Florence Schornstein Transcript

Abe Louise Young: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today is January 11th, 2005, and this is an interview of Florence Schornstein. And Florence, will you spell your last name for me?

Florence Schornstein: Yes, it's S-C-H-O-R-N-S-T-E-I-N.

AY: Thank you. The interview is conducted by Abe Louise Young at Florence Schornstein's home in New Orleans, Louisiana. This is disk one of one. All right, so can you tell me briefly about your childhood?

FS: Well, I'm an only child. I was raised, though, in a household of several adults. I was raised in the home with my parents, my aunt and uncle, my grandmother, and until I was ten, my first cousin, who, being ten years older, married when she was 20 and left the household. She and I are the closest things that either of us have to sisters. So, I was raised in this very loving and large home, where much was expected, but there was a lot of gratification as well. We were not a wealthy family by any stretch, but I never wanted for anything. I was given a lot of opportunity and advantage. I went away to camp, I went to private school, of course, I went to college. My family was not a religious family. We were all raised here in New Orleans, going back for a couple of generations. My grandmother had been raised in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, and actually was educated at a convent, which a lot of the Jewish children were in those days.

AY: Why was that?

FS: I don't know if there was a public school system back then, and particularly in a small river town like Donaldsonville, it may have been the school for girls. We were very, very -- as a family, very, very mindful and conscious of our Judaism. My family would

have not taken it well had my cousin or I not married a Jewish man. We went to temple on the High Holy Days. My grandfather, who had died before I was born, had been on the board of our temple. So there was that feeling, but there was no real observance. And whatever I learned about Judaism, I pretty much learned at Sunday School, which was rather sparse. The one thing that I did learn, though, was because we were in a classic Reform congregation, Temple Sinai, the one thing that I did learn was the concept of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, that we're here to make it better. And that has stuck with me always. *[ed: Florence also attended Religious School and was confirmed at Temple Sinai.]*

AY: And did you absorb that from time in the synagogue or from the views of your relatives, or where do you think the Tikkun Olam idea first really entered you?

FS: I think it did come from the temple and the rabbi, at that time, Rabbi Feibelman, who taught us that. My family, my mother was on a couple of boards, but my family really was not involved in the Jewish community in an organized sense.

AY: Maybe you can tell me a little bit about your family, and your mother and father.

FS: Well, of course, they adored me. (laughter) And my father traveled on the road, so he was gone a great deal. My mother was pretty much in charge of my upbringing and wanted the best for me always.

AY: What did you want to be when you were a child?

FS: I don't remember having any ambition to be anything. During the years that I grew up, there weren't too many women role models who were *being* something. People were getting married, having children, becoming volunteers, which is what I did.

AY: When and where were you born?

FS: I was born here in New Orleans at Touro Infirmary, where I later became, as an adult, very, very involved. I was the first and so far only woman to Chair the Board of Governors of Touro Infirmary, and during my tenure, I was convinced to move from governance to management to become Executive Director of the Touro Infirmary Foundation, which I had helped to found as a Touro volunteer. So I did that, I gave up the Board chairship and moved over to become the Executive Director of the Foundation and did that for five years. So, that's the hospital I was born in, where all my children were born, where my husband was born, where my mother was born. (laughter)

AY: Really?

FS: Yeah. Actually, no, my mother was not born there, she was born at home.

AY: And what was your family's class status when you were growing up?

FS: Class status?

AY: Yeah, like relative wealth --

FS: There was no wealth. There was no wealth. We were comfortable, I think. My cousin and I, she's ten years older than I am, and we have interesting conversations about the comfort level in our family. She felt that we were not comfortable, but she was ten years older, so she was a Depression child. I came along toward the end of the Depression, and so I had advantages that she didn't have, and so I never felt the same way that she seems to feel about our upbringing, and it was ten years later. So it was like two different generations, really.

AY: What schools did you attend?

FS: Well, I started out in public school. And I was moved to private school for the fifth grade because I was a very, very short, little girl, and the public school kept wanting me

to skip a grade. And my mother said, “She can’t, she’s not big enough.” (laughter) So, they moved me over to Newman School in the fifth grade, and I stayed there until I graduated from high school.

AY: And where did you go to college?

FS: Newcomb College.

AY: Mm-hmm, the women’s --

FS: The women’s college of Tulane.

AY: OK. Were your parents active in their communities?

FS: No. No. My mother was on a couple of boards, I remember, but not as a leader, I mean, you know, she wasn’t president in anything. My cousin, who was really a role model for me all my life, did become very involved. She became President of the Council of Jewish Women, and ten years later, so did I.

AY: Can you tell me her name, and spell that for me?

FS: Her name is Julanne, J-U-L-A-N-N-E, and her last name is Isaacson.

AY: And you’ve been close since you were children?

FS: Yes, well, we became close *after* we were children. There is not a lot that a little girl has in common with her ten-year-old first cousin, but as I became a young adult, we became very close. And she’s always been a mentor and a role model for me.

AY: And what was your father’s occupation?

FS: My father was a traveling salesman.

AY: What did he sell?

FS: He sold mostly neckwear. He sold, at one time, belts and slacks. He traveled around mostly the South.

AY: So, did you spend most of your time with your mother?

FS: Yes. Mm-hmm.

AY: Did you feel that your parents had ambitions for you?

FS: Oh yes. Yes.

AY: And what were they?

FS: To be a star. To be the best. To get the best grades and to do the best things, and I don't think I disappointed them. (laughter)

AY: That's wonderful. And you're married?

FS: Yes.

AY: Can you tell me a little bit about when you got married, and who you got married to, and your children?

FS: Yes, I'd love to do that. I'm married to Richard Schornstein, who is also from New Orleans for several generations. Until he and I moved here five years ago, we both always lived within walking distance of the houses we were born in, and now we're not very far away, we could walk, I guess, if we wanted to. We've been married for almost 50 years, September will be 50 years, and we have three wonderful daughters, and they are all married now with their own families. One lives here and two live away. And of course, they have always been the center of our life, and their children are the center of our life. And I got some pictures reproduced in case they were of use to you, I just don't

have a picture of our whole family. The one that I had was from my granddaughter's bat mitzvah, and they wouldn't copy it because it was a professional photograph. I tried.

AY: So, maybe we can wait for these until the end, but that's wonderful.

FS: That's our family from, that's three years ago, and one of our granddaughters just had a bat mitzvah a couple of weeks ago, we don't have the pictures yet. But basically, that's the only family picture I have.

AY: It's a beautiful family.

FS: Thank you. I have a picture on the wall behind you that was taken on my mother's 90th birthday, but one of the children wasn't even born yet, so.

AY: In what ways did you[r] family identify as Jewish? You began telling me a little bit --

FS: You mean my family or my parents?

AY: Let's maybe start with your grandparents, if you know, and then to your parents, and then to you.

FS: Well, I didn't know my grandfather. My grandfather had emigrated from Germany and died the year before I was born, so I didn't know him at all. And I know that I have all of these Kiddush cups on this shelf that came from the family, and so there was identification, I just don't know to what extent or how. My grandmother, of course, grew up in this very small Jewish community in Donaldsonville, Louisiana. There was a Jewish community. This plate that I have on the wall, in the center is a picture of my grandmother, and the names around it are the names of beaus and other men who gave autographs to a photographer who came to Donaldsonville every year from Chicago, took the picture, charged each signatory with, I think, ten cents, to get their name on the plate. And then he'd go back to Chicago, and the next year when he came back he'd

bring the plate. And a lot of those names are Jewish, and they're names that are familiar to some of us to this day, because a lot of them must have ended up in New Orleans. So, there was a Jewish community, but to the extent that there was any observance, I don't know. I know that my great-grandparents are buried in a Jewish cemetery in Donaldsonville, so there was that. But I never heard any stories about observance. There were Seders, I remember hearing about that. We had Seders once in a while growing up, but not yearly, at our house. We had Hanukah candles, always a Christmas tree, and until I got married and left the family, an Easter egg hunt. So, it was the way that a lot of very Reform Jews were raised at the time.

AY: Why do think?

FS: Assimilation. Starting with the immigration, wanting to be American, and particularly I think during the World War II years, not wanting to be different. Now, that's not true of the Orthodox community, you know, but it was true of our community.

AY: And in your family in particular, how was Judaism observed or not observed?

FS: Well, it just really wasn't, just the way I've said.

AY: Where you were raised?

FS: We went to temple on the High Holy Days, we had an occasional Seder, we lit the Hanukah candles, but we observed these other Christian holidays.

AY: And who in your family was bar or bat mitzvahed?

FS: No one until my granddaughter. Now, I'm not sure that my father wasn't, and there's no one left for me to ask because I thought about that when Alison, my granddaughter, was bat mitzvahed. I gave a little talk at temple that she was the first in the family and that it was not an accident.

AY: Can you explain that a little more?

FS: We were brought up to be assimilationists. We were brought up in a very Reform temple, and when I was Alison's age, not even the boys in the temple had bar mitzvahs, much less the girls. And it just wasn't done, it wasn't considered to be done. But I think my father -- my father grew up in Pensacola, Florida, and I think he might have had a bar mitzvah, but I'm just not sure.

AY: How has your relationship to Judaism changed over time?

FS: Well, just totally. I still am a classical Reform Jew. Still belong to the same temple that we've belonged to for generations. Still believe that for me, the best expression of my Judaism is to make the world a better place. I am not very observant. My children are much more observant than I am, than we are, and we certainly participate with them to the greatest extent. But I think that becoming involved in Jewish organizations certainly sharpened my sense of the importance and the value of our Judaism. And going to Israel, of course, changes everyone.

AY: Tell me more about that.

FS: Well, the first time we went to Israel was in 1970, where I was chosen as one of two women in the United States to represent the National Council of Jewish Women at a three-week, international learning seminar in Israel. And it was a life-changing experience. We met Ben-Gurion, and Golda Meir was out of the country, or we would have met her. All of the important people in Israel came to us, where we did travel around the country, but they came to us. It was a small group of about 20 or 30 people, but it was a very important group, it was an *international* group. And that was really an incredible experience. Nothing was ever the same after that. I came home, got off the plane, and told my little girls, "No more Christmas trees, no more Easter rabbits." And that was the end of that.

AY: How did they react?

FS: They said, “Oh, she doesn’t mean it.” (laughter) But we did. But we did. And we’ve been back several times since, and I think the identity that we all have with the state of Israel is such a strengthening thing to our observance, to our Judaism, to our sense of who we are.

AY: Do you consider yourself Zionists?

FS: Yes. But not in the sense that we ourselves would move to Israel, and of course, it would kill us if any of our children did. (Laughter) My granddaughter wants to go this summer, and I keep saying, “Maybe next summer it’ll be better there.”

AY: More peaceful?

FS: Mm-hmm.

AY: So, you have hope for the resolution of the conflict?

FS: I do. I do.

AY: What are the particular challenges, I guess, of being Jewish in the South?

FS: Well, I think identity is a challenge because we’re a minority. I mean, you go to New York and you’re just one of millions of Jews, and you can probably, if you were not in the world of work, probably you could go through your whole life and just be surrounded by other Jews. In the South, you’re a minority, and so it’s a delicate balance of fitting into the community at large without sacrificing your Jewish identity. And there are lots of things in New Orleans that set us apart, I don’t know if you’re familiar with this, but the whole Mardi Gras scene doesn’t really permit Jewish participation. Now, everybody says, “Well, there’s a carnival club now for everybody,” and that is true, but the old line carnival clubs still are very restricted to Jews, and in some cases, Catholics, and

definitely African Americans. This is an issue only -- I mean, it's not because we care, it's that the people who are a part of them spend their whole life being groomed to be part of them, and so everything they do growing up and as grownups relates to maintaining that separateness.

AY: Have you experienced or witnessed discrimination in any other ways?

FS: I am aware that there is, to some extent, Black antisemitism, and I have a lot of African American friends, and we do not talk about the Middle East. It's just some things you just don't talk about because it would become a confrontation, I know that. The sympathies with African Americans are with the Palestinians.

AY: Had you --

FS: That's not necessarily antisemitism.

AY: Did you witness anything in the African American Civil Rights movement that seemed to you to be familiar or motivate you in terms of Jewish work?

FS: Well, it was sort of where I got my start.

AY: Oh, tell me more about that.

FS: I was very involved in the Civil Rights movement and became very dedicated to equal rights, and worked very closely, for the first time ever, with African American men and women, on an equal footing. First --

AY: How did you get involved? What drew you in?

FS: The Council of Jewish Women. I was an officer of our local section, and we had a very strong and active public affairs commitment, and studied legislation and got involved in community groups, and just became very active in keeping our schools open when

integration was the order of the day, and in lots of human rights organizations and gatherings that were designed to bring equal rights to everybody.

AY:Can y ou tell me more about keeping your schools open and integration?

FS: Well, we had an organization called Save Our Schools, because the Brown versus Education decision, of course, had come down in ’54, we are now ten years later, and our local judge has mandated that the New Orleans public schools be open to all, and it was a huge fight in the community, and it was a dangerous situation. We used to meet in the dark at night in somebody’s living room to do whatever we could to keep the schools open. I didn’t have any children in public school, my children went to private school, but it involved certainly encouraging those who did have children in public school to just keep the peace, to just let things move, take their natural course. There was a lot of violence here. It was not the violence that took place in Alabama or Mississippi, it wasn’t that kind of violence, but it was a scary thing for little Black children to be walked into an all-White public school. Interestingly, I just finished a book written by one of my daughter’s friends, who was one of the only White children in an all-Black school in Richmond, Virginia, and that was a terrible, terrible experience. Terrible.

AY: What else did the Council of Jewish Women do at that time?

FS: Well, we did a lot of testifying in Baton Rouge, our state legislature, and also before our city council in trying to get laws liberalized or overturned in some cases. We worked in coalition with others. But we spent a lot of time doing that, and we developed a -- (phone ringing) it’s my husband, Richard. Take your phones away, we’re on a recording here. We, where was I? (laughter) We... Oh, I’ve lost my train of thought.

AY: Let’s see, hold on.

FS: I’m trying to think where I was, about the Council of Jewish Women, and we --

AY: You were talking about going before the state legislature.

FS: We did, to change laws, and to liberalize laws, and to overturn laws where they were discriminatory.

AY: Is there any particular law that you remember working with that you felt passionate about?

FS: Well, voter registration would have been one of those. It was extremely difficult for Blacks to register to vote, and the process made it almost impossible if they went to the trouble to try, the questions were just daunting. And I had my own personal experience with that, because, at that time, you had to be 21 to be able to vote, and when I turned 21, Richard drove me down to the voter registration office to register. And he said, “You really need to practice this, you really need to think about this, because they have some tricky questions.” And I said, “Don’t be silly, I’m a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Newcomb College, I’m going to be able to answer these questions.” I flunked. Because one of the questions was, “Calculate your age in days, months, hours,” this, and I did it wrong, and that was the trick question. That was the trick question. So, we became, as a group in the Council of Jewish Women some years later, we became very active in opening up the voter rolls to everybody. And, of course, so did the League of Women Voters, and so did a lot of other groups, but it was an opportunity to do that. This is what I had started to say before, now, I’m remembering. The Council of Jewish Women, the local Council of Jewish Women started a preschool for disadvantaged children, which is the term we used at that time. And it was the precursor to Head Start. It was so successful that when Head Start was created by Lyndon Johnson as part of the Great Society effort, New Orleans was able to implement Head Start because we had demonstrated the success of such a program.

AY: And what was your program called?

FS: It was called Magic Land.

AY: And was it just for Jewish children?

FS: No, no, not at all. It was for disadvantaged children, primarily minority children. And this whole involvement that I had, which was over a period of years, I felt was very Jewish involvement.

AY: How so?

FS: I felt that this was a way to build a better world. I felt that I was expressing my Judaism by making life better for everybody else. And we did have some success, not all on our own, of course, we know that. But it was a great thing to be part of that. And I was exposed, through Council of Jewish Women, to the leaders of that time in the civil rights. Not Martin Luther King, but Whitney Young, Bobby Kennedy, and others, and it was just all so inspiring. And for young girls from the South, who had led very sheltered lives, it was quite an opportunity.

AY: Have there been specific challenges because you are a woman?

FS: Yes, there have been, and I think there probably still are, although I don't focus on that. But yes, there have been. I've done things in my later years that women had not traditionally been chosen to do, for example, I am still the only woman who has ever chaired the governing board of Touro Infirmary. I was the first, and I'm still the only.

AY: What qualities did you draw on to be able to manage that experience?

FS: Leadership. Leadership and administrative experience, not in terms of running the hospital, which wasn't my job, but in terms of managing other leaders. And, of course, I thought at the time, and I think I still think, men have traditionally been community leaders. They've been on boards, they've chaired boards. They've had staffs in their

businesses to do most of the work, and women come along, they have to do it all themselves usually. And it's a little bit harder, it's a little bit harder. I was the second woman to chair the board of the United Way here.

AY: The local United Way chapter?

FS: The local United Way. I went on to serve on the United Way of America board, and I was practically the only non-CEO on that board. I remember sitting there once in a freezing cold, it must have been January, and I was worried about would the planes take off, because we were going to leave after the meeting, and I turned to the man next to me and I said, "What time is your flight?" And he said, "Flo, it's any time I say so." He was the chairman of the board of Exxon. (laughter) And I said, "Oh, of course. Could you give me a lift?" (laughter) So, I have had a lot of experiences where I've either been the only woman or the only woman like me, who's made it to some of these places without having gotten there by virtue of a husband, or a father, or great wealth.

AY: If you had to choose one accomplishment that you've made on these many different boards and positions that you've served of the public, and what would you choose?

FS: Well, I became the Director of the city's Parks Department in 1982. And the Mayor at that time was a personal friend, and he was our first African-American mayor, and I had known him since those Civil Rights days. And he had served his first term, and he was running for a second term, and --

AY: What was his name?

FS: Dutch Morial, M-O-R-I-A-L. And when he ran for the second time, he was opposed by a very handsome, young, White candidate, and it seemed to be a racist entry into the race. Dutch had done a good job in his first four years. He was a difficult person, he became more so as he got older, but he deserved to be reelected, and I tried to help him get reelected and he was. And after he was reelected he said, "I'm going away for two

weeks, but when I come back, I want to talk to you, there's something I want you to do." And I thought, "He wants me to be on some committee or board." And so he called me in, and he said, "I want you to head up the city's Parks Department." I said, "No, no, no, you don't want me. I don't know anything about trees, I don't know anything about horticulture, you've got me mixed up. That's not what you want me to do." And he said, "Yes, it is. You will have expertise on your staff, you'll have landscape architects, you'll have foresters. What I need is somebody who knows this community and can mobilize it, because there'll never be enough money in the city budget to do our green spaces and our parks justice."

So, I took the job, and it was a very exciting opportunity for me because I got to combine in that job what I had learned in terms of managing people, which I had learned from the voluntary sector, and the mobilization of volunteers, which I had also brought with me from the voluntary sector. And I reorganized the workforce there, they were doing a terrible job. And I reorganized the workforce, and once I got that done and could easily demonstrate improvement, because when you're talking about the green space in New Orleans, it either looks good or it doesn't, just like that. I then created the Parkway Partners Program, and that was in 1982. And today, we have 13,000 volunteers in this city who are participating in what has become a galaxy of programs. We started out with Adopt-a-Median -- we call them neutral grounds, but Adopt-a-Median Program, where we said to people, "You've got this median in front of your business or your house. You're taking care of your lawn, your own grounds, can you cross the street and take care of that block? You can hire it out, you can do it yourself, we don't care. We will confect an agreement with you, and you will tell us what we can expect of you."

So we started with that, and we still have that, but we have this huge, vast array of programs now, where we have children, elementary children in public schools creating gardens on school grounds, and having that work coordinated with their math and science curriculum. We have over about 150 formerly vacant, overgrown lots that have

become community gardens. We've taught people how to market their produce. They go down to our green market every week and sell their produce. We have the largest community garden program in America that is not funded with public funds. None of our work has ever been included in the city budget. We raise our $450,000 a year budget every year, and I'm in charge of that.

AY: Still?

FS: Oh yes. I'm going out as President of the board next week, for the first time in all these years, I'm becoming President Emeritus, and I will still be in charge of raising the money. I have become a fundraiser. It's something that developed over the years, I didn't go to school to learn how to do that, but I'm a pretty good fundraiser. And so, I am the leader of the fundraising for Parkway Partners, raised a lot of money -- well, I'll tell you about that in a minute. So, I think that that Parkway Partners Program is probably the thing I'm proudest of. We have our own building now, we have a staff of four. The community knows we're here to stay, so they will support us, and --

AY: How do you see the difference (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

FS: Oh, it's very evident. It's very evident. We have a lot more beauty in the city. We have a lot of seasonal flowers because people pay to have them. We have saved thousands of trees on public property through our Save Our Trees Program. Through our Urban Tree Project, we plant new trees in marginal neighborhoods where trees make a difference both aesthetically and environmentally. We have two community gardens that are particularly interesting. One is to teach children how to grow, and harvest, and utilize what they grow, actually eat what they grow. And another is a program where a group of youngsters, led by a very visionary older gentleman, are growing peppers and making and bottling their own pepper sauce. And we're helping them market it.

AY: And what's that called?

FS: What is the sauce called? The garden? It's called God's Vineyard.

AY: God's Vineyard.

FS: Yeah.

AY: And is the program called God's Vineyard?

FS: Well, it's one of our community gardens. I have a bottle of their sauce, I forget what they call it. But it's very highly regarded, and -- it's called St. Thomas Hot Sauce, a product of God's Vineyard. Emeril is interested in it and has given us money from his foundation to keep them going. So, I mean, this is what this little challenge grew into.

AY: And was this volunteer work, or was this paid work?

FS: For whom?

AY: For the Parks and Parkways Department?

FS: Well, being the Director of the Parks Department was a paid job, and I was one of the city's department heads and on the mayor's cabinet. I served under three mayors. It is normally a political appointment in the sense that a mayor wants to make sure he's got a friend there. He doesn't want somebody he doesn't know or doesn't care for, or whatever. I got to stay, I think, because in some cases I had a bigger constituency than the mayor had in terms of my numbers of volunteers, and the reputation -- (noise) I don't know what that is, but it's not at my house, and I can't do anything about it -- the reputation that I have in the community.

AY: You know, I'm going to, let's see, I'm going to pause here.

(break in audio)

FS: When you asked me what is my proudest accomplishment? It would have to be that. But I'm really very proud about everything I've done because I think it's extraordinary for somebody like me, an English major in college, never thought about going to work, because you just didn't, has ended up doing so many of the things that I've done. That I became a department head, running a city department. I've become very involved politically in the community. Our current mayor invited me to be one of seven people on his transition team when he got appointed, when he got elected. And I'm now a member of his finance committee and his new appointee to our Sewage and Water Board, which is very powerful organization in the community.

AY: What is the secret to being able to mobilize so many people, get them on your side?

FS: Well, I think you have to have demonstrated your own value. That you develop a sense of trust. People look at you as someone who can get the job done, and who doesn't elaborate or create a lot of extraneous promises, or describe things in ways that can't materialize. I think trust. People, in terms of fundraising, people, I'm convinced, give to people. Now, they're not going to give to some ridiculous fly-by-night charity that some lovely person comes along with, but generally, people give to people, and I think if people trust you and know of your reputation as a good, solid person who gets things done, and who tells it like it is, then you have an opportunity for success. You have to tell the truth. And it's just been a developing thing through my life, beginning with the Council of Jewish Women. I give that organization all the credit in the world for helping me develop. When I was first married, well, I was still in college when I was first married, but after that one organization, all these organizations called to get you involved, because that's what women did. And one organization called and said, "We'd like for you to get involved with us, and we have a spot for you in our kitchen. We cook for our luncheons." I said, "No, I don't think so." I didn't cook at all that time, now I'm a really good cook. Another organization called and said, "We know that you're newly married, but if you could put 50 cents a week away in a jar, you could save up the dues." And I

said, “No, I don’t think so.” Council of Jewish Women called and said, “We want you on our board, and we want you to be our program chair.” I said, “Got me.” (laughter)

So, I started with them, and I was active in that organization and president at a very critical time in the country’s history, in the organization’s history, and in my own personal development. And I credit that organization with giving me my start, but I took it from there. And I’ve been extremely involved in this local community, and internationally as well. I’m part of an organization called the International Women’s Forum, I don’t know if you know of that group. It’s a by-invitation-only organization for women who are considered powerful in their field, whatever that field is -- they may be physicians, they may be scientists, they may be television personalities, like Jane Pauley was a member, and we have about 3,000 women worldwide. And I’m no longer an officer, but I’ve been an officer of the International Women’s Forum. And I’ve gone to London, and I met Margaret Thatcher.

AY: What are the goals of the Forum?

FS: It’s really a networking organization, very high level networking organization, for women to be in a setting where they’re comfortable with each other. For women in business, it’s a marvelous networking opportunity. And it’s a learning opportunity, because we have a foundation where we mentor younger women who are almost at the top, but they need some mentoring to get through that glass ceiling and get to the top. So we do that. And we are not an issues-related organization, because there would never be agreement on what that could be, especially in a worldwide organization, but we support women. We went to the Philippines, a small group of us, when Corazon Aquino was elected, the first woman president of the Philippines, and we met with her. And we’ve made these women honorary members of our organization.

AY: Can you briefly give me a rundown of the different organizations that you’ve been involved with in your life?

FS: Well, of course, the United Way has been a continuing commitment on my part. As I said, I was the chairman of the board here, I was on the board of the United Way of America for six years, and I have recently helped to found and am the vice-chair of the Women's Leadership Initiative of United Way.

AY: Can you tell me more about that?

FS: That is a group that exists in several communities in the country. It's for women who give a minimum gift of $1,000 a year, some communities it's more, that's what it is here, and who develop a focus and a program that is important to them. Here in New Orleans, early childhood development is our focus, and we're trying to get childcare centers nationally accredited, and we're looking at possible programs to create strong bonds between caregivers and children as a second endeavor. We have two events a year, we have one coming up where the Governor of Louisiana, who is a woman, is going to speak and share with us her plans for early childhood development in the state. And we have an annual event each year. And we have smaller events, I'm in charge of these events, we have smaller events. We're having a wine dinner coming up, and we do membership, and we have about 450 members. So I'm very involved in United Way still. I'm very involved with the Mayor of the city. As I told you, I was on his transition team and did headhunting for him when he was looking for his top people.

AY: What other kind of political work have you done?

FS: I have run for office. I ran for the New Orleans City Council in 1980. The city was not ready for a woman yet. I did not win, I lost by a handful of votes. I have supported candidates through the years, both local and nationally, and continue to do so. And I have been on the inside of city government since 1982, in one way or another.

AY: How do you explain your work to your children?

FS: Well, they have lived through it with me, so I don't really need to explain it, but they don't do it. They don't do it, I can tell you that. I've also been involved in every Jewish organization in the community. The JCC, the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Welfare Federation, I don't think I could name a Jewish organization that I haven't been involved in. And also other organizations like Family Service and some of the community organizations whose boards I have been on.

AY: Have you experienced any conflicts between your family responsibilities, as a mother and a wife, and your work?

FS: No, I have not. I have always thought that my work is an example to my children. And I've been very fortunate always in their growing up years, I was not working except, I was working as a volunteer -- I hate to say except, because it's not any less, but you have a little bit more flexibility in terms of how you allot your time. And I always had very good help in my house so that I was not doing housework, and cooking, and stuff. I always was able to delegate that. (laughter)

AY: You mean to domestic workers?

FS: Mm-hmm.

AY: And what is your husband's occupation?

FS: He has been in the whole financial world, life insurance, estate planning, business acquisitions and unacquisitions (laughter), mergers, that kind of thing. And he is partially retired, but you can see from the telephone that he's not really. And we have property in Florida that we go to all the time, and he's president of the association there. So, he keeps very busy. And we go back and forth, and actually, our place at the beach has become a real central factor in the lives of our children. It's a place where the family can gather, and it's become very, very meaningful to our children and their children, and so we value that a lot. Glad we have that.

AY: All the work that you've done in so many different arenas seems to challenge women's traditional roles in a lot of ways. Can you tell me anything about your thoughts on that or any particular moments when that became clear to you?

FS: I think it was more evident 30 years ago than it is today. My feeling today is that it's very -- women no longer really have the career that I've had. They may come to a time in life when they become involved, but they do not have that life experience that I have had, because, thanks to people like me, the world has opened up for them. I was very involved in the women's movement at the time that, you know, that it first began, and we certainly made strides. Women are still earning less hourly than men, there's still a lot of room for improvement, but by the time my children grew up, they could be anything they wanted to be. They weren't going to get married and stay home, and they weren't going to have domestic help like women of my generation in the South were able to have. They were going to go out and work.

One of my daughters got a law degree, one of them has an MBA, the other one never did too much work-wise, I mean, she always had some sort of a job, but it was never much. Both of my daughters, with their graduate degrees, gave up working when they had children, they were in a position where they didn't have to do it, and now when people say to me, "What do they do?" I say, "They drive. They drive their children around." And they are involved -- one of my daughters is very, very involved in her Judaism, and in a way that is different from my own expression of Judaism. And, of course, that is, aside from the fact that it's her direction, it's really the direction of a lot of younger people today, Jewish people, who really want to examine their Judaism, want to express it in ways that are different from the ways that their parents have.

AY: Can you tell me more about your participation in the women's movement?

FS: Well, I was involved in the issues that related to equity for women and opportunity for women, and the pro-choice movement as well. Still have a lot of concerns about that.

AY: Can you give me some specifics?

FS: Well, locally, we were very involved at the time in trying to get passage of the ERA. We always supported legislation or tried to even create, even get someone to introduce legislation that would provide more equity for women, financial equity, and equity of opportunity, wherever that existed. Supported women candidates, still do.

AY: How were you involved in the pro-choice movement?

FS: Strictly at the local level, although I support financially NARAL and some other groups. The National Council of Jewish Women is very involved in the pro-choice movement, so that's a good place to work through. And in terms of the selection of federal judges, we're very involved in that. When Robert Bork was being nominated for the Supreme Court, I led a group, about six New Orleanians and went to Washington and met with our Senator, Bennett Johnston at the time, who was, if we could change his mind, Robert Bork was not going to get appointed. And we changed his mind. That was very exciting.

AY: Who was the name of [the] person whose mind you changed?

FS: Senator J. Bennett Johnston. He was our Senator at the time. And it's getting harder because lines are getting blurred. But that's the way I've been able to act on convictions.

AY: You mentioned your cousin as a role model. Can you tell me more about her influence in your life and her work?

FS: Well, yes. She has been committed all her life -- she's a very brilliant woman -- and she has been committed all her life to excellence. And she was a star in school, and so I had to be one too. And luckily, I was able to be, because I don't know, this whole story might be different if I had failed. She became president of the Council of Jewish Women;

ten years later, *I* became president of the Council of Jewish Women. But her life took a different direction. She went to, because of her presidency and her involvement in the community, she went to the Tulane School of Social Work and became a social worker, and worked for years in the field, and became executive director of Jewish Family Service and was in that position for years.

AY: The national organization?

FS: No, the local. And she also experienced a divorce after about 30 years of marriage and had some life changes that sort of took her down a different path. She retired as Executive Director of the Jewish Family Service, I want to say, maybe ten years ago. And she had been working for years at that point. She said to me, “I don’t know what I’m going to do with myself, I’ve worked all these years, what in the world am I going to do?” I said, “Why don’t you do something you’ve never done before?” She said, “Like what?” I said, “Go be a docent at the museum.” She said, “I don’t know anything about art.” I said, “They will teach you.” Well, she took me up on it, she became a docent, she became president of the docents, she is still a docent, but in addition -- we call her Grandma Moses -- she has taken up painting. And that is how she spends her time now. She is a painter, she has done beautiful work. She called me last night to say, “I got into my art class at Loyola.” And I said, “Well, I knew you would.” She’s 80. And she is still so active, and so interested, and that is my real goal, to be like her when I’m 80 years old.

AY: Yes. All right. I just have a few more questions, because I know you have to go.

FS: Well, I have time. I mean --

AY: OK, your appointment is at 12:30?

FS: No, 1:00.

AY: Oh, OK, great. So we'll have to close by 12 --

FS: 1:30, actually.

AY: Oh wonderful, OK.

FS: Well, I have to pick somebody up for another meeting at 1:30, so I'm fine. What time is your next?

AY: Not until 4:30.

FS: Oh, well, we're both in good shape.

AY: Yeah. Can you tell me your birthday?

FS: Month, date, and year? Eight, eight, '34.

AY: What has been the greatest challenge for you, or the greatest challenges in your work in your lifetime?

FS: Hmm, gosh. Each new thing. (laughter) Each new thing is its own challenge. I don't know how to answer that.

AY: And it could be professional or personal.

FS: Well, I guess most important work I've ever done is raising three daughters. We're an extremely close family, and maintaining those ties and having strong ties with their children is a job in itself. (laughter) And a very important one to us. Professionally, hmm.

AY: Tell me more about the personal, about raising your daughters and what that has meant to you.

FS: Well, it's just meant everything. They are the center of our life. And we're just very, very close family. Very, very close to our daughters, to their children, to their husbands.

AY: How many grandchildren do you have?

FS: We have five. We have five. And we miss them when they're not here. And, you know, we try to get together as often as we can, but the older the kids get, the harder it is. So that's a challenge, I guess. But they are the center of my life. They are the center of our life. They are it. They are it. And as an only child, I was very, very close to my mother, and my mother died about, almost six years ago, three months shy of her 95th birthday. She died in the beauty parlor. I hope she knew that she died at the beauty parlor. I want to so be able to have her know that, because it was just, if she was going to go, it was a wonderful way to go. Of course, I don't think the people in the beauty parlor thought so, but. We were in New York and --

AY: She was getting her hair done?

FS: Mm-hmm. And it had become her big outing of the week, you know, to go to the beauty parlor. And the people there were her friends, she wasn't alone, and she wasn't lying on a bed of pain, or, you know. So --

AY: You said she was 95?

FS: She was about to be 95. She was about to be 95, and she and I were very, very close because I was it for her. She was very close to my daughters, also. The out-of-town girls called her constantly, the in-town daughter was over visiting her all the time. We've just been a very, very close family, and I feel that I've been the glue, really, for that. My husband was raised in a not very loving family and was not close even to his twin sister. But he's a very loving, caring man. We don't know how he got that way, because he was not raised that way. And so, the closeness that we have with our children is something real special for him.

AY: How did you meet and decide to marry him?

FS: One of my best friends got married, and she had dated Richard. And so I was in the wedding, and he was at the wedding, and that was where we met and started going out. We were talking about that the other day. He said, “How did all that happen?” And then we remembered.

AY: That’s wonderful.

FS: Yeah. I have a lot of very close friends here, who are the girls I grew up with, went all through school with, Newman, Newcomb, and life. (laughter) And we stick together pretty well.

AY: It’s hard since you’ve accomplished so much in so many different arenas to really know how to narrow it down to write your biography in 300 words.

FS: Yeah, yeah.

AY: So, I wonder, is there anything else that we haven’t talked about that you feel is important to be included?

FS: Well, I think, in terms of my activities, I think I’ve really covered the most important ones. I don’t know, do you have a copy of my bio, or? Yeah.

AY: I think we haven’t spoken that much about your work on the Touro Infirmary Foundation, I know that was a big part of your life. Any particular heights or achievements?

FS: Yeah, well, I raised a lot of money for the hospital.

AY: Any sort of number you could give me?

FS: The years I was there, I raised over a million dollars each year, which was considerably more than had been raised prior to my being there. I have become known as a really good fundraiser. It's really interesting. That started with the Council of Jewish Women, too. I was on the national board and became a national honorary vice president of the organization, which is a lifetime appointment. And when I was on the board, the national president called and said, "I want to ask you to chair our national giving committee." And I said, "Oh, you don't want me, I don't raise money, I don't know how." She said, "Oh yeah, you'll do just fine. I do know enough about you that if you take this assignment, you'll do well by it." So that was where I started with this fundraising. And I don't want to brag, because it's always a challenge, and it's never over. The thing about raising money for these organizations or these efforts, it's never done once and for all. It's an ongoing effort, and that really is a big challenge. I would have to say that raising money for whatever or whomever is got to be the biggest challenge for anybody because it's never done for once and for all.

AY: Is there any particular gift you remember or one sparkling moment between you and a donor, or when something really happened that you were working hard for, that you could give me as an example?

FS: Well, I think the biggest gift that I raised while I was at Touro was a $400,000 gift from a gentleman in the community, who has since passed away. He was very difficult, and people used to just cringe if they had to go and ask him for money, but I never felt that way because he was always very nice to me. (laughter) He hardly ever refused the contribution that I asked for, so. We were building some kind of center at the hospital, geriatric program that was going to be in a particular place of its own, and he gave the $400,000.

AY: How do you summon the chutzpah to just ask for $400,000?

FS: You believe in the cause. You believe that it's so important that this project get done, or this program get done. You also have to assess the giving ability and the giving history of the potential donor. It's not enough to say, "Oh, they have loads of money." They may or may not. But a lot of people who have loads of money aren't in the habit of giving it away, either. And so with Parkway Partners, we do a whole study of the giving patterns of these foundations and companies that we go to, try to ask for funds that are consistent with their giving. I mean, if you go and ask for $50,000 from some foundation that never gives a gift more than five, you're not going to get anything.

AY: And Touro Infirmary, what kind of a hospital is that?

FS: Touro Infirmary is a not-for-profit hospital. It's a full-service hospital, and it is over 150 years old. It was started by a man named Judah Touro, who was a great philanthropist, who created a small hospital down on the river, along the Mississippi here, to treat longshoremen or workers on the ships that were coming in, who couldn't get treated any other place. And, it became -- after he died, he left the hospital in his will, but he didn't leave any money for it. And the hospital was moved up to Prytania Street, where it still resides. It's very big now, of course, and it was originally a place where Jewish doctors could practice who were not allowed to practice in other local hospitals. That, of course, is no longer the case. But the hospital's mission is based on Jewish values, and it is governed by members of the Jewish community as well as some professionals at the hospital who may or may not be Jewish.

AY: When you say Jewish values, what do you mean?

FS: The need to take care of others. In the sense of a hospital, the need to provide good health care even for those who can't afford it. The quality of care that's important in a Jewish sense. And the lines get blurred as the years go by. And I'm not involved in Touro anymore. I retired from the position about three years ago. I still feel strongly toward the hospital, but I'm not involved anymore.

AY: What was the most intense time period in your life, when you were doing the most?

FS: Well, I think becoming director of the Parks Department became an all-consuming thing. I had never really had a position like that before. I had worked for about four and a half years in a city hall office for a member of the city council. That was the first job I ever had, and I was 40 years old when I took it. But I think becoming director of a city department was just a huge -- I was managing a tremendous workforce, and it was a workforce composed primarily of people with whom I would never have had much prior contact.

AY: Tell me.

FS: Well, laborers. People from a whole different walk of life, I was now their boss. And I did win them over, they were always very helpful and supportive, not that we didn't have to discipline people from time to time. But just the other day, I was coming into a busy intersection, and one of the -- now, I retired from that job in 1997 -- and I was coming into this intersection, and this big parkway truck was there. And they recognized me, and a man jumped out of the truck and waved, and stopped traffic to get me to pass. (laughter) So he was one of the old timers, I guess.

AY: That's wonderful.

FS: Yeah, yeah. And my successor there, who is somebody that I remain, she wasn't there when I was there, but she became the director about two years after I left. No, it was more recently than that. There were two directors between me and her. And she tells me that to this day, people call there and ask for me. And when she says, "Well, she's not here, she retired," they argue with her. They think I'm still running the Parks Department. So she's very good-natured about it, I'm happy to say, but my whole image in the community really is there, more than anywhere else. And I think my ongoing identity with Parkway Partners has had something to do with that. I'm hoping that the

new president of that board will be able to move the organization just a little bit more away from the department because there is some confusion over who does what.

AY: Wonderful. Anything else you would like to tell me?

FS: I think we've covered it. If Richard had been sitting here he'd probably say, "You didn't tell her about this, and you didn't tell her about that."

AY: Any words for other Jewish women after this, to Jewish, young women?

FS: Well, my message to young, Jewish women is to be active. In our society today, it seems to me that the younger people are so self-directed. They are not stepping outside of their own four walls to become involved with the community at large, the world at large. And I just wish that there was always a time and a place for these younger women to get outside of themselves. I know that their lifestyle is different. I know that they can't rely on somebody else to do just the household tasks to free them. I talked to one of my daughters this morning, she said, "I'm vacuuming again." And by the time she finishes cleaning her house, it's going to be time to go pick up her son from school. She is on the board of the JCC in her community. My children have always been involved in their children's schools, but I wish they just would all do something -- they and their counterparts -- would just step out and do something for a *stranger*. And my own personal opinion is that the most --

END PART ONE

FS: -- basic, and maybe the most meaningful thing that any of us could do would be to feed the hungry. That is not something I've done, and it's something I want to do. I feel that that meets the most basic need that a person has. Now, we give money to people on the street, and one of my granddaughters is so worried about all of these people that my daughter has started carrying snacks around in the car, and handing snacks out rather than money, which has been a good lesson for my granddaughter

who's 13. But, you know, my daughter in Atlanta has fed the hungry. She's cooked and taken food to shelters. And my grandson, her little boy, organized a group of four of his friends and went out and had a lemonade stand the other day for the tsunami victims, and raised $300 in two hours in Atlanta. And we're so proud of him because that's the kind of grassroots thing that you want to teach your children. And hopefully, that generation is going to maybe do a little bit more, but the young women today are very self-absorbed, it seems to me. And they're doing their exercises, and they're focusing too much on their children. (laughter)

AY: I'm interested in one last thing. I think it's unique, perhaps, to the South and to your generation, as we mentioned that you were able to have domestic help in the house. Can you talk more about that, the role that that played for you, what kind of domestic help it was?

FS: Well, the primary domestic help that I had when my children was growing up was a woman who actually lived in the house with us. And she would give them breakfast in the morning, she'd make their school lunches, she would be the babysitter, she lived with us. She had maybe two days a week off, but other than that, we would leave her in charge. When we went to Israel in 1970, she was in charge of my children. Now, my mother was the driver for them, because she didn't drive, but she was the decision maker.

AY: What was her name?

FS: Her name was Marie Becnel, B-E-C-N-E-L. And she was a very valuable member of our household and was like a second mother to the children. She left, well, she moved out and still worked for us for a couple of years, and then she left altogether. Today she's managing one of the big restaurants here in town.

AY: And was she an African American woman?

FS: Yes, uh-huh. And she came to me when she was 18. But I've always had help. And didn't have full-time help when they were little, but always had some help, maybe if it was just two or three days a week. And those would be the days that I could get out and do *my* thing, but I've had such tremendous support from Richard, and I think that's real key to my being able to do what I've done. He has been completely supportive and has always felt that I can do anything I want to do and do it well. And he will be there to support me. Now, he's not a domestic person, he doesn't cook, he doesn't clean -- well, he does a lot of chore kind of things, but I don't mean in the sense that I go off and do something and he's home washing and ironing or something like that. But he believes and has always believed that I and his daughters can do and be whatever we want. And he's had that attitude always, I mean, a lot of men have it today, but he had it 50 years ago.

AY: Do you consider him a feminist man?

FS: I do. I absolutely do. I absolutely do. And that's made a tremendous, tremendous difference in my life. Tremendous.

AY: What else are you grateful for?

FS: Good health. Good health on all of our parts. That can change in a minute, and then that changes everything. And I guess I'm grateful that I've stayed in New Orleans, because that is where our roots are, we're so known here. We can't go anywhere where we're not recognized. And you sort of take it for granted, but the anonymity of another community would just be very hard for us. You know, people move to where their children are, and they move to where the weather's different, and we could just never do that. Could never do that.

AY: What do you love about New Orleans?

FS: Well, I love everything about New Orleans. I think it's a wonderful city. It's a beautiful city, and I've helped to make it so, and that's a great source of pleasure and pride for me. I love --

(break in audio)

AY: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today's date is January 11th, 2005. This is an interview of Florence Schornstein, S-C-H-O-R-N-S-T-E-I-N, conducted by Abriel Louise Young, at Schornstein's home in New Orleans, Louisiana. Disk number two of two. So you can go ahead and tell me what you were saying.

FS: OK. [*Reading aloud for entire passage*] Who and how many will follow our mandate for Tikkun Olam, repair of the world? Judaism teaches that to save a single life is like saving the entire world. So, who will feed the hungry and perhaps save a life? I once heard a Shabbat prayer that expresses this. It is this: "God bless everybody's children, and mine too." Profoundly Jewish, it speaks to the need to think of others first, to reach beyond the boundaries of our own families, to try to make the world a better place while we're still in it. So taking action on behalf of others is a Jewish act, our answer to Hillel. "If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" Because for all of us at any age, now is always the time to attempt to repair the world through simple acts of loving kindness and social justice. And it is not too soon, and it is never too late to begin.

AY: OK, could you repeat what you just said to me?

FS: Sure. I often wonder who and how many will follow our mandate for Tikkun Olam, repair of the world. Judaism teaches that to save a single life is like saving the entire world. So who will feed the hungry and perhaps save a life? You know, I once heard a Shabbat prayer that expresses this. And it goes like this: "God bless everybody's

children, and mine too." This prayer is profoundly Jewish, because it speaks to the need to think of others first -- (phone ringing)

AY: OK, can you tell me again that wonderful thing that you were just saying?

FS: Oh, sure. I often wonder who and how many will follow our mandate for Tikkun Olam, repair of the world. Judaism teaches that to save a single life is like saving the entire world. So who will feed the hungry and perhaps save a life? You know, I once heard a Shabbat prayer that expresses this. And it's this: "God bless everybody's children, and mine too." Think about it. This is profoundly Jewish. It speaks to the need to think of others first, to reach beyond the boundaries of our own families to try to make the world a better place while we're still in it. So, really, taking action on behalf of others is a Jewish act, and it's our answer to Hillel. "If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" Because you see, for all of us at any age, now is always the time to attempt to repair the world through simple acts of loving kindness and justice. And it's not too soon, and it's never too late to begin.

END OF INTERVIEW