that on the
6 first day of the Yom Kippur War my cousin, my nachim, was in
7 the Golan Heights and was captured by the Syrians, and we did
8 not know if he was alive or dead until the Red Cross went in
9 when the war was over, went into the prison camps, and found
10 him there.

11 A very interesting story that I want to tell you
12 about very quickly is that there was a very famous Life
13 Magazine picture of Israeli prisoners in a line. They all had
14 their heads down. So that was one picture. The next picture
15 was all of these Israeli soldiers had their heads up, except
16 for one, and that was my cousin. He didn't lift his head up.
17 So we didn't know. They did studies. People looked at his
18 hands, people measured the height of this person, and they
19 thought it was him, they were almost certain it was him, but
20 they didn't know it was him until the Red Cross went into to
21 see these prisoners, and we saw him. It was on tape. It
22 could have been ABC News, I don't remember.

23 So someone asked him. You know, everyone else
24 lifted up their head. Why didn't you lift up your head? He
25 said, "Because a soldier was smashing me with a rifle and I

1 couldn't lift my head. Every time I tried to lift my head, he
2 would smash me with a rifle."

3 So we didn't know if he was alive or dead, and we
4 hoped he was alive. And thank God he was alive. But that
5 sort of cemented my resolve to work for Israel and to work for
6 Jewish people. So that was the only other thing I wanted to
7 add to this tape.

8 **CHARLOTTE:** Thank you, Michael.

9 **MICHAEL:** Thank you. It's been my privilege.