

**Oral History of:** Lisa Lis  
**Interviewed by:** Faye Wolf  
**Date of Interview:** March 5, 2018  
**Location of Interview:** Max M. Fisher Federation Building  
**Subject Matter:** Women’s Philanthropy Dept. of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit

Faye Wolf: [00:01](#) My name is Faye Wolf and today is March 5th, 2018. I am interviewing Lisa Lis at the Max M. Fisher Federation Building in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. This interview is being recorded as part of the Woman in Leadership Oral History Project. The Women's Philanthropy Department of the Jewish Federation has had several names throughout its history including Women's Division and Women's Campaign and Education Department. For the purposes of this interview, we will refer to it by its current name, Women's Philanthropy.

Wolf: [00:34](#) Do you give permission to the Leonard N. Simon's Jewish Community Archives to publish, duplicate or otherwise use this recording for educational purposes and uses deemed appropriate by the archives?

Lisa Lis: [00:46](#) I do.

Wolf: [00:47](#) Okay. When and where were you born?

Lis: [00:49](#) I was born in Detroit, Michigan at Sinai Hospital on October 24th, 1960.

Wolf: [00:56](#) And where did you go to school?

Lis: [00:58](#) I went to school both in Detroit, where we lived from 1960 until 1969. I went to Hampton Elementary. And then we moved out to Farmington Hills in 1969. And I did public school for one year and then I went to Hillel Day School and graduated from Hillel in eighth grade and I went on to public high school, Harrison High School, and then Michigan State University.

Wolf: [01:24](#) How was your religion observed in your house as a child?

- Lis: [01:29](#) Well interestingly enough, when I was really young we were members of Temple Israel. We lived in Detroit not far from Temple Israel. And so the early years I would go to Hebrew School, Sunday School very reluctantly. I don't remember a lot of, we were reformed at the time. I would have holidays at my grandparents house and my aunts and uncles houses, but for some reason I protested Hebrew School. And that is exactly why my mother decided to send me to Hillel Day School because that I meant I didn't have to go to Hebrew School and Sunday School, which indirectly pretty much changed my life going to a Jewish Day School. It really put me on a path that I think would not have been there if I had just gone to public school.
- Wolf: [02:22](#) How so?
- Lis: [02:23](#) Well, it planted a seed for me for the love of Israel, for the love of Judaism. I really wasn't getting that at home. Like I said, we weren't really religious and subsequently years later ... We had never gone to Israel. We weren't that involved in Federation as I was growing up. My mother was very busy building a business. We owned the Weight Watcher business so she was building her career. And then when I was in college I saw a flyer to go to Israel and I had that seed in me from Hillel and I went to Israel and it literally changed my life. I met my husband. This was 40 years ago. We've got four kids and two grandkids now. And Israel and Judaism is very strong in my life now.
- Wolf: [03:17](#) Okay. Was philanthropy important to your family when you were growing up?
- Lis: [03:22](#) Not that I recall. I'm sure it was. I think my mother had always given to Federation. My father really wasn't connected much to Federation or philanthropy. He was also a workaholic, very involved in building, in working. So it really wasn't until I was an adult that philanthropy became a big influence in my life.
- Wolf: [03:49](#) When and how then, did you become involved with Federation?
- Lis: [03:54](#) After I got married and we came back to Michigan and just as we were starting a family, our very close friend, Brian Keeps, was involved in the young adult division of Federation. And he brought us in. Generally when you get involved in Federation or any non-profits you're brought in by somebody else. And so we brought in by him. We got, my husband and I both got very involved in Jewish Federation and in the young adult division at the time. My husband then went on to become the President of young adult division. I was involved in committees and chairing

committees. Then it sort of jump started my career also in other philanthropy. Jewish and non-Jewish as well.

- Wolf: [04:44](#) So when did you transition then to Women's Philanthropy? Were you a committee chair before that?
- Lis: [04:51](#) I didn't get involved in the Women's Philanthropy until after all my kids were born and I became, I got involved then. Somehow I just either got on a committee or went to some event. Actually it was an event in someone's home. We used to have parlor meetings at that time. And it was an event in someone's home that I went to. And that's how I got started.
- Wolf: [05:17](#) So timeline wise, when about the time did you become involved with Federation? And then when did you become President?
- Lis: [05:27](#) Okay, so I got involved with Federation early on in young adult division. And then in Women's Philanthropy, I probably got involved in my 40's and my memory is not great, but I was President probably when I was like, let see. Does it say what year I was President? No. I'm sure it's somewhere. That's okay. It's not a problem.
- Wolf: [06:03](#) It does somewhere.
- Lis: [06:04](#) I was probably President when I was in my late 40's, early 50's. Something like that I was President. I was Vice President first. A couple of times was Vice President. And then became President.
- Wolf: [06:16](#) Okay. You were one of the first young women's Vice Presidents.
- Lis: [06:19](#) Yeah.
- Wolf: [06:19](#) Okay, so. All right. It has in your biography that you became a trustee of JWF in 2001? This is a separate one.
- Lis: [06:32](#) Yes. And then I became Chair of the Jewish Women's Foundation as well later on.
- Wolf: [06:37](#) Okay. And then you got involved in the women's department in the late '90's, you think.
- Lis: [06:40](#) Well, yes, see, the Jewish Women's Foundation, which you have questions about that afterward, I was the Chair of that before I became the President of Women's Philanthropy. So they're two different agencies.

Wolf: [06:56](#) I see. So, which one were you Vice President? You were the first young woman Vice President.

Lis: [07:06](#) I was, in Women's Philanthropy. I was Vice President of Women's Philanthropy before I was Chair of Women's Foundation, Jewish Women's Foundation.

Wolf: [07:12](#) Okay. Now I got the timeline. Okay. And who were the leaders of Women's Philanthropy when you first-

Lis: [07:17](#) There were so many leaders back then, but some of, and I know that there's a question in there about my mentors and so the leaders and my mentors were really the same time. The leaders when I came on were Susie Citrin and Paula Glazier and Penny Blumenstein. Penny Blumenstein and Doreen Hermelin are two of the women that I look up to in this community as pillars. They're just, they just are so symbolic of what I would like to be as a leader in this community. They're just selfless and work so hard to make this community a better place.

Wolf: [08:04](#) Describe Women's Philanthropy when you first began. Like the types of activities and programs that you were involved in.

Lis: [08:11](#) So, Women's Philanthropy is the entity that is meant to outreach to all women in our community. We have 67,000 Jews in our community and presumably half are women. So Women's Philanthropy is meant to reach out to all the women and find something for them to come into our community. Whether it's education or helping to raise funds or helping to do charity work or volunteering their time. So really it's effort is to just reach out in any way it can to encourage Jewish women to be part of our community.

Wolf: [08:54](#) And did you receive any type of training for this role? Anything in leadership or solicitation?

Lis: [09:00](#) You know, my form of leadership is just on the job and I just learn as I go. We have, we had many activities. We had leadership programs. When I feel most important about training and learning to do your job is education, is learning as best you can about the agency, about the organization, what it does, it's history. The more you know about the organization that you're working for, the more you can be a great ambassador and help raise awareness and help raise funds for the organization. So educating yourself on everything that it does in its history I think is the best training method that you can provide yourself as a leader.

Wolf: [09:46](#) What positions did you hold within Women's Philanthropy and when? We touched a little bit about that already, but do you have anything else to add that we didn't already discuss?

Lis: [09:54](#) Right. I was Co-chair for various different volunteer programs and educational programs. Then I was Vice President, which oversaw different communities, different committees. So various different aspects of Women's Philanthropy. I took on all of the roles.

Wolf: [10:15](#) It says you worked on young women engagement.

Lis: [10:17](#) Yeah.

Wolf: [10:18](#) What are the challenges to engaging that demographic?

Lis: [10:22](#) Well at the time you have to try and reach out to the young women who are coming out of next gen or young adult division and encourage them to come into women's programming. And what they're coming from a program that's both men and women, coed programming, which they felt comfortable with and then it's hard to transition them into a program that's just for women. So that's one aspect that was difficult.

Lis: [10:53](#) Also, trying to get young women involved in Women's Philanthropy when they're raising their kids and they're working and they're busy, is also a challenge. So there's lots of different challenges in getting all the women involved, but specifically trying to get young women involved they're just so busy as it is, it's just difficult to get them.

Wolf: [11:13](#) So interestingly because one of the questions is historically many of the Women's Philanthropy volunteers didn't work outside the home and they were more available during the day and has Women's Philanthropy changed now with more women working outside the home-

Lis: [11:29](#) Yeah, right. In the early days a lot of the volunteers of the Women's Department, Women's Philanthropy, whatever we called it in those days, didn't work outside the home. They were either women that had already raised their families or had a lot of free time. Now, 21st century, you've got women doing all kinds of things so you try to adjust by offering programs in the evening time or lunchtime programs or early morning programs, but for Women's Philanthropy as a whole we still generally target toward women who are available during the day to come to our meetings. But we do have working women's entity that

targets specifically women who are working. We do have a young women's group that targets those women.

- Wolf: [12:25](#) Is that something you started or was already in place when you-
- Lis: [12:29](#) The Working Women was something that I re-energized when I became President. The Young Women's Outreach was already there at the time. So, I think that all Presidents have different styles when they come on and they have different priorities. Mine was to try to be as inclusive and welcoming as possible. I instituted weekly Shabbat messages that I would write every Friday and have it sent to all the women to try to encourage them to learn more about what Federation has to offer and what are Jewish community has to offer. I would try to incorporate different rabbis from all the different streams to do a little Dvar Torah a very brief Dvar Torah for those Shabbat messages.
- Lis: [13:15](#) My true emphasis was really being inclusive. At one point Federation had the feeling that maybe it was maybe elitist or some people didn't like if for one reason or another. Or they were insulted or ... We're all human. We all have sensitivities and we have to be as, you know, as leadership we have to be as inclusive and welcoming and sensitive as possible to make sure everybody feels comfortable in our community because we are a small community. We have a lot of people in this community who really need a lot of help and the Jewish people are the only ones taking care of our Jewish people.
- Lis: [14:02](#) I mean Jewish people have a belief of Tikkun Olam. We are here on this earth. It's a responsibility of us to repair the world. And not just repair our own family or our own community, but our whole world. Jewish, non-Jewish, everybody. But it's not as reciprocal. Non-Jews understandably are not gonna come in and help our Jewish, small Jewish community for people who need loans, for Hebrew free loans that we provide or whatever else it may be. So we first need to take care of our own Jewish community that does need a lot of help and then we expand it out.
- Wolf: [14:45](#) What does your family think of your involvement?
- Lis: [14:48](#) Very supportive. My mother, after I was in Israel, she went to Israel for the first time. She came back. She got involved in Federation. You know, I think she used to solicit people or give gifts early on, but again she was busy building her business, but when my husband and I got involved she also got involved. Our

kids are all adults now. They were supportive of us in our work and they're all kind hearted philanthropists in their own right.

Wolf: [15:24](#) And what inspired you to work your way up to the Presidency?

Lis: [15:30](#) Actually it wasn't aspiration really. It just kind of fell in my lap. It was, there was a woman that was supposed to be President and she had to move away and they needed to find somebody and I had just finished my position as Chair of the Jewish Women's Foundation. I was available. They asked me and I said yes.

Wolf: [15:53](#) What were your duties as President?

Lis: [15:57](#) Like I mentioned earlier, to make sure that all women in our community felt comfortable and welcomed in Jewish philanthropy, to come to events, and make a donation to our community so that we could help everybody in our community.

Wolf: [16:15](#) Were the same mentors that you mentioned before the same ones you had within Jewish Women's Philanthropy?

Lis: [16:20](#) Yeah.

Wolf: [16:21](#) Okay.

Lis: [16:21](#) Penny Blumenstein, Doreen Hermelin, Marcie Orley was the President right before I became President and she was helpful as well.

Wolf: [16:33](#) What do you think some of the challenges were that you faced as President?

Lis: [16:38](#) Well, one of the big challenges that we have in our community, in our Jewish community is that people today don't have that same connection to Israel. Certain generations remember when Israel became established as a state and knew the struggle that, that took on. Certain generations remember the Six Day War or the Yom Kippur War and understand that. And certain generations just know Israel as an entity that's always been there and now it's even becoming controversial and progressives feel Israel used to be an underdog, it's no longer an underdog.

Lis: [17:20](#) And I mention Israel because Israel is a core value in our Jewish community. Sadly, some anti-Semitism has existed for the 3000 years we've existed and sadly, it will probably continue to exist forever. For some reason people use Jews as scapegoats and

there's anti-Semitism. That's why it's so important that we have a strong Israel. And it's so important that we're connected to Israel and we go there and we visit often. So one of the challenges is getting people to understand the history of Israel and the love of Israel and the importance of why Israel needs to exist.

- Lis: [18:01](#) Another challenge in this community is that Israel used to be the only force and we knew we had to give to our Jewish Federation because half the money went to Israel and we need to make sure Israel can survive. Israel can survive on its own right now. They almost don't even need our money, but we still continue to give it to them, but there's other forces now, not just forces, there's other entities like I mentioned before that are campaigning for our Jewish money. And we should be giving to the hospitals and the museums and everything else that we do give to, but it's difficult to make Jewish people understand that yes, we should give to other organizations, but we really need to give to our own organization first because we are the only ones that will support this organization. And it's hard for us to get younger people who don't understand that to instill that importance of sustaining our Jewish community, also helping others, but we do need to take care of ourselves first.
- Wolf: [19:08](#) Do you have something that you would say would be your proudest accomplishment as President?
- Lis: [19:14](#) I would hope that just increasing the amount of women that were touched by our community when I was President of Women's Philanthropy, that people felt welcomed, people felt comfortable coming and learning and educating as many people as possible.
- Wolf: [19:35](#) Were there certain staff members that you worked with and what was your relationship the staff members?
- Lis: [19:40](#) There were several. Jennifer Levine was the Executive Director of Women's Philanthropy when I came on. She has since moved to a different office in the building, a different department. She was great. Rachel Robinson has left our Jewish community. She lives in Chicago now. Amy Nistein works now in Women's Philanthropy. All the staff was amazing here.
- Wolf: [20:10](#) How were you affected by transitions and staff and lay leadership?



- Lis: [20:17](#) The transition and staff ... I always felt that staff really did all the work. They really did. They just made us lay leaders look good. It was a staff, you know, we had a great partnership between staff and lay leaders, but the staff really were the heart and soul of this. And are the heart and soul of our Jewish Federation. So, we, I felt we always had a great relationship with our staff.
- Wolf: [20:47](#) This is more of a broad impression, but why is Women's Philanthropy important to you and how does it rank among your other endeavors?
- Lis: [20:55](#) It's top. Women's Philanthropy and Federation are, is my top priority. As I mentioned before, 'cause I feel that Jewish people need to take care of ourselves because no one else will. And yet, with that said, I still am involved in various other organizations in this city. I'm on the board of the Zoo. I chair their Development Committee. I'm involved in other non-profits in this community. Forgotten Harvest, I sit on a committee. I help out with various other organizations. ALYN Hospital was something I was involved in, in the beginning and it's a hospital in Israel. Just if something is important to me, I try to step up wherever I can.
- Wolf: [21:49](#) Do you feel that women solicit differently than men?
- Lis: [21:53](#) I do. I think women have a little bit more compassion and sensitivity than men might have and they are more straight forward and women pull on heartstrings a little bit more. So, I think that women are, sorry, is that okay the noise out there?
- Speaker 3: [21:53](#) [inaudible 00:22:16].
- Lis: [22:17](#) Okay, sorry about that.
- Lis: [22:21](#) I feel that when a woman, two women come together they have some bond that does help you get on the same page.
- Wolf: [22:31](#) How did Women's Philanthropy interact with the general campaign of Federation?
- Lis: [22:38](#) Well, Women's Philanthropy is a very big component of the general campaign. I happen to sit on the Board of Governors. I also sit on the Executive Committee of Federation as a whole. So we represent a lot of women throughout the Federation board, our current and new President is Beverly Lis who was the President of Women's Philanthropy and also was the President of Jewish Women's Foundation. So, Penny Blumenstein was a

President of the Federation, so we're very integrated with the whole Federation, Women's and Federation are connected.

Wolf: [23:24](#) So, do you feel the Federation values Women's Philanthropy?

Lis: [23:28](#) Absolutely. Yeah.

Wolf: [23:31](#) Has Women's Philanthropy changed at all throughout your involvement?

Lis: [23:34](#) Sure. It's gone from an organization that maybe was more focused on women who didn't work and now people who are working. It's just changing with the times. We changed our name from Women's Department to Women's Philanthropy. It represents us better. There's various different innovations that Women's Philanthropy has taken on through the years.

Wolf: [24:03](#) Why do you think it's important that women have their own department?

Lis: [24:08](#) Well, every voice needs to be counted. Every Jew needs to step up to the plate and be counted. There's a lot of couples who like to give together. They're married. They can council together. They want to give their gifts together, but each of us is an individual and it's important that we step up and be counted. And the total number of donations to our campaign gets counted in Lansing and when we get funds from Lansing they look at the number, the total number so it's important that we have individual donors as well.

Wolf: [24:50](#) Why is philanthropy important to you?

Lis: [24:55](#) Like I said, goes back to Tikkum Olam. It's so important to give back when you have the ability to do so. And quite frankly, helping others makes you feel good. It's scientifically proven that you feel good when you help somebody else. So selfishly, you know, we do it for selfish reasons. We do it because we have to. We do it because the importance of maintaining our community here in Detroit, our Jewish community. It's top priority.

Wolf: [25:31](#) What are your hopes for Women's Philanthropy in the future?

Lis: [25:34](#) That it continues to grow. It continues to bring in a wide diverse group of women throughout our Jewish community. That it's inclusive. That we reach out to, like I said, diversity. All women. There's LGBT community or there's the community of mixed

marriages. I think it's important that we're inclusive and open for every Jew to feel comfortable in this space.

- Wolf: [26:04](#) Okay. Can we talk a little bit about Jewish Women's Foundation?
- Lis: [26:07](#) Yes.
- Wolf: [26:07](#) Okay. What is Jewish Women's Foundation?
- Lis: [26:11](#) The Jewish Women's Foundation started back in 2000 as a grant making organization. And it invited women to participate with their dollars. So every trustee makes a commitment of \$10,000 over five years and they pay it off \$2,000 a year. All that money goes into the endowment and every woman that is a trustee then has a vote. And we give the money away in grants of \$20,000 or many grants of \$5,000 for programs that help Jewish women and girls. And at the time that the organization was established, there was nobody that was doing it. There was nobody that was giving grants to programs for Jewish women and girls. Various different programs. Programs like a program that would help Jewish incarcerated women. Jewish women who are in prison and help them transition out. Or a program that would help single moms send, take their kids to camp or various different programs. Women's learning programs. A teenage girl programs. Teaching teenagers about boyfriend abuse or whatever. Just a wide variety of programs that we have given grants to over the span of the lifetime of the Jewish Women's Foundation. So it's a very democratic, hands on kind of organization.
- Wolf: [28:07](#) And the differences between JWF and Women's Philanthropy, is it just for women? The grants are just for women?
- Lis: [28:17](#) The grants that we provide from the Jewish Women's Foundation are for programs to help Jewish women and their families. So we sort of expanded. It used to be just Jewish women and girls. Now, its Jewish women and girls and their families. There's a lot of elderly Jewish women that need help. I mean there's just a wide range of programs that we have provided money to.
- Wolf: [28:43](#) When did you become a donor and trustee? Was it from the inception?
- Lis: [28:47](#) In the very beginning it was just growing so the first year are the founding members. I'm one of the founding members. My

mother became a member first and she said, " You're becoming a member." And I was like, "Okay." It wasn't even an issue. It wasn't even a question. And so from the very beginning I've been a trustee.

Wolf: [29:09](#) And let me go back a little bit. You were a past chair?

Lis: [29:15](#) Yes.

Wolf: [29:16](#) And what was the organizational, what did the organizational chart look like then?

Lis: [29:20](#) So, I think I was maybe the fourth or fifth chair of the organization. See, Margo, Beverly. I think I was the fourth chair of the organization and there's a chair basically and then there's committees and committee chairs. It's not as heavily structured as Women's Philanthropy, so there's also an associate chair. So there's a chair, the associates chair and then there's just committee chairs. And I was first the associate chair and then I was the chair.

Wolf: [30:01](#) Do you have anything to add to about how the grant making process works? You went into it a little bit about who it's for.

Lis: [30:08](#) It's all democratic and we have one cycle a year, which means that we take in requests for proposals, which means organizations send us a request for a proposal, for a grant. We go through those proposals. We chose which ones will go to the next stage. Then we have site visits with these organizations to learn more about their proposal. And then we come together as a group and we vote on which proposals we're gonna give our money to.

Wolf: [30:40](#) Do you solicit for these grants or are they just targeted to you from other areas of Federation?

Lis: [30:48](#) No, we solicit. We go out and we send out a request for proposal. It's like a email or a letter out to all the non-profit organizations in our area. The Jewish Family Services sends in a lot of proposals. Jewish Senior Life sends in proposals. The synagogue up in Flint will send in a proposal. The Friendship Circle will send in a proposal. So, lots of different organizations send in their proposals and we generally give out about \$200,000 a year, give or take.

Wolf: [31:27](#) That's impressive.

- Lis: [31:28](#) Yeah.
- Wolf: [31:29](#) Why do you think it is important to have a grant making organization specifically targeted to women?
- Lis: [31:36](#) Well because nobody else was doing it. And because it's a strong bonding experience for women and it's a learning experience for women. So these trustees come in and they learn about all these organizations in our community that you would never know about. And you learn about them through the proposals they're sending in. So the organization talks a little bit about themselves and their history and then tells us what they do and then what their grant request is for. So it's very educational, even more so when we go to site visits. When you go and you sit down and you listen to the organizations who are asking for money.
- Lis: [32:15](#) So, it's a benefit both to the organizations who are asking money, but also the trustees to learn more about our community. It's a group of women that are strongly bonded together. There's a difference, you can be a trustee with just the \$10,000 over five years or you can be a lifetime member, which is \$50,000. It's accumulative. So if you've been a trustee for five years and then you go on again for another five years that means you've already put in \$20,000. So when you get to the \$50,000 you're a lifetime. That means you are a member forever. You don't have to put in any more money.
- Lis: [32:56](#) But then when you get to the \$100,000 level, then you are a trans generational member. Or intergenerational member, which means that you, your daughters, your daughters-in-law, your granddaughters continuously, forever, will all be trustees. So we, my mother and I are at this intergenerational level, which means that my daughter who is 31, lives in this community, very active in the community. She's active in the next gen community and she's on the board there. She is also a trustee. So she gets to come and my grand baby who's four and a half, when she's older or, I have an eight month old one also, when she's older she, you know, hopefully God willing, the Jewish Women's Foundation will still be around and she can be a trustee of the Jewish Women's Foundation.
- Wolf: [33:46](#) Do you think it's important to have both JWF and Women's Philanthropy at Federation?
- Lis: [33:51](#) Yeah, absolutely. And we work together. The Jewish Women's Foundation can't really do the work we do without Federation. I

say we're like kissing cousins. We help them they help us. So, we work together to make our community a better place.

- Wolf: [34:14](#) Are there specific women's issues that you feel most passionate about?
- Lis: [34:22](#) Wow, that's a tough question. Specific women's issues. I have a lot of women's issues, not specifically in the Jewish community that I really worry about. I mean, I believe in equality and I believe in various other women's issues with choice and other, we're very involved in politics. We make sure that women in our community are treated fairly.
- Wolf: [34:58](#) What do you hope to accomplish with the Jewish Women's Foundation?
- Lis: [35:02](#) Well, you know, I've already been the Chair. I participate in the program and I try and vote when we do have our voting. I'm thrilled that my daughter's involved and you know, if my granddaughters are involved, that would just be a wonderful bonus.
- Wolf: [35:20](#) What is your message to young women about why they should participate in these types of programs whether it's JWF or Women's Philanthropy?
- Lis: [35:28](#) I think that women, young, old, any age, it's important to get involved. It's important to be involved in your community. It's important to you and to others, meeting people, doing good, being, helping to grow a strong Jewish community, a strong Detroit community. Find your passion and just pursue it.
- Wolf: [35:57](#) Is there anything else that you want to let us know? Whether its Jewish Foundation or Women's Philanthropy.
- Lis: [36:05](#) Yeah, no, I think we really covered a lot with all those questions. I mean, Israel is so important, you know, I really think I got my message across.
- Wolf: [36:15](#) Well thank you very much for taking the time.
- Lis: [36:15](#) Thank you.
- Wolf: [36:18](#) We appreciate this.
- Lis: [36:19](#) My pleasure. My pleasure.