

**Oral History of:** Ellen Labes

**Interviewed by:** Robbie Terman

**Date of Interview:** May 9, 2019

**Location of Interview:** Max M. Fisher Federation Building, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

**Subject Matter:** Women's Philanthropy Dept. of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit

Robbie Terman: [00:01](#) My name is Robbie Terman and today is May 9, 2019, and I'm interviewing Ellen Labes at the Max M. Fisher Federation building in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. This interview is being recorded as part of the Women in Leadership oral history project. Ellen, do you give permission to the Leonard and Simon's Jewish Community Archives to publish, duplicate or otherwise use this recording for educational purposes and for use as deemed appropriate by the archives?

Ellen Labes: [00:29](#) Yes, I do.

Robbie Terman: [00:31](#) The Women's Philanthropy Department of the Jewish Federation has had several names throughout its history, including Women's Division and the Women's Campaign and Education Department. For the purposes of this interview, the questions will refer to it by its current name, Women's Philanthropy, but you can use whatever name you feel comfortable with.

Robbie Terman: [00:49](#) We're going to start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Ellen Labes: [00:54](#) I was born in Detroit, Michigan, May 1, 1933.

Robbie Terman: [00:59](#) And can you talk a little bit about where you went to school? Elementary, middle, high school?

Ellen Labes: [01:04](#) Absolutely. I went to John Jay Bagley Elementary School, and that in those days went through the sixth grade. And then I went to Durfee Junior High for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, and to Central High School for the 10th through 12th

grades. And then I went to the University of Michigan and got a bachelor's of music degree in 1955.

Robbie Terman: [01:33](#)

How was religion observed in your household?

Ellen Labes: [01:36](#)

As I was growing up, my parents, both of whom were raised in Orthodox homes, decided that they would like a different kind of observance, so we were reform Jews. We belong to Temple Beth El. I was confirmed there, and in those days the Rabbi was Dr. B. Benedict Glazer, who was absolutely phenomenal, a leader of the Reform movement, and it was my privilege to have attended Temple Beth El as a youngster.

Robbie Terman: [02:14](#)

Was philanthropy important to your family while you were growing up?

Ellen Labes: [02:18](#)

Yes. My mother was president of an organization at that time called the Denver League, which raised money to help children with asthma and other related illnesses get treatment, and I believe they had a treatment center in the mountains of Colorado, and she was very much involved with that.

Robbie Terman: [02:41](#)

And how about your father?

Ellen Labes: [02:43](#)

I'm sure that he was a donor, but as far as a leadership position, he just didn't have the time.

Robbie Terman: [02:50](#)

Actually, while we're talking about your parents, can you tell me a little bit about your family, your parents' names, siblings?

Ellen Labes: [02:57](#)

My mother's name was Ethel. My father's name was Sidney. My maiden name is Sherman, and they were both born and raised in Bay City, Michigan in a very close knit, small Jewish community, but quite active. And my parents each moved separately to Detroit before they were married, but they knew each other all their lives. And my father was one of six. My mother was one of four, and my mother had an older sister who moved here, and my father had one older brother, but the rest of the family remained in Bay City, so we had very close ties to Bay City, Michigan, which always has a special place in my heart. And I have one younger brother with whom I'm very close. Fortunately lives a mile and a half from us.

Robbie Terman: [03:55](#)

Very nice. I want to talk about your path in philanthropy. Growing up, were you part of any Jewish organizations, whether it was just as a participant, something like a camp, or just any Jewish organization?

Ellen Labes: [04:15](#) Not any philanthropic, as I was growing up. I did belong to a Jewish high school sorority, which in those days was illegal, but somehow we got around it, and I actually didn't become familiar with philanthropic causes until I had children and we were settled in Detroit. I lived out of state for several years, returned, and then learned about the Jewish community and became involved, and have been involved ever since.

Robbie Terman: [04:50](#) What was your first involvement in Detroit's Jewish community?

Ellen Labes: [04:54](#) In the early 1970s, my children, we have three, were all in school all day, and I was looking for something to do. I was, at that time, a volunteer in the elementary school library, but I wanted to do something more, and a neighbor of mine told me about something called Phone a Gift. I had no idea what it was, but it sounded interesting. It sounded like something I could do for a couple of hours a week.

Ellen Labes: [05:24](#) She explained to me what it was. At that time I was unfamiliar with Federation. This was around 1972, 1973, and we met in a building on 10 Mile between Greenfield and Southfield, and our purpose was to call women in the local Jewish community to ask them to support Allied Jewish Campaign, as it was then known, as the fundraising arm of our federation. And after that day I got hooked.

Robbie Terman: [05:59](#) Do you remember at what points you were aware that it was Federation, and more specifically the Women's Philanthropy, or Division?

Ellen Labes: [06:07](#) I think that day we had a brief training, and who was ever in charge of that particular day's Phone a Gift told us what we were calling about, why we were calling, what it meant to the community, and it was something that appealed to me, and that was my first introduction.

Robbie Terman: [06:29](#) Do you remember who the leaders of Women's Philanthropy were at that time?

Ellen Labes: [06:32](#) I believe Tillie Brandwine was president. And in those days it was called Women's Division.

Robbie Terman: [06:40](#) So you started with Phone a Gift?

Ellen Labes: [06:42](#) Yes.

Robbie Terman: [06:42](#) Where did you go from there?

Ellen Labes: [06:43](#) Well, then I became part of the Leadership Training Group. I was asked to do that, which was a wonderful program, and it brings together a lot of young women who take an intensive course to learn about Federation, its agencies, what each agency does, how it impacted or how our community is impacted by these wonderful agencies, and the purpose actually of why we have a Federation, and what the moneys raised do, and how through a very, very intensive allocation process, each of the agencies get sums of money to help them to succeed in their goals. It was eye opening. We went to every organization who receives money through Federation, and it was a six week course, and it was really wonderful. There were also at that time smaller groups called communities that were held in private homes, and the hostess would invite six to eight to 10 women whom she thought would be or could be interested in Federation, and would perhaps volunteer, but as importantly, support it monetarily. These were very, very important, active programs that were really thriving in the mid to late 70s, early to mid 80s.

Robbie Terman: [08:33](#) And when you became active, can you talk a little bit about some of the more important programs to you that you were either involved, or had started taking a leadership role in?

Ellen Labes: [08:49](#) I was a vice president in what was called, and I believe still is, the education arm of Women's, at that time, Women's Division, and was responsible for seeing that leadership training went as well as it should, that there were hostesses for communities. We also had, one day in the fall every year, a program called Institute, which we brought in well known keynote speakers to address the audience on topics of Jewish interest that were very important for the community to know about, and this was a very popular program for several years, and I was involved with, what was then, as I said, Institute as well. I was primarily focused in the education department of Women's Division, although I contributed, and still contribute, at that time, and I believe there still is one vice president of fundraising and several vice presidents who are responsible for the different education programs. My focus was on education.

Robbie Terman: [10:14](#) It seems that traditionally there was more of a focus on education, leadership, and then the campaign, whereas it's not quite structured that way today. Do you feel it's missing that more education and leadership training arm that it once had?

Ellen Labes: [10:28](#) Personally I do, because if somebody doesn't know what an organization is doing and why it's so necessary to support it, she

may not be as willing to support it financially as she could. I think education is tremendously important, and I wish there were more programs for the community, and I think it would help to tear down the stereotype that unfortunately has been built around Federation, of it being an elitist organization. It isn't. It's for the entire Jewish community, but unless you're educated to know what Federation does, it's very difficult to explain to somebody, "Well, this is what we do, and you really should support it." And she has to find out for herself, through, I believe, through education programs, so I do wish that there were more.

- Robbie Terman: [11:42](#) Is your family involved in Federation as well?
- Ellen Labes: [11:46](#) My husband at one time was co-chair of the Physicians' Division. It was doctors not only of medicine, but of podiatry, dentistry, and he and the late Daryl Goldberg were the co-chairmen of that division for years, and to this day he still takes cards and calls professional people, and is still very much involved with Federation. It's contagious.
- Robbie Terman: [12:22](#) What are your children's names? Sorry. What is your children's names?
- Ellen Labes: [12:24](#) Susan, Robert, and Daniel.
- Robbie Terman: [12:27](#) And when they were young and you were involved, how did they feel about you being away at events like Phone a Gift or education events?
- Ellen Labes: [12:35](#) Well, they always took place during the day when they were in school. They knew I was involved, and I hope that they were proud of what I was doing. I mean, those were the days when moms usually stayed home, took care of the kids. I didn't go back to work until after they had all grown up and left home, and I felt that that was the time when I could go back to the workforce. But they are all active in their communities. We have one son who lives here. Our two other children live out of town, but they're both active, so I guess something rubbed off.
- Robbie Terman: [13:19](#) Can you talk about the different positions that you've held in Women's Philanthropy on your rise towards the presidency, and if you remember any years?
- Ellen Labes: [13:30](#) I don't remember. I was president from 1983 to 1985, and one of the accomplishments I was very proud of, at that time, as I mentioned, most women were not working out of the house,

but there was a small contingent of those who did, and it was called the Working Woman's Division. I was able to change that to the Business and Professional Women's Division. I thought that it made it sound much more important. It was important, because more and more women were returning to the workforce. They could not attend afternoon events, but they were very much needed to support our community, and so we would have events in the evening. Anybody could attend, but it was especially for those who were working during the day who wanted to become involved, who wanted to support, and did support Women's Division. So that's when the Business and Professional Division took hold and I was very happy about that.

Robbie Terman: [14:46](#)

Do you remember about when that was? What year?

Ellen Labes: [14:51](#)

Well, as I mentioned, I was president from 1983 to 1985, so-

Robbie Terman: [14:55](#)

Somewhere in there [crosstalk 00:14:56].

Ellen Labes: [14:55](#)

... sometime in that, we had that. And another project that I'm very proud of, this was after my presidency, but a very dear friend of mine had passed away, and her husband wanted to honor her memory in some way and wanted to do something educational, so we started what was called a Women's Day of Learning, and I was privileged to be chairperson of that, and it was an all afternoon event. It usually started about noon. We would bring in a keynote speaker. For two years, we were privileged to have Deborah Lipstadt, who's a very renowned scholar, to be our keynote speaker, and after the keynote speaker's address, the group would divide up into several workshops, all led by woman scholars, rabbis, cantors, teachers. It covered a broad spectrum of the community.

Ellen Labes: [16:06](#)

We had Humanist Reform, Conservative Orthodox women, all of whom participated. It was always held in a congregational building, not at Federation building. There was always a brief Federation message, which I would give about what Federation is and why it's so important to support it, and then it became a day of learning, and it was outstanding. Absolutely outstanding, and I think we had that for a good half dozen years. This was before Sage and before Melton, and it was a very special day for the women of our community.

Robbie Terman: [16:53](#)

Why do you think that Women's Philanthropy has veered away from doing that kind of educational programming?

Ellen Labes: [17:00](#) I don't know. I don't have a specific reason for it. Perhaps the powers that be felt that because Melton is so strong here, I'm proud to say I'm a Melton graduate of the second class of 2002, perhaps they felt that that was sufficient, but I would love to see the Women's Day of Learning reinstated at some time, because not only was it a day of learning, but it was a day of coming together, which I believe is so important, because women love to be part of the community and to reach out to other women who may not know that much about Federation, and this a wonderful way of learning and experiencing. So maybe someday it'll come back.

Robbie Terman: [17:58](#) I want to go back to you and Women's Philanthropy back into the 70s, because at that time the women were still being often referred to, especially in the early 70s, "Mrs. Jim Labes," instead of Ellen Labes.

Ellen Labes: [18:16](#) Correct.

Robbie Terman: [18:16](#) And it wasn't until the mid to late 70s that it changed, and women's first names started to appear on documents. Do you remember any discussion during that time, how that came to be, how they decided to start using women's first names?

Ellen Labes: [18:35](#) Personally, I don't remember. No. I don't know if it was part of the Women's Movement that became very strong even before the 70s. I'm thinking of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, and did they have anything to do with it? I'm not sure, but it's definitely a change, and I think it's a change for the better. We are our own individuals. It's good to be known by our names. Many women today choose not to be married, and so they are Ms. or Miss their names, and I think it ... I don't know how it started here, but I think it was the right thing to do.

Robbie Terman: [19:27](#) One of the founding principles on Women's Philanthropy was women giving a gift separately from their husbands.

Ellen Labes: [19:33](#) Absolutely.

Robbie Terman: [19:34](#) Do you feel that's important still today?

Ellen Labes: [19:36](#) Absolutely. We are individuals. We make decisions for our families, for ourselves. I think it's important that we make our own gift.

Robbie Terman: [19:47](#) Even before you were president, you were campaign chair.

Ellen Labes: [19:51](#) I never was.

Robbie Terman: [19:51](#) Oh, you were not campaign chair? Can you talk a little bit then about that path to the presidency? Because often it goes through campaign chair and then president, but you skipped that.

Ellen Labes: [20:03](#) As far as I know, there were only four of us who did not take that particular path. In other words, we were not campaign chairs, but we were vice presidents of various educational programs and we became president. I know that it's usually the case where the campaign chair is asked to be president, and 99% of the time accepts.

Robbie Terman: [20:35](#) Can you talk about your duties as president?

Ellen Labes: [20:38](#) It was wonderful. I had wonderful coworkers. I had the privilege of meeting intelligent, bright, friendly women. We had excellent staff who couldn't do enough for us. To me, it was two wonderful years of fun.

Robbie Terman: [21:02](#) And can you tell us some of your mentors in Women's Philanthropy or people you worked very closely with?

Ellen Labes: [21:11](#) Well, there were so many. All of the presidents, beginning when I became active, as I mentioned, with Tillie Brandwine, all went out of their way, I think, to work with the women who were just starting to become active. And there was always a feeling, I felt, of comradery, and there are too many people to name because I was influenced by so many intelligent, wonderful women. We have an outstanding community here, and we're very blessed to have such a wonderful community.

Robbie Terman: [21:53](#) Can you talk about some of the things you learned from other people in women's philanthropy? Or a lesson that you learned?

Ellen Labes: [22:02](#) I learned to be patient. I learned to be diplomatic. I learned to try to make everybody feel comfortable. I tried to be, when I did solicit, and I have always been part of the fundraising arm, to do it in a way to make the donor comfortable. I think women have a special technique that men often do not have. Many of them use the hard sell, and for a new donor that can be very uncomfortable, so I learned how to make my prospects, I hope I learned how to make them feel very comfortable and to make them feel very good about supporting campaign.



Robbie Terman: [23:00](#) Do you remember any of the staff that you actually closely with?

Ellen Labes: [23:05](#) Michelle Passon was director of Women's Division, than Department, and now Philanthropy, at that time, and Bertha Chomsky was associate director, and Esther Weitzman was one of the secretaries, and they were just wonderful to work with and I appreciated all of their assistance. That's what made being, for me, president, so delightful.

Robbie Terman: [23:38](#) Were you affected by the transition of staff or lay leadership during your presidency?

Ellen Labes: [23:46](#) No. Everything went smoothly, as far as I was concerned. Everything seemed to go beautifully.

Robbie Terman: [23:54](#) You talked about some of your successes during your presidency. What are some of the challenges you faced?

Ellen Labes: [24:04](#) I think the biggest challenge was convincing those who were unfamiliar with Federation that we welcomed everybody. Some people felt, as I had mentioned earlier, than it was a very elitist organization, which we certainly aren't. And it was my responsibility and my privilege, I think, to let the women of our community know that we welcomed everybody, that we needed everybody's support. And I hoped that they responded to that in a way that was helpful for them and also helpful financially for our Federation. And I think that that was probably the biggest challenge, to let the community know that we are here for everybody.

Robbie Terman: [25:01](#) Do you have an example of how you did that?

Ellen Labes: [25:04](#) I just tried to be a very welcoming, to be non-judgmental. When I did make campaign calls, I always thanked the woman for her gift. I always asked if this was a good time to speak with them, to tell them why I was calling, and to give them one or two examples of what their donation, either pledge could do, and I can't remember anything specific, but it was a time of my feeling very good about what I was doing.

Robbie Terman: [25:47](#) We went from face to face, door to door kind of solicitation to phones, and now it's getting even harder to reach people by phone. Do you think that contact, that actual personal contact is an important part of the solicitation process?

Ellen Labes: [26:04](#) I know some people like to do that, and I did it sometimes. It's very hard to get people at home when you call, and ask if you can meet with them and why. They're always ... Not always, but very often there are excuses they make. So I think that's when the phone calls became more expeditious, because people didn't want to be solicited face to face. It's a problem we still face, particularly as phones become more sophisticated and you see who's calling you. You may not want to answer, but I don't know any other way to reach potential donors, and if somebody could come up with a solution, it would be wonderful.

Robbie Terman: [27:04](#) Were you part of G Day, or was that before your time? The Giving Day, where they went out to all the homes door to door?

Ellen Labes: [27:10](#) That was even before my time.

Robbie Terman: [27:11](#) Before your time?

Ellen Labes: [27:12](#) Yes.

Robbie Terman: [27:12](#) You talked about some of the things you learned from other people in Women's Philanthropy. Can you talk about what skills you think make a good leader?

Ellen Labes: [27:22](#) Patience is probably the most important. The willingness to say you've made a mistake and you will rectify it. The willingness to listen to other people, not to jump to conclusions about anybody or anything, and I think to be a diplomat is the most important, and for some people it's probably very difficult.

Robbie Terman: [27:57](#) Why is Women's Philanthropy important to you?

Ellen Labes: [28:01](#) Because as individuals, as members of the community, I feel it's our privilege as well as our responsibility to support our community. And if we can do it financially as well as giving of ourselves, I think it's tremendously important, particularly as one learns about the community and everything that our federated community does. It's absolutely amazing, and what better way to practice tikkun olam then to be part of this wonderful organization?

Robbie Terman: [28:43](#) Are you involved in any other organization, Jewish or otherwise?

Ellen Labes: [28:46](#) Yes.

Robbie Terman: [28:48](#) Which ones?

Ellen Labes: [28:49](#) I'm very involved with National Council of Jewish Women, Michigan. I belong to two sisterhoods, and I'm involved as a volunteer with JARC, and of course still Women's Philanthropy, which will always be my first love.

Robbie Terman: [29:09](#) And how do you feel that Women's Philanthropy interacts with the general campaign?

Ellen Labes: [29:16](#) I think we do quite well actually, and fortunately we've had a few women precedents of our Federation, as we currently do, and I think it's important for women to take a leadership role, which we've done, and I think that we lead by example, and many of us have encouraged our partners or our spouses to also participate in, and our children as well. So very often it becomes multigenerational.

Robbie Terman: [29:57](#) And do you feel that the Women's Philanthropy and their campaign is valued within Federation and its general campaign?

Ellen Labes: [30:03](#) Absolutely.

Robbie Terman: [30:06](#) How has Women's Philanthropy changed throughout your involvements?

Ellen Labes: [30:11](#) Well, I think there are less education programs, which I referred to in this interview. And again, I think education is so important for the community, and particularly for the women here, and that is probably to me the most important change, and I'm sure there are valid reasons why there aren't as many programs as there used to be, but I would hope that perhaps in the near future there would be more programs available to the women of our community that would be educational.

Robbie Terman: [30:59](#) And we talked about this a little bit. Why do you think that it's important that women have their own campaign?

Ellen Labes: [31:06](#) Because we are individuals. We are independent in many ways. I think it behooves us to support our community, and I can't think of a better way to do that than to financially support it as well as being a volunteer at an agency here at Federation. Whatever we can do to strengthen our community. We know it's smaller than it used to be, and so all of us, I think, have to pitch in and do what we can to ensure that this wonderful community will stay viable and vibrant for our grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Robbie Terman: [31:51](#) And why is philanthropy in general important to you?

Ellen Labes: [31:56](#) Because I think it's our moral Jewish obligation to support those who need our support, and it just makes me feel good, and I would hope it makes everybody feel good. If we do practice tikkun olam, what better way than through our Federation?

Robbie Terman: [32:17](#) What hopes do you have for Women's Philanthropy going forward?

Ellen Labes: [32:21](#) I would hope that more and more people would support it. More and more women obviously would support it, and will continue to support it in any way possible so that it would reach the entire community. And I know that that's been a thought not only of mine, but for years. We know we have to reach out, and hopefully in the near future we will succeed in building our numbers.

Robbie Terman: [32:52](#) Do you have any ideas on how you can reach out to that next generation?

Ellen Labes: [32:57](#) I think by offering them programs of their interest, which is certainly different than what my generation was interested in, or is interested in, and I know that takes dollars to do, but as the saying goes, sometimes you have to spend money to make money.

Robbie Terman: [33:18](#) And is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to add about your time in Women's Philanthropy?

Ellen Labes: [33:25](#) I think we've pretty much covered everything. It has been a wonderful ride, which I hope to continue for many years, and it's been my privilege to work with and meet so many outstanding women, and men too, but the women of our community are amazing, and I think we have a national reputation of being one of the strongest Federations in the country. Although we're certainly not the largest Jewish community, we're probably the best.

Robbie Terman: [34:02](#) Well, thank you so much, Ellen, for talking with me today about Women's Philanthropy, and thank you for all the work you've done.

Ellen Labes: [34:09](#) Thank you, Robbie. It's been my pleasure.