

Transcript – Carol Canner, Class of 1959 – Second Interview

Narrator: Carol Canner
Interviewer: Amanda Knox
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Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I'm the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is Wednesday, November 18, 2020. It's 9:30 in the morning, and I am here with another Brown University alum who would like to share her story about this COVID-19 global pandemic. And I invite you to introduce yourself now.

Carol [Gjelsvik] Canner: Thank you. My name is Carol Gjelsvik, I was in the class of 1959 at Pembroke as it was called then. And in my senior year I met my husband, Atle Gjelsvik, who was studying to get a PhD in mechanical engineering at Brown. [inaudible] something then called [1:00] Friday Club, which I didn't realize was probably illegal for me to be at because there were all these older men there and I wasn't supposed to be there. But I didn't think about that until later. We, we met there and later we got together again. And then I got a Master of Arts in Teaching at Harvard the following year. And in June of 1960 we got married. And he died in 2020. March 13, Friday the 13th. And we would have been married for 60 years [2:00] in June. It was a good marriage. A very good marriage, I think. We have two children. Our daughter, Annie, is a professor and was just made the Director of the Masters of Public Health Program at Brown. She has spent almost all her adult life at Brown. She was an EMT and then she became finally the Director of the Emergency Medical Service. And then she went into public health and eventually got a PhD and now she's a professor and now the Director of this Masters of Public Health Program, which is in the news, she was in the news yesterday.

But to stick more to me, although my children [3:00] certainly are me, and this topic. So, my husband fell in September of 2020 [*sic* 2019] and broke his hip. And when I think back on it, I think he was sick for a long time before that. Let me make clear from the beginning that he didn't die of COVID he died of metastasized prostate cancer. And though I believe he was getting all this, I think, I don't know the name of it, PSA tests? You know what the name is?

Anyway, the cancer tests for prostate somehow, they never picked it up. And so, when he fell, it was discovered that he had metastasized prostate [4:00] cancer, and he had surgery on his hip, which worked very well. And first he was in rehab for a week and then he came home. That was in September, and he died at home in March. March 13, as I said before. It's sort of funny because his birthday is September 14, but actually, he actually was born on the 13th of September 1933, but his mother didn't want him to be born on the 13, Friday, oh, both of them were Friday the 13th. So, she moved it. And he was born so late that she was able to get him born on record [5:00] Friday, Saturday the 14th. And I like, it strikes me that the Friday the 13th finally caught up with him. He died at home in his sleep.

Leading up to this time, life was, I guess what you'd say normal for someone who was dying. People came in and visited him and visited me. We had moved to Rhode Island in the late 1990s, partly because our daughter was living here. And we bought a house on the water in Wickford, which was always one of our dreams. I wanted to have a house I could swim off [6:00] of. But actually, I can't swim off this property because it's near a mill and the mill put too much mercury and other bad chemicals into the water many, many years ago, and that's still in the mud here. And he wanted a big garage. He liked cars. I just got rid of his 1925 Model T Ford, which was in the garage. He wanted a big rush for his cars and his tools and he got that. We, I don't know if I'm actually going to be able to talk for a whole hour about this.

AK: Well, can I ask you, in this time, kind of, so he fell in September 2019 and then you're kind of going through those –

CC: Oh, yes. [7:00] You're right.

AK: You're kind of going through those motions up into the new year. Do you remember when you first started hearing about Coronavirus?

CC: Not really too much. I mean, I heard about it in China, but it seemed really distant and not at all important to my life, which was very involved with caring for my husband, as he got worse and less able to take care of himself. And so, I really didn't think about it, I didn't pay any attention to it whatsoever. And I don't remember the news paying much attention to it either as

far as the United States was concerned, as far as anybody was worrying about it here. It never, [8:00] what happened the day, the day or the day after he died, which was the beginning of social distancing. Never ever, ever crossed my mind in my wildest dreams.

AK: So even, did you have a moment prior to him passing away where it felt like it was becoming more serious in the United States or were, did you just have so much on your plate that even before that point in March, it wasn't even really kind of crossing your mind at all?

CC: No, it was not in my range of thoughts. Yeah, I was pretty involved in the day to day work of caring for him and, and having respite from that mentally from visiting with people that came, talking to them about life in general. [9:00] I don't remember anybody ever saying that it was coming or talking about it or being a topic of conversation.

AK: So when, you certainly don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but when he passed away were you still attempting to make funeral arrangements or some kind of arrangement in that way, or was it clear from that very moment that that wasn't going to be an option?

CC: You cut out every so often. I'm Jewish, and my husband was Norwegian and we're both pretty much, I would say, atheists, and we hadn't given a lot of thought to what would, to death. I don't know why, to exactly what would happen. We both agreed [10:00] that we wanted to be cremated. I've given my body to Brown Medical School when I die if they want it. But we hadn't, hadn't thought much about a funeral or what would happen. I should add that there were nine of us in my immediate family, my, my daughter and her family of four, and my son and his family of three. And we all live in Rhode Island, and they were all frequent visitors during the, during the time, my husband's name was Atle, when Atle was sick. And I didn't stop seeing them just because he died and becomes of COVID. They've been here a lot and I've been at their houses [11:00] from time to time continuously. But as far as a funeral, it was immediately clear, we couldn't have a funeral, nobody would come. And most people would have to, and I know much of our families would have to fly here or drive from Boston. My sister in law has had serious eye problems that make her vulnerable. And then I have my, their two children, my nieces. And that's our immediate family here. Atle had two cousins that visited me. One cousin

that visited him twice while he was sick from Norway. [12:00] And I didn't really expect him to come to a funeral. So, I can tell you what I did, I don't mind.

AK: Yeah, absolutely.

CC: Well, the first thing that I did was find someplace to cremate him, and I did in Warren. And I was very pleased with what happened. They came and picked him up almost immediately and, and brought him back in a, in a little plastic box. And oh, no, my son in law picked him up there. They didn't bring him back. And I, I, since nobody was going to be around I didn't see any sense in spending extra money for that. [13:00] I think about money now and that whatever I have will go to my children, both of whom can use it with kids going to college soon and hopefully, someday wanting houses and things like that. I'd rather do that than – And I was glad to find this place in Warren. And, and then maybe a month later, I decided we should do something. And it was still nice and warm. And as I said, we live on the water. And one of the things that's important to me in my life was sprinkling my mother's ashes in the water where, my favorite place in Rockport, Massachusetts, which she had asked for. [14:00] Atle never really said exactly what he wanted. But my parents are very near in Massachusetts, and I've visited them twice in my life so far. I don't, I can't see that as being important. So anyway, we went out in our kayaks and, and sprinkled his ashes out in Narragansett Bay. And then we didn't put all of it in there and we, I have a place where I put them in, in a garden. And my daughter took some and when she can go to Norway where we have a summer house and sprinkle some there. It was just the eight of us.

AK: May I ask –

CC: You can ask anything you want. [15:00]

AK: These are moments where traditionally you have so many family members who gather around to support in this decision making, in this process, and it sounds like you have a good size immediate family as it is, but did you find that because of the coronavirus you really weren't able to get kind of the, the family support that you might have otherwise?

CC: Well I'm sort of a take charge person and I think one of the reasons that we had such a good marriage is my husband enjoyed me being in that position and not having to make a lot of decisions in his life. Little, you know, where are we going to eat dinner, and he just didn't do that. He was a [16:00] Professor of Engineering at Columbia University most of his career and and, and a beloved Professor of Engineering. I mean that's the thing I guess about his death I feel badly about is that there was no public expression of the goodness of his life. That's how it was. But as to how to do it, I just decided myself. I, I don't I don't think anybody would have disagreed with me. But I just planned like it. [17:00] I mean, I planned it at a time that all eight of us could be together. I said what I wanted to do I guess, in advance, I guess, if somebody had another idea they would have told me. But, like I said, I'm a take charge person.

AK: Did you have a moment following all of this where you kind of started to come down from this moment and the pandemic kind of hit you at some point or have you been sort of just kind of riding the wave the whole way through?

CC: I don't know exactly what the wave is, but any waves that are around I like to try. But not this one maybe. These, I really think of it as two waves, Atle's death and dying, and death and dying, [18:00] and, and then the pandemic which has affected the support I think I would have had and the easy contact with people just isn't there anymore. You can't easily go out to dinner, you can't easily be in any kind of a group, and the things I belong to don't meet, and so a lot of my days are pretty empty. That's, that's the thing that's awful.

AK: Have you been finding any kind of activities big or small to help pass the time?

CC: Yeah, I go walking with friends. We, we go outside. I'm a little worried was going to happen now it's colder. I had someone [19:00] living here from URI, a postdoc from Mexico. She left yesterday and that's going to be hard. Seems like suddenly a lot, not a lot, but some of my support system is, is, is diminishing. One of my friends who drives long places that we go walking hurt herself in she can't walk much now. I hope she'll be better, but I think it'll be, maybe she'll even have to have surgery before she's better. One of my friends has a new boyfriend that she's spending a lot of time with which is nice for her, but not nice for me. [20:00]

Could have, all the timing of those things could have been better. That's why I volunteered. I'm happy to have the opportunity to have something meaningful to do. I really want that.

AK: So I think that's another great question that typically I would lead with, but what compelled you to want to share this story with me today?

CC: Well, as I said, two things. One is I am looking for things to do that I think have some meaning. I hope this will have some meaning to somebody. I have lots of time on my hands and a lot of details to attend to [21:00] that I don't particularly want to do. Especially in Norway, things have been a mess. It's been very hard. And everywhere, everywhere you get this stuff, "Thank you for your patience." Well, I'm not patients. "We value your, your business," or whatever it is. If they valued my business, they would hire more people to answer the telephone. All this enrages me maybe in ways that wouldn't have enraged me before. But anyway, and I do find that I'm more volatile. So, I want good things to do like this. And I just saw the possibility of doing phoning for AMOR in Providence, which helps immigrants. [22:00] And I think I'll sign up to do that.

I was also, I was actually a social worker in my career. I didn't like teaching at all. Then, with kids, I thought everybody would be more like me and interested in what I have to say. I really wasn't good at maintaining control in the classroom. And so, I eventually became a social worker and I worked for 25 years in Headstart, which I loved, as a social worker and an administrator. So, I guess that's what, what compelled me.

AK: Do you have any advice for, [23:00] I mean, of course, we know so many family members have lost loved ones to the coronavirus, and that's not to mention the families who are losing loved ones from other ailments as well. Do you have any advice for somebody who might be in a position similar to yours, dealing with the death of a loved one in the middle of a pandemic?

CC: Well, I don't know if any of the right people will be listening to this, but I wished, I think there should be more emphasis in our culture, on how hard it is for some someone when a loved one dies. I don't think many people are really prepared for that and think about it enough and talk about it enough. [24:00] It's not a, there's not workshops until you get into it, until

someone's already dead. Planning a life and thinking about life alone. I think that would be really good. I guess there are books about it, but I haven't read them.

I didn't join a support group right away. I joined one recently and I'll see how I feel about that. Not being religious, there is a lot of support that is out there that I'm not interested in and sort of turns me off frankly. Discussion of are we going to meet again? [25:00] It's not where I'm coming from. And I guess I don't have, I guess the advice I would have is to think about it and, anyway you can, prepare yourself.

AK: Is your support group meeting virtually?

CC: Yes.

AK: Interesting. Have you been to any meetings yet?

CC: Yes, I've been to three meetings.

AK: How are you finding a, I mean, I suppose you might not have anything to compare it to, but so far, what are your thoughts on a support group of this nature that's virtual?

CC: I don't mind virtual as much as some people do. I haven't found it to be a horrible difference. Now that I got my, now that I got it to work easily. [26:00] I'm not distracted by, which was very clear in the beginning, and I also tried some WebEx thing, which started, I mean, I can get completely overwhelmed at my age and incompetent with the technology and the whole thing just, just falls apart for me. But as far, and once I can do it easily, and I can do Zoom easily now, I think it's okay. I, I can look at you. It's too bad you can't tell somebody's looking back at you, especially with just two people. You can assume when somebody is looking out they're looking at you.

AK: So you may have answered this question already, but if somebody were to listen to this interview [27:00] tomorrow, what is one thing you would want them to know? And if they're listening to this interview 50 years from now, what is one thing you would want that person to

know? Maybe about you, or the pandemic, or losing a loved one at this time? Any, any piece of knowledge you would like to share for those people?

CC: Well, I guess first of all, if they want to know more about me, they can watch my individual interview.

AK: Yes.

CC: I don't feel this is about me very much. And I would, I would like them to want to know me. I hope that doesn't seem conceited or something. Well, one of the things I think that's important is how conflicted I am about having had such a good marriage because [28:00] it really was much harder to lose than if it, maybe than if it had been a bad marriage.

AK: Do you maybe have any advice – the secret to having such a good marriage?

CC: My, my husband always said, "Do everything your wife says." Advice from him. Pretty much, pretty much he did. I mean, he went his own way if he wanted to. We were comfortable enough that each of us could do our own things. For example, He had his, his cars and his garage. And before we moved to Providence, I had a friend I really enjoyed traveling with and he didn't travel very much and I travel a lot to many different places [29:00] with her. And I was very lucky. I had a wonderful boss and a wonderful job in Headstart. I, we didn't have really a lot of pressure on our marriage that I think some people might have. Although, I guess we had as much as some. So I don't know that I can except the advice I gave first. My parents fought a lot and I don't like fighting, so. They fought over. Things like were the socks washed? And I mean stupid things with great emotion and we hardly ever fought. [30:00] It was nice. I'm glad, I'm glad of that.

AK: Well, before we close the interview today, I would just like to leave a little bit more space if there's anything else that you want to share that you are hoping to get into this interview today.

CC: No, I don't think, I don't think there is. Thank you to the future. I don't know what somebody will think about in 50 years about this. Well, I hope it's all behind them. I hope they're, and frankly, I hope there are people here in 50 years, I'm very concerned about that. I've made a pollinator garden at a local farm. And I just watched Frontline last night about plastics and how they are ruining the world and how the how the [31:00] gas industry which my husband was involved with is pushing recycling which only does 10% of all plastic, and it's likely not to increase too much. So, I wish the person 50 years from now well. I'm glad that he made it. Or she.

AK: Well, thank you so much, Carol, for reaching out and offering to share this really important story. As you said, I would like to direct our listeners to the first interview that you donated, it is an hour long or thereabouts. It's more specific to Carol's life at Brown and after Brown. It's absolutely fabulous so do be sure to check that out as well. Carol, thank you so much for joining me today.

CC: You're welcome. I do want to add about my own interview that an important aspect of that was being close to an African American woman, [32:00] woman, one of four, you know, of the quota in our class at that time. And I have devoted quite a bit of my recent thinking to slavery and its injustice.

AK: Well, thank you so much.

CC: Okay, thank you.

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