

**CELEBRATING OUR STORIES**  
**Jewish Life in Ann Arbor**

**Carol Amster and Michael Brooks**  
**Recorded April 22, 2013**

**0:40-1:00**

*Michael:* Well it always seems with good friends that they have known each other forever, but your memory may be better than mine. What's the first time we met, Carol?

*Carol:* Ah. The first time I actually met you to talk to you was up in the old Hillel building when you became the director.

**1:38-2:08**

*Carol:* I knew about you because you were the pied-piper of the Jewish students of the University of Michigan. That's how you were described to me. You had a following of students. You didn't have any title but you had a following of Jewish students who idolized you. They were all hoping that they would follow you to Hillel to make Hillel a stronger organization than it was at the time. And lo and behold, it happened.

**9:27-11:15**

*Carol:* . . . Ann Arbor was my first venture into the Midwest. I did not come directly from New York. I lived in Massachusetts for a number of years. I lived in Maine for a year. At the end of that year my husband and I—he was changing jobs. He had an opportunity to come to work for Ford Motor Company and we had an opportunity to live in Dearborn or you know, wherever else Ford Motor Company employees live. And they said, "No, you should live in Ann Arbor. It's a cosmopolitan city." This was in 1964. So cosmopolitan city, I thought, "Terrific. I can go live in Ann Arbor."

Well this was 1964 and this was Ann Arbor in 1964. There was—you could get a bagel on Sunday because there was a market called Ralph's and Ralph would go into Detroit every Sunday and he would buy bagels from the Detroit Jewish community and bring them to Ann Arbor. There would be a line outside of Ralph's Market. Many people coming from church, you could tell by the way they were dressed, to buy bagels from Ralph's Market.

You could get the *New York Times* on Sunday right kitty-corner at—the store is still there. It's called the Blue Front. They would get the Sunday *Times*. There was one Chinese restaurant in town. Its name was Leo Ping's.

**12:09-13:26**

*Carol:*

... Beth Israel Synagogue at that time, as I was, in the Hillel building. It shared the Hillel building. I have one favorite story about that. The first high holidays I spent at Beth Israel Synagogue in the Hillel building we must have joined late and we couldn't get tickets upstairs. You didn't have to pay for the tickets but you had to be a member. We couldn't get tickets so they put us in the basement for Rosh Hashanah services and our rabbi—the rabbi was piped into a large speaker which stood in front of us. And that that was the rabbi.

When you had to stand, you were standing up for this speaker. This big wood speaker. It was surreal. It truly was very amusing. Fortunately we didn't have to put up with that for too long because eventually, not long after, the present building of Beth Israel was built.

**22:41-22:22 1:41**

*Carol:*

... we did become a federated community which was also a big brouhaha. Lot of people didn't wanna do that because that was a threat also to what was existing. Then my goodness, somebody, Chuck Newman by name, said, "Well if we wanted to have a community center—if somebody wanted to have a community center couldn't they just go out and raise money and make a community center?" I said, "No" because I was executive director of this organization and we did things with process. Well process was killing us.

And guess what? Chuck Newman did it. He went out and he said, "Okay, I'm raising money" and he and four or five other guys got together. Then they had focus groups to sell the idea but it was an idea that started and that has remained and has been a tremendous cohesive force here. We are a tremendously different community than we were in 1964 when I first got here or when I came back in 1978. This is a very exciting place to live. We fortunately have attracted a lot—many more Jewish people who want to be Jewish and look for ways to express their Jewishness which has made all of these organizations and ideas flourish and it's a great place to live. Both secularly and religiously.

**24:59-26:17**

*Michael:* One of the curious things about this community is, I'm sure you know, is it was one of the first Jewish communities in the state of Michigan.

*Carol:* Yes.

*Michael:* It had been very early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The oldest Jewish cemetery in Michigan was in Ann Arbor at the site now of the Rackham Graduate Building. Then it sort of died out for some time and in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as I'm sure you know, Osias Zwerdling's home was the place where the Jewish community came for Shabbat services.

*Carol:* Right.

*Michael:* He was really a remarkable man. He owned a business downtown. In fact I was told sort of hyperbolically when I came here that if you threw a nickel up the air there was a good chance it will land on Osias Zwerdling property. When the Day School was being considered I was on the committee that was doing that. The question was what should we call it? They wanted to name it for Osias Zwerdling.

*Carol:* Really?

*Michael:* Someone said, "But if we name it for Osias Zwerdling people will think we don't need any funding."

*Carol:* Right.

*Michael:* They'll assume that he did it. I said, "Well why don't you call it the Michael Brooks School? No one will believe for a moment that you have the funds to do this." In a very short period of time things really turned around.

**28:42-29:56**

*Carol:* This is a great place to live. To be a Jew and to live here, it is great. Just briefly the other side of that is I have served in the secular community on a number of boards of directors. The Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation among others. And I've never

felt that I was the token Jew. I may have been the only Jew on the board at the time but that's not why I was there.

I don't think like in many other places there is an underlying feeling you know that's just waiting to burst forward of anti-Semitism. I think that we can be as assimilated as we want to be in this community and can be on both sides. Can have a Jewish presence and be active Jewishly and can be active in the non-Jewish community as well and accepted for who we are and what we can contribute. I think that's pretty remarkable.