



Gertrude Webb Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: So let me just introduce us to the tape so that anyone who listens to it will know when it was made. Today is January 15, 2002. I am sitting here in Waltham with Gertrude Webb, and this interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. Great. So, usually, the way I start is by asking some questions about family background, so maybe you can begin by telling me a bit about your childhood, like where and when you were born and where you grew up.

Gertrude Webb: I am a Boston native. I was born in Dorchester and moved to Roxbury before I could remember. And interacted with children in my neighborhood as I went to the local public school. Life was fairly pleasant, although the night before we moved into the house that my father had bought to surprise my mother, a fire broke out and the firemen, to do their job right, had chopped a hole from the upstairs living room to the downstairs one. Well, at six years old, I thought that was heavenly and sat on the edge of that and kicked downstairs. My mother was in tears, of course, at the whole proposition. But we lived there until I was married. And that was many years later, actually, in 1941. I went from the local junior high school to Girls Latin School.

JR: My mother actually went there. My mother and her sisters.

GW: Oh. What year were they?

JR: My mother must have graduated in 1964, maybe. And her sisters in '66 and '69.

GW: I was there long before that. 1933 was the year in which I graduated. But I felt that the education I got at Girls Latin School was superior to what I got at college, believe it or not. Because the emphasis was on how do you think, why do you think that way, and how do you get to that conclusion, so that it became a way of life for me, really. I was



very grateful for the opportunity I had had there. Still have friends from that school, and we meet on occasion to share what is going on in our lives since then. I was graduated from the Teachers College of the City of Boston in '37 and was immediately assigned to a school in Hyde Park. I had never heard of Hyde Park before that because I was glued to Roxbury and had, many times, walked from home to Girls' Latin School. It was a lovely walk. I have a friend today who said I taught her all she knew on those walks as I would ask her questions and she would have to answer them.

JR: Can I interrupt you for one moment and just take a step back and ask you a little bit more about your family before you get to your teaching stuff?

GW: Sure.

JR: Were your parents born in Boston, or were they immigrants?

GW: My parents were born in what is now Lithuania, in Kovno and Vilna, respectively. I don't know which was born where, although I do have things that I got at the archives on my father in particular. My mother was three years old when her folks came here. And, unfortunately, while they were packing to leave, her mother somehow accidentally died, so that her older brother, who was fifteen, brought his siblings over. He was artistic and, in fact, did a painting that won a prize in Boston. I looked for a record of it in the attic of the public library but couldn't find it among all of the things they had there. He was also killed by the influenza, and my grandfather remarried. The children were unhappy, naturally, because they had just lost their mother. My mother's older sister married a gentleman named Julius Seltzer who became captain of the Minutemen in Lexington. His history is rather fascinating, but I don't have the time to go into that at this point.

JR: Did you have many relatives nearby as you were growing up?

GW: Well, I would go to Lexington every school vacation because we lived in the city, and that was country. I mean, they still had cows, and I dug potatoes and all of the rest.



So, it was heavenly to me, and I would go there all of the time. I had an older brother and an older sister and two younger brothers so our family was quite full. My older sister I admired tremendously. I mean, she was very talented and, in fact, when I was in grade school, she wrote all of my compositions for me. When I got to junior high school, she said, "That's it. I'm through. Your writing needs help." And I said, "How can I do that?" You know? But I did learn how. She married when I was maybe sixteen, and married a gentleman named David Brickman who owned a newspaper in Malden and rose in the political field along with the governors and all the rest that went with it. So their life was rather exciting. They had twin daughters and a son, and one of the twins after sophomore year at Simmons went to England and looked up old relatives, but she also found a gentleman who followed her back to the States and married her. So she went back to England to live, and that didn't go too well for her, so they came back here and, eventually, settled in Toronto. Very shortly after, he was stricken with cancer and died very quickly. Their older daughter, no, their younger daughter, is at Mass General and Harvard now, because she discovered the enzyme that would hold transplanted organs in the body and, to this day, she's chasing all over the world, but she's a wonderful young woman. Her sister is artistic and editor of a magazine in Paris. So, we bounce around from one to another. And their son stayed in Toronto.

JR: Were your parents very involved in the community when you were growing up?

GW: Not particularly. My dad was a worker. He was a florist in Boston, and he just was intent on feeding his family and clothing them, and my mother – in fact, my mother was the person to whom everybody in the family came with their troubles, and she was very good at soothing. My brother, my older brother, invented a machine that makes the plastic bags that are used to hold flowers when you purchase them. He first went into the flower business with my father but didn't find that satisfying. So he invented this machine, which is a real Rube Goldberg affair. Very simple. And only one person needs to monitor it. It's operating to this day out in Haverhill, Mass. My brother has passed on



about ten years ago, but that machine still makes bags, really, for all kinds of things that need to be covered with plastic. He also brought flowers back from Honolulu, Hawaii – from Holland, he brought the bulbs back. He was really an innovator, as my grandfather had been before him. My grandfather was a very religious Jew, student, a scholar -- he also invented a Shabbos clock and a way to take the garbage down from their third floor to the dumpster so that he wouldn't have to do it and, with pulleys, getting it right back up. I thought he was pretty special. But all of the men in my family seemed to have this inclination for invention. That was their way of solving whatever wasn't working correctly. To get back to my sister, she went to Roxbury Memorial High School and was in the business department because my father felt she ought to get out there and earn a living. She always felt cheated, and she was the one who discovered Girls' Latin School for me and insisted that I go there.

JR: She was looking out for you?

GW: Yes. And I was very grateful to her for that.

JR: Can I ask you some questions about your family's Jewish identity?

GW: Sure.

JR: How would you say –? Tell me a little bit about how you saw yourself Jewishly or what kinds of things you did, whether you went to synagogue and celebrated holidays.

GW: We lived, actually, two houses away from the synagogue on Brunswick Street in Roxbury. My father followed the rituals using tefillin and tallis every morning until he was probably seventy-five. And after my mother passed away, he just stopped it. I pleaded to go to Hebrew School. I was not allowed to go until I was ten because my brother had – well, he was always standing in the back of my class when I got in there Sunday because he caused trouble, and he didn't get along with the system and the teachers. I had a principal who would come in and say, “Nu, Gitele, it's time for another double



promotion.” So I made the six-year program in three and went to the Hebrew Teachers College. My mother, then – that was the year I was starting Girls’ Latin said, “Either you go to Girls’ Latin alone or Memorial and Hebrew College. You cannot do both. It's impossible,” and so forth. So, well, I dropped the Hebrew College at that point. I regretted it many times because it was an education that was not complete. I had picked it up again with my own son, who calls me at 6:30 every morning to do – today we did a portion of Love and Fear of God, really, and what there is in the human soul to make that candle go ahead. He is very upset at the moment because my granddaughter, my daughter's daughter, is the first one to marry out of the faith, and she lives in London.

Actually, my daughter married a Britisher. She was in the Peace Corps after she had been to Brandeis. When she got back, she wanted to find a cure or a way of life for the people she attended to as a Peace Corps member in Brazil. She was advised to go to London to a program that would address those needs. So she did, but she also came back with somebody who married her in our backyard, which has been the center of a few marriages.

JR: How many children do you have?

GW: I have six. I had a seventh, whom I lost at five months because of an open heart surgery. In those days, he was one of the first to have open heart surgery, and it supposedly worked, but he didn't survive. Anyway, the others are all adults, of course, and I have twenty-six grandchildren at the moment.

JR: Wow.

GW: And twenty great-grandchildren.

JR: Wow.



GW: Because I have a daughter who is in Israel, and her family is prolific. I had a new great-grandson this week.

JR: Mazel tov.

GW: To get back to my family, I think they all were Jewish, but they were not well informed in Jewish lore and literature. That, to me, seems a shame, but it was what was happening to people coming from Europe and making their way and assimilating as they all were. So, I would say that certainly they followed the usual rules, but they would drive on Shabbos and do things that were very American.

JR: But your parents had a kosher home?

GW: Yes.

JR: Is that what you mean by 'usuals'?

GW: Yes.

JR: Who in your family were bar mitzvahed?

GW: They all were.

JR: All of the boys were, but not the daughters.

GW: Yeah. Well actually, I spoke at the graduation from high school. That was a real expressive kind of thing, equivalent to a bat mitzvah. My daughter, who is in London, had the first bat mitzvah here in Waltham.

JR: Was your family Zionist? Did people ever go to Israel?

GW: Oh, boy, were they. My uncle was secretary of the Zionist Organization in New York, and my aunt started the charities in Boston back in 1903 or '04. I went with her



when I was sixteen on a business tour because she had a factory for furniture making, and she had a route that went through Pittsfield, up to New York, and through the mountains there. Well, that was my first experience with mountains, and also we spent a romantic weekend when her husband came up from New York to meet her. I discovered that this spot in northern New York was where they were meeting quite regularly because she was taking this tour. She also was afraid of nothing. She picked up one gentleman every few weeks when she took this route. Never concerned about being hurt. She was very inspirational to me. And I must say she also favored me and wherever she would go, she would send me some piece of clothing. Her taste was atrocious, and I hated them, but my mother said you have to call her and say thank you before you even try to put it on.

JR: Right. How would you say your relationship to Judaism has changed over time? How would you describe it now?

GW: Well, I am upset by my granddaughter's marrying out of the faith, so it's still there, and I, as I expressed before, felt I had missed a great deal by not going on at Hebrew Teachers. I'm trying to pick it up by interacting with my son, who is very much in the Chabad Lubavitch regime. His whole family is. They're doing all kinds of things in prisons and all over the world, setting up. And, of course, the rebbe is their inspiration. But anyway, he is very much like my grandfather was, studying every day and keeping his business going for a few hours, just enough to weather it. The daughter in Jerusalem also is Orthodox. Now, I did not keep a kosher home because my husband was not interested in it, and he liked oysters and clams and things of that sort, which I wouldn't have in the house. But when we would go out, he would get those things because he had no – I wouldn't say he didn't have respect for Judaism. He did have that. But he felt that a lot of the rules were unnecessary. Anyway, I keep two kitchens-- my daughter is coming from Israel next Tuesday. Well, whenever any of her children came across, I needed to have kosher food. So I have a kosher area here in the house – and the one



that is less kosher. I would say that I certainly never hid my Judaism, and I did a lot of things that people were surprised by when they discovered that I was Jewish. Because the name Webb was not one that would trigger it. And they were surprised and respectful, so that, to this day, I try not to speak on Shabbos at a conference.

Sometimes I've done it, but if it can be rearranged, I try to have that happen. So I would say, yes, I am Jewish, but I hear this granddaughter of mine who has been to South America, and the boy she is marrying is South American. We had a South American boy in our house many years ago for a year in an exchange program. I have been there a few times teaching, too, so I know a little bit about the country. And she just feels that she has been open to all peoples, and she loves this young man, and he has agreed that the children will be brought up Jewish -- whatever that means -- and she is very happy to go along with it. As my daughter said to me the other night, we brought our kids up to be very open to all people. Our generation and your generation will just have to accept it and live with it.

JR: Do you see your education activism as being related to Jewish values?

GW: Yes. Unwittingly. I really have incorporated a lot of the moral beliefs that were embedded in me into what I am currently doing because I write an article every week for the local and the Metro West areas. Just last week, actually, I wrote on why we have rules for an eleven-year-old boy. It was stimulated by my grandson up at Waterville Valley. They have a condo up there, and I was up there, too. He was in a class to improve his skiing, and he walked out of the class, and the teachers got very upset until they found him. He said, "I don't know why they were upset. I knew where I was all of the time." I asked him why he had done it. He said, "I saw something down there, and it looked interesting, and I wanted to see what it was." When I asked him about why people have rules, he could verbalize it beautifully, but apply it to himself, that was a different story. So that's the substance of the article that I wrote, and I'm waiting for my secretary to come in and revise it and send it to the paper. But it really speaks to a moral



issue of the rights that we have and the reasons that we have to have regulations and rules. So, I would say, yes, every day, without my even being aware of it, I incorporate something that is from the moral beliefs of Judaism.

JR: So, let's get back to your sort of path as an educator. You were saying you graduated from Teachers College.

GW: Right. I was one of two of the graduates in our class who were given an assignment for the year, which was stupendous. I also found that on December 1st, I got a pink slip (terminating my full-time employment) on account of education budget cuts because Mayor Tobin had decided he wanted to build a bridge, and all year-round assignments were destroyed. So, for the next two-and-a-half years, I taught every age level in the city and really got to know Boston and the reason that people were complaining about the fact that the schools in West Roxbury had proper tools and the schools in South Boston – ha-ha. I had a mother come into my sixth grade screaming, “My husband is going to kill me.” It was a shocker to me. “Help, help, help.” I got the principal to do something because it was beyond my – but it was a revelation of how people were living and what caused the whole upset in the bussing (a reference to desegregation in the 1970’s) and all of the rest that followed. Then, I got an assignment back in Roslindale teaching English and history at the junior high level. They called it junior high, then. By that time, my boyfriend (who later became my husband) had found out where I was teaching and used to come in every day after school and write on the blackboard. “Now, isn't it time to let those kids go?” He had lived in Hyde Park, and his mother had a friend whose daughter was in my class in Hyde Park. That kid told me, this was the first year I was teaching, that her mother's friend's son said he was going to marry you. So, it was a revelation to me, and I was not interested in marriage at the time. I was really interested in teaching. And in the Roslindale school, we had an open house one evening, and the next day the principal called me down. He told me that one of the mothers had come to him complaining because she had found out I was Jewish, and he



threw her out. But it was my first recognition – this was '37 – of the Nazis in Roslindale because it was prevalent there. We had been one evening to the Haufbrau (a bar/restaurant popular at the time), and we danced and sang and all the rest. But then we realized who was there and what their beliefs were. So, it was an awakening. When the war came along, my three brothers all were called to duty and it was the same year I was married. And my mother, in fact, didn't want to stay at home because her house had changed radically. So my mother would go into town to meet my father, and that's how they handled it. I had one brother who was really a musician. It was the same one who was the inventor. He joined the Navy band before he was called. My younger brother was at BU [Boston University] at the time, and my husband and I and our first infant went down to the Waltham train station to see those boys off because they had all joined – you would think they were going to a party – and they were to become officers when they were through. Well, somehow or other, the training my brother was supposed to get did not happen, and he became a private and was overseas and was hurt, not fatally, so he was hospitalized. We couldn't find him. The Red Cross came to the rescue. Anyway, after my brother returned, my husband urged my brother to go into law, which he did, later becoming a prominent lawyer in Boston.

JR: Was your husband a lawyer?

GW: Yes. And his father was a lawyer. And our daughter is a lawyer. So you do have an article about the three generations.

JR: Right. So how did you become interested in issues of learning disabilities and dyslexia?

GW: The very first year I was teaching, I had a young boy in my class, in my ninth grade, and I was teaching *The Merchant of Venice*, and his hand would go up when I would ask a question that was about an abstract belief, whomever the character was. He just had a handle on it, and everybody else I was sweating to get them to move from the concrete



up a little higher. But, in October, when I gave a quiz, I couldn't recognize what he had written. There was not a sentence, not a paragraph, no punctuation, and so I called him up, and I said, "Bill, tell me what happened when you took the test. Were you sick or something?" He said, "Oh, join the rest of them. My family has quit on me. My teachers all flunk me, so flunk me." I said, "I can't do that, because I know that you understand better than anybody else in the class, and I'm teaching for understanding. So, if you'll come after school every day, I don't know what I'll do, but we'll do something with language." That was the same year in which I was given a pink slip in December, so after I got through with that chapter of my teaching career, the whole business of why language was so deficient when thinking was so good, intrigued me. I started to look for people who knew something about language learning difficulties, and I found they were overseas, mostly – England, France, Germany, South Africa – and I made contact with all of these people. Well, I was married by that time and started, with my husband's help, the Massachusetts Association for Children with Learning Disabilities.

JR: Were you continuing to teach at this time?

GW: No. I took a twenty-year vacation, and I probably would have stayed at home and cooked because I loved what I was doing. But my husband pushed me out. He said, "You've got too much on the ball, and you've got to get out there and use it." At that point, Curry College was looking for somebody to teach some parents of kindergarteners and first graders who were having trouble in school. The parents had been inspired by a minister, and they were meeting in his church, and they now wanted a setting to establish a laboratory school. So, my husband said, "That's it. Go ahead." The first thing I knew, I was there. In very short order, the students in the undergraduate program wanted to come in too – because I started a school there at the same time and used undergraduate college students to help out – and they wanted to become a part of it. So Curry allowed that to happen so that it became the first school to have a double major in education and learning disabilities. I was speaking all over the place, and starting -- well, in the



beginning, I was begging people to start a program such as I had because I knew Curry was too small to accommodate them. To this day, they're going with that program, and eventually it also led to the creation of an undergraduate program for students with dyslexia, and Curry has graduated two-thousand students from it.

JR: Wow.

GW: Curry named the building after me because that's where my career lived for twenty-seven years, and it was fun for me. It really was. I never found it difficult because these kids who came in – and we assessed them for their general intelligence – had to bring that because otherwise, they couldn't make it in a college setting. Curry, although at the time I started the program was seen as more of a playground, became much more difficult because they established a really good curriculum.

JR: So that it specifically is aimed toward students who have learning disabilities, to work with them?

GW: Well, yes and no. There was a lot of resistance to it, and what I noticed was that our students were electing the arts, the visual arts in particular. They were doing beautiful work. So the first thing that followed was a whole program of visual arts, and it's led to a strong concentration to this day because students with dyslexia are often more strongly visual, and right-brained than verbal and left-brained.

JR: Right. What role would you say your work plays in how you define yourself?

GW: Well, I told the kids that I was going to retire from Curry in '92, and some of the graduates of that program had already established The Webb International Center for Dyslexia. I was embarrassed by their using my name for it, but I was stuck with it. They had started it and gone through the whole process of -- the legal processes to get it off the ground in '90, so when I did, in fact, retire in '93, they were still just inching along, so I said I'd come in and help out. So I've been here since, volunteering, and whoever comes



my way, whether it's a school department or – I got a call just yesterday from one of our Board members who said he had a letter from a girl who is living in San Francisco who has a child who seems to have a learning problem. She remembered him, but she had forgotten my name, so she called him because she had introduced him to me originally, and we had gone out to lunch together. So, it still keeps coming back. I had a fireman in here who couldn't pass the fireman's exam and you never know whether it's going to be a three-year-old or – someone much older.

JR: Right. So does this organization do sort of consulting with –

GW: Yes. School departments.

JR: – schools.

GW: We have a particular program, which we call Journey to Success, which was funded by some people who had some faith in us. We had difficulty getting more funding for it, although this year I think we will probably do it again.

JR: What have been the greatest challenges for you in doing this work?

GW: I think just taking young people who feel pretty hopeless because of the treatment they have gotten and turning that around so that their families are happy, they are happy, they are doing things that nobody would have ever imagined that they could do. I have something on the screen that I couldn't seem to get off this morning from a girl who is out in Seattle. She went out there last June, I believe it was, to visit her sister, who was out there working. She supposedly was going to stay for the weekend, but she got a job, and she is staying out there. She was home for Christmas. I visited with them, but I asked her to write a follow up on what she's doing now because she's teaching kiddos after school, preparing them for MCATs [Medical College Admission Test] and things of that sort. If you heard her early school experiences, you wouldn't believe that she would end up that way. She's in a master's program. She's got a boyfriend, and life is going on



pretty happily for her. So, what more could I ask for?

JR: Right. What was it like for you to take a stand on these kinds of issues within your own community?

GW: Waltham didn't believe dyslexia was a legitimate diagnosis. They felt it didn't exist. They were more open to the learning disability terminology, but they never have really been supportive of the program. So, we've had to struggle along. That's all you can do. I found one school in Waltham that was very open to it, where the principal did believe in it, and she didn't care what the administration said. We worked through one year's program, so it was very good.

JR: Would you say that you see your work as fitting into or challenging traditional women's roles?

GW: I have problems with that terminology because I have never had problems being a female. When the Dean at Curry was leaving, he said, "You should have this job," and I knew the Assistant Dean was running for the job, and I did not apply for it. That probably was the only time I just felt that they would go for a male rather than a female, but other times, I just did whatever needed to be done – there's a gal at Harvard Graduate School of Education who headed the reading program. She passed away last year. Her name is escaping me at the moment. But I was in contact with her the first year I had the association going, and we ran an international conference that year here in Boston, and I teamed up with a gentleman who really started the Landmark School, and together we ran a beautiful conference, and I had invited her to speak. And afterward, we went out to lunch, and I told her that I hoped that this program would only last about ten years because I thought we could cure it all in that time. She said, "I hope you never get as big as the IRA." I said, "Who are you talking about?" And she was talking about the International Reading Association. I thought she was talking about Ireland. So we had some fun, and she was more cooperative then. But she emphasized phonics in her



work, and I was not so hip on phonics. Anyway, I have an article in which I said phonics are necessary. I'm not saying they're not. But there is much more to reading and to understanding and to using your intelligence for it, so let's stimulate that in kids who have trouble with phonics. So if we had an argument, it was an argument on subject matter. It was not on whether I was female or male or whether I was Jewish or Christian. Those things were not pertinent, really.

JR: What would you say has been most rewarding for you about doing this kind of work?

GW: I think I already said it. Just seeing the changes in people who had no hope and establishing hope within them and seeing what they can do.

JR: This question may also be repetitive, but you can decide. How would you say your contributions have affected others?

GW: Well, I said I thought it would last ten years. Well, now it's certainly global. I never dreamed it would be. I wouldn't say I was the cause of that, but I would say I contributed to it by speaking constantly when there was an opportunity to convince somebody that these children were not retarded. You see, when I came into it, that's what they were considered, and that, if you gave them a chance and gave them this setting in which they would flourish, you would be surprised. And they were. People would come back to me afterward and say, "Boy, I never dreamed that she could or he would." One of the boys I'm referencing is one of our Center's contributors, and when he graduated from Curry, his father said, "Come into my practice," which is stock brokerage. He lasted three years, and he hated it, and he finally walked out and said to his father, "I can't do it anymore."

And his father said, "If you don't do it, no money. Go ahead, on your own." Anyway, he and his brothers started a cookie factory down in New York, and I have all kinds of things – every belly needs a cookie. [Editor's Note: Ms. Webb is referring to the company, Cookie Island, whose slogan is, "Every cookie needs a belly."] They have a story associated with it. His imagination is beautiful, and he's got a kid who makes cookies on



an island and gets deserted on an island. I don't remember the story too well. But it's coming out in a book shortly, and he's been written up in several magazines. So, it's wonderful.

JR: How would you say your activist work has affected you?

GW: I think just going through the experience. I interact with people of all ages. I have a young girl living with me right now who is a graduate of Brandeis last June. But I met her last spring at my daughter's house in Jerusalem. She was in Israel for a year, and my daughter had put her beside me at the seder because she knew this kid was at Brandeis. When I discovered that, I said, "Stop by." So she stopped by once, twice, and so it continued. This fall, she got a job in Newton in a psych lab, and she lives in Lakeville. So it's an hour's drive each way. So she said, "Can I stay with you?" Having had seven kids, my house is still large enough for all of them, so I can give housing, and I'm enjoying interacting with her. I also have six students from Brandeis, current students, who come to me every Thursday night to learn, and we enjoy each other.

JR: About education?

GW: No, it's the Chumash or something related to it. We have a great time. I find out what's going on in their lives, so I don't feel at all disassociated and willing to only stay with people who are my age.

JR: That's nice. Have you had any role models?

GW: I would say my sister and my aunt were probably the role models that I certainly had.

JR: In what ways? What did you learn from them?



GW: Well, certainly giving back to society, doing something worthwhile with your life. My sister was verbally very fluent. She could speak several languages. I respected that, so I tried to mimic her since I was a kid. And the business of finding something novel, I probably got from my brothers, and still use those strategies and use the strategies, as I said earlier, that I learned at Girls' Latin. So they keep cropping up.

JR: What have some of your most recent projects been? I know you said that after you retired, you remained involved here.

GW: That's right.

JR: But if you could talk about some of the things you're involved in now?

GW: Sure.. We have a particular program that evolved in the school I was talking about in Waltham, where children who had learning problems were referred to me, and I would find a way that their teachers could get them to establish the setting that these kids needed, and these kids were turned on. So the teachers were anxious for help, and I used to meet every Thursday morning with some of the staff and work together on the needs of kids, needs that weren't always language problems. I mean, there were emotional problems. There were a lot of other things. We had a little third-grade kiddo who came from Haiti, and the teacher said, "She just doesn't do anything in the class, and she won't talk." And I said, "Well, what does she do on the playground? Oh, there, she talks." Okay. All right. So, I talked to this little girl herself and I told her how smart she was because I had done a little intelligence test on her, and she was shocked, and she started to produce in her class. And the teacher said, "What did you do?" And I said, "Nothing, really. I just told her how smart she was, and then she told me how, in her family, she had an older sister and a father who beat them. They don't conform. And so they're afraid. She's afraid she'll do something wrong, so she won't talk. And it's what's holding her back from talking in your class. So I assured her she's okay, and you've got it made." Now, that certainly wasn't a dyslexic child. It was something else



that was holding her back. There are always other things that are embedded in and often they can get in the way of a child's learning.

JR: Right.

GW: But dyslexia can be a very difficult thing. There is a gentleman who has written a book on how wonderful it is to be dyslexic. It's out in California, and I can't buy it because I think that dyslexia probably starts in utero and probably comes to the fore at about two or three when other children are starting to talk, and the dyslexic child gets a negative reaction from his grandmother who might come in and say, "What's the matter with that kid? Not even talking yet?" And you get that several times before you even get to school, and your ego is really destroyed from it. And, when that happens, you can't produce. So, that's where it is.

JR: Do you think of your work as political?

GW: There are some facets of it, right now, the whole MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) thing. I've taken a stand – sure, we need testing, but I don't think one test is an appropriate evaluation of a kid's ability. So, I have plugged and gotten teachers organized – working with some teachers a year ago in the summer, all summer, and they were complaining about this, that, and the other thing. We had invited one of the legislators who had talked about all of the resistance in the legislature to getting anything done, and I said to the teachers afterward, "Why didn't you speak?" And I said, "I want you to sit down and write something of what you're talking about," and I put that into an article in the paper. It takes a heck of a lot more than that to change the legislature, and there has been a lot of resistance from regular educators and the parents of typical children at the expense of special education.

JR: Right.



GW: And I think much of that is legitimate because many of the people who have gone into special ed have gone there for the money and not – as a matter of fact, there was a gentleman in New York who got a big grant from the federal government for three years for dyslexia education. He said to me, quite honestly, when the three years are gone, if they don't have any more money, that's the end of the program. And it was. But that's not what drives a program. And I think my own sincerity has been what has driven this program and keeps it going to this day. That makes me very happy. In fact, this coming February vacation I am taking a little girl to see Curry because she really could benefit from it. Not everybody would.

JR: Right. Have there been other causes that have been important to you over the course of your life in addition to these issues of special education?

GW: Well, family issues, naturally. The loss of one's mother, father. The loss of a child. I remember my grandmother saying to me at my aunt's funeral when my aunt died – she was fifty-five – and my grandmother saying there is nothing so painful as the loss of a child. And, boy, I realized that later. At the time, I didn't know why she was so distressed ... and she was an inspiration to me, too. I must not forget her. Because my aunt did a lot of traveling and had no children. So, my grandmother lived in her house and had a Polish maid. When I'd go there to visit, she'd talk in Polish to this maid, and in English to me, and in Yiddish to somebody else. And then she'd take me out in her garden, and she was growing beets, and she lived in Beachmont, and she was going down to the ocean at six o'clock in the morning to swim.

JR: Wow.

GW: So, she continued until her old age. She was supportive of the rabbi there and had raffles going and all kinds of things. So there were a lot of people who inspired me, I think.



JR: Did you ever feel any conflicts between your responsibilities to your family and your work? Your education work? It's just hard to imagine with six kids just how you did everything.

GW: Well, as I say, I took a twenty-year vacation. But when my youngest daughter, Heidi, was coming home from school at about a quarter past two, I had just started teaching child development at Lasalle College, which was very close to my home. I would come into the driveway just before Heidi's school bus because I didn't want her to come home to an empty house. So I guess there was some consciousness there, and the kids were generally very cooperative about it because I didn't go for my Master's degree until the twenty years were over, really, at the tail end of my time being primarily at-home, really. That meant I had to be out a couple of long evenings a week, and they pitched in. They didn't seem to mind. They had interests of their own that kept them going. I would say there was a sub-consciousness of maybe I was doing too much for others and not – and cheating my own. But it wasn't enough to really upset me.

JR: What was your graduate training?

GW: My graduate training at the teachers' college was for my master's in guidance, and then I went to BC [Boston College] and I said to the gentleman who was interviewing me, "I don't know if you'd want me or if I'd want you but let me tell you what I've been doing these last twenty years." I did, and he said, "I want you to go across the street to Mary Griffin, who is my wife, but she is also the Dean of the School of Education, and she will give you an assignment, and on the basis of that assignment, we'll make a judgment." So, I went over, I met Mary, and she fell in love with me; I fell in love with her. I don't know which it was. But anyway, the assignment she gave me was to establish the program at Curry. And of course, I was in heaven, and I did it, and she monitored it and said, "Come on in. The water is fine." And my dissertation, actually, was comparing language development in a school in Birmingham, England, because I had met a



gentleman along in my travels who said, “Whenever you want to do anything, your research, remember I’m here.” And I took advantage of it and compared their problems at first grade with those that kids in Waltham schools were having trouble in first grade, and that was inspired, really, by Learning Magazine, that had written an article saying that dyslexia is a rich person's excuse for a kid not learning. And I was furious. So it showed the kids, not-rich kids in Birmingham, England, had the same problems.

JR: Right.

GW: And so that dissertation, Mary monitored it along with a few other people, and it still sits in the Hebrew U [University] and a few other places around the world.

JR: So, it sounds like while you were home with your kids for those twenty years, you remained very involved in a lot of these kinds of issues.

GW: No, I was involved in civic issues, then. I was president of the League of Women Voters. I was president of Hadassah when my second child was maybe two. And I remember, in the summer, the women's excuses when you asked them to do something, and they just shocked me. One mother said, “I have a daughter in Texas, and she's going to have a baby in January,” and this was in August before I was asking her to do something like get the tea ready. “I have to be available.” So, there was nothing that stood in my way. If I wanted to get something done, I would do it. I was on the school committee here in Waltham for sixteen years, and people would say, “You'll hate it. You'll hate it. All you'll get are complaints from people.” And I didn't hate it. I got a lot of approval, as well as the complaints. And when they were legitimate, I did something about it. I got off, actually, when my husband got ill and needed my care, and people begged me to go back on because some of the people on the school committee said they had to move up to city council, to mayor, to this, that and the other thing, and that wasn't my goal.



JR: That's pretty much the end of the questions that I have, but I always end by asking if there is anything we haven't covered that you would like to tell me about.

GW: You have had very good questions.

JR: Thank you.

GW: Really. I searched out and got from life what I applied to it. I haven't thought much about it in preparation for this because I come here as a grandmother now. I had my grandson over Sunday afternoon because he was going back to Rochester on Monday morning, so I wanted to say so long for the next semester. I have a granddaughter coming over next week. So, I value that hardly a day goes by that I don't hear from somebody in the family.

JR: That's nice.

GW: And life has been very good to me, I would say. I've enjoyed it. So, I keep on plugging away as long as I can.

JR: I have a few bookkeeping-type questions. Just because we put all of this information into our virtual archive records, there is certain stuff I need, like I need your full name and your maiden name was as well.

GW: Well, that's a story in and of itself because when I was born, I was named Goldie, but when I went to first grade, my teacher said that's too foreign a name, and she changed it to Gertrude in the school records, and it went through that way and nobody – my father called me Goldie until the day he died, but nobody else ever did. So, my name officially, is Gertrude. My maiden name is Mikels. And that's M-I-K-E-L-S. When I got married, I took my husband's name. Not all of my kids have done it. They've kept their maiden name or doubled it.



JR: And do you have a middle name?

GW: No, I never had one. It bothered me. I did, when I was a teenager I guess, adopt an E. because then I had a scarf on which I could put G-E-M. Gem. But it wasn't really my name. But I used it for a couple of years that way, the way kids do when they're teenagers.

JR: And can you give me your birth date?

GW: 7-24-16.

JR: One of the things that we do to sort of code the materials is to put into the bio like a one-sentence description of your work. So, in the past, I have written these for all of the people, but I've realized this year I should give people a chance to kind of write their own little caption of how they would describe themselves.

GW: I'd still like you to do it, if you don't mind.

JR: Sure. I can do it, and I can check it with you if you want me to do that. Well, thank you very much. This was very interesting.

GW: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]