

Phyllis Dreifus Interview, August 2016

J: June

P: Phyllis

23:32

J: Hello

P: Hello.

J: Hi, is this Phyllis?

P: Yes.

J: Hi Phyllis, how are you today?

P: Ok, how can I help you?

J: This is June Hussey in Tucson. And I wanted to thank you for volunteering to be interviewed for The Watermark. Did they give you some instructions about what this call is about?

P: No, they didn't.

J: Oh, let me do that for you. We at Watermark Retirement Communities, which manages The Fountains at Millbrook, do interviews with residents all over the country. And we like to learn a little bit about them and what kind of process they went through to make their decision to move to a retirement community. And then what we do is we share that story with other folks out there who may be just in the beginning of their own decision-making process. So does that sound ok to you? It'll take about 10 or 15 minutes of your time, is that ok?

P: It's fine.

J: Very good, well, thank you very much. I'm sorry if there was some miscommunication about it.

P: No, I just didn't know quite what the call was about at this time.

J: Ok so basically I'm going to be asking you some questions and I'm going to let you do most of the talking. And just to let you know, we are recording the conversation so we can produce a transcript of it and then if you should say something along the way, however, that is too personal that you don't want to make known as part of the transcript, just say that right then and there. Say, "Hey, please don't include this part." Ok?

P: Ok.

J: Ok, we'll do it that way. Ok Phyllis, so it's pretty easy. If you would like to begin by just telling me a little bit about yourself, maybe you want to say where you were born or grew up, something about your family, your interests, that kind of thing and I'll get into my questions, ok?

P: Ok.

J: Alright, go ahead.

P: I was born in New York City at Fifth Avenue hospital. Both my parents were American-born and a moderate Jewish family. Lived in the Bronx for a little while and then two brothers bought a home in Brooklyn. It was a two-family house on a moderately used street and was surrounded by families and small children so I had

plenty of neighbors to play with. Went to a local public school 217 on Coney Island Avenue and Newkirk. It was a modern building. My mother passed when I was five and so after a year or so I was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Williamsburg. We lived at 210 Hughes St. and I went to a public school there where there was an outhouse that we used during recess. And not a happy situation having come from a modern school with indoor plumbing. I was there for a year before my father invited them to come and live in the apartment that they had on Ditmas Avenue. It was a three-bedroom apartment and as he said, "I don't have to sleep in a basement." I could be part of the family too. And so that's what happened. My brother, who is five years older than me, was able to go back to his friends on East 9th Street and we were all happier there. I slept in one bedroom with my grandmother who was part of our family there. And I still remember she took a nightcap of whiskey each night before she'd go to sleep. The whiskey was between the bed and the wall. It was a happier situation and a matter of fact, before that I had a grandmother living with us, too. I learned how to treat my elders and to care about them. I hope to heaven then I've taught my children the same thing.

J: Yeah.

P: Now, I'm on the receiving end and they are the leaders. As I said, I went to a nice school and went to a junior high on 16th Avenue which was a 15-minute walk in the opposite direction. And graduated from there to go to Girls' Commercial High School, and graduated in 1947 just in time to go to work for a war industry business as their bookkeeper. Stayed with them for a long while. And when the war was over and this soldier named Morty Levine was retired from the Army he came to work as a trimmings buyer for the business. By that time I had gone to work for a ready-to-wear dress house and Morty came to work there as a trimmings buyer until he could get back into school because it was the middle of the semester. We became friendly since he didn't eat lunch, we sat in the office and chatted. We spent some time at the beach that summer and by the end of the summer I was engaged. He never did make it back to school. He went to work for a brother-in-law and became part of their business. He sprayed acoustical ceilings and at that time they used asbestos. And eventually that is what shortened his life. We married when I was 21. I remember being sent home to get my birth certificate because I didn't look my age and we had a very interesting and fun marriage. We have three children and went along doing the usual things that young couples do. We were busy at our synagogue and involved in Parent Teacher Association et cetera. After children grew and changed they each went off to college. At that time a family could afford the college fees and since they went usually one at a time. One point there were two at a time but somehow or another we managed. My son graduated and had not served in the Army at the time and so he felt he owed the country some of his time and joined the service to America and was sent to Alaska as an attorney for the Eskimos. I used to ask him what kind of problems did they have and he would say, "Well, first of all, they are quick to be involved in fisticuffs so they end up in jail or alcoholism." And sometimes something nice like arranging for grandparents to adopt grandchildren because the parents are no longer around. He had an interesting life up there but a cold one and eventually after serving three years he decided to go to a warmer climate and he re-upped but was sent to Hawaii.

J: Those are two extremes, huh?

P: He warmed up. I got to visit Hawaii.

J: Nice.

P: He became very involved with photography and flowers and fauna of the islands and actually he should've become a photographer for National Geographic but having earned a law degree he stuck with that. He's still involved with Hawaii in that fashion. My other two children were daughters and both have married and started families so I have three grandchildren.

J: Nice.

P: One of them lives in Jersey so I go to visit New Jersey every weekend.

J: Wow.

P: So far they aren't tired of me so I get to visit every weekend and watch the kids grow up.

J: Nice, so from your childhood to when you got married where did you raise your kids, what town were you living in?

P: I was still in Brooklyn. My husband was a Brooklyn boy too and so we stayed in Brooklyn and the kids went to state colleges. What else can I tell you?

J: Let me ask you where were you living just before you moved to The Fountains at Millbrook?

P: My daughter and her husband lived in Poughkeepsie. I used to come up every Friday and stay over Saturday. And Sunday go over to the Catskills to see if my house was still there and then drive back to Brooklyn. And after a while that became difficult time wise and the kids suggested that I sell the house in Brooklyn and move up to Poughkeepsie. At the time I had retired and was going to school on a program that they called My Turn and for \$75 you could take as many credits as you liked. My son challenged me to go for degree at which point he said, "I will come to graduation." Well, I had two grandsons at graduation but my son couldn't make it. He was called in court at the time. I got my degree in 2002.

J: Good for you.

P: Having done that I followed my kid's suggestion and moved up to Poughkeepsie and sold my Brooklyn home and lived on my own in a little ranch house until this year. And to celebrate my 90th year I moved into The Fountains because through the years I had been to The Fountains with different programs in the spring and fall. I had enjoyed the programs. I knew about The Fountains and how to get there and how to get home. When my kids prevailed upon me they had found The Fountains on their own and thought it would be a good place for me at this point in my life and subsequently they delivered me back here and they took me to the apartment, all my furniture was there. It was now home. They had moved me in over the weekend without my realizing it.

J: Nice.

P: And that's where I arrived.

J: So you've been there how long now?

P: Since January 30th.

J: Ok.

P: I'm still a newbie.

J: Yes so tell me about moving in and meeting people. How was that process for you?

P: Incredibly easy. First of all I moved in and everybody knew my name. I never did figure that one out. Everybody I met in the hall and said good morning to knew my name. How is that possible, I wondered? However, now I realize that when new people

come in one or two at a time it's not too bad but really I couldn't imagine how everybody on the staff knew my name. It was very friendly and very warm. Everybody here has been incredibly nice. I guess that's why they're in the jobs they hold because they're people persons.

J: So describe a typical day for you there. What kinds of things do you enjoy doing?

P: Well, I usually check out the program for the day and invariably, well, I start with exercise at 10:30 every day. I feel that's what keeps me moving and walking. And whatever else is on the program, whether it's current events or improvising or theater or a movie or a speaker. Whatever it is, I manage to attend and it keeps my interest involved. It keeps my brain involved as well as my body and I think that's what keeps me going.

J: Excellent. What advice might you have for people who aren't living in a situation like you are and may not have access to those kinds of opportunities? What would you say to someone that maybe has never visited a retirement community?

P: Well, frankly, if my children hadn't gotten me involved I would not have even thought about it. I was still driving. I had my car. I was driving to different activities, whether they were at school or at The Fountains or at the local synagogue or at the JCC. I was looking for activities that involve my mind and kept me going. I think that you have to have the opportunity to do these things and get involved because you can. I suspect since I no longer can drive that I would have been in a very depressed position if my kids hadn't thought about it and made the arrangements for me.

J: Nice.

P: I wasn't thinking in terms of the long way down and being at an age where I couldn't drive. When the day came that I hesitated at an intersection and realized that I could be a problem for other drivers, I handed the keys to my son-in-law and have never driven the car since. I realized that I could be the cause of an accident at that point and it was the right decision for me. I miss being less independent but I'm lucky I have a couple of kids that will fill in for me and do some chauffeuring so that I don't have to give up things that I enjoy.

J: And what about the transportation provided by The Fountains? Do you take advantage of that?

P: You know I haven't. Until this point I haven't needed that kind of attention so I really haven't looked into it. I do understand that they go out twice a week for shopping if you want to go with them. I'm involved in something I started years ago, a group of us that wanted to use the Yiddish language and practice with each other. We had all learned it from grandmas and wanted to continue to acknowledge the language. And so we meet on Tuesdays once a week. I had a neighbor, one of the members of that group lives nearby in Verbena and he picks me up and one of the other members of the group here at The Fountains and he drives us into Poughkeepsie to the JCC where we meet with five or six other people and we continue the group that we started years ago.

J: That's nice, very nice.

P: I'm very lucky because I didn't have to leave at that point. Of course if I'm really desperate I'm going to start one here at The Fountains.

J: That sounds like a fun class.

P: Yes it is. It's interesting that each of us learn at the heed of our grandparents. It's a very warm thing to acknowledge.

J: I think we've covered a lot of territory and I know that I'm going to have another interview hop on the line here in a couple of minutes. Is there anything else that you can think of that you think people ought to know about what retirement community living is all about?

P: Well, the most interesting part for me is the fact every hour of the day there is something happening and if you're interested, if you have the strength, get out of your apartment and move around and go to these different conversations, discussions, music and whatever it may be. There are so many opportunities for things, for instance I haven't painted or drawn or sculpted in years now. Those were things I did after retirement and now I have the results of those activities and I have the opportunity to continue them if I like.

J: Nice.

P: But people have to be aware of that, that without being able to drive to activities when you're at The Fountains you can walk to them. And there's something happening all day long and I take advantage of that.

J: Well, very good. Well, I think that just about wraps up the conversation and I thank you very much Phyllis for sharing such a beautiful story with us today. It's really lovely to have you living at The Fountains, thank you.

P: Well, thank you.

J: Well, you have a wonderful day there in beautiful Millbrook. It's such a lovely place and I hope the weather's nice today.

P: It is. I'll be out there.

J: Ok, you take care, thanks again.

P: Thank you, bye-bye.

J: Bye-bye.