

Transcript – Elizabeth B. West, Class of 1973

Narrator: Elizabeth B. West

Interviewer: Amanda Knox

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Part 1

Amanda Knox: Good afternoon. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women. It is 2pm on Wednesday, January 13, 2020. 2021, actually. We made it out of 2020. And I am here doing another Zoom interview with one of our Brown University alums who I invite to introduce herself now.

Elizabeth West: Hi, my name is Betsy West, Elizabeth West, officially. I am Brown class of 1973. I am also a Trustee Emerita and I am the proud parent of a Brown grad, Jane Jacoby, class of 2017.

AK: Fabulous. Well, thank you so much for joining me today. We have a lot to cover. A lot has been going on in current events, but a lot was going on in current events in the days that you were at Pembroke and Brown. So, if we can, [1:00] I'd like to go way back to sort of the beginning. If you don't mind sharing a little bit about your childhood, maybe where you grew up. What your parents did, that that kind of background information.

EW: Sure. I had a somewhat unusual childhood. I grew up in rural Maine, a little town called Hebron, Maine, where for a number of years I attended a one room schoolhouse. It was up in the, sort of the foothills of the White Mountains, inland Maine. My parents were not Mainers. My father went to Brown and my mother went to Wheaton. They were both from Trenton, New Jersey. My father was in World War Two, interrupted his Brown career to go into the war. When he came out, he finished Brown, he got a graduate degree in education at Harvard. And then he went to teach in this small boarding school in Hebron, Maine. So, I grew up as a, as a faculty brat in this little [2:00] town. We lived in a dormitory. And yet I went to the local, you know, for a time, one room schoolhouse. So, it was, it was very strange. There weren't many kids who lived

near me who were my age. My sister was five years younger than me. And so in some ways, it was, I felt like an outsider a little bit. My parents weren't from Maine, Maine is a very provincial place. The very few classmates that I had didn't sort of live near me, I kind of had an outsider thing and it was a little lonely. I was a great reader, I used to love to read to my sister. And I think that was the beginning of my love of storytelling, really.

We moved to Providence when I was in high school, and I went to Wheeler. So, at the time, Wheeler was a very fancy girls' school, basically. I mean, kind of, it wasn't exactly [3:00] a finishing school, but it was definitely a different atmosphere. And, you know, once again, I felt a little bit like a fish out of water and an outsider a bit. But you know, it was a good education and doing well in school, in a way was my refuge. I, you know, I liked my schoolwork. I didn't think that I would go to Brown, actually. I wanted to go to Oberlin. My art teacher had told me about Oberlin and it sounded like a really groovy place. But my parents kind of put their foot, feet down collectively and said, "You can't apply that far away." So, you know, at a certain point I was applying to schools, you know, in New England mainly, and I started hearing about the new curriculum that was going on at Brown, because it was right at the time that this student led change [4:00] was happening with Ira Magaziner and Brown was getting some national attention for what it was doing. And at a certain point, I thought, wow, you know, maybe, maybe Brown would be a good option. And my parents, of course, my father was thrilled, and my parents kind of stepped up and said, "All right, if you go to Brown, we promise we won't bother you. We won't come and see you. We'll stay away from the East Side. Please go to Brown." And, you know, so I did. You know, my high school was only two blocks away from Brown and I had spent, you know, a fair amount of time wandering around Thayer Street and going into the stores there. But I really do remember that totally exhilarating feeling of walking onto the Brown campus as a student, you know, of being part of this very [5:00] exciting new world, opportunities opening up. And, you know, the campus was abuzz with the talk of the new curriculum in the fall of 1969. And they had instituted Modes of Thought courses that, you know, were created to have more interdisciplinarian, interdisciplinary, learning, and creative learning where students were contributing to what it was that we wanted to study. So, it was a, it was an exciting atmosphere to come in in 1969.

AK: So can I ask, at this time, I understand that Pembroke was a little bit making its way kind of out of the parietal rules of the environment that it had created in the '50s, but Pembroke was still the coordinate college of Brown University. When you applied, were you applying to Pembroke or were you –

EW: Yes.

AK: And did you, was there talk [6:00] at that time of the impending merger or were you thinking that you were going to Pembroke for your four years?

EW: I don't remember knowing about the merger. I was applying to Pembroke and so at that time, Pembroke had a reputation for having smarter students than Brown in a way, that it was tougher to get into Pembroke. But we, you know, we lived on the Pembroke campus, my, my room was in Andrews, in East Andrews. But for all intents and purposes, it felt like coeducation. I mean, I had gone to a girls high school, so I knew what that was like. And here we were, we were having classes, all our classes were with the Brown men, and so it didn't really feel like a women's school, like a women's college. You know, there was a Pembroke identity. You know, you did have posture pictures [7:00] taken in the gym. Pretty, pretty sure that happened. I'm pretty sure that that happened.

AK: We definitely know that it did happen at Brown. I, I wasn't sure how long that was going for. Do you, if you don't mind talking about that, do you remember –

EW: You know, it's really funny, Amanda, because I, I don't remember the details of that. But I kind of remember it happened. I don't know. We should probably double check that I didn't conflate reading about it with it actually happening because I don't remember strongly the details. I thought that it took place in the gym, you know, which is now Pembroke Hall right?

AK: I think now it's Smith-Buonanno, Buonanno. Is that right?

EW: Oh, it's Smith – yes, that's right. It's Smith-Buonanno. But it was the gym and they had a funny little bowling alley in there. And it was a, it was a funny little place. But the, you know, the everything was changing. I mean, it was the late '60s and just, you know, [8:00] all of the rules were being thrown out. So, there were no parietals anymore, but that was the first year I believe that they got rid of the parietals. They got rid of the you know, dorm hours, and everybody was going in between the various dorms between Brown and Pembroke. It, it didn't feel like a cloistered women's college at that point.

AK: Sure. So now you are, for all intents and purposes have kind of left home, you're on campus, and it's this totally evolving and changing campus in a totally evolving and changing country and world at this point.

EW: Yes.

AK: Do you remember any, were you on campus for kind of any significant national events? Or, you know, I know campus was really bubbling with all of that going on? Did that impact your experience [9:00] there at all?

EW: Yeah, I mean, especially my freshman year, the campus was really roiling. I mean, the opposition to the Vietnam War was really heating up. And, you know, there were demonstrations against the war. And then that spring of 1970, Kent State, the bombing of Cambodia. The campus just went crazy. And I remember Sayles was turned into a, kind of an organizing central headquarters and there were all kinds of tables where you could go and volunteer to do various election work, and they were, had some kind of stenograph machine and you could get your t-shirt stamped with a strike [10:00] emblem because there was a vote that we would go on strike. I had a favorite purple tshirt that I wore everywhere. And then I got the strike thing put on the back of it. And I have to say, I will really never forgive my mother because at some point in the purge of my room, you know, when I was in my 20s, or 30s, that thing disappeared. But, yeah, we were all mobilized about the, really about the war in my first year.

And then they just, we voted to go on strike, and everybody just went home. We didn't have final exams. And that was, I think, at the end of April, the beginning of May, as I

remember. And I went with a classmate to Block Island and got myself a summer waitressing job, you know, early. I went out to Block Island sometime in May and just started working. And then, you know, school started up again [11:00] in September. But it was it was pretty, that was pretty intense, the, the anti-war protests.

And then of course, the Women's Movement was starting up at that time. And, you know, I was certainly identified as a feminist. I certainly identified with Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem and all of the activity that was going on nationally to protest women's status in our society. I know there were consciousness raising groups going on on campus at that time, I didn't take part in that. I don't really know why, but maybe I was shy, or I don't know. But I, it was all in the air. It was all in the ether. You know, my, my father had become a headmaster of a boys' School in Providence. That's why we moved. [12:00] My mother was a very accomplished and smart person. And yet she had spent her career kind of in service to my father's career – Her, her life in service to my father's career as his kind of unofficial, unpaid, you know, chief of staff in a way. And I, I don't know how, I just thought I don't want that, you know? I want my own identity, I want my own agency, I don't want to be tied to somebody else. So, there was this, this sea change for the women of, I think of my generation where we thought we're going to do it differently than our mothers did. And that was that was also kind of, you know, in the air at the time.

AK: Do you remember, do you have kind of snapshot memories of your time at Brown, like high point, really high points or really low points that have really, that have stuck with you?

EW: Yeah, that's fun. I mean, look, [13:00] Spring Weekend. How fun to go see Bonnie Raitt or Bonnie and Delaney, or you know, Judy Collins, or all the people who, you know, would come on campus. Tina, I can, Tina Turner. I mean, you know, Spring Weekend was so much fun and after that long gray, Providence winter, you know, it's such a release, and I know that sort of continues at Brown. That was a super high point.

I was also remembering, you know, one of the coolest things that happened to me, and it never occurred to me this way until I started thinking about all this, you know, one day I was walking across campus, I think it was my, beginning of my sophomore year, and this guy stopped me this tall gangly guy and he said, "What's your name?" And, you know, I told him.

He said, “You know, let’s go get a tea at the Ivy Room.” I’m thinking like, who is this guy? He’s like trying – but he seemed nice enough. So, I went with him over to the Ivy Room. [14:00] I really thought he was trying to pick me up. But he, he had a girlfriend. He just said, “You know, I just think you look interesting, let’s talk.” And so, you know, he was like me, a movie lover. I mean, I was crazy about movies, part of the Brown Film Society, but he was, but he was also much more than that. He was a Rennai – kind of a Renaissance guy from a very different background. He had grown up in New York, his name was John Lax. He had, his parents were Jewish intellectuals, refugees from Nazi Germany. And he kind of opened up a world to me and became one of my best friends. And as a result of meeting John, I met a whole lot of other people. His friends, both at Brown, but, but later on, when I was in New York, I kind of became a part of his family’s circle and his circle of friends. I mean, the thing that’s so sad is that you know, John [15:00] was tragically killed by a drunk driver when he was about 26 or 27 years old. He was a PhD student at Columbia at the time, a very promising, you know, young historian. And yet, you know, I remain in his orbit of all the friendships that I made, and the people I met, friends with his parents, his fiancée, who actually became my very best friend. So, it’s like one of those moments that happens in your life where he just kind of got in his mind, oh, let me just stop her and ask her what she’s all about. And it really did have a huge impact on me. And I think for a lot of college graduates it’s or, you know, people who have the opportunity to go to college and to make these friendships with people that you really might not have met, from very, from different backgrounds, and to open up new [16:00] worlds to you is, is a great privilege and a gift. And, you know, I have so many friends from Brown who I’ve kept in touch with over the years.

AK: So, we’ve touched upon your freshman year, and your sophomore year, or first year and second year, I think they call it. But at this point now, in 1971, we reach the Pembroke Brown merger. And you’ve said, and a lot of our other interviewees have said, that, for all intents and purposes, Pembroke and Brown were really a coed for quite some time. But did you notice any kind of shift in your experience or treatment or just general shift kind of in the universe when that merger happened?

EW: Not really. I really didn't notice a lot of difference. As I said, for all intents and purposes, it felt like, from the students' perspective, that we were merged. [17:00] We already had our classes together. And you know, frankly, I remember thinking, oh, it's about time, you know? I thought, oh, I didn't really like the idea of a segregated woman's school. It seemed anachronistic, and it seemed, in some ways, second class. And if you read the *Brown Daily Herald* coverage, at the time of the merger, as I have recently, it reflects what is in fact, a kind of sexist attitude, I think. You know, it's like, of course, Pembroke would become part of Brown and not the other way around, like, that was never even on the table, like, what are you talking about? And, you know, that headline that the *BDH* has, you know, "Pembroke Dead at 78," you know, it's almost gleeful. You know, the, the author of that article was a friend of mine. He was the, the editor of the *BDH* [18:00] and, where I had, you know, worked for a bit. And, you know, he writes about the glorious end of spinsterhood, you know, at the woman's college, as if sort of being a spinster is the worst thing that you could possibly be. And, you know, it's really kind of cringing now to read it. And especially the part, my favorite part of this thing is like, "women need special attention from female advisors who are young, of course, married, and career oriented," you know? Yep, let's just get rid of women's education, let's free up women to be on an equal footing with men and by the way, you know, open their eyes to the benefits of the sexual revolution. That, to me, is what that thing says, you know, "This is good for us, Brown guys." You know, we, I don't think we [19:00] valued or understood the history of the women's colleges, and the long, long fight that women waged. Not over years, but over decades for long, to get educated. You know, and I was, I think, really ignorant of that history. And, you know, luckily, later on in my career, I really had an opportunity to, to delve into the history of the Women's Movement and to appreciate the benefits that I had being a part of Pembroke and the benefits that Pembroke gave to so many women over the years.

AK: So you made a nod to the sexual revolution, and I'd kind of like to touch on that also, for a moment if you don't mind.

EW: Yes.

AK: Do you remember anything about [20:00] access to birth control on campus, or abortion rights or access, or anything like that happening in your world?

EW: Well, I do remember that the Health Service offered birth control. I don't remember, I don't know when that started, but I do remember that it was available to us. I don't really remember about abortion. I mean, you know, Roe v. Wade didn't happen until the year I graduated, 1973. So, abortion was still illegal, but I think you could get abortions in New York. I'm not 100% sure of that. But they were not, you know, completely unattainable I don't think. And I didn't have any personal experience with friends, or anything, but I know that, you know, it became much, you could go to Planned Parenthood and [21:00] just get birth control without, you know, your parents' permission or, you know, go to the Health Service. And so there, it was a time of, you know, much more availability of, and, you know, certainly of birth control, and, you know, there was a little bit of pressure, I think, about becoming sexually active. You know, it was sort of an expectation, oh, everybody here is going to be sexually active. And, you know, what does that mean? And, you know, what are the consequences of that? We didn't, you know, not that our predecessors weren't sexually active. They were, I'm sure. But it did feel a little more of an expectation. Oh, we're going to go out? [22:00] Okay. Come back to my room, you know.

AK: And to turn again, a little bit more to University sanctioned activity, you were participating in the film club, did you mention?

EW: I was, yeah, yeah. I mean, I was a reporter for, on the *Brown Daily Herald* for a bit, but I have to tell you that the, my fellow students kind of intimidated me who were the reporters. They were so smart, and they were so sharp, and they kind of scared me a little bit. And I wound up writing film reviews for the *Brown Daily Herald*, which I felt more comfortable doing because I had already begun to study film, starting with my first Modes of Thought course, as a freshman, where we really dissected the "Treasure of the Sierra Nevada Madre" [23:00] for, you know, like two months. And I joined the Brown Film Society. I mean, you have to put yourself back in a time where there's only three television stations, and they play movies late at night, there's no cable, there's no streaming, there's no nothing. And so we were hungry for films. And the Brown Film Society would often run six films a week, you know, we, and, and it would be silent

movies, Buster Keaton, “The Gold Rush,” and then it would be film noir classics and all kinds of films that, that we programmed and that I religiously attended. I was a, you know, really was kind of a film buff. And also, that, I think, coincided with my academic studies. I was an English major. [24:00] I was lucky enough to take a course on the picaresque novel with the great literary critic, Bob Scholes, who was just a fantastic character on campus. I mean, he looked like a cartoon, you know, with a beard and the white hair and stuff and he was witty and smart and just a great, very kind of soft spoken, but a wonderful guy and he was really one of the founding American intellectuals in the study of semiotics, which is, you know, the study of signs and symbols. And so I, I studied with him, and that was sort of complimenting my, you know, my outside activity was just going to the movies all the time.

AK: So, [25:00] I think is there anything else you’d like to say about your time on campus at Brown before we go beyond your time at Brown?

EW: Yeah, what else? Did I write down a note here? No, I mean, I think that, that, I mean, maybe we’ll go back to talk a little bit about Brown. I mean, there’s something about, you know, my father went to Brown during World War Two. I went to Brown, during the crazy ’60s and early ’70s. My daughter went to Brown, you know, in 2014 through ’17.

AK: Still a crazy time.

EW: Yeah. And the, it’s a very, very, both, all these times it’s a very different kind of University. The school has really grown and changed and evolved in many ways. But I do think there’s kind of a through line to Brown. [26:00] And I, you know, my dad was such a great guy. I mean, I really was crazy about him. And one of the things he used to say about Brown was that it was unpretentious. You know, you do serious work, but you don’t take yourself too seriously. And I like that about Brown and it and it feels that that has carried through in a way. My daughter once said to me that in comparing her high school friends who went to other Ivy’s, who she knew, she said, you know, “The people there, they, they just don’t seem to be as nice and as friendly.” And I think there is something about Brown that is open to different ideas and creativity and is not as pre-professional as so many places, and does give you an opportunity to just explore [27:00] and

try things out without the kind of judgments that people make about your choices at that time. And I see that as a, as a sort of through line from my dad's experience to mine and my daughter's. Anyway, I think that was it. I think that's probably it.

AK: Well, I'm sure that Brown has kind of stayed with you through, you know, to, to today. Can you tell me a little bit about, you know, you graduate and do you have a job to go to at that point? What are you thinking of doing? What are your career or life goals at that that point? What are you seeing for your future, you know, kind of on graduation day?

EW: Yeah, I mean, I really didn't know what I was going to do. Except I was interested in the media. I had become, I wasn't necessarily wanting to become a narrative film director. [28:00] I just didn't think that was my strong point. But I was interested in the news and I was interested in media, and at the time, cable television was just starting. I mean, nothing like what it became in the '80s and '90s, but there was talk of kind of a democratization of the media because cable was going to allow so many more channels. God knows beyond democratization what, what we were –

AK: Eight zillion apparently.

EW: Yeah, what we were leading to, but I was just generally interested in that. So, I did what many students do when they don't know what the hell they're going to do with their future – I applied to graduate school.

AK: Yeah.

EW: And I wound up going to Syracuse, partly because I got a full scholarship, and it really was important to me to kind of be on my own financially. I didn't, you know, my parents had been very generous and had, you know, supported my Brown education. I, [29:00] I worked the whole time I was at Brown in the library, actually, in the Pembroke Library. That was my, that was my Brown job. But you know, that and I worked in the summers, making money, but basically, my parents had, had paid for college, and I just felt I want to be on my own. It was so important to

me. So, I got the scholarship and I went to Syracuse to get a master's in Television and Radio and that led to my first job, just it wasn't a job. I called up a radio station and just said, "Hey, can I come and intern for you?" And in those days, before the Fairness Doctrine was repealed in the 1980s, there were local news departments in radio stations in cities all over the country. So, Syracuse must have had four or five radio stations that had active news departments going out and covering local news. [30:00] I mean, that just doesn't happen anymore. But, so that's how I got my start. I was going to graduate school I was working, you know, my internship actually morphed into an actual job. I was reading news on the radio and I was going to the, you know, Syracuse City Council meetings and covering those. And you know, the scandal at the Onondaga Community College with somebody had extorted, you know, had stolen money and all these kinds of local stories. I loved it, it was just so much fun. And that was kind of, you know, the beginning of my move into, into news, into journalism.

AK: And do you mind, well, so at that point, we're still in the 1970s at that point. And you are kind of, you know, a working gal, right? So, [31:00] are you experience, what is your experience working and going to school and being this very independent woman at this time?

EW: You know, it was pretty exciting when I think about it. You know, I, I bought a little car for 1,000 bucks that I'd saved up from babysitting and other things and drove myself to Syracuse. And, you know, to live on your own for the first time was very exciting, and to, to feel a kind of agency of, when I got my job, and actually, they were actually paying me and I was getting Social Security taken out of a paycheck. I was like, wow, look at this. And, you know, it was, it was kind of thrilling. I remember when I was at, you know, it was a one-year program, I was getting a master's and I have to say, I wasn't a particularly diligent student in the masters. I was much more interested in working in the radio station. And I had [32:00] some kind of an exam due and the, the Battle of the Sexes was on that night. And you may not remember what the Battle of the Sexes was, it was the tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs. And this was just like a huge, big deal because he had been taunting her and goading her and she took the challenge. And they had this crazy, you know, over the top tennis match in Las Vegas, which I remember I was supposed to be studying, but I just couldn't study. I had to watch it. And it felt

like so much was riding on this tennis match. Could she please beat this sexist obnoxious jerk, please? And she did. And it felt like a victory for all of us out there. [33:00]

Yeah. So, you know, at the time, I had a boyfriend from Brown, and he had gone to graduate school in Cambridge. We've been commuting. And so, I you know, I was in that relationship and then we decided to get married and decided to, and I got a job in New York, after I graduated, like a year after I graduated, got a job for ABC, at ABC Radio. It was a part time job, but it looked like it was going to morph into something else. And so, we wound up moving to New York together in 1975. And that was really the start of my career in, in network news. So, I went from radio news, I was there for a couple of years. Then I got a job in Chicago, writing for television in the late '70s, for ABC, the bureau in Chicago for ABC [34:00] network news. Then I became a producer. And then I started working for Nightline in the '80s. I mean, it was a time of great opportunity, especially for women in a way because, you know, Title IX had happened. Opportunities were opening up for women in graduate schools. They were, you know, law schools were welcoming more women, and medical schools. And there were a series of lawsuits in the media, especially one by Newsweek, of the women at Newsweek, who were, you know, supposed to be, they were kind of capped at being researchers, they weren't allowed to move on from being a researcher to being a writer. And because of that lawsuit, all of the networks were terrified that that they were going to be sued as well. So suddenly, as a result of the act, you know, the activism of other women opportunities were opening for all of us. And I think that's why [35:00] I got the job at ABC Radio where most of the people in the newsroom where I went to work in 1975, were men. And so it kind of went from there.

AK: Do you feel that you met any kind of resistance in your career journey because you were a woman? Or because you were married and working, or any of those reasons that one might think of?

EW: Yeah. I mean, at the time, I didn't feel that I was meeting resistance. I really didn't. I felt that I had an opportunity to prove myself, and to just work as hard as I could, and to show that I was as good as the men, if not better. And, you know, some of my smarter bosses took advantage of women like me because we did kill ourselves, you know, and we were so busy, I think, [36:00] proving ourselves, grateful for the opportunity to work in these interesting jobs, that we

kind of had blinders on about some of the harassment that was just taken for granted in those days, and also about perhaps limitations on where we might ultimately wind up. Because we were, you know, we were moving up the ladder, but if you'd asked me in 1978 or 9, you know, what do you think the landscape will look like in 2021, I would, "Oh, it'll be 50/50 women and women will be running the networks," and we're not, you know, it's like, well, it didn't quite work out that way. But we thought that was the trajectory that we were on and we put up with a lot of, you know, crap from, from men.

I mean, [37:00] I, you know, I've got a bunch of stories. I mean, nothing super horrifying, but, you know, when the #MeToo movement happened it triggered memories for a lot of women, I think, of my generation of things that we just sloughed off. And, you know, one of my favorites is, when I was, I think I was 25 and I was at ABC Radio, you know, my first real big job, and I'm in this big news room, and all of a sudden, I see like a table being wheeled in and people start singing happy birthday. And I'm thinking, oh, my goodness, they remembered it's my birthday! This is just like, so cool, I can't believe it! I mean, I was super excited. All these guys are singing happy birthday, they look really happy. And as I get closer to the cake, I realize that it is a cake shaped as a giant penis and it has come from the [38:00] erotic bakery which was a store up on 83rd Street. And, you know, everybody is looking at me. And I just didn't know what to do. You know, I was just horrified, mortified, but I thought, well, I better just laugh, you know, I better just like, you know, just slough this off, because they want to see me embarrassed, and you know, they want to see what I'm going to do. So, I just laughed and then I kind of forgot about it. But that was the kind of thing that could just could happen all the time.

You know, I mean, another time I you know, those were the days like in the late '70s where people were getting perms. And I remember I went to, you know, I've got sort of thin hair. I thought oh, I'll get a perm. So, I go, and I get this perm and I walked into the newsroom, you know, my shift was starting, I came around the corner. My hair was kind of like, big. And [39:00] this guy stands up from his typewriter, he's in the newsroom, he's on the typewriter. He stands there, you know, everybody's going oh my god, look at her hair, look at her hair. And this guy's hands up and he goes like this, he goes, "My bride." I'm like, oh my God. I mean, look, much, much worse things happened to people and I don't know.

Wait. Please stop. Turn this off. I'm sorry, this phone, I thought I turned it off. I'm going to just like totally. I think it's on my computer. That's the problem is it's going to ring on my computer. Anyway.

AK: Everything's very connected these days.

EW: Everything is connected. So, yeah, there was just sort of widespread jokes and you know, things that you just kind of now you roll your eyes. You can't believe, but yeah.

AK: So, you've had, [40:00] of course, I don't need to tell you, a really incredible career. Do you have a, like, one job that you've had, or one project that you've done that is your all-time favorite?

EW: Well, you know, in a way, I've had three careers and that's really surprising to me that this has happened. Because I had my career starting at ABC News, where I became a producer, and then eventually was working for Nightline and I was posted to London and I traveled all around the world. Then I worked on a TV documentary series at ABC. So, for about 24 years, I was doing that. And then I went to CBS News as an executive. But that's all sort of like one career in network, television news. And there were some incredible highlights, like, just, well, living in London, traveling the world, covering amazing [41:00] stories, the fall of the Soviet Union, and, you know, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the Intifada in the Middle East. I mean, so many, the Philippines, the fall of Ferdinand Marcos, I went to China, so many great stories. But you know, in a way, what happened, that, that career, that part of my life, ended because in 2004, I got caught up in a mistake that CBS News made in a story about then-President George Bush, and it was a truthful story about his evasion of, you know, military responsibility. But the documents that we included in the story turned out to be unverifiable and that, it was a huge to-do. It was like a total shit storm, frankly. And, you know, I was sort of the [42:00] political, the highest-ranking person, at that point I was Senior Vice President at CBS News, and I became the highest-ranking person asked to resign. I mean, I was not fired, because I didn't really do anything wrong. But I was asked to resign as a kind of sacrificial lamb in a way. It was really horrible, really embarrassing. You know, my name was on the front page of the *Providence*

Journal, my parents reading this, oh, my God, like it was so, it was in the *Times*. I mean, it was all over the place, everybody. And in retrospect, it was actually, like the best thing that ever happened to me. I mean, in a way, I shouldn't say the best thing. It's not the best thing that happened to me. But it turned out to be a good thing, because it propelled me out of network television news, which, you know, is a great thing, but I had always loved documentaries. I'd always liked long form [43:00] storytelling. And so, my second career was teaching at Columbia Journalism School. I mean, luckily, I got hired at Columbia Journalism School, they understood what had happened to me was completely ridiculous. And I became part of that journalism community, and I learned about social media, and I learned about you know, YouTube was just starting up. And I, I really had a new chance to reinvent myself first as a teacher, which I enjoyed. My, many of my family are teachers. I never thought I wanted to be a teacher, but I really liked it. I met so many fantastic students I'm still in touch with and just had a great time. But then I think, you know, this is a long way to getting to the point you asked.

I mean, really the best thing that happened to me, career wise, was in, you know, I think 2009 when a colleague, someone I [44:00] barely knew, came to me, Peter Kunhardt Productions. They were doing a series about the modern women's movement and they asked if I would work on this as an executive producer, so I was doing that, you know, as I was also doing my teaching job. That led to me interviewing a slew of women for this, what we, wound up being called *Makers: Women who Make America*, and the idea was to capture the stories of the groundbreaking women before it was too late, almost like the oral histories of the women from *Pembroke*. And so, we identified 100 women from across the board, the spectrum, including Billie Jean King, by the way, and so many other groundbreaking women, to tell their stories and it was totally eye opening for me. I mean, I had lived through this history and yet [45:00] I had no idea that Ruth Bader Ginsburg was in the Supreme Court, arguing cases that were really going to change my life and the lives of all these women. I had a chance to interview, Justice Ginsburg. Ruth Simmons, I interviewed for that. I mean, I'm not, just extraordinary women, and it was eye opening and a real turning point for me because it ultimately led me and a colleague who worked with me on that project, Julie Cohen, to come up with the idea of doing a full documentary about Justice Ginsburg. So, in 2015, that's when we started that film, you know, it took us three years to make it. And, you know, that was my transition really into my third career, which is doing the thing I always wanted to do, which is to tell long form stories. And I feel

incredibly grateful [46:00] that I've been able to do this. And you know, I just finished working on two documentaries that are done and we're starting a new one now. So, and I'm, and I have retired from teaching officially last summer, because it just became too much to juggle both of these things. You know, I my students, I felt like, I have to make a choice here. I can't, you know, I, I can't be giving them less than 100%. They need me and I just, there's only so much for me to go around. So.

AK: With COVID making its way to US shores around this time last year, did that impact your ability to work on the documentaries that you have coming out?

EW: Well, yeah, I mean, luckily, the two documentaries were mostly shot when COVID really hit. So, then we all went into [47:00] our little private studios, and started working virtually. Our editor was in Brooklyn, my partner, Julie, is in Brooklyn. Our producer went to LA where she's from. She's in LA. Every day we would meet online, 10 o'clock in the morning, go over what we're going to do. The editor would be editing, we would be working on the script, we'd be sharing things. He would upload things to watch, or actually two editors. So, we'd have, we have two films going. A meeting at 10, a meeting at 10:30.

One film is about Julia Child, the game changing French chef who really did have a very profound impact on the way we think about food and really the way we think about women, what's acceptable for women on television. When she came on in the '60s, there was no one like Julia Child on [48:00] television, believe me. So that's, that's one film. And the other film is about someone you may not have heard of Pauli Murray, who is a real unsung hero of both the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, someone who influenced Thurgood Marshall; Ruth Bader Ginsburg credited her with her thinking. And it also was, Pauli Murray was a non-binary person who is living at a time when no language existed to describe the feelings that Pauli had that Pauli was a man. So, it's a, that's been a great project.

And I'm so grateful to the technology. I think if the if COVID had happened five or six years ago, I don't see how we could have finished these films. I just don't think it would have worked. So, in a way, we were profoundly lucky, all these people, and I feel kind of guilty about it in a way [49:00] because so many people lost jobs. So many people lost lives, loved ones,

suffering. And you know, we were really able to keep going with these projects, which was a gift.

AK: Over the last 12 months, we as a nation have experienced quite a lot. For the listener who's listening in 2070, a quick recap. Australia was burning. There was the, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, countless other people of color. Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. We had an impeachment of the President. We have an impending impeachment of the President. The Capitol Building was just stormed by rioters a week or so ago. Does any of this, is any of this influencing the next documentary, you're thinking of [50:00] making?

EW: Yeah –

AK: If you're thinking of making one?

EW: Yes.

AK: Not to make you keep working, but.

EW: So we are, no, we are working on another documentary and it will deal with this. We haven't really announced what we're doing, so I know this is for the future, but you know, it has to do with politics to some extent. I mean, in the same way that Ruth Bader Ginsburg had to do with politics. I mean, it'll touch on politics, and definitely there was an involvement with this past experience with the, with the takeover that will wind up being a part of the film. You know, it's a, it's such a disturbing time. And I think that the opportunity to document Ruth Bader Ginsburg's life, and not only her fight as a progressive, you know, liberal lion of the Supreme Court who was, you know, [51:00] holding up for the values she believed in at the time when the court was turning more conservative, but also her steadfast belief in our democratic institutions. And that is so resonant right now. And her, her belief in civil dialogue, in friendships with people you don't agree with, up to a point. And, and certainly, she was a model of civility. And also, practicality, as she would say. And I remember one point in the interview with her when, you know, in the early 1970s, and she's making these arguments about women's rights, and the nine

male justices are like, “What are you talking about? Women are treated in a really special way. They’re great, you know, it’s not a problem.” And they would be so condescending to her. You know, “Oh, wouldn’t you be happy with, let’s just put Susan B. Anthony on the dollar [52:00] and just, you know, get over it.” And, you know, I said to her, you know, “How did you respond?” And her answer was so fast, “Never an anger, because that would have gotten me nowhere.” She was so strategic, she said, “I really thought of them as kindergarten students. And I was teaching them that there really is such a thing as discrimination. And how am I going to do that?” and one of the ways she did was she found victims of discrimination who were men. And by making the case for a man who was discriminated against, because as a widower he couldn’t get the benefits to take care of his baby that his wife would have gotten had she been a widow. That really, that turned on a light bulb with these with these men and it helped pave the way. So, I think that I learned so much from doing that film about Justice Ginsburg [53:00] and how to take the long view. I mean, look at her. At the end of her life, seeing some of the decisions that were coming out that were so contrary to the beliefs that she had, and, and yet, she kept going. And she kept writing her dissents. And she, occasionally she won some victories. She would bring Justice Roberts over to her side for the five-four majority. And she saw it as something for the future, as her writings perhaps is going to, perhaps would resonate down the line. And so optimistic even in the face of struggles. So I try to stay optimistic. Like, I try to, you look at the horrifying siege of our Capitol, it’s just like, I mean, I want to say it’s unbelievable, but what more unbelievable can happen? And yet, you see what people did in Georgia, when they organized to make sure that people’s votes [54:00] could be counted. That to me is very inspiring, and I try to hang on to, to, to those moments, and certainly in the films that I’m doing I’m, you know, looking at people who are role models, people we can admire and maybe learn from.

AK: I think, for me, the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg is one of those days almost like 9/11 that I’m never going to forget where I was that night and how I heard it and how I felt. And it just felt like the ground shifted underneath me.

EW: Yeah.

AK: It was really quite – I always knew when she died it was going to be strange, but I think the worst part was her dying with the world the way it was at that time. You know, I just wished for her that it could have been something different.

EW: Yeah. And, and she did too. And I think, you know, [55:00] we did a little film about Jill Biden for the Democratic National Committee for the convention. Julie and I produced this little eight minute film about Joe Biden, which was really fascinating. We met and spent the weekend with her and with Joe Biden and just, you know, fell in love with her. She's an amazing woman, and so admirable, upbeat, funny, very funny, and just a really cool person to be our First Lady. So, we did this video and, you know, the next day, we got an email, so this is the middle of August, from Justice Ginsburg. And it said, you know, "Dear Betsy, and Julie," she's, you know, very short. "I saw your wonderful video about," I mean, I don't know how she even knew that we did it, because it didn't say "By Betsy and Julie," it just was there. [56:00] But I guess, you know, had been tweeted about, or maybe someone at the court, you know, told her that we had done it. We certainly didn't. "Saw your wonderful video. You did an extraordinary job," you know, "RBG," she signs it "RBG." I mean, it was so thrilling. And the most thrilling thing was, oh my God, she's up and watching the Democratic Convention, you know. So I, we really felt that, her determination to keep herself alive. And it was a stunning and very, very sad day. But I also did feel that wow, we can't ask any more of this woman. You know?

AK: That's for sure.

EW: She gave everything. She really did. And she left a legacy that I think will inspire people for generations. What more could you ask for?

AK: Right. You know, I think we could go on for hours about all of this, [57:00] but I don't want to take up too much of your time. So, I would just like to leave some open space, if you have any final thoughts that you would like to share for, you know, somebody who might listen to this tomorrow, or somebody who's listening 50 years from now, about your time at Brown or your work, or current events, anything that you'd like to share.

EW: Wow, that's a big – given what's happening in the world, it's sort of hard to know, I guess. You know, the, the idea of hanging in there, and realizing I, you know, I remember when I was at ABC Radio, you know, when I was 25, with those guys, who were, you know, giving me the, the penis birthday cake. I was really frustrated in that job. I wanted to be doing longer stories and reporting and getting out in the world. And I just thought, [58:00] oh, my goodness, I'm like, I'm never going to get out of here. Look at these guys. They're just like, so old. And I'm just going to grow old in this job and that's going to be it. And, and I think that when you're in your 20s, that's kind of the way you feel. And if I've learned anything, it's that you never know. And you just can't keep, you can't look backwards. You just have to learn from mistakes, and learn and be looking for new opportunities, and have an optimistic point of view and a determination that okay, that didn't quite work out, I guess you don't have that job anymore. But you can do something else. And that is, you know, really a powerful thought that I think younger people need to hang on to because sometimes [59:00] when you're in the throes of frustration and trouble, it can be overwhelming. And you have to try to get over that and just see to the next cloud.

AK: Well, thank you so much for your time today. Your interview will join almost 300 other interviews of women, trans, and non-binary people who graduated from Brown. Your story is really a treasure for us. Thank you so much.

EW: Well, thank you. I really appreciate it. I treasure my time at Brown and the opportunity to keep connected. Thank you.

Part 2

EW: Okay.

AK: Good afternoon. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is Friday, January 22, 2021, and I am here again today with Betsy West to follow up with a part two of her part one oral history. Welcome back, Betsy.

EW: Thanks so much, Amanda.

AK: So, I know, we covered a lot of ground in our last interview, but I think we missed some parts of your personal life that you were hoping to get into your story. I suppose, you can, you can start that story wherever you'd like.

EW: Yeah, you know, I mentioned that I had a brief marriage to my Brown boyfriend. I mean, you know, a wonderful guy I met at Brown, but as some people refer to it a kind of a starter marriage. We kind of moved in, in different, in different directions. [1:00] And you know, so I was single in my 30s, working super hard for ABC News. I had been living in London as a producer for "Nightline," and you know, just traveling all the time. And when I moved back to New York, I had a brunch for my friends Tom and Sarah Gleason. Tom Gleason. Abbot Gleason was a history professor at Brown and had become a good friend of mine. And I in fact, I babysat for their kids and I lived in, in the Gleason's house, and they really became, you know, among my best friends. So, I had this brunch, and they invited another student of Tom's, a guy named Oren Jacoby. And Oren and I, actually, at the time, I had a boyfriend, he had a girlfriend, he came with his girlfriend, and we were [2:00] in my hallway talking, and all of a sudden, he saw this book, *The Art of the Narrative*, which was written by Bob Scholes, my advisor at Brown. And turns out Oren had taken a lot of Scholes' courses as well, as well, was a big Bob Scholes person. So, we had this conversation about Scholes and his classes, what a great guy he was. And you know, it was a, the beginning of our friendship, and then eventually we fell in love and we had a Brown marriage. And we were actually at a Brown event, maybe four or five years later, and there was Bob Scholes and we went running up to him and said, "Hi, Professor Scholes, remember me?" "Yes, yes." "Remember me? Well, guess what? We're married." It was very sweet. [3:00] So, I think that certainly I have a lot to thank Brown for, but certainly, and my, my connection to my husband, who is also a documentary filmmaker, Oscar nominated documentary filmmaker; and helped me in my transition from being in broadcast television an into working on documentaries. And I now, we work together in his longtime independent film company, Storyville Films. So that has been a, you know, a huge part of my life, obviously. And then Oren and I have a daughter, born in 1994. And even though we didn't push her in this direction, she

wound up going to Brown and graduating in 2017. She had such a great experience. A very different place, I think, as I talked about before, Brown in the in the teens, the 2000 teens, [4:00] was a very different place than the Brown that Oren and I attended in the 1970s, and that my father attended during and after World War Two. But still a place that we all connect to.

AK: May ask about what year was it when you got divorced?

EW: You know, it was in the early '80s, was in the early '80s. So, I was married in my, in, sort of after Brown, couple years after Brown, and then divorced in the early '80s.

AK: Did you find was, was there any kind of stigma around that either just generally or also while you were working? Or do you think it's perhaps more like it is now, it was kind of an accepted part of how life goes for some people.

EW: Yeah, I think [5:00] it, there wasn't a, there wasn't a huge stigma by the time, you know, my ex-husband and I decided to part ways. I think that you know, my parents, when I think about my parents' generation, my father was one of four children, all four of them had very long marriages to the same person. So, though there are four couples in that in that generation, and then I have 11 cousins, the children of those four couples. And of the 11 cousins, half of us were divorced and had second marriages. So, it's kind of interesting generationally, what happened, that I think people – and part of it was definitely the Women's Movement, that there was a sense that if you were not happy, that [6:00] things weren't going well, that you could try to make a change. And I remember, for me, it was the sense that, you know, I just don't feel that this is the kind of marriage where I want to have a child, I don't want to bring a child into this marriage, because it just doesn't feel that happy. And I wanted to have kids and so luckily, I met another wonderful Brown grad and, and we do have, have our daughter, Jane. So, you know, I'm pretty glad that I was born at a time where I could say, "Hey, I made a mistake. That wasn't the right thing." And you know that I could fix it.

AK: Absolutely.

EW: Yeah. It's a real generational shift, I think,

AK: For sure. What year did you in Oren get married?

EW: We got married in 1992. And our daughter was born in 1994. Yeah. [7:00]

AK: Well, I also, that's a really great story, and a very typical Brown story, and I thank you for following up to share that with me.

EW: Yeah, yeah. I'm glad you gave me the chance to do that. Thank you.

AK: Of course, I also wanted to follow up with you from part one, because you had mentioned a short film that you made for the Democratic National Convention where you got to spend a weekend with the Biden's. And so now, of course, we are here on January 22. President Biden is now our President. We have a woman Vice President. The world is completely different, it seems, from the last time we spoke with each other. Would you mind sharing a little bit about that weekend you got to spend with the Biden's?

EW: Yeah, that was an extraordinary weekend. We got a call about you know, in the middle of July, Julie Cohen, my directing partner and I, got a phone call that [8:00] the Biden's were looking for a filmmaker to make a short film about Dr. Jill Biden. And so, we did a Zoom interview with Dr. Biden, and she was extraordinarily warm and funny and charming. And it turns out that she and I are the same age. We are, you know, class of '73 from college and really connected. I liked her so much. And so, we got the gig, which meant getting ourselves and our crew tested for COVID. It was really the first shooting that Julie and I had done since the shutdown. We had shot an interview in very early March, just under the wire, for our, our latest film that, that's coming out at Sundance next week. And that was the last interview. We'd all [9:00] kind of retreated to our offices like everybody else in the world. We'd been working virtually with the material, but we hadn't been out filming. So, we had to learn about testing and how we could get the results quickly. And we were able to do that and we all traveled down to Delaware, to the Biden summer house. We arrived and you know, it's a, it's a nice sort of beach

community and just sort of typical houses. There were a bunch of black, big vans in front of the, of the building. And the Secret Service is there with dogs and they're searching us and they're searching all of the equipment and we're standing outside and all of a sudden, I see coming out of the kind of garage of the house this guy leading a dog with a dog on a leash. I went, "Oh my goodness. That's Joe Biden." Out he went looking [10:00] super fit and trim, and pretty energetic. And it was at a time where people were criticizing him for having retreated to his basement, and he's too old, and he's too weak. And I saw a guy who did not look old and weak, that's for sure. That was interesting. You know, we wound up spending a day and a half with the Bidens and some of their children and grandchildren who were there for the weekend. And, you know, just hanging out. They could not have been more welcoming, more normal. Nice. Just, we kind of rearranged the furniture in their, in their living room to do the filming. They were fine. At one point, Joe Biden asked me if I would like a diet coke and I was like, [11:00] "You know, that's okay. I can go and get it myself." I mean, he's just a, Jill Biden said, you know, "Joe, would you please take out the trash." They're just like a normal, warm family. The kids, the grandkids, their daughter was there, Ashley, and a couple of their granddaughters were there and you know, you just see how relaxed everybody was and, and, and friendly. They had a nice, just easy supper out on the porch. And Joe Biden went to get his favorite ice cream because I think he's an ice cream nut. It was just really heartening to, to see this very loving family.

And then of course, the interviews. If you've seen the video we did, their love story is so genuine. So beautiful. Just, you know, I was in tears [12:00] listening to it because he had suffered a horrible tragedy, lost his first wife and a daughter. His children were badly injured. And she came into his life a few years later. And really, as he put it, rescued him. And you could see that they are still in love, still very connected. They joke with each other. It's just fun to be around them. So, I, and I came to admire her. I had no idea, I think, that she had been teaching while she was the Second Lady. She was teaching at a community college. And I think in a way, obviously, she was the Second Lady. Michelle Obama was such a big presence that people didn't, weren't really aware of, of Dr. [13:00] Jill Biden and what she was doing. She was just quietly going ahead with her business because she's extremely committed to her work as a teacher. And I guess they say she's going to continue teaching now that she's First Lady. She'll probably do one class a semester. She's somebody who has a, while she devoted herself to bringing the family together when she first married Joe. And she was reluctant to marry him at

first because she felt like this was a big responsibility. These two little boys. She, she spent a few years kind of getting the family together and then she went out and got more degrees and, and continued her teaching career. I mean, she's really committed to it. I think she'll make a fantastic First Lady. She's so warm, and people relate to her. She's just a regular person. And she's also a nut. She's kind of funny, [14:00] and she plays practical jokes. In that part of the interview, she was telling us about all the practical jokes that she's played over the years. This is, I guess, part of a family tradition. Her father was a practical joker. And so, she does it as well. She has like a whole closet full of wigs. And it's kind of crazy. At one point she went to, when she was Second Lady her social secretary was turning 50 and so, there was a big party for him. And he invited the Bidens to come and he was very happy that they were going to come and his family was there, his parents and everything. And so, Joe Biden shows up and he says, you know, "Jill has been delayed. She'll be here in a few minutes." And so, he's introducing Joe Biden to his parents and his family and everyone and all of a sudden somebody taps him on the shoulder and just says, "I think that you need a drink." And he turns around and it's Jill Biden in a big red wig, [15:00] dressed up in a, you know, waiters catering outfit. I mean, you know, he didn't recognize her at first, did a total doubletake. I mean, this is the kind of stuff she likes to do. It's completely wacky, but so endearing.

AK: That's incredible. It's incredible to hear these stories about, you know, a family, who ordinarily, you know, we're getting a very certain picture of. We don't always get these inside looks of what the First Family looks like and is doing. And their, their love is actually one of the things that I commented on, as I was watching the inauguration, and the way, Dr. Biden was looking at her husband while he was swearing in. Like, you could just see in her eyes, all of this love for him. It was really remarkable the way that that stuck out.

EW: Yea, I mean, she also talked to us about how she never intended to be a political wife, how she didn't really like being a political wife. When they [16:00] first got married and he was already a senator, she did not embrace this role. I mean, she's not someone who was marrying him, I don't think, because he was a senator and she could have, you know, be in his reflected light. She basically recoiled from a lot of the public appearances and speaking, and she grew into it. And she talked about that, how she had to teach herself how to be a good public speaker, how

to be more of a presence, obviously, as his ambitions for higher office, which she supported, and she realized, I'm going to have to do this. And then she saw it as an opportunity. And I think she will use the opportunity to talk about education, to talk about, you know, a very important issue for our country. She's going to make education front and center. I think that's fantastic.

AK: Something we haven't quite had recently.

EW: No, we have not had that. [17:00] So yeah, it was a pretty great weekend, I would say. And I remember afterwards, Julie, and I said, "Wow, this is going to be such a wonderful memory, or it's going to be so better bittersweet. And I have to say that on Wednesday, I was sure happy that it was a wonderful memory that we can, that we can really bask in and feel good about the character of the people, you know, of our leader and of the family that he comes from.

AK: Can you tell me a little bit about this past Inauguration Day, and maybe what you were doing or thinking or feeling?

EW: Yeah. You know, yea, I was a journalist for many years and I still consider myself a journalist. When I do documentaries, they're about things that are true. They're, they're about factual events. That said, I am [18:00] no longer constrained as a journalist who might be covering political campaigns or issues. So, I feel, have felt as a person less, less constrained to basically put my opinions out there. And the past four years of the Trump administration have been so deeply disturbing, to me as someone who does believe in truth and facts and science and journalism. And all of that was under assault and under attack by this administration, which just was so profoundly upsetting to me, as a person, as an American, as a journalist, on every single level. And so, I for the very first time campaigned, you know, door to door. Door knocking for [19:00] actually, for Hillary Clinton, I campaigned. And our daughter took a campaign job in 2018, and was working for senator John Tester's reelection campaign in Montana. So, she actually became a real campaign worker for a while. I mean, she is now in law school, but she was doing that. So, this year, I did voter registration in North Carolina, where, you know, that was a very important state. And I was happy to be able to make this video on behalf of Jill Biden and presenting her story. Again, I think it's a true story, but it's not a work of, necessarily, of

journalism I mean, because we were doing it for the Democratic National Convention. I was thrilled to do it. So that's the best backdrop of [20:00] my evolution.

Obviously, I was just like so many other people so profoundly relieved on Wednesday. I mean, after the Capitol assault, which was just one of the most terrifying, disturbing events of my lifetime. I think we're extremely lucky that it wasn't worse, that more people didn't die, that our legislators weren't taken hostage, that we also, I think that the face of white supremacy was there for everybody to see. This is what it is. Is this what you support, these words, these actions, these? It's, I think, in that sense, maybe something good can come out of that. So, I just felt a profound sense of relief, watching all the events. And [21:00] I thought that Joe Biden's speech was beautiful. You know, the performances are always great. I mean, it was just like watching a royal wedding or something. I mean, we were just all glued to it. We couldn't stop. And the outfits and looks between the people. "Oh, there's Barack. He's looking at Kamala." You know, we just, it was just oh so wonderful.

And then on top of it, as if that day for good enough, I had my appointment to get my first Coronavirus vaccine. So, I went and walked with my husband, Oren. We walked about seven or eight blocks over to a high school in Harlem, and I waited in line and I got my vaccination.

AK: Can you tell me, what was it like to be able to get the appointment? [22:00] How easy or difficult was it to just get that appointment?

EW: Well, it's not, it's difficult now. What happened was they opened it up. First in New York State, it was open to frontline workers and people over 75. And then a couple of weeks ago, they opened it up to people over 65. I went online shortly after that happened and it took me a couple of hours to navigate various websites with the city. And but, I all of a sudden, there was a date and it said January 20, which I knew was the inaugural. I thought great, this is perfect. I, you know, and I clicked it and took it. The next day, when other friends were trying to get their appointments, they were already gone. I mean, it's still not available enough. And I just feel lucky that I did it early enough after, you know, I became eligible that I was able to get this appointment. [23:00]

I hope that you know, the pace is way too slow. They haven't, they haven't inoculated enough people in in New York State and we'll, just it'll take a year at the rate they're going. So, this is obviously going to be a huge priority for the Biden administration. When people see this interview we'll know whether or not they met that challenge. It seems to me it's their number one priority. Their number one challenge is to get people vaccinated. But the other you know, the other thing that's so disturbing is, you know, I have a friend who's a gynecologist, and the people in her staff were reluctant to get the vaccination. These are people who are working for a doctor in New York City. An esteemed, you know, respected ob-gyn who herself had been vaccinated. And then there was availability for her staff and many of them [24:00] were reluctant because they were hearing things on social media and other places that were scaring them. Oh, you could get cancer in 20 years, they're putting a microchip in the vaccination, they're going to be controlling us. They were believing this and my friend actually, you know, did a pretty good job. I mean, she was taken aback. She, there's a, she sent them a fact sheet and then the next week she did a Zoom with someone in her hospital, Mount Sinai Hospital, whose a vaccination expert sort of leading it. And he took their questions because she said, you know, "At this point, they're not listening to me. What do I know, I'm not a vaccine expert?" So, after that, they did get vaccinated. But if you think of, if you multiply that to all the people who have been fed misinformation and lies on so many different levels – the people who still think the election was stolen, [25:00] the people who think that the vaccination is some big plot. I mean, it's a real crisis in our country and a challenge for this administration to, to deal with.

AK: I saw yesterday Dr. Anthony Fauci was able to speak.

EW: Yes!

AK: Which was also like drinking a glass of cold water. And he admitted how difficult the last several months have been for him trying to do his job.

EW: Yeah, he said he'd been liberated now. He said he's like –

AK: Yeah, exactly.

EW: No, it's, you know, the idea that, that expertise and science has been so discredited is really upsetting.

AK: And that to get in the historical record, that he said that there were moments where they felt they couldn't say something without fear of retaliation –

EW: Yeah. [26:00]

AK: From the federal government, from the president. Like, we all kind of expected that that's what was happening, but then to actually hear that is something else. But he also mentioned, it sounded like a big challenge for them is the fear of getting the vaccine. And I mean, I've similarly heard, you know, with what happened at the Capitol, people saying that that was all CGI made to look, make Trump look bad, like these things that are just out there. And I mean, it gets to a whole other issue of education, and interrogating sources, and access to information, and targeted ads, and, you know, all of, all of that other stuff. But it does sound like a huge hurdle for everybody is just going to be convincing people to get the vaccine –

EW: Yeah.

AK: First, and then getting the vaccine to them.

EW: The assault on truth in this country, [27:00] and the kind of false narratives that people have, it's, it's going to be a tough road. I do think that the pandemic has, maybe will be a watershed in this because people denied that there was a pandemic, and that you needed to wear a mask. And then we saw what happened that, you know, 400,000 Americans dying. I think that's, that's opened the eyes of a lot of people who were believing some of this misinformation, and then suddenly when your Aunt Sophie gets it, and she dies. That's, that's pretty sobering. And I think we've, we've had a lot of that. And I hope that with the vaccination when [28:00] people see others get the vaccination and not have negative repercussions, be able to go out in the world. I hope that that will eventually sink in.

AK: Definitely. Yeah, I think one of my, my least favorite things of the last four years is that “mistruths” has been a word that I hear.

EW: Yeah.

AK: There’s no such thing! It is not a “mistruth.” That would be a lie. Like we don’t speak in the negative here. That’s not a thing.

EW: Yeah. Well, or alternate, as Kellyanne Conway said, “alternate reality.”

AK: Yes, right.

EW: I mean, it began with –

AK: Alternate facts? Yeah.

EW: Alternate fact, yeah. Alternate reality. The alternate reality that actually, Trump had the largest crowd for his inauguration that there’s ever been.

AK: Right.

EW: No, actually, you could see the pictures. That’s not true. Yeah, it’s a real crisis, [29:00] how to handle the spread of misinformation on social media. It’s an ongoing issue that is, I’m sure going to be playing out into the future.

AK: Absolutely. So, I guess I’d like to take a moment again, like we did in the last interview to leave it open. If there’s anything, especially now, we’re like, a week since the last interview. Do you have anything different that you’d like to share for the people 50 years from now or even the people who could listen to this tomorrow? Any new thoughts on the state of affairs or, you know, anything that you think we should all be keeping in mind?

EW: You know, it's been such a tumultuous year and such a difficult year, 2020, we'll never forget this. But I do think that the reassessment of our [30:00] history and the honesty about our history is something hugely important that's happened this year, and has opened the eyes of many people, myself included, to the reality of, of systemic racism. You know, certainly, I don't think of myself, I've never thought of myself as a racist, and think of myself as an open person. And yet, when I take a look at what our African American citizens have been subjected through over the years, really with an open, just opening your eyes to everything that happened prior to after the Civil War, just the ongoing outrages, the violence, the, the disadvantage. I mean, to me, it's profound [31:00] to have a little bit more of an understanding about that, and to see that other people are, other white people, are embracing the idea of Black Lives Matter and what a profound thought that is. That's, I hope, a good sign that even though you know, the forces of hate have not gone away and there are people who are still fearful of the "other" who have hate, racism in their hearts for whatever reason they do. I think there are also a lot of others whose eyes have been open. You know, we've just done this film about an African American activist and lawyer named Pauli Murray, who is someone pretty much forgotten by history, but had a huge impact on [32:00] Thurgood Marshall, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, was just a groundbreaking legal thinker on the idea of separate but equal not being equal on its very face. And was saying this before, long before Brown v Board of Education was. And then ultimately gave an idea of how to win equal rights for women as well. I mean, this person and was a kind of zelig-like figure in our world. Knew many, many important, "important" people, but, but Pauli herself was not known. And it's been so much fun to work on a film about somebody like that, to take another look at history and to recognize that the people that we admire and put up on a pedestal are not necessarily the people who [33:00] deserve that place, or there are others who deserve that place. Pauli Murray is certainly such a person. And you know, that has been a great learning experience for me. So, I see that as, as maybe, maybe a good sign in 2020. We'll see.

I mean, we're, you know, it's still a question like, is Donald Trump a blip in history? Or, you know, is it just the beginning of something else? It's not clear, because certainly, if Trump goes away, we're so happy just to like, forget about him and go to Mar a Lago, and I don't want to hear from you or see you again. But Donald Trump represented, you know, a deeper problem in our country and something that we're going to be dealing with for a long time. So, we'll see. I

like to be optimistic. Pauli Murray, my new documentary subject [34:00] was, you know, subject to a lot of discrimination, a lot of racism, had a very tough life, and yet was a profoundly optimistic person. RBG was a very optimistic person in the face of, of real setbacks. And I think I try to follow that example, to, to keep pushing the arc of history in the right direction, as Martin Luther King would say.

AK: Well, thank you so much for joining me again for part two of your oral history and sharing so much more about your life and, and how Brown has impacted it over the years. Thank you very much.

EW: Thrilled to do it, Amanda, and good luck. Thank you.

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