Nicki Newman Tanner Transcript

Gail Reimer: This is Gail Reimer. Today is August 24th, 2007. I am here with Nicki Newman Tanner at her home in Scarsdale, and we are recording an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive. Nicki, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Nicki Newman Tanner: Yes.

GR: 2007. Thank you. So, five years ago in 2002, for your Wellesley Record Book entry, you recorded an imaginary interview between you, the oral historian, and you, the Wellesley alum, class of '57. I especially liked one particular question you asked yourself and thought it might be a good way to begin and possibly to structure this oral history. If you were to divide your life into segments (you asked as the oral historian), what would those segments be?

NNT: How did I answer it five years ago? [laughter]

GR: We want to know your answer now.

NNT: Well, there's the personal, the domestic life. There's the organizational life, which is also public. (It's life in the public domain.) Now, I can't remember whether I said at the time Jewish as a – as a separate piece or whether I also said feminist – I can't remember. But those seem to be, while not strict divisions, they're areas. They're integrated together in many important respects, which is true of every life.

GR: So, should we start with the domestic and as things get integrated, you'll integrate them.

NNT: That's the easiest.

GR: Okay. Let's start with your early life, where and when you were born.

NNT: Chicago. Nineteen thirty-six.

GR: Did your parents grow up in Chicago as well?

NNT: Yes, my father was born in Chicago. His mother was German, spoke German. His father was born in Chicago, but his father's father was born in Ireland. His name was Newman, and we thought Newman was a fictional name. We traced it back – we were in Dublin and found that Newman was not an unusual Jewish name in Ireland. We went to the synagogue, and many Newmans were in the synagogue. So that was very interesting to us. My mother was first-generation American and she died when I was two-and-a-half in an accident.

GR: And you were their first child?

NNT: I was their first child. Then my father remarried, and he married a New Yorker and stayed married to her for ten years until she died. She had leukemia. She was ill very early into their marriage. She died when I was finishing high school. When I was a sophomore in college, my father married a third and final time and married a native Chicagoan by the name of Muriel Kallis Steinberg, whose first husband had died. They were married until his death thirty-five years later.

GR: So, – at a very young age – your biological mother died. And then you sustained a second loss. What was it like growing up in your household?

NNT: My father was the constant, and he was an interesting, vital, intelligent autodidact, and we would joke. He read slowly, but he read passionately. So, he would read a book a year and would want to discuss every page of that book throughout the year. Everybody around him would roll their eyes, but he had numerous interests. He was interested in everything. He was very curious and had qualities that I think became

qualities that I looked for in my own friends and relationships. He had a great eagerness for life. He was a sailor and raced sailboats. He was a pilot. Took me up in his plane, a Bonanza, 3279 Victor. I can't remember anybody's phone number, but I can remember that. We always had great fun but also terrifying times because he was a bit of an adventurer.

GR: And do you remember the time between – what he was like between your mother's death and when he remarried?

NNT: Oh, yes. I became his mother then. He loved company. He was very gregarious, and he did not like to be alone. So, we did a lot of traveling. We went off to Europe. Took our car with us, which was something else again in those days, and we traveled through Europe. I was very watchful and protective of him because I was his "mother." He was grieving in his way.

GR: Where in Chicago did you grow up?

NNT: We lived first on Wellington Avenue, right in the city. I started school at a public school, Nettelhorst [School], and then a private school, the Town school. And then, when my father remarried, he moved us to Lake Forest, Illinois, which is a small suburb much like Scarsdale. At the time we were the only Jewish family there. We were not terribly Jewish. We had a huge Christmas tree, a two-story Christmas tree. Celebrated the "American," holidays. Never the Jewish holidays. Never. And yet, my father sent me to a temple in one of the nearby suburbs because he wanted me to be confirmed and meet Jewish boys. I did. And that was the extent of our Jewish experience. I went to one Passover Seder, I think. Perhaps two in all of my early educational life.

GR: Were grandparents alive in Chicago?

NNT: My grandfathers on both sides were not. My father's mother had died when he was a boy. My birth mother had died. Her mother had died. The only grandmother I

knew was my second mother's mother, who lived in New York. We called her Mama Flo. Mama Flo was a character. She lived at 40 Central Park South, and I would come and visit her. This was where, when Harold and I got engaged many years later, we had the engagement dinner. She was a colorful character.

GR: Mama Flo.

NNT: Mama Flo. Her name was Florence – Florence Ginsburg.

GR: So, I just want to go back to two things that you mentioned. One, confirmation and going to temple in another suburb. Did you feel any conflict or cognitive dissonance in what was happening in the home and about what you were studying in temple, and about your father's desire for you to meet Jewish boys?

NNT: No. The '50s were a bland, unquestioning time. I don't know what we talked about, but it wasn't anything serious. We took our studies seriously. Relatively seriously. But the expectations were conventional ones. Our paths were very clear. And we were going to go to college, meet a fellow, mine would probably be Jewish because my father said, "You should do that. They make better husbands." I didn't ask why they make better husbands. [laughter] And was pinned to a non-Jewish boy for a number of years. Who seemed perfectly fine to me.

GR: Did he seem perfectly fine to your father?

NNT: We didn't talk about it. His name was Tom Hall. My father was perfectly nice to him and, perhaps, assumed that I would get over it, whatever it was. He was a very permissive father. There were no rules for me growing up. No time I ever had to go in. Wellesley was the first time I had rules imposed upon my behavior. [laughter]

GR: So, we'll get to Wellesley. But since you mentioned being pinned, what exactly did that mean? I know it from Bye, Bye Birdie but –

NNT: Well, this fellow was from Highland Park, Illinois, and I loved his family. His family was everything mine wasn't, it seemed. It turned out not to have been the case, but it was a family of four. His sister went to Wellesley after I did, and it was a picture book. It was a two-story house, and the mother –the parents had a fireplace in the bedroom, and the father had the job of bringing the newspaper and the coffee in the morning, which he had set the night before. I'd never heard of such a thing. And they would read the paper in the morning together with their coffee. And it sounded just ideal. I think I was in love with their family. The pin was an insignia that men got when they joined a fraternity. At Princeton, which is where Tom was, he was in the Canon Club, so it was the Canon Club Insignia. And you'd wear it on your bosom, and it showed that you were "taken." And I wore that for a number of years with great pride, by the way.

GR: In high school or college or both?

NNT: The last year of high school and the first year of college. And, I suppose, it was a feeling of security. If you don't have a social life, it's a protective device. You're going to be okay. You're not going to be an old maid, which was anathema to anyone in the '50s, the prospect of old maid-dom.

GR: Do you think that was a leftover from the war era?

NNT: No, I think the war era interrupted that because Rosie the Riveter gave women, for the first time, a sense of independence, which men were very frightened by when they came back from the war, as I understand it. So, this was a reversion. A woman's proper place was to be in the home. And if you didn't have a proper place, you were on the streets. You were not in the corporate boardroom or in the laboratory.

GR: So, high school. Where did you go to high school?

NNT: I went to a private high school not far from our house in Lake Forest called Ferry Hall, which no longer exists. It has merged with Lake Forest Academy, and it was a tiny

school in a very beautiful set of buildings by Lake Michigan. My class had twenty-four girls in it. It was pretty easy to be ahead of the pack of twenty-four girls, and so I served my class in various ways. One of them was to be the “Supreme Court” to rule on such crimes and misdemeanors as holding hands with a boy in public. [laughter]

GR: So, were there any teachers or particular experiences that stand out as formative?

NNT: Yes, there were many teachers. I had a French teacher, Willetta Reber, who tried to teach me to play the harp, who made sure that this motherless child got to the dentist and really took an abiding interest in me, and I rewarded her by winning some French prizes. She was very proud of that. She moved to Livingston, Montana, and Harold and I visited her as recently as six years ago there.

GR: So, you went from one girls’ school to another. Was Wellesley a girls’ school then or a women’s college? Do you remember how it was –?

NNT: I don’t remember even thinking about the distinction. But it was where, if you were serious about academics, your choices were the women’s colleges – Wellesley, Vassar, Smith. (I don’t remember thinking about Holyoke.) I don’t even remember thinking about Cornell. Don’t tell Harold. It was the women’s colleges or the universities. And two of us from the Class of 24 – one went to Smith, one went to Wellesley, and the rest went to Northwestern and Michigan and places like that.

GR: And what made you choose Wellesley over the others?

NNT: I really don’t know, except I think it was a perception that it was the best of the group.

GR: So, you did not know people who had gone to Wellesley?

NNT: No. I functioned at a very high level of ignorance and unquestioning acceptance.

GR: And you said something earlier about expectations. So, let's go back to that. As you went off to Wellesley, did you have some sense of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

NNT: No.

GR: You knew you didn't want to be an old maid.

NNT: I knew I didn't want to be an old maid. No. And the language of Wellesley even then, because in 1953 when I arrived, the language was conventional language. There were both expressed and unexpressed expectations. Certainly, marriage was right in there. Talk about cognitive dissonance. There was the social expectation, much like that miserable movie with Julia Roberts, of needing to get married in order to validate your life. Yet, most of the faculty at Wellesley were single then. So there was the academic option. You could get your doctorate and teach. Certainly – you were discouraged from getting married before finishing your education, so education was paramount. Everything after that was okay, but it was not as important as your education.

GR: The goal of the education was –?

NNT: To be a good citizen, which Wellesley has kept. Certainly, it's added on to, but to function at a very high level in the world, to be actively involved in your community. We knew of women like Madame Chiang Kai-shek and other leaders, not identified to the same extent that these leaders are now to lead current students – but we were aware that we were expected to take leadership positions in our community, in organizational life, and maybe beyond. The motto is very, very clear – non ministrari sed ministrare.

GR: Which means?

NNT: Which is "not to be ministered unto but to minister." And we took that really seriously. It's amazing, the students today take it every bit as seriously as we did.

GR: Can you say a little bit more about what it meant, even as you were in college, to take that seriously?

NNT: Well, when I was in college, there were work projects. It was not unusual for the students to go out and find ways to be a helping hand. I'm trying to think of specific instances, but whenever there was some kind of local problem, Wellesley students would rush there and lend a hand. It was part of the culture. You just did that. And you kept that with you. So you see, I suspect, a larger percentage of Wellesley alums doing stuff and getting their hands dirty, which was another part of it. You did what was needed. Didn't have to be the leadership, although you assumed that eventually, you would take on a leadership role, but you wouldn't turn your nose up at getting your hands dirty, either.

GR: So, you were in college during what years?

NNT: '53 to '57. The McCarthy years.

GR: The Cold War. And McCarthy years.

NNT: The Army Hearings.

GR: How did that manifest itself on the Wellesley campus?

NNT: The television had come to Wellesley. They were not ubiquitous, but they were there. And many of the students, not all, and I can't tell you what percentage, but many were interested enough to group themselves around a television in the dormitory during the Army hearings. But it was not a political time on the campus. Nobody was marching. Nobody would have dreamed of marching.

GR: Was it a fearful time on campus?

NNT: I don't remember it as such, no. But I may have been uniquely oblivious. I didn't believe any of my friends were sexually active. I now know they were.

GR: So, an interesting segue from McCarthyism to sexual activity. I'm just curious; were they doing air raid drills?

NNT: No.

GR: Nuclear attack drills?

NNT: No. I don't remember any of those. I don't remember those until we moved to California a few years later, and the Angelenos were building bomb shelters because of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

GR: Back to Wellesley for a minute. What did you major in?

NNT: English.

GR: And what made you choose English?

NNT: Well, because I spoke it already, it gave me a head start.

GR: Your French teacher in your high school would have been upset.

NNT: Well, I took French. I took some French in college. I took the required courses, and I was a very conscientious student. I was not brilliant. I was a hard-working, dime-a-dozen Wellesley student.

GR: The English department was probably the largest department at that point.

NNT: I think it was. I think it went back and forth between the English and the Art History department as being the most popular. It doesn't matter in a liberal arts college what you major in because you have to take distribution anyway, and the whole point is to become

an intelligent dilettante with more than a smattering of knowledge in one area. So, English literature was where I had more than a smattering.

GR: I have to ask you this question.

NNT: Don't ask me about Chaucer.

GR: Was there a particular period in English literature that you liked the most?

NNT: I truly loved it all.

GR: You loved it all?

NNT: I loved it all.

GR: And a particular professor?

NNT: Oh, well – yes. I had Katherine Balderston, who taught a Shakespeare course, a full-year course, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at nine o'clock in the morning, which did cut into one's social schedule. She was remarkable, and every time I go to Shakespeare – as I did last week – I was reminded of Ms. Balderston, who approached each play with such passion, but especially the tragedies, which were the second semester. When we read King Lear, she came into the class, and she banged her head backward – (she looked like Edith Piaf. Her hair stuck out like she had put her finger in the socket.) And she said, "If I could get you children to understand one – one line of this incredible play," and then she banged her head against the blackboard again, "one line," crash, "my teaching life would be worthwhile." She was so invested in these plays. You took them very seriously. So, I remember her. I loved her. And I didn't mind staying at college all junior year on Saturday morning.

GR: Did you feel like a Midwesterner coming east?

NNT: Oh, yes. I felt like a Midwesterner all through college, especially like a Midwesterner in Los Angeles when we were first married, and I suspect for the first few years of being in New York.

GR: And what did that mean to you, feeling like a Midwesterner?

NNT: Oh, it meant the sense of being geographically central. I don't mean center of the universe, but if you're an easterner, your eye is to Europe. If you are a southerner, your eye is generally to South America, and if you're in the Midwest, you're in America. You're in the heartland, and this was good news/bad news. I mean, you were not sophisticated, but you saw yourself as real, as authentic. Westerners would say I tell it like it is. And this was never a source of embarrassment. It wasn't a source of pride, either. It was just that's the way it was. If you're from Chicago, you spoke – well, the first thing, at Wellesley I had to take a speech test. And I was told if I spoke the way I speak, I would have to take Speech, and I did not want to take Speech. So, I put on a strange combination of British and Boston, said "yahd" instead of "yard," because the hard R, I was told, was not a good thing to say. That was the sense that if you spoke as a Midwesterner, it wasn't quite right.

GR: Did you think you would go back to Chicago after graduation?

NNT: I thought I would probably go back to Chicago. I love Chicago. It's a wonderful place. There is an accessibility and a level of straightforwardness in Chicago that I still like very much. I can often spot a fellow Midwesterner and have great empathy for Midwesterners. I think there is an openness. When our first son was applying to college, I wanted his first interview to be at Northwestern, and it was. Because I had confidence that they would treat him nicely, be friendly, and get him off to a good start. And they were.

GR: He didn't go there, did he?

NNT: No.

GR: I'm still thinking about the move from Chicago to the East Coast and to Wellesley. Was there any shift in your sense of yourself as a Jewish person or –?

NNT: No.

GR: Was there any kind of active Jewish life at Wellesley?

NNT: Not to my knowledge. There were many Jewish students at Wellesley at the time becasue Harvard-Yale-Princeton had not opened to women. It was not unusual for the Jewish girls to be at the top ten percent of their classes, so Wellesley had a very large number of Jewish students, but there was not a rich Jewish life in Wellesley at the time.

GR: And were some of these students refugees from the war?

NNT: No. Not to my knowledge.

GR: There are a lot of changes that have happened in Wellesley since you were there, and because of your relationship to the college, you are very aware of them. Are there any ones in particular you wish had been made early enough for you to take advantage of?

NNT: That's such an interesting question. Well, I was very happy there. Since it's continued to be a part of my life, I've been able to get closer to some of the good things that have happened. The more conscious pluralism. If that had been in place in the 50s, which is very unlikely, nobody would have known what to do with it. Of course, the biggest change was post-1968. It was the end of parietals, which, on the one hand, were a nuisance. On the other hand, parietals allowed you to blame someone else for what you have to do and not take that upon yourself – I could say, because of parietals, "I'm so sorry. I have to go in now, at eleven o'clock."

GR: Right.

NNT: Sophomore Bible, which was required of all Wellesley students until 1968 – was for those of us who had it one of the great experiences. Everybody took this course, and it gave us a common language. Having something in common with one's community is a powerful thing. What other changes? I think acknowledging the role that landscape plays in one's education is a consciousness that, again, we're ready for now. I don't think we would have been ready for it in the '50s.

GR: What does that mean?

NNT: Well, it means that – it's a spiritual piece. It's not taking your environment for granted – acknowledge it both visually from an aesthetic, but it's a – something more, a spiritual connection with the land, with nature, which, by extension, makes poetry and literature and music more vibrant. A Chicagoan contends with weather. You don't sink into it in the same way that you do if you're privileged to be on a landscape such as the Wellesley landscape.

GR: And it wasn't as beautiful in the '50s as it is now.

NNT: It was. It probably was. But there is a consciousness now of it. There is an invoking of it. There is a teaching about it. The landscape is used in the science classes. It is used physically for different places for congregation, for play, as well as for meeting. It's part of the consciousness that comes directly out of the landscape renovation.

GR: Let's move toward the end of your time at Wellesley as an undergraduate when you became class president.

NNT: For the first five years after college.

GR: So, earlier, you talked about in a class of twenty-four, it's easy to be a leader. But the Wellesley class was considerably larger than twenty-four. How did you get to that position?

NNT: I don't know. Wellesley – again, it's part of the culture. There are many leadership positions. Anybody who wants to take responsibility at Wellesley can find something to take charge of. So, if you are at all interested in something, as you are there for four years, you will be given responsibility. It's a natural thing. I don't remember anybody campaigning for office, although we must have done – women do it today when they say, "If I am elected college government president, this, this, and this will happen." But it flows naturally as part of the understanding that Wellesley offers opportunities to all of its students to assume leadership positions. It was powerful, and it is powerful. Now Princeton, Harvard, Yale accepted women, – Wellesley had to market itself as a place where all leadership positions go to women, and for young women who have often been shoved aside for the boys, this was a plus.

GR: You were part of that huge percentage that was married right away? Yes?

[After Graduation]

NNT: Yes. I graduated in June and married in July in Chicago.

GR: To Harold Tanner.

NNT: Yes.

GR: And could you tell us a little bit about how you met?

NNT: We met on a blind date. A Harvard Business classmate of his suggested he call me. The classmate was really interested in my roommate and was trying to further his suit. Didn't. But we are very glad that we were set up and actually meeting this older

man, I said goodbye to my previous love, sent him back his pin, and there were many things about Harold that I thought were wonderful. His maturity. He graduated very young from college – from Cornell – had been in the service, was in the Business School, as I said, and seemed to be very directed and very kind, and the rest is a lot of luck.

GR: How long was your courtship?

NNT: With Harold. We met in January, January 28 of my junior year, and we were married in July after I graduated.

GR: And you were married in Chicago at –

NNT: The Standard Club.

GR: Big wedding? Small wedding?

NNT: Big wedding. I mean, big enough. I don't remember the number exactly. Maybe a hundred and fifty, two hundred. Nothing about it was surprising. I wore white. Long dress. Looking like every other friend of mine of that era. I had an array of wonderful friends as attendants.

GR: What color did they wear?

NNT: Blue.

GR: And then you, like everyone else, went away on a honeymoon?

NNT: We did.

GR: And where did you go?

NNT: We went not to where everywhere else went. We went to Mackinac Island because the following year, we were going to go to Rio. But we couldn't go to Rio in July. And also, Harold was starting his new job in Los Angeles. So, we went to Mackinac Island and never got to Rio because the next year, I was pregnant with what turned out to be David. We've never been to Rio.

GR: Shortly after you married, you moved to LA.

NNT: Right away.

GR: And you knew as you were preparing for your wedding that you were going to be moving to LA?

NNT: Yes.

GR: What was LA like in those years?

NNT: Oh, it was very different then. I had been given a car for my graduation present – a little convertible (but, in '57, there was no air conditioning). So we drove across the country from Chicago to LA in July, and as we crossed the desert, it was so hot that we stopped in one of the desert towns, went into a hotel, sat in the downstairs of the hotel for the day because it was air-conditioned, and then got back into the car at night and drove across the desert at night. It was a hundred and ten or something like that. Opening the windows didn't do anything. So, that was a reminder of the blessings of air conditioning. We got out there, and found an apartment. It was a hundred and fifty dollars a month for two bedrooms and a kitchen. And I started to work at UCLA, in the Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering.

GR: It sounds like a thing that an English major would do.

NNT: Well, it turned out to be a good thing for an English major because nobody there spoke English, and I was their translator. They would crash anthropometric dummies against a cement wall because they were testing seatbelts and things, and I would put their results into English. So, I was very useful. It was sort of fun. It was in a Quonset hut set up on the periphery of the campus. Then, within maybe six months' time, I was pregnant and David was born in December of ’58. Then we moved into a house in Brentwood.

GR: And who was your community in LA, or was there such a thing? Who were your friends? Who was your network?

NNT: Friends came one by one. We didn’t know anybody when we first arrived. We met one couple who we became friends with, and we would meet others, and that’s the way it worked.

GR: And LA at that time was mostly transplants from other areas?

NNT: Oh, yes. It was years before I met a natural-born Angelina. We were all transplants. I never loved it very much, although I made some good friends there. I realized that once I moved back here, what a great luxury it was to have raised three children without the benefit of winter clothes –

GR: Why did you not like it there? Did it feel like a cultural wasteland?

NNT: Well, not really. I was active in the museum there, but I didn’t like the weather. I didn’t like it being warm all of the time. I liked the seasons. I liked contrast, and LA is not a land of contrast. I didn’t like Hollywood, and that world seemed a little questionable. It wasn’t my world.

GR: You had three children, all born in LA?

NNT: All within a year and a half of each other. Karen was born – the last one was born during the LA fire, which was a big fire. It was in all of the magazines. It was in the newspapers. It was one of those huge natural events where the dry winds, the Santa Ana winds, come. There was a spark of some kind caused by a lawnmower. I don't know what it was. On dry leaves. Everything was dry. And it was a conflagration that just blew into the sky, and wherever it would land, it would catch new fires. That started on the day that I brought Karen home from the hospital.

GR: Oh, but it didn't prevent you from getting to the hospital.

NNT: No. But she spent her first night in a friend's bathtub because I was taken out of our house because it was in the line of fire. Harold had gone to the office, and I was taken with the three little babies, our dog, and our baby nurse to another house that was supposed to be farther away. And we watched it on television.

GR: Wow. And were the boys scared?

NNT: Sure. Although they were too young to know the implications, but I had visions of the house burning down.

GR: From everything that I can tell, you've been an amazing mother, which is, in some ways, shocking given that you had no model in your own life.–

NNT: I think Harold was a better father than I was a mother.

GR: Really? What do you mean by that?

NNT: He's the one who stayed up at night waiting for them to come in. He's more regular than I. He calls them regularly each week.

GR: But let's go back to their early years. What about mothering did you enjoy, and what didn't you?

NNT: Parenting is a lot of work. Once they laughed at my jokes, I enjoyed them. Once we could read together, I enjoyed them. Books made a big difference. There were three little children, and it was a lot of work.

GR: And were you doing it alone or did you have –

NNT: Oh, we had a housekeeper. She was wonderful. We had a housekeeper. But it's still a lot of work. And when we moved east and they were all taking music lessons, I was spending my life in a car picking one up and dropping one off and all of that. Did I love that? No, not terribly much.

GR: Did they end up being good musicians?

NNT: Yes. Well, two of them – yes. David and Karen are very accomplished. Karen plays to this day. David does not, which is too bad.

GR: And during those years, what did you do to nourish yourself?

NNT: Well, I played the piano, too, in those years. And when they graduated from Hoff-Barthelson Music School, I performed with them, which was pretty much a big kick. I volunteered in Scarsdale and became a PTA chair and all that.

GR: That was once you moved to New York.

NNT: Yes. In LA, my activity was the museum, the Los Angeles County Museum. I was in charge of the rental – there was a place where people could come and take art out, and we would choose the art for that place. So I would go around LA with other volunteers, and we would pick art and rent it out.

GR: While you were living in LA, Betty Friedan comes out with the Feminine Mystique. You read it right away.

NNT: I read it right away.

GR: So, in what ways was it big? And especially in what ways was it personally big for you?

NNT: Because it was a source of discussion among all of the women that I knew. There were certain books that become touchstones. Betty Friedan was one. I met her while I was still in LA, and it was very weird because she was one of the panelists, and I was part of putting the program together, so I met her at the dinner beforehand. And I remember she was very grumpy because she had been without her husband for a number of days. And I thought this is not the way a feminist should be acting. She was lamenting his absence. She was not so big in my mind as Carol Gilligan, which was later. By that time we were in, In A Different Voice was one of those “oh my God” books because the idea of there having been a standard that we were so used to, that we never questioned, and that the standard was a male standard was breathtaking. It was physical. It was like a physical punch.

GR: How did it affect your relationship with Harold?

NNT: I knew that it was important to make sure that he was understanding what I was understanding, and so we talked about it, and then things started to happen that were blatantly bizarre. Karen, by this time, was in high school. Karen came home with a new science textbook, and a chapter was called “the human body,” and it was full of these transparent pages where you lifted up, and you saw the skeleton and all this – but the human body was male. And I’ve never gone to the school before with a complaint. I was a worker bee. I wasn’t a complainer. But I went bouncing over there and said, “How can you have a textbook that has a chapter about the human body, and it’s only the male body?”

GR: So, this was part of the transformation?

NNT: Oh, yes.

GR: For you?

NNT: I wasn't the only one. I had a group of friends. In those days, we met every Friday. We had our little lunch group, and we'd meet every Friday, and it was sort of the touchstone of where we all were. We built a lexicon together.

GR: And speaking of language, did you think of it as a consciousness-raising group, or was it just a lunch group?

NNT: No, but we knew the word. By then, we knew the word consciousness-raising. We also knew the word – not the word, but the phrase, assertiveness training – because this was also part of what was in the air. One of our friends had gone to a discussion of assertiveness training, and she came to lunch, and she said, "Okay, so here's what I learned today." She said, "This lecture or discussion was called, 'The dog is on the sofa,'" which has become a byword in our house now. When the guy comes in and says, "The dog is on the sofa," you, the female, are not – underline not – supposed to jump up and say, "I will get the dog right off of the sofa." You say, "Oh, the dog is on the sofa." And, to this day, if somebody comes in and says, or if Harold comes in and says, "Something is wrong with the car," I say, "Oh, something is wrong with the car."

GR: I'll have to use that. I like that.

NNT: Yes, but I forgot one big event while we were in LA. That ha Jewish implications – the assassination of Kennedy.

GR: Why Jewish?

NNT: It became Jewish because we had joined a congregation. It was a very perfectly nice congregation, but I had no feeling for it particularly. We did it because it was the

thing to do, and our children were enrolled in Sunday School. This was all from Harold's side. This is what he knew. This is what he wanted. We had already worked out my desire for a Christmas tree. That discussion we had had long before.

GR: How was that settled?

NNT: It was settled because Harold said, well, fine, it will make me uncomfortable, but I know you want it, and you're used to it, so why don't we get a small one but just keep it for a few days. Which we did for, I think, two or three years. But it felt very different in LA than it felt in Chicago. The weather wasn't conducive to the Christmas spirit. We were surrounded by Jewish people who did not celebrate. And it faded. It was more trouble than it was worth. So, it went by the by. It was very smart of Harold, I must say, not to have made an issue of it. It went away.

GR: So, back to Kennedy's assassination.

NNT: When Kennedy was assassinated, he was assassinated, I believe, on a Thursday, and Friday came, and Harold and I looked at each other, and we were not Shabbat keepers at all. And he said, "I feel so odd." I said, "I feel odd, too." He said, "I think we should go to temple." I said, "I think that's absolutely the right thing to do." So, we went to Friday night services directly after the assassination. The place was mobbed. And it was my first experience of being part of a large community. Now, this was a community of grief and angst, but the service itself was a balm. It soothed the spirit. It lifted us up. It did all the things that – I don't want to say religion, but a spiritual moment can do. It doesn't always and it was palpable. We were in the right place. We were doing the right thing, and it felt really good. And so, it became, then, a natural place. If you were going to celebrate a life event – I don't know, it clicked. It felt right. We were in our community. And that's when our family Jewish traditions started. It didn't hurt that Leonard Bierman, who was the rabbi, was brilliant. He was poetic, brilliant, a pacifist, and informed our early Jewishness in a major way.

GR: So, when you moved to New York, did that temple or synagogue now figure as a prominent piece of what you were looking for in deciding what community to live in or where to live?

NNT: Not community. We picked the community based on schools because our children were very young. And in Scarsdale then, and to some extent now, fifty percent of every tax dollar raised go to the schools because there's no crime to speak of or anything else like that. We were both familiar with Scarsdale, and we came here for that. But there are many temples to choose among, and we were a little older, so we went around and we listened to the different rabbis. We settled on Westchester Reform. We liked Jack Stern a lot. Westchester Reform Temple has been blessed with two rabbis – both leaders in the reform movement – each very different. We lucked out with this synagogue.

GR: So, could you talk a bit about how your life changed as a result of the move from LA to Scarsdale?

NNT: Well, I love New York and I love Scarsdale because it's a community, and I fell into this community wholeheartedly. I went on the board of the music school, and I became active in the PTA and took leadership positions with that and became active in the Wellesley – it had a much more accessible Wellesley Club than LA did, so I became active in the Wellesley Club here. And it was closer to everything, and I loved seasons. By this time, the kids could get into their own snow clothes.

GR: How old were they when you moved here?

NNT: Oh, when was it – it was '67. So, they were little. They were in kindergarten and second and third grade.

GR: So, '67, to just turn back to the Jewish piece of your life for a moment – '67 was the war that really shifted the American Jewish community's relationship to Israel. Do you recall a shift in your own relationship to Israel at that point?

NNT: No. Harold was the organizational Jew. I was not. He had joined the American Jewish Committee in LA and was active with them, and I would come along to do things. We traveled with the AJC. I'm trying to remember our first trip to Israel. I don't think it was with AJC. I think it was with the Federation, but I could be wrong. What was happening in Israel in the 60's I didn't hone in on that until later when I was doing the oral history for Federation, and that became a big part of our question because, for many people who were somewhat older than I, this was a key moment. They had more clearly formed impressions of Israel. Harold comes from a Zionist home. I do not. My father went to Israel but only after they had traveled to every place else, including Egypt. When he came back from Israel, he had been bowled over by Israel, but he wasn't a Zionist.

GR: When your children were young, did you find yourself going to New York City often?

NNT: No. From time to time but not a lot.

GR: It was really a suburban life you were leading.

NNT: Yes.

GR: But you were very involved in community activities, and you said earlier also involved in the PTA.

NNT: Yes. And the League of Women Voters.

GR: What was the league doing at that time?

NNT: Well, the League is always in three parts – local, state and federal. The local stuff didn't interest me too much. The federal level interested me the most. It was a good learning place. I didn't take leadership positions in the league, but I liked to go to the meetings, and I learned how to run meetings there.

GR: When you say you learned, was that by behavior that was modeled, or they actually taught you?

NNT: Behavior that was modeled. One thing I picked up from the league was their determination – very conscious determination to not take a position until they had studied it carefully. Because they said, as women, we must take every argument and be prepared to discuss it from all sides. So, when you see league material, they will often have the pros and the cons, and that was an important lesson.

GR: Let's talk about post-college to the period when you were raising your children. Were you drawn to go back to school? Were you drawn to learn new things in formal settings and informal settings?

NNT: Yes. I became the chair of something called the Scarsdale Adult School, which is a big deal, and because it is so close to New York and Scarsdale has wonderful resources, people resources. Scarsdale Adult School has been around for a very long time and produces a course catalog that is quite large, and it was both the source of learning for the community and certainly for me as well as a joy [to] be part of an organization that I really liked. It was lots of fun. And there was learning from writing the course description in the book. It was learning about language because there were a lot of courses – we had a lot of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in Scarsdale and wonderful courses about how to deal with different things – your depression, your elderly parents, your teenage child and so on. We learned that there were certain things that you could not put in the book because people would not sign up for the course as described. "How to deal with" – "how to cope with surviving your" – all of those things you had to banish. But you had to tell them what it was going to be about. So, one of the most successful ploys was to use film clips. A wonderful doctor, Elliot Rosen, a psychologist and a film devotee, would use film that would chronicle life cycle events, and then he would discuss it, but first, you would get to see the movie. So, you could say, "I'm going to see

wonderful movies, and talking about problems is beside the point." But it was very instructive, how we named things to give permission for people to come forward.

GR: Were you writing the copy for the course catalog?

NNT: A friend of mine, Laura Strauss is a wonderful writer and a very gifted wordsmith. I would help her, and we would work out the copy together on her dining room table. Very hands-on.

GR: And you took courses at the adult school as well?

NNT: Yes.

GR: Was there one course that stands out?

NNT: Well, I loved the Elliot Rosen courses because they were so helpful.

GR: Were they the genesis of the film group that you later joined?

NNT: In a way, yes. Elliot Rosen may have been the first one to tell me about the film club, because he was an early speaker for the film club.

GR: And you've belonged to that film club for how long?

NNT: Oh, twenty-five years.

GR: You watch films together once a month?

NNT: Every couple of weeks. In a movie house. You asked about education and at some point, and I don't remember what year, I decided I needed a master's degree. I had started at UCLA. I had taken a course in Faulkner at UCLA in the masters program. And then, when we moved back here, I thought, I'll sign on for Sarah Lawrence for their graduate school. I filled out all of the forms, and I wrote a long essay about why I wanted

to join, and they rejected me. It was the first rejection of my life. I was crushed, certainly.

GR: What did you do? Did you find out why?

NNT: They didn't think I would make an interesting addition to the class, I guess.

GR: Well, it was a master's program in writing or in women's studies or –

NNT: In women's studies.

NNT: It was led by Gerda Lerner, who didn't want me. So, that door closed. That usually means that another door pops open and I turned to oral history. It probably was as a fallback position.

GR: When you say you started with oral history, you started doing oral histories, or you started training as an oral historian informally, formally?

NNT: I went to AJC and volunteered because I knew that they had an oral history program. I had been introduced to it, and it was run by Milton Krentz and his wife, Irma. I volunteered there for years and then went on to Columbia for their graduate program..

GR: What did you do at AJC?

NNT: I read oral histories there, and I indexed them, I did synopses of them, and after having read a great number, really a great number, I said to Milton Krantz that I would like to do some interviews myself. And he gave me a few. I can't remember who I started with. Clearly, it was not memorable. But I went, out of interest. to an oral history conference, and there I met Columbia people and found out that there was a Columbia oral history program. I came back and told Milton Krantz that I wanted to apply to that program. He said I didn't need it. I could learn everything I needed to learn there at AJC. I insisted and ultimately talked my way into the Columbia program. I'm really glad. It was a hard, rigorous program, and I had chosen to do, for the class work, an oral history of

Elizabeth McCormick who had been a nun and the president of Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart. She told the story of her being in a cloister, her choice to go into a nunnery and her experience as an educating nun. When the encyclical of Pope John changed everything for the church, it certainly changed her attitudes and people's attitudes toward her. During her presidency of Manhattanville it went co-ed and secular (not in that order). It was first secular and then co-ed. She ultimately, left the church, married the treasurer of Manhattanville, Gerry Aaron, who was a Jewish man, and, by the time I met her, was working as the executive at the Rockefeller Family Foundation. It was a fabulous story. I had very little to do with how fabulous an oral history it was, but Columbia took this out of the classroom project category and put it into their regular category, and ipso facto, I became one of their interviewers, and I stayed with them for a number of years and interviewed all kinds of people: Louis Thomas and Willard Gaylin, who was the co-founder of the Hastings Institute. And my last one for Columbia was Gordon Davis, who was then the Commissioner of Parks, then "Billie" [Wilma] Tisch invited me to begin a project at Federation. She was the President. So, I started that project [and] created a volunteer base to do Federation's oral history.

GR: Federation's oral histories meant the oral histories of –

NNT: The organization. Those who – both executive and volunteer – had had an effect on the organization, either through a leadership role or as part of what was deemed an important historic moment. I did that for twenty-five years.

GR: But that was not the only oral history project you were doing at that time.

NNT: No, I did the Salvation Army. I did Pace University. I did the Jewish Museum, but that was an out-growth, really, of the Federation project. I also interviewed various individuals who wanted their mothers or their fathers lives captured.

GR: And you were doing all of this as a volunteer.

NNT: Salvation Army paid me. Pace University paid me. The individuals – I didn't ask for money, but I asked them to contribute to one of my charities. So, I would give them a list of my charities, and they would choose.

GR: You started this while your children were around what ages?

NNT: They were in high school.

GR: After recording these stories, did you become a teller of these stories?

NNT: Well, I wasn't only the recorder. I was also the connector between Federation and my volunteer group, and I was the teacher of the volunteers. We had, at one time, a dozen to fifteen volunteers, and so I had an education program for them.

GR: What's happened to that program?

NNT: Well, the Federation building closed for almost two-and-a-half years for renovation. Before that time, my associate, my secretary, my beloved friend Lillian, who had been with me from the very beginning, was now in her eighties, and it was hard for her. So, Lillian – her last name was Stutman. We spent a year getting the oral history project on microfiche, which, after a lot of research, we found was the most secure way of keeping this material. So, it was all microfiched, and it was put at the Center for Jewish History in three forms: in microfiche form, in paper form, and on the tapes. We duplicated all of the tapes. We duplicated the paper. We kept the duplicates at Federation. Now UJ Federation. But the whole project was put at the Center for Jewish History because they have a reading room. We were to celebrate its arrival and market it, but that never happened because they'd been having financial and political woes. But it's there. And I'm very comfortable with that because they will take responsibility for it, and the Federation has it and still uses it. It's accessible. They just used it recently. Unfortunately, they use it mostly for funerals. They happen to refer to people who had been past leaders. Westchester Reform Temple just had a funeral of one of their

presidents, Rosemary Burden, and I had done her oral history.

GR: Nicki, your oral history career took off with your oral history of Elizabeth McCormick, and I'm wondering whether there were other women that you interviewed that are particularly memorable.

NNT: Well, my beloved Billie Tisch was a very good interview, and since she was the "founding mother", I was very interested in that. I watched Billie and listened to her carefully over the years, but it was in her oral history that she gave me some very interesting insights into leadership. She was very conscious of being a non-professional as President of what was then still Federation – not to spend all of the time she had to spend on this job because it would make it difficult for the person to follow her if the person who followed her was a professional person. And I thought that was so wise and thoughtful, and that came through in the oral history. And Peggy Tischman, my beloved friend, Peggy was the first President of the merged UJA Federation organization. Her oral history is a gold mine for how to take two disparate organizations, each with a distinctive culture, honor them both, and bring them together so that they work effectively together. She would carefully invite people to her home and because she felt that if you broke bread together, you would understand each other better around the conference table.

GR: Now, you've spoken about her as your "beloved" Peggy Tischman. You had a relationship with her before you did the oral history.

NNT: We were on the Wellesley board together, too. She was my "godmother". She took care of me. She looked at me very closely, and she promised me she would tell me when I needed cosmetic surgery.

GR: And she never had the occasion to do that, right.

NNT: No. She died before she felt it was essential.

GR: So, now that you mention the Wellesley board, maybe we can talk a little bit about that. We had talked about your time at Wellesley as a student and then a little bit afterward, since you were the class president for five years and spending some time going to Wellesley events, but how did you end up on the Wellesley board?

NNT: Well, I think, my “little sister” at Wellesley, Bea Strand, was responsible.

NNT: Bea was in my wedding as one of my bridesmaids. We were very close. And Bea became the chair of the Alumni Association at Wellesley. She called me and asked if I would take on the leadership of the anniversary year. It was the 125th. And I said, “Sure.” I had not a clue what it would entail, but she said, “We’re going to celebrate it at different points with a program of some kind,” and it meant designing the program and then traveling it in some form around the country. So, I agreed to do that, and I did it. It was great fun, and it introduced me to a lot of people, and it introduced them to me. So, I think that’s what gave me some visibility within the Alumnae Association circles. I was first an alumnae trustee, which is different from a statutory trustee, so my first six years were as an alum trustee, and that meant I reported to the Alumnae Association regularly. But then the President, then Nan Keohane, asked if I would co-chair the first capital campaign. And after some thought, I agreed to do that. And what usually is a hiatus, and they are very definite about this – an alumna trustee goes off the board at least for a year, sometimes forever. Nan said, “You cannot leave the board for a year. We’re going to find a way to make it continuous.” So that’s why I had eighteen continuous years because I became a statutory trustee right after my term as an alumn trustee.

GR: And this was what year, Nicki, do you remember?

NNT: It was 1986.

GR: Describe what chairing that campaign entailed?

NNT: Well, what I knew about fundraising could have taken up a very, very small matchbook cover. And I said to Nan, “I will do this if we can address what is universal ignorance about women and their fundraising.” I think we have a Center for Research on Women. We should know more than we do about what motivates women to give. And Nan helped identify on the Wellesley campus, Rosanna Hertz. Rosanna Hertz is a sociologist, and she was at the Center for Research at the time, and she was doing a book called More Equal than Others. She was examining couples who earned the same. They were both professionals, in their forties to fifties who earned the same. She asked them questions about how they felt about their discretionary income spending and found some fascinating differences. So, she was really interested in working on a project at Wellesley with me. And together, we designed a questionnaire. And everyone signed off on the questionnaire. Nan Keohane, the president, did. Luella Goldberg, the Board Chair, did. I think we ran it past a few other people, and we wanted to send it out to the alumnae. And that’s where we hit a series of walls because the alumnae suddenly were nervous. “We don’t want to ask – we don’t want to talk to our women about money. This is not what the alumnae association does.” And they would not serve as the vehicle for sending the questionnaire out with the alumnae magazine, which would have been the cheapest way to do it. And there was no Internet. So, the alumnae leadership was going to be meeting at the college. I said, “All right. You won’t send it out, suppose we use the alumni leadership as a focus group, and I talked to them about what we were hoping to learn in the course of this fundraising campaign and ask them to take the questionnaire?” They were lining up, telling me one after another why they couldn’t do this. There wasn’t time. Their schedule was too tight. There was this, that, and the other. And I called Nan, the president, and I said, “I think this is going to be too difficult. I think our alumnae are scared, and if this is the way they are going to be, we are stopped before we can start.” Nan said, “They gave me forty-five minutes to speak to them. I am going to use the time. I will tell the story, and I will distribute the questionnaire.” And she did. And she locked the doors behind them so they couldn’t get out until they had finished filling

out the questionnaire. P.S., no one complained. Everyone filled it out, and we used that – I mean, maybe there were about eighty questionnaires. It wasn't a big group, but it was enough to have some significant understandings, and we used that questionnaire to make the case again and again and again. I found I was suddenly the speaker, and I would speak about the campaign, talk about the campaign, talk about women in a fundraising campaign. And then, after the campaign, when it was successful beyond our wildest dreams, there was even more interest. What did you do? How did you do it? Because Wellesley had raised more money than any other liberal arts college and had raised more money from women per capita than Princeton had from its people or Harvard from its people. It was in the New York Times. It got a lot of attention.

GR: What did the data show that you collected?

NNT: The piece of information that we found most important was what we called "the cookie jar mentality," or "the bag lady mentality." These are all new expressions. But they were beginning to come to the fore. Women were afraid that they would not have money when they were old and that they would be on the streets. They were afraid to give it away, especially if they didn't earn it. There was a difference between the older women who either got it through marriage or inheritance and the young women who were earning what they were giving away.

GR: And the difference was?

NNT: That the ones who earned it said, "If I did it once, I can do it again." And we also learned about the role that the husband played in many of the women's lives – if they had a conventional marriage. We learned this also from Rosanna's book. It had less to do with the amount of money that the couple had and much more to do with their ideas of their marriage contract. The conventional marriage contract or the unconventional. I tried it out in my own home and found exactly this distinction. One of my daughters-in-law was a much bigger earner than my son at the time of their marriage, but she is a

more conventional person, and she had a conventional idea of a family. They put their money in a joint account. My other daughter-in-law, an actress, a teacher, never made anything, she kept her nothing separate from her husband. She had a completely different idea of the marriage contract. They are both strong marriages, so there is not one better than the other one, but they are very, very different. So, when we wanted to ask alumnae for money and talk about Wellesley, we left it up to her whether she wanted to involve her husband or not. We made no assumptions.

GR: And your own philanthropy?

NNT: Did it change over time? I don't think so. I mean, from the onset, what I learned about philanthropy, I learned from my husband, not my father. My father was not a philanthropist. My husband, although from a very poor background, is a philanthropist to the core. So, his generosity of spirit – (it was always from spirit, which was another thing) – well, that gets into issues of gendered philanthropy, but more men will use philanthropy to get from point A to point B. And women do not. But there are many men who also do not, and my husband is one of them. You give because you believe in the cause. And you get pleasure out of doing it. So, he was my mentor, both in giving and in fundraising.

This fundraising pre-dated mine by a lot. He changed the fundraising face of Harvard Business School so much so that there is a case written about the Class of '56, their reunion, which was his – he led that, and he changed the whole model.

GR: So, you were walking in his footsteps.

NNT: Oh, I was definitely watching him very carefully. I picked his brain all of the time. What he gave to his causes he expected to give to mine. And this was not typical. Most women – if they didn't earn it themselves and didn't make the decisions themselves were giving a much smaller gift. So that became part of our case to say, look, if you have a spouse, partner, look at his philanthropy and ask yourself, is what Wellesley is trying to

do less important than what your husband's school is trying to do?

GR: And the impact of what you did was huge, not just for Wellesley, but really turned around fundraising for women's colleges –

NNT: Well, I don't know how long lasting. Every once in a while, there are suggestions of "déjà vu all over again" with women who think that he is the earner, and you are not. At the same time, there are models, and they were coming to the fore for. There was Susan Berresford at Ford Foundation. Joan Spero at Duke Foundation – these were women at major foundations, and we would give the examples of money in women's hands. The corporate women, or the Melinda Gates example with the guy who makes it and the woman who takes the money, puts it in the foundation, and runs the foundation. So, either way, it's women's judgment, women's interests that are now in an important position.

GR: And you were at the forefront of that thinking.

NNT: We added our voice to it and that was my job, to add my voice. And whenever anybody asked me to talk about women and philanthropy, I did because it was a Cause.

GR: As a trustee at Wellesley, you were involved in several other – you were involved in a search, or several searches actually. Do you want to talk about one or two memorable moments?

NNT: Well, there were plenty of controversies. For one of them I was "wearing a Jewish hat." One was a question of a professor; his name is Jerold Auerbach, a history professor. He was invited to do a history of Wellesley for some occasion. He was given access to the files, and he looked through the files, and the result was a very strident story in Commentary Magazine that went back to a time when Wellesley (and every other school) had a quota.

A Jewish quota. And this was not news to anybody, but he brought it forward and suggested that because there were many fewer Jewish students on Wellesley's campus today that the quota was still in operation, which was very misleading, and it was a disservice. And Commentary had its readership, and they were prepared to be agitated, and they were. And so, Peggy Tischman and I and – there were a number of Jews who were trustees at the time – Luella Goldberg, who was either the chair or about to be the chair – we tried to put out some of those fires. There is not much you can do. So that had an ambiguous ending. One of the most exciting during my first six years was when the strategic planning, which is called the Plans and Priorities Committee, announced the end of a study that put the arts and the art museum in the third tier. That was the lowest tier of priorities. And I could see that the museum was in really bad shape, and it was there in the middle of the campus, and I thought this is very odd. And so, I went home – and this was so long ago I typed it out on a typewriter. I didn't have a word processor at the time. And I stood up at the next meeting, and I read my statement about what it means or – I think I put it in the form of a question –what does it mean when a liberal arts college puts an art museum at the bottom of its priorities? And Nan Keohane, to her unending credit, formed a commission to study the role of the arts at Wellesley. They worked for an entire semester, and at the end of the semester, read their report and recommended that it be moved up to first priority, which meant that the arts would be front and center for the fundraising campaign when it got ready. And Nan, by this time, had language to promote the arts at Wellesley. That felt really good.

GR: And then, of course, a significant sum of money was raised for the museum.

NNT: Yes. It was the first big gift. It was five million dollars, and it came from Kathryn Davis, and it went right to the museum.

GR: That was the first big gift for –

NNT: For the campaign.

GR: That's wonderful. Just a little detour, since you talked about typing on a typewriter, and word processors still weren't in place. Over the course of your life, the technologies have changed enormously, and yet you seem to keep up with them pretty well. Have they changed anything in your life, the new technologies?

NNT: Oh, certainly. Haven't they in yours?

GR: But this interview is about you.

NNT: Yes, I know. But the question is, what has changed? Well, the downside is the different mental process. What you write, you can discard. So, the record that you leave behind is a polished record, and it doesn't show your thinking process. That's number one. Number two is a lot of the communication that we are now engaged in does not have the benefit of careful consideration. It's much more "top of the head." Whereas that whole exercise of working with various drafts – a lot of time went into it. A lot of thought. Very different from if I had gone home, as I would now, I'd think about it, and then I would send off an email. I wouldn't deliver it in person.

GR: So, you delivered your letter in person to the board?

NNT: I read it. I read it at the next board meeting. I crafted it and read it. Well, I had to dampen down the emotion, but I think people probably saw that I was emotionally involved in this question.

GR: But that's so interesting what you were saying. We were also talking about the theatrical power of communication.

NNT: It's not even theatrical. It's emotional. The emotional content when you speak it or even when you see it in your handwriting is very different from when you send it online. Which is not to say that email does not have also some wonderful attributes. I love being able to say thank you quickly because, if you do it well, you can convey your

excitement. It's timely. It's immediate. So, it has its very, very good sides.

GR: But your involvement in Wellesley is, in some ways, totally predictable from your time at Wellesley and your love at the college, but you've also taken leadership roles in other places, and I think some of them are more surprising, or perhaps not. But I'd love for you to talk about them a little bit. Maybe we can start with Colonial Williamsburg.

NNT: Well, Colonial Williamsburg was the result of Nan Keohane's reaching out to me after she chose someone else to be the chair of the board. And I know because people told me – there were many people who were aggrieved at the choice and, very possibly, made their grievances known to Nan. Anyway, shortly after, Nan came and said, "I would like to interest you in a wonderful board," which was Colonial Williamsburg. She was on the board at the time. I knew a few of the people on the Board, but I was one of the few people on that board. It was full of really notable people. However, because I was not a Supreme Court Justice like Sandra Day O'Connor or a university President (Nan, by then, had gone to Duke), I could chair a lot of things there. They asked me to, and I did. So, I chaired the Educational Policy Program and Policy Committee, which was the juicy one. And I was one of the four members of the search for the president, the only woman. And I co-chaired their campaign. So, it was really fun. And Harold gets grumpy whenever he thinks about my not having been Chair of the Wellesley Board, but I remind him that I had done that, I would not have had Colonial Williamsburg and it was very interesting. And I learned a lot from it.

GR: It had to be completely different from being on the Board of Trustees of a college?

NNT: Well, yes and no. It is an educational institution. It's a research institution. The people on that Board were serious about attending. The attendance was invariably 100 or 99 percent. Much like Wellesley. People never said no to a job. They took their board responsibilities very seriously. There was full and respectful discussion. And one of the things that they did at that board (which I then brought to Wellesley) was to spend

a half an hour before ending every board meeting just going around the table and asking if there was anything that we should reflect upon that hasn't been talked about or should be thought about more seriously for the next board meeting.

GR: And did you play a role in the transformation of Williamsburg? And by transformation, I mean from a relatively limited, one-sided, or partial history into a more inclusive history.

NNT: Oh, no. No more than just being an enthusiastic encourager of that. But we knew this was the way to go. It was trying to bring itself out of the deep South mentality into a larger, broader, more pluralistic understanding of history.

GR: That the full board was committed to.

NNT: Oh yes. Yes. Well, most board was certainly committed to it.

GR: From Colonial Williamsburg to the Jewish Women's Archive and HUC, it feels like another big leap.

NNT: Well, not really. They're all educational institutions. WNYC is an educational institution. Each one appeals to smart people. The Archive – well, I was introduced to the Archive via Wellesley because Wellesley, as you very well know, invited me to tell its founding mother, Gail Reimer, why Wellesley could not have a Jewish Women's Archive at Wellesley. That was my job. To come to dinner and say we couldn't do that. And that's how you and I met and, if I remember correctly, I said – I said somewhere after the dinner, well, "Wellesley can't do this for the reasons we talked about, but it's a really good idea, and I will help you if I can." Is that the way you remember it too?

GR: Yes.

NNT: And that's how we began.

GR: So both presidents at Wellesley that you worked under were responsible for your involvement in one organization or another. Who was responsible for your getting involved with Hebew Union College?

NNT: Barbara Friedman.

GR: And how did that come about?

NNT: Well, she had been on the board for a long time, and she kept saying, “Would you join?” And I kept saying, no, no, no. And then she said, “I want you to come to dinner. I want you to meet the new president and some of our new faculty.” She asked me a long time in advance. And so, I came to dinner, and she seated me next to David Ellenson, with whom I fell in love because he was a feminist, a genuine, 150 percent feminist. It wasn’t showbiz. We have a Geiger counter for false feminists, and he was the real thing. And there were eight new faculty members at the dinner, all women, and one was smarter than the next. So, I could see that this was a place where things were happening, and I was beginning to be convinced that Reform Judaism is the most important denomination. It’s the yin and yang of Judaism. If Orthodoxy is to hold on to everything of the past, Reform is to connect Judaism with today and with tomorrow. And I was also convinced that Dave Ellenson was the person to do this. So, it was one of those “if not now, when?” moments. And I’m glad I said yes. It’s sometimes dysfunctional, but it does important work, and change in these institutions happens slowly.

GR: And is that a very different board experience?

NNT: Totally. There is no model for good governance. So, it is not good governance.

GR: How did you learn to be a productive board member?

NNT: Well, Wellesley assigned me early on to be Wellesley's representative to the Association for Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities. I did that for a lot of years, and that was all about governance. So, I became very knowledgeable about issues of governance. And then there was a great deal of interest in AGB, as it was called, cloning itself for the not-for-profit world. And so AGB did that, and they began something called the National Center for Nonprofit Boards. And AGB put me on that board when it started. I'm learning more and more and more about how you start organizations, the difference between those that are national. That was huge learning – so I became the person at Wellesley who knew the governance stuff.

GR: And what did you learn from oral history?

NNT: How to ask a question that would get an honest answer. How to ask it in a way that will not be contentious or confrontational but that shows a sincere interest in the response. The importance of body language. The assumption that everybody has a story. Maybe not more than one but at least one. I used to tell the volunteers "if you become an oral historian, you'll never be bored. You'll be able to sit next to anyone and find out that person's story."

GR: Now, am I correct that the Jewish Women's Archive was the first board that you chaired? I know you're now chairing WNYC's board.

NNT: Right. They were simultaneous.

GR: So, let's talk about each of those. I remember that it took some convincing to get you to chair the board but, fortunately for the Jewish Women's Archive, you did agree to take that on.

NNT: You're asking me why I said yes. Because I knew that you and I would work well together.

GR: And we did.

NNT: And we do. But that's important because I've observed a lot of partnerships, and almost all of them were healthy ones. It isn't that the Chair and the Executive have to always agree, nor should they always have the same skills, but they should be able to make up for each other's deficiencies in a way that works for the organization. And that sometimes requires some fine-tuning. That was a big thing. If I had not respected you or in WNYC's case, Laura Walker, and felt that each of you were heading in a very important direction, doing important work, in an interesting time and heading in a good direction with the skills to do what's possible or what had potential to be part of that is very attractive.

GR: And is there anything that you wished you had accomplished at the archive that you didn't –?

NNT: I may not be sitting in the chair, but I'm still part of the organization, so, I don't have a sense of time running out because I see the archive as only getting stronger. The board is more diverse in age and geography, but their interests are universal interests. They are bringing that to bear on the mission of the organization. I intend to be a part of what's next.

GR: Well, that is wonderful to hear. And do you give some thought to what else is next in the years ahead?

NNT: Well, there are certain boards I will always have some role with, I assume. I think that once you're a Chair, you become Chair Emeritus, and you can just stay on and try not to get in the way but be helpful when you can. The same is true of public radio, about which I care very deeply. I had been asked to consider some other boards, which I will possibly.

GR: I'd like to talk a little bit about women's leadership. As a leader yourself, and a board member at Wellesley, you served under two very different College Presidents and probably had very different feelings about their leadership styles, about what you learned from each of them.

NNT: They were very different, which, again, does not mean one was less than. Actually, probably if they had been reversed, neither Diana Walsh nor Nan Keohane would have been so successful. I asked someone on her senior staff who had been there for both Diana and Nan what differences she felt. And she said, "Well, Nan would go around the table and ask people's opinions on the issue. She would listen carefully, hear them out, and then she would make the decision based on what she heard. Diana was a consensus builder. She waited for the consensus – she's from a Quaker background. She waited for the consensus to come from the group." There were those who were restive of that approach at first, found it time-consuming, but in the long run, those who were part of that consensus-building exercise were totally invested in the decision in a way that the Nan Keohane model had not created. So, these are two very different ways, and I think Nan's is closest to a healthy corporate model. Nothing wrong with it. But I wonder if, in a multi-constituent organization such as a college, where you have such different agenda – you've got the students wanting one thing and the faculty wanting another thing and the alumnae wanting another thing and the administration wanting a fourth thing – and if you don't have these large conversations and provide for them, as time-consuming as they are (it's what Diana used to call "the work before the work", which also is one of the things that I now take with me at all times). That upfront work at a moment of a big decision is well worth it, however much time it takes. And there will always be some who are really impatient saying, "Are we ever going to make a decision?" Faculty are notorious for loving to be on the outside and to gripe about any decision that's made. And in two instances – one was for the search for the new president, and the other was for the building of the Wang Center at Wellesley, which was the first new building to go on the campus since the sports center – twenty-plus years

had intervened. The College provided for different focus groups, opportunities, not focus groups – invitations to all the faculty to come together and talk about what they felt the next president should be. We took copious notes and included that language in the announcement, some of the language. And they did the same around a new building, what it should be – a new college center. What should it look like? What should it feel like? How would you see yourself in there? And they loved to talk, and it was very helpful. I learned that a leader should be wary of voices or people that see themselves outside and find ways to bring them in. It could be trouble down the road. What I also learned, and I learned this from Diana and from you and from all good leaders, is not taking the credit, being very generous with giving credit, and somehow that's more important than it seems.

GR: Is that a woman's thing? Is that a problematic woman's thing?

NNT: I don't think it's problematic. I've heard from Harold of more leaders who have great difficulty in sharing credit. So perhaps it is.

GR: I want to go back to something you said much earlier in this conversation about the importance of reading Carol Gilligan's "In a Different Voice". Is there a different voice of women's leadership? Would you say consensus-building is part of that?

NNT: Consensus-buidling, I used to say, is certainly one manifestation, but now that we've learned a little bit more about how male and female brains are different, women have an easier time working within a larger context. Perhaps coming out of our days in front of the cave, when we had to scan the entire horizon for marauders while our men folk went out, focused on getting the prey for dinner. And stirring the pots and holding the babies while protecting. So, we do know that there is a brain difference, and I do find

that women bring to bear on decision-making a larger context and seem more willing to entertain scenarios of the future. What will happen if? If we do this, then what? Whereas, if we read the newspapers and we see what's happening in current events, it seems to be the last question on our leader's minds – what next. Whereas, when we're sitting around an organizational table, that's a large amount of what we talk about isn't it?

GR: We can multitask.

NNT: We can't be annoyed if the fellow can only read his newspaper and cannot hear you. He cannot hear you. He's reading his newspaper. Whereas we can read a newspaper. We can also listen to background noise because we're listening for a child's cry. So, I guess I think that makes for a very different organizational behavior.

GR: And do you have heroes? Who are the leaders you most admire? Present or past.

NNT: I mentioned Billie because I've had opportunity to watch her up close and personal.

GR: This is Billie Tisch.

NNT: Billie Tisch. What I admire so, is her way of being firm and soft at the same time and saying something so graciously but is still true and wise. It's hard to put in words, but I watch her very carefully.

Susan Schlechter and I, a number of years ago, when she was getting her PhD, had a conversation about –

GR: And Susan Schlechter is –

NNT: A board member and a friend of mine. She's a board member of the Jewish Women's Archive. And she was getting her Ph.D. in Education at NYU, and her professor said to her, "Beware the tyranny of tact." And Susan reported this back to me,

and it started a long conversation because I was puzzled. I said, “How can tact ever be a tyrant?” Tactlessness stops a conversation in its tracks. If the whole point of discussion, is to move an idea ahead, then tact seems to be imperative. And we kept going back and forth, and I said, “Go ask that professor what on earth she was talking about.” And she did, and she came back, and she said that she felt that tact sometimes silenced women’s voices. And so those moments that are most fascinating to me are the moments where you have a really difficult decision or discussion and to find the words – to put it in a frame so that everybody can discuss respectfully is not only leadership – I mean, this skill is essential. It’s essential on public radio, which is one of the reasons I love it so – to get to hard questions without being offensive. To get to authentic questions without being contentious and nasty and have an honest discussion. In the best of places, which the Archive is, which WNYC is, which Colonial Williamsburg was and certainly, Wellesley is, honest discussion goes on respectfully and injures no one in the process. So, it’s not necessarily leadership, although leadership helps that to happen by helping to create the environment.

GR: What about athletic listening? That’s a phrase that I’ve heard you use a lot.

NNT: So many of these thoughts also come from oral history. Athletic listening, I think, was urged upon me at Columbia. Because some of the students were talking about how exhausted they were after their interview, and we were told, well, you’re supposed to be tired. Your body is involved. Your mind is involved. I think the professor coined the phrase “athletic listening”.

GR: Do you see any Jewish values in forming the ways we think about leadership or volunteer activity? Or philanthropy, for that matter?

NNT: Well, certainly philanthropy. Philanthropy is really Jewish. It’s one of the pillars of tzedakah. For the right reasons. The other part – I don’t think I’m enough of a scholar. I am sure that there is great wisdom in Tanakh that could inform leadership discussions,

but I'm not enough of a student to say.

GR: I suspect you will be. We only have a few minutes left. I'd love you to say a little bit about what the experience of grandparenting has meant to you.

NNT: It's all of the fun and none of the work, and it's given me a new appreciation for boys. And each boy is so different from his sibling or cousin. We have poets. We have athletes. We have musicians.

GR: How many do you have?

NNT: Eight boys. And the age range is from six to eighteen. And then the rest of the seven – there are three thirteen-year-olds. They are all having bar mitzvahs this year. And they've been a joy because they are so close. They play together in a clump. We call them our testosterone clump. And each one is nice, loving to the other. We've never heard a harsh word, ever, to the cousins when they play together. Our children are wonderful parents. Different. But wonderful parents. And I've learned a lot about parenting (which never was a verb before) while watching my kids.

GR: Do they come to you with questions about being a parent?

NNT: I don't tend to give advice because I don't think they need it. I say I learn from them. I'll give you a for instance. We were hiking in Estes Park, and the three boys were hiking along with us in their little hiking books and so on.

GR: And Estes Park is where?

NNT: In Colorado. And there was a rushing river just to the left of us. A very steep drop and a rushing river. And my inclination was to say, "Ooh, be careful, fellows." I didn't, but I really wanted to. Then I heard my daughter-in-law say, "Okay, guys, what three things would you do if you were to fall in the water?" So, they began to think, and they

said, “Well, one, you take off your heavy boots, and two is you grab for something stable,” and they struggled with the third and finally, Cathy said, “Well, you would yell.” And they said, “Oh, that’s right. You would yell.” And I said to Cathy, “That was a brilliant moment as a parent,” and she said, “Well, what we hope, since we know we can’t be with them all the time, is that each has a helpful voice in his own head, and that’s our role, to put that helpful voice in his head.”

GR: That’s wonderful.

NNT: And I thought, that’s really pretty splendid. Isn’t that what all education is about? Is to put good voices into people’s heads?

GR: And how do you see yourself communicating the things you care about to your grandchildren?

NNT: Well, I think readiness is all. Boys – especially teenage boys, have lots of hormones. If I do anything smart as a grandparent, it’s try – not always successful, I’m sure, but try to meet them at the place they’re ready to be met. So, the eighteen-year-old who is now going off to college is very concerned about college. I know he is. I don’t feel that talking to him about his concerns at this juncture, until he has lived with them and confronted them and has succeeded in some way, is the right conversation. So, instead, we talked about the MacBook which he’s going to be taking to college, and he showed me what he could do on it, which is awesome. And it was where he was. I want our times together, and I do this very, very athletically – Passover, Thanksgiving, just coming for dinner – I want them to be really fun experiences. I don’t want them to be boring, and we work very hard. That has governed all of our traditional get-togethers to make sure they are not boring.

GR: And you come together for Passover, and they all have a good time?

NNT: And they all have a good time. But it takes a lot of work.

GR: And fun is a pretty important category for you, Nicki.

NNT: Yes, it is, and one of the most fun things is talking. You can ask anybody. But also we are a game-playing family. We play a lot of games.

GR: Board games?

NNT: Sometimes. Games are wonderful ways of bringing people who are not members of the family in, and music. Our kids are musical. Having fun is a way of addressing the "Undertoad". Do you remember Garp? And since we all live with the Undertoad, the way that I address it is to make sure when the moment is good that you acknowledge it. It can be brief, but you still have to acknowledge it. And fun is one of those ways of acknowledging the moment.

GR: So, this has been great fun.

NNT: It's been fun for me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]