Betsy Shure Gross Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: It's July 31st, and I'm sitting here in a beautiful home in Brookline with Betsy Shure Gross, and the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. Let me make sure I can see this because I don't really like to wear these while I'm interviewing someone. Just to make sure that the microphone is in back.

Betsy Shure Gross: It's clicking?

JR: It's doing it. So maybe you can start by telling me where and when you were born and where you grew up.

BS: April 2nd, 1940, in New Haven, Connecticut.

JR: Oh, I'm from New Haven. I've read some article that you talked -- where you talked about playing in Edgewood Park.

BS: In Edgewood Park. Yeah. The [inaudible] because after we lived on Ellsworth Avenue until I was eleven, then we moved to Westville. Did you go to Sheraton?

JR: No, we moved there when I was in high school. I went to Hopkins, actually.

BS: Which was half a block from my house. We lived on Knollwood Drive. So we'd come out at Hopkins and go down the hill, not toward the parkway, but down toward the residential area. We lived a block away.

JR: My parents still live on Westwood Road.

BS: That's amazing. It's one of those things that brings up the comment, "Isn't it a small world?" So, I grew up in New Haven. Spent summers in Woodmont, Connecticut, at the beach. And just lived with my paternal grandmother, who I spoke of in that article as

well, because she was such a significant influence. She immigrated here as a very young woman and spent a fairly rough time as a young woman and as a young widow and raised four boys on her own. Had a very dear friend whose name was Rose Lender, and the apocryphal tale about Rose Lender was that she would own a bake shop, and one night she made something that turned out really, really hard. My grandmother said to her, “Rose, don’t throw it away. Someone will eat it.” And that was the birth of the bagel. But as I was thinking of the dinner that night and of the influences from my childhood, we certainly were not observant. We held holidays, but the line was always if someone asked if we were religious, one of my aunts or uncles or someone would say, “Yes, we get together for the holidays and eat.” So there was a sense of identity and solidarity, but there was no true observant practice. But I think that my grandmother’s ethic and her sense of justice clearly came from her background, the influence of the war, and from the sense of both isolation and identity.

JR: How did she communicate that to you?

BS: Her house was sort of the underground railroad. The message that if you were in trouble, or if you were hungry, or if you were a new immigrant, there was always room, and there was always food. In that grandmother’s house, there was always something cooking. It was not always identifiable. It had been boiled a few times. But the sense was that whether it was a cousin or a stranger, there was always food, and there was always a place to sleep. Whereas my maternal grandmother had come from Hungary as a very young girl, had been from a fairly wealthy family, and had none of the characteristics of my Grandma Dora. She was more likely to be on a train to New York to shop, whereas my Grandma Dora, I think, never wore anything but house dresses unless it was a wedding or a funeral. But she was an extraordinary woman.

JR: Do you have any siblings?

BS: I have a younger sister.

JR: And what were your parents doing in New Haven?

BS: My father was born in New Haven and had gone away to college. And then his father died, so he came back and took over the family business and brought his brothers in with him. He had gone to law school and had hoped to practice in New York, but just after he had taken his law boards, his dad died. They owned a firm called Shure Brothers Dry Cleaning, and they had lots of cousins in town who were the Shure Brothers and sort of traveled in the clan. In the ’40s and ’50s, we’d go out at night, after work, to this place called the Norton Spa. I guess it was the Jewish version of -- in New Haven -- of Locke-Ober, where they saved you a table. So would always know that at 10:30 at night on a weeknight, you would find the Shure brothers at their table at the Norton Spa.

JR: So you had a lot of family in the area?

BS: We had a lot of family. My father was very conscious of trying to keep his family together, clearly after his dad’s death. And my grandmother was the glue. But my paternal family was large and clannish, and fairly inclusive. So it was an interesting sense of family rather than religion. But clearly, it was a sense of both assimilation, particularly, I think, after the war. But isolation in terms of whether it was the -- whether it was Hebrew School or the country club, you were part of a community.

JR: Did your family belong to a synagogue?

BS: My grandfather on my mother’s side had founded the synagogue in Bridgeport, Connecticut. They continued to go to synagogue. My father’s younger brothers went to synagogue. My father had been schooled by his grandfather, who was apparently quite harsh and had really walked away from ritual and practice and was very impatient with any kind of dogma. When I was ten or eleven and was in Sunday School and then Sabbath School, my cousin who was a little bit older and not as smart as I was, was struggling to learn his trope for his bar mitzvah. I had been learning Hebrew along with

him and was sort of tutoring him, and then asked why I couldn't be bar mitzvahed. They explained to me that girls couldn't. I apparently wasn't polite to my Hebrew School teacher or my Sabbath Sunday School teacher, and they called my parents to school and explained that I obviously wasn't ready for this education and that I had to understand that girls couldn't do what boys could do. That was the end of my education. So they pulled me out, and I never went back.

JR: Wow. You said that your family did celebrate holidays together. What kinds of things did you do?

BS: Ate. We ate. My grandmother would cook, and we would eat. And eat. There was a sense of -- and I think that too was from the war. There was always enough food. Because my mother's mother's family was lost in Hungary, and for years, she continued to send packages to her brother and her cousins, which, of course, were never received because they had been annihilated. So, there was always a sense that the children were not going to starve and the old joke about, "You have to eat this because the children in Europe are starving." You would suggest that if they wanted this, they could have it. But we definitely belonged to the clean-plate club because the children in Europe were starving.

JR: What did you know about the war, growing up?

BS: Maybe too much. One of my father's college roommates was part of the Nuremberg legal staff and sent photographs from the Nuremberg trials. For whatever reason, my dad showed them to me and to my cousins, and they haunted me. I remember not only the refugees coming to my grandmother's kitchen, but I remember seeing black and white glossies of the camps and of what the armed forces found. And it haunted me. I think that's part of the sense of justice, is making sure that that kind of prejudice and destruction wasn't part of our family or our lives. My dad was the first chair of the Human Rights Council in New Haven. So that in terms of the rejection of dogma certainly was

channeled into another way of activism.

JR: Did your family talk about Zionism or Israel at all?

BS: Not really. I mean, I was certainly aware of the founding. But there wasn't the sense of connection that certainly there were in other families.

JR: Do you see your own work as being connected to those kind of Jewish justice values?

BS: I do, and I said that that night. But it seems to me that the activism and the commitment to environmental justice and social justice come from the values in my family and the awareness of the constant threat of prejudice that I didn't really understand until I was older. I went to school in the South at a place called Sweet Briar. And really wasn't aware until I got there, but there were very few Jewish women there and the men at the University of Virginia and Virginia Military Institute had never met a Jewish woman. So, there was a certain sense of – number one, why not? And number two, the freshmen were all assigned to a family in the local area, and I was assigned to a very lovely woman named Leila Rosenthal, who invited me for holidays. I was probably more aware, then, of the willingness to make connections because of your background and identity than I'd ever been before.

JR: [inaudible] in your own family community and --

BS: Well, the community was, for the most part, Jewish.

JR: So what was that experience like for you, being in the South?

BS: I think I was so busy dating my husband, who was a student in Schenectady at the time. I spent very little time there, except during the week. I had really wonderful friends who have remained friends, and I'm their children's godmother, and they're my children's

godmother. Actually the late ’50s and early ’60s – and there was so much interest in the Civil Rights Movement that religious things were just simply not an issue.

JR: Were you involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

BS: Just peripherally. I mean, the college was clearly all white women, and the women from the North and the East were obviously uncomfortable with the racial issues. So, we spent a lot of time talking about the potential for change there. Shortly after I left, a group of women did go to court and break the will of the founder to allow the college to integrate. But it was early.

JR: Was your family political? Did you talk about politics at the dinner table?

BS: They were political in terms of New Haven. And they were certainly aware of Ella Grasso and Abe Ribicoff and those folks in Connecticut. But certainly not on a national level.

JR: So, how did you become involved in community federation and environmental justice kind of issues?

BS: Gary and I were married after he finished at Union, and we were twenty-one.

JR: Did you know each other from New Haven?

BS: We knew each other from camp. We went to Camp Adventure in Ridgefield, Connecticut, together. We had known each other since we were seventeen. When he was at medical school, I was student teaching. The school in which I did my student teaching was the school in which I had been a grammar school student. It had changed because the neighborhood had changed. It was clearly, when I was there, a fairly homogenous school. And by 1961, it was quite racially mixed. It was very clear that there was a sense, in terms of the faculty, that there were some parents who were more

important than other parents. New Haven was changing., and we became involved with Planned Parenthood and reproductive freedom because in Connecticut, you couldn't buy a contraceptive until 1972. So the changes in the community, I think, and the pressures, both racial and in terms of the women's movement, were very clear to me. I think I had always been a feminist, but I didn't realize it because I thought I was just always in trouble. But there became a way to find a place in the community to work for change. Both at the local level, in terms of the schools, and in terms of reproductive rights. And then, it became clear to me that parks and open space were the places that both students, wives, and members of the community went for sanctuary, rest, and creation. And they were awful. They were really a mess. I went back to Edgewood Park because it was near where we were living as medical students, and it had become part of a mixed neighborhood. It was really suffering from not only a lack of maintenance that had to do with the park's budget and economics, but it was suffering from being in a changed neighborhood. It was just sort of instinctual to try and make the park better, as an adjunct to making the neighborhood better. It was a place that I had really loved and cared about, and it seemed important to be able to make it beautiful again and a gift to the neighborhood that had inherited it. So, I just got involved in open space that way. And then, when we left New Haven after Gary's residency and moved up here, I was taking courses at Simmons and walking along the Emerald Necklace. Then we had this dog that had six puppies, so we had begun to do more walking along the Emerald Necklace. It's only two blocks from the house. It was worse than the park in New Haven. It was just ghastly. I began to ask the neighbors about why they didn't do something at the park and discovered, of course, that they didn't have to, because they all had gorgeous backyards, or belonged to the country club, or had a second home. So I called the town hall to ask who owned the property, and they said, "Oh, that belongs to Boston." So, I called Boston and they said, "Oh, no, that belongs to Brookline." So, at the time, I was on the board of the Neighborhood Association, and said to a couple of the folks, "This is crazy. That's such a beautiful park. Why don't we just get down there and

clean it up?" They said, "Well, nobody ever mentioned it, but maybe that was a good idea." So, we went down one weekend, and just literally cleaned it up, and then thought to ourselves, "We're paying taxes. Why aren't we getting any services when the baseball diamonds and the football fields and other active recreational places are being well-taken care of?" So, we trotted off to talk to the selectman who said, "Well, nobody ever mentioned it before." Anyhow, it was a dangerous area. At that point, it was very clear that it was the squeaky wheel that got the grease. So we just started to go to meetings and said, "We really want it to be -- we want to return it to the neighborhood." They were fairly responsive. Nobody had ever pushed it before. For the most part, it just became part of the neighborhood's activities. The High Street Hill Neighborhood Association is quite old. I think it's the oldest in Brookline. It started in the late '40s, and always had a board of directors, and it met monthly. We just formed this subcommittee called the Friends of Leverett Pond, which is the part of Olmsted Park right at the base of the hill, and we started to do cleanups. Then we just did an arts day in the park and started to raise some money. About a year later, I got a call from someone who said that there was a group of people getting together in Buffalo, New York, and that they were all working on Olmsted parks, and we had discovered this was a park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and Frederick Law Olmsted's home and offices are only a quarter of a mile away. So, we'd gone over there to look at the plans, and they said, "You really need to come to Buffalo, because this woman from Buffalo, who is an Erie County legislator, had been using her WATS [Wide Area Telephone Service] line with two interns to call around the country to places where she had been told there were other Olmsted parks, like the gorgeous Olmsted parks in Buffalo, and she wanted to have a meeting in December in Buffalo. People said to her, "December in Buffalo?" She got a hold of a man named Dr. Charles Beveridge, who was the editor of the Olmsted Paper's Project at the Library of Congress, who got on the phone and started to call people that he knew. He knew a friend of mine in Boston, who called me and said, "I've heard you said you're not going, but you really need to go because this is a really interesting group of people, and you're

really part of a national connection -- the national concern about restoring historic landscapes, and you really ought to go." So, I went. It turned out that the people that were there were from Louisville, Seattle, Atlanta, New York, and San Francisco, and they were all dealing with exactly the same issues. They were learning that these extraordinarily, unusually designed landscapes by Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed Central Park and Prospect Park, were suffering from a syndrome, not only of deferred maintenance, but of the fact that after the Second World War, everyone was interested in active recreation, in swimming pools and skating rinks, and that these incredible tracts of open space were just either being gobbled up to make them into something else, or somebody was building schools in them, or people had no sense of the value of passive recreation. So, we formed the National Association for Olmsted Parks. As we were talking that weekend, we said, "What we really needed to do was have a national conference, and since the Olmsted house was being acquired by the National Park Service, why didn't we do it in Boston?" And I said I would do it because I had no idea what the hell I was talking about. I was a graduate student, right? So, I said, "We've done a pretty good job of organizing here, and if we're going to form this organization, I'll do the next conference." So, I came back here and talked to some friends, and there was a woman at town hall at the time who said, "You've only got half the issue. You're talking about restoring the environment and historic parks. But what you're forgetting is that, yes, there's been a national environmental movement starting with Earth Day, but there's also been a national preservation movement. What you're looking at are historic landscapes that have a cultural value, as well as an environmental value." She said, "What you really need to do is to take the environmentalists and the preservationists and shove them together, because they're on parallel tracks, and they've talked to one another." She made a list of organizations we needed to visit, and I made a list of organizations we needed to visit, and over a three or four-month period, we lined up eighty sponsors for the conference, borrowed their mailing lists, and did all the things you do when you know what you were doing. We just were sort of doing it by instinct. But we

got the mayor of Boston to give us Faneuil Hall, and Harvard Graduate School of Design to give us lecture space, and by the next spring, we had 450 people from twenty-seven different Olmsted cities, and we had a conference that had figured if we could get people to talk to each other [and] if we could get the park commissioners from all these cities to talk together and realize they weren't alone, that they all had these unique parks for their places, and if we could get the activists to talk together. And it worked. When the conference came together, we decided what we really needed was a Massachusetts branch. What we wanted to do, since Massachusetts is the place where there are more parks designed by Olmsted and his sons and their successor firms, was to see if we couldn't get some kind of designation for them as a unit. So, we went to the Historical Commission, and said, "You really need to do this." They said, "Well, we don't do that with parks. The National Park Service doesn't do that with parks." So we went to Washington and talked to the National Park Service, and slowly garnered this group of people together who realized that we were on to something. So, when we came back to Washington, we went to talk to the folks in the governor's office. We had some friends among the elected officials. The governor at the time was from Brookline. The lieutenant governor candidate was from Brookline. The director of communities and development was from Brookline. So, we said to them, "You've got a model right here in the Emerald Necklace. If we can restore this, we can restore anything in the nation." And they said, "Well, you just can't do just Boston, Brookline. If you want it to pass through the legislature, you have to do a few more parks and a few more cities." So we sat down, and we figured out where the chair of Senate Ways and Means and chair of House Ways and Means and developed a program, and had a piece of the Open Space Bond Bill, and created a thirty-two-million-dollar restoration program, which was the largest in the nation. So all of a sudden, from having said two years before, we really should clean up our local park, we were not only a part of a national movement, but we were the leaders of a national movement. It just sort of grew, like Topsy. The person who was running for lieutenant governor, who had been secretary of environmental affairs a few years before,

I had asked her to speak at the conference. And after the conference, we sat down to talk about it, and she said, “What are you going to do with this?” I said, “Damned if I know.” And she said, “Well, you know you might find it interesting to come into state government, bring your advocacy skills, and your organizing skills, and work from the inside, to see if you can’t take this program, and use the models of other programs, and really develop something that will become institutionalized.” So I did. I worked on the state’s Urban Heritage State Park Project, which was an initiative that Michael Dukakis had started in ’78, sort of before he got thrown out, and then revised in ’82. And the concept was if you could go into older communities, like Lowell, and Lawrence, and Holyoke, and Springfield, and Lynn, and Fall River, and New Bedford, and do some environmental restoration at the community’s core, and do some adaptive reuse of some of the historic structures instead of tearing them down, that you could recreate the core of the community, and bring people back into where their infrastructure already existed. So, the Urban Heritage Park Program was sort of a departure for the parks movement in state government, which had just been forest and parks. So, here was this urban environmental initiative, and I worked for a couple of years with that project, and then when Evelyn Murphy said, “If you can raise all of this money for parks and open space, how about raising it for me for my run for lieutenant governor?” I said, “I don’t know how to raise money for people. I only raise it for open space.” She said, “Well, I think that you might give it a try.” And so I agreed that I would do some house parties for her and discovered that, indeed, someone with her background – because she had been secretary for environmental affairs and then became secretary of economic affairs. So here was this once -- one more time, the connection between the environment and understanding the economy of a community and understanding if you could restore the center of a community, you could perhaps keep the sprawl from occurring and keep the urban open space from disappearing. So, I spent from 1979 to 1989, while I was doing a lot of the open space work, raising her money for her -- both runs for lieutenant governor. Then, in 1989, decided I had had enough of political fundraising, that I had

seen more than I wanted to see and knew more than I wanted to know about political fundraising, and decided that what I really wanted to do was spend all my time doing what we had come to call community preservation. I chaired the statewide preservation organization called Historic Massachusetts and spent a decade trying to convince people at the advocacy level, that this concept of community preservation was a combination of the environmental preservation and economic justice. Then, a good friend who I had known in the legislature was appointed Secretary of Environmental Affairs a couple of years ago. He asked if I would like to come back into government with him as his special assistant for community preservation, and that was just too good to miss. But it seems to me, as I look back over the last thirty years – actually, it's almost forty. But it's always been the sense of fairness and the equitable distribution of resources that drives me, and that the environment is the place. Because I have a sense that if we don't protect it and we lose it, we will have chaos.

JR: Well, it's a real interesting combination of needs, that it's, I think, really important and very powerful to bring all those things together.

BS: Yeah, it was fascinating. The night of the dinner when the -- I can't remember the name of the woman who introduced us -- but when she said I was responsible for things being pretty, I thought, "That wasn't what I thought I was doing." But it was interesting because it's the -- the whole concept of preservation is soft. So, when you take the term community and add it to preservation, you get closer to what you're trying to do in terms of urban revitalization. I mean, there've been so many terms applied to it over the last thirty or forty years, and none of them, to my mind, have come as close as talking about community preservation because it's an attempt to be more inclusive. But it's a hard sell. You wouldn't think so, but it is. The Community Preservation Act that we passed at the state level last year, after a long, long initiative, includes affordable housing, and the environment and preservation. People get affordable housing. Trying to convince them that if you can use historic structures and use the technique of adaptive reuse for housing

in the community's core, that in itself is a way to stop sprawl because it protects the open space on which you're not going to build because you're building where you've already got the infrastructure. I'm still struggling with how to get people to hear that message. There was an extraordinary *Boston Globe* editorial the other day about the Community Preservation Act and its potential for passing in Boston, and it was called "Urban Elixir." It was so well-written. But even so, the focus is using the potential for the act to pass in Boston and the matching -- state matching funds. The focus is still affordable housing. Then sort of the tail at the end of it was, and of course, it will also protect urban open space from development. But it's a hard concept for people to grasp. That night at the dinner, I thought, "Now here's a really intelligent person who does media, and I'm presuming she read some of the background material, and it just – whew." And so you think, "How else to market this?" It's a really -- it's a challenge.

JR: I feel like on the academic level, people sometimes -- a lot of the reading I've read about the history of leisure and recreation and parks, and things that -- what people in Olmsted were doing were cultural influences and impacts of that. It makes some of those connections, but I guess on a political level, people haven't quite put all the pieces together in the same way. They're not part of the same conversation in a certain sense.

BS: I think that's true. I think it's like my friend saying the environmental movement is on this track, and the preservation movement is on this track. I think it's true that the idea of space in which you, quote, "don't do anything," except refresh your soul is still not as well understood as getting together to play baseball. Therefore there's an organized constituency for soccer, football, baseball, and all the other things. So sometimes when you -- the National Association for Olmsted Parks has what they call a squat team. When there's a community that either doesn't have a strong enough local group or is under threat that they're going to put yet another school in their park, we've very often gone to visit the community. You will go to either the track or the soccer field, or the baseball field, for the most part, have been newly restored, and they've got irrigation

systems. You'll sometimes see people out there, mostly men, in the morning, making sure that the white lines are clear and edges are cut. And then, maybe two blocks away, you go to visit this extraordinary cultural resource of just their design -- historically designed Olmsted park, or one of the folks who were trained by Olmsted, and it is the pits. We were in Newark one weekend and got there on a Thursday night. Friday morning, we went for a walk in Branch Brook Park in New Jersey, at Newark, which is just gorgeous. You would never think that you were in the middle of Newark. We all met at this lovely little pond. We were met by someone from the city and someone who's an advocate there. There was a real concern about the parks department's use of the space and their incursion into the park for maintenance sheds. They've got these ghastly metal buildings up. Saturday afternoon, when we got back there, we thought we were in the wrong place because we knew we had met by the pond. Between Friday and Saturday, they had filled the pond and capped it because what were they putting there? A maintenance building. And I thought, "Well, that is really disgraceful. What a horrible, dumb group of people." And you look at Boston College, where there is a reservoir, but a number of years ago, there were two reservoirs. Now there's one reservoir, and there's a football field with a giant stadium. You think, well, don't turn your nose up at Newark, honey, because it's happening in your own backyard. And it's a constant threat.

JR: What's been the greatest challenge for you? Maybe you just answered that, but, I'll give you a chance to answer that if that's not what [inaudible].

BS: Sustaining activism. I think people are responding with great energy to a threat and to an immediate problem-solving situation. You can get them to go out and clean a park, and hang up posters, and knock on doorbells, and get petition drives going, and then when you have created a partnership with the municipality, and you've achieved some level of funding, and rehabilitation or restoration is occurring in the park, people tend to think that they've achieved what they started to achieve, and then they can go back to the other things that challenge and drive them. So you get capital investment from a

human perspective, the capital investment of energy. Then you get the capital investment of funds and rehabilitation and restoration. And then, if you're not right on it and you continue to lobby and advocate for that space, then you're right back to the deferred maintenance game because the next group of people who need help at the municipal level are there with all that energy and concern and commitment, and you've gone on to something else. So I think the constant infusion of both keeping the original group with you and adding to it, so it doesn't ossify. It is really a constant issue. And also the education of volunteers, and then partnership between true volunteers and the professional cadre in most municipalities, and trying not to blame, but to build.

JR: I'm going to pause for a second because I'm noticing the battery is low, and I really don't want it to let run out. [Recording paused.] Let's see, where were we? What role would you say your work plays in how you define yourself?

BS: Interesting question. Well, it's hard to separate my advocacy from my paid work. I think that I think of myself as someone who works to change situations, so there's never really been a line between my advocacy and my paid work. I'm increasingly aware that other people have lines. Our phone sometimes rings at seven in the morning and eleven at night. And I think that I -- maybe more than most people -- bring myself and my colleagues and my family and my friends to everything I do. No one remains unscathed. Increasingly, when we get together in groups and people are introducing themselves, people say, "Well, Betsy dragged me to this, or Betsy introduced me to this." And it's really interesting that as you get older, you think, I really have had some influence. But I think I define myself by really wanting to be part of a group and making connections and triaging the need and the people who can address the need. My kids used to say, "Yeah, places like Grand Central Station." But now I realize is I've visited them. Their place is done like Grand Central Station. My son is a union organizer, and he's married to a woman, a battalion commander for the Sandinistas, and they've got four teenagers. That's his stepchildren, but still, his children. My daughter has Jason, who is her

stepson, and his younger brother, who is sixteen. And then she and her husband have a six-year-old. They are now off in Siberia, picking up a little girl in the Ural Mountains. As I look at these kids, I think, "The Grand Central Station syndrome clearly had some echo in their lives." So I just think that we've all -- Gary included -- have always been sort of rebels with a cause. When Gary was in medical school, and there was no -- it was illegal to teach contraception and illegal to distribute contraception. Gary and his colleagues went to Planned Parenthood at the risk of their medical educations and did what needed to be done. So, I'm not sure there is a line, and I think maybe my life defines my work, and my work is everything I do. Sometimes I think it's very nice to get the paycheck. But sometimes I have to pinch myself to realize that I'm now being paid to do exactly what I want to do.

JR: That's great. That's very lucky.

BS: It is.

JR: Was it ever difficult to balance between all the things you were doing in the community and your family?

BS: Yeah. I think medical school was extremely hard because I only had two years of college, and the choice was whose tuition was going to be paid, and obviously, it was Gary's tuition. And then, when he was in medical school, and we had a young family, he was really in medical school. I really had a rough time being so isolated. Most of the people we knew were students, and I was a young mother with no money whatsoever. I found it extremely difficult. But then it became an advantage because as I got involved in things, my hours were more like Gary's and there certainly was never an issue of, "You're spending too much time doing this or that." Whatever I wanted to do was fine. So, I think the opportunity to make my own life and make my own way, because his work required so much of him, was in disguise. It didn't feel good at the time. It was in disguise, a great advantage. Because nobody ever thought there was going to be dinner made. We

all made dinner, hither and yon. And so the independence, and the ability to say there's something or not in the refrigerator, was a real advantage at a time when women were trying to break out of a mold of being constrained by having to be in a certain place at a certain time.

JR: [inaudible], but I haven't heard that particular take on the medical schedule.

BS: Gary says it's not as bad as it used to be.

JR: I don't think it is quite as bad.

BS: As a medical student, he left the -- he was at Yale. And, of course, Yale had no exams. So, they would just say learn anatomy. He would leave the house at six in the morning and come back in at one or two. He was just literally never there. And then, he did a surgical internship. And they were on every other night and every other weekend for a year. Then he did an obstetrical residency, and they were on every other night and every other weekend. Then he did a year of nights. So the kids, actually -- we lived in student housing when he was a resident. Andrew was, I think, about two. He was toddling down this long backyard, following this man, saying, "Dada, dada, dada." The guy turned around. It was not, "Dada," but Andrew didn't know that. And that was hard. That was really tough. But then again, nbody told me what to do. I had eighteen hours a day, seventeen days a week to do anything I damn pleased.

JR: I'm not exactly sure how to phrase this question, but do you see the work that you've done as fitting into or -- and it could be both -- or challenging women's traditional kinds of work?

BS: Well, my father said I could do two things. He said I could be a teacher or a nurse. And that box was so small. I was so resentful of the idea that Gary got to go to medical school, and I went to teach. That it was very clear that I was not happy with the framework. And I remember reading *The Feminine Mystique* and thinking I am not crazy,

I am not alone, and realizing that I needed a different kind of structure and that life in New Haven wasn't going to do it.

JR: In your work, have you faced particular challenges as a woman?

BS: No, I've been really lucky. Particularly Brookline is so activist that there were women on the board of selectmen. Clearly, in the state government to which I was exposed when we first came here, there were so many local women doing such extraordinary things that I've always thought of myself as a feminist. I've always been concerned by equal pay for equal work and equal access. But, I wouldn't say that the glass ceiling, except for being, quote, "a medical wife," unquote, which I sort of pushed aside -- because I figured if they really asked me what I thought, I'd destroy Gary's medical career in a week. I just made my own path, and particularly I think in the environment, there are some really marvelous women, who've been smashing the glass ceiling for a long time. But I do remember going to a medical conference in New York, at the Waldorf Astoria with Gary, when he was -- I can't remember whether it was when he was a resident or when he was first here with the Beth Israel. We didn't usually have the money to go anywhere or do anything, but my mother had taken the children, and we were going to be in New York for the weekend. He goes to the counter to get these sign-in things, and he comes back with two badges. He puts his badge on, and he gives me my badge, and I look at it, and his badge says, "Dr. Gary Gross," and my badge says, "Mrs. Dr. Gary Gross." I look at the badge, and I looked at him, and I said, "I got to go get this changed." He said, "Wouldn't you rather go to Central Park for the day?" I said, "Yeah, I would." He said, "Why don't you do that, and I'll meet you later?" But the idea of being Mrs. Dr. Gary Gross did not appeal to me at all. I have always loved him, but I didn't want to be his appendage. I did, I think, go to one medical wives tea at Yale. I guess he must have been first year. I remember being properly dressed with my suit and my gloves and everything. And the wife of the dean, whose name Mrs. (LaPard?), was pouring in this gorgeous room with this huge sterling silver tea set. We were all sort of

standing around thinking, “What are we supposed to do now?” And this marvelous, huge room [inaudible]. It was pouring, and as she was pouring. She put her head down. And in her hat -- in this wonderful hat -- was a nest with birds in it. I thought, “Holy shit, I got to get out of here.” A couple of us looked at one another and thought, “Are we supposed to laugh? Is it funny? Isn’t it funny? Is it a test?” It was years before I realized it was her way of saying, “Well, I got to pour the goddamn team for the medical wives; I might as well enjoy it.” But it was very conservative. I just knew that it may have been the way he needed to be trained. But I didn’t fit the mold, and I knew I couldn’t break it, so I avoided it.

JR: What would you say has been the most rewarding thing for you in the work that you’ve done?

BS: Seeing all these degraded, ignored, really truly depredated public spaces, restored and populated again. It is the most extraordinary thing to be downtown and to see the Boston park rangers -- which I helped to create in the early ’80s -- I mean, look at them with their uniforms, and you look at them talking to all different kinds of people. You look at them in their cars, and you look at them on their horses, and you think, “Oh my God.” When they were doing in 19 -- late 1970s, early ’80s, in Central Park, people said, “Well you know, Central Park. It’s 59th St. and Fifth Avenue, and who’s got an address like that?” The fact that we’ve been able to replicate that urban open space survival in major cities around the country – in Chicago, Atlanta, Louisville, Newark, and Boston – it’s just extraordinary. Twenty years isn’t a very long time for a movement to be successful. It’s alive and well in all these places. You may not hear much about it, but if you go to these major cities where the word was in the ‘60s and even the ’70s, it’s not safe to go there, it is safe to go there. People who have choices go there. But people that don’t have choices go there. That seems to me to be a [inaudible].

JR: I have to say that the Emerald Necklace is my favorite part of living here.

BS: Is it?

JR: Yeah.

BS: Well, if you had seen it in -- when we moved here in ’65, and Liza was four, and I was pregnant with Andrew. Because of Edgewood Park, I knew of Franklin Park. I said to someone that I was going with a friend to Franklin Park, and she said, “Oh my God, you can’t go there.” I said, “Well, why not?” She said, “Well, because it’s dangerous. Murders happen there!’ I thought, “I don’t think so.” So, I went to Franklin Park, and there was this new group called the Franklin Park Coalition just beginning to work on this issue. They were trying to get the police to give them reports as to what the murder rate was in Franklin Park, as opposed to the murder rate in Back Bay. They were doing exactly what we had done in New Haven. Now, when you got to Franklin Park, nobody says to you it’s too dangerous to go there because we’ve taken back the park. It’s terrific.

JR: How would you say -- and you just sort of answered part of this, but if you want you can add to this -- how would you say that your contributions have affected others?

BS: Well, I have some developer friends who say I cost them a fortune. I think it’s drawn people to something they might not have done otherwise, whether it’s people in the community who belong to the Sierra Club, and the Trust Republic Land, and the Trustees of Reservations but had never done anything locally. Or it’s my colleagues who are scholars in the Olmsted tradition but who had never thought of themselves as connecting with community activists as part of their role. So I think it’s connecting people.

JR: And how would you say that your work has impacted you?

BS: Well, probably kept me from a padded cell somewhere. I need to be able to feel that I’m making a difference and that it’s possible to do something that matters.

JR: Have you had role models? You talked a little bit about your grandmother.

BS: I think she's the most significant influence. She's just had the capacity to survive and a determination to do things her way. She had a charge account with a cab company in town. And she always lived with one of her children. So she certainly didn't have that independence of space, but she was just a force in the community. If there were times of doubt, I didn't see them. But what I saw was the effect of someone saying there was always a place -- or you'll do this for me. I sort of get teased by friends who had no intention of doing some of the things they're doing. They'll say, "You'll do this for me." My grandmother used to -- we were complaining about something or saying somebody was doing something you couldn't do. She'd look, and say, "If you're going to be like them, who's going to be like you?" I have said that to so many people over time, and we laugh. But what I realize is it was this woman's way of saying you have to do it your own way, but you have to do it. There's a line that a very dear Catholic friend told me from the Talmud about the -- where do you come to lines from the Talmud? -- and she said – oh God, I wish I could remember. But she said, "You do not have to complete the task, but you are not free not to begin." Just the sense that you don't have the freedom not to try.

JR: Have you stayed involved in some of the women's movements [inaudible] talked about?

BSG: You bet you. You bet you. I haven't been marching to Washington as much as I would have liked to, but I'm a charter member of NOW [National Organization for Women], and I am a founding member of lots of organizations, like the Mass Women's Political Caucus. No matter whether there was food or not, I would send my mother the human rights campaign (form?). I really do feel strongly that if women and gays and lesbians can't feel safe, nobody is safe.

JR: What's your next project that you're looking at?

BSG: Well, actually, there's several. There's a ninety-two-million-dollar restoration of the Emerald Necklace, which is one of my projects. The surface restoration of the Central Artery after the taking down of the green beast. There is the development of the new Charles River Basin Parks, which is part of the Central Artery Mitigation. There are the Boston Harbor islands, which need restoration. So I have a nice, full urban plate.

JR: It is.

BSG: I added it up one day, and it came to something like three hundred million dollars. And I thought, "Oh, God." But it's challenging, and it's fun. The people in the executive office for Environmental Affairs are extraordinary. I have been in government and out of government, and I have watched when governors change, and the transitions occur, what happens sometimes when someone new comes in. The secretary, Bob (Green?), for whom I work, is the most extraordinary team builder I have ever seen. The group that is there now is just extraordinary. There's a sense of passionate commitment to the environment, but there's also a sense of camaraderie. It is really wonderful and very welcoming, and it's fun. Sometimes you can go into a work environment and think, "Jesus, the stress is awful." Well, the stress is awful, but the camaraderie and the sense of challenge is just -- for somebody like me, just wonderful – having made my mark as an advocate and being known to be a great pain in the ass to many officials. The apocryphal tale of when we went in was the governor said to the cabinet, "Well, Bob has good news and bad news. The good news is that Betsy Shure Gross is coming in with him. And the bad news is that Betsy Shure Gross is coming in with him." So, someone said to me, "Is Bob aware of the Emerald Necklace issues?" I said, "Oh, yeah." And someone else said, "You got to be kidding. She's making him crazy." But it's wonderful. It's fun.

JR: It's a good job to make people crazy.

BS: Absolutely. Absolutely. And the way they can keep from being made crazy is just to fund it faster and get it done, and then I will leave them alone.

[END OF INTERVIEW]