

Interview of Debbie Greenberg Irwin, class of 1979

Interviewer: Phyllis Santry, class of 1966

Date: June 9, 2014

Location: New York, NY

Interview transcribed by Daniel Putnam, class of 2015

Note: From the start of the interview through 7:30, there is significant amount of background noise.

PHYLLIS SANTRY: This is Phyllis Santry, I'm talking to Debbie Irwin in New York City on June 9th, 2014—part of the Oral History Project of the Pembroke Center Associates. Debbie, I'm sure you took a look at some of these questions—it's basically divided into three sections: your background, your experience at Brown, and then your experiences going forward. So we have a few sample questions that might get the ball rolling here, whatever you think is important to focus on, of course, is up to you. Could you tell me a little bit about your family and your background?

DEBBIE IRWIN: Sure. I don't recall actually if you said my name—I'm Debbie Irwin.

SANTRY: Oh, did I not say that? Oh dear. [laughter]

IRWIN: You may have, I'm a little distracted by the noise in the background, and I hope that it's not a problem for the recording... So, I grew up in Chicago, and my father was a professor of Entomology at the University of Illinois. And my mom was and is a family therapist. We did a lot of traveling abroad because my father won a Fulbright, twice, to study wherever he wanted. So we went to Rome and spent a year there. Two times—the first time, I was only two. But the second time I was ten, and I went to Italian public school, so I became fluent. We would also spend many summers in Mexico because he would do research there as well. We would drive from Chicago down to Mexico City or wherever it was. And so I developed an affinity for languages and for travel.

I finished high school in three years and wanted to go away to college at that point. In fact, my passion had always been theater and acting, and I wanted to go to London, but my parents said no. [laughter] They said, "We want you to get a good, solid, liberal arts education first, and then you can do whatever you want to do." And also they didn't want me to go away yet because they felt that I still had some things to work on, emotional development-wise and, I guess, even with them—so that was a year where we did some therapy together, I guess. But what I did, after I graduated, was I went to the University of Chicago. So I matriculated there as a freshman with the knowledge that I was going to transfer after that first year. That was wonderful, I lived on campus even though [unclear 2:50] was only a matter of blocks away. And then I left. Now, U of C, like many universities, has a core curriculum—and since I knew I wasn't going to be there, I just took the courses, pretty much, that I wanted to in writing. I didn't take any math or science for that

first year. And then I transferred to Brown, and I think it was lucky to have had the experience of two different universities, top rated universities. What I say to people is that I thought academically, the U of C was a bit superior. But socially—and I think the university and college experience is a lot more... it's about a lot more than just academics. Socially, there was, you know, no comparison. I mean, Brown was a great place and a warm, and wonderful, and friendly, and enriching, and you know—a wonderful place to spend my college years. So that's a little bit about my family and childhood.

SANTRY: What was your first impression when you got to Brown? Had you been to the campus before, did you see what it was like or what it was about? What made you pick that?

IRWIN: I think I must have, but I really don't have any recollection. You know, having... being a mom of three kids who have gone through that whole process... Nowadays we're really much more involved with our kids. You know, we take them here, we go there, we look at all these schools... [4:30] So I remember my parents taking me there, moving me in. And, you know, I remember just loving the campus—I don't think there's a soul who doesn't experience the campus and kind of fall in love with in. I've interviewed a lot of kids who are applying to Brown, and I do that. You know, anybody who I've spoken to who has been there [5:00] —there's a magic there, on that campus. There was and still is.

SANTRY: Where did you live when you were a freshman?

IRWIN: I was a sophomore because I transferred.

SANTRY: Oh, right.

IRWIN: So I lived on the Pembroke campus, actually in some newer buildings that are just off of Thayer Street. So I guess that's not technically the Pembroke campus, but that side of town. And being a transfer student has its own... I don't know—benefits, I suppose. And the benefit is that you've experienced two different places. And so, I think, in much the same way that I've traveled and experienced other cultures, you realize that there are a lot of different ways of doing it, whatever the "it" is. On the negative side, you miss that wonderful magic that happens in the first year, that camaraderie that you develop with your freshman classmates. So you come in as a transfer student, and you don't really know that many people, and it's not as easy to get to know—you don't get to know your class, you know. You get to know the people that you're living with and those you meet as you're there. So that was one thing that I missed, I wished I had had that at Brown. So that was where I lived sophomore year. And then my junior year, I lived on the Pembroke campus—in one of the old buildings on the...

SANTRY: Andrews?

IRWIN: Yes, I think so. And then my senior year, I lived off campus, in an apartment on... what's the big street that's perpendicular to Thayer...

SANTRY: Waterman?

IRWIN: Waterman! Thank you. You're testing my memory. [laughter]

SANTRY: So, what do you remember most fondly about your time at Brown? Is there anything that—

IRWIN: Um... Some of my teachers, whose names I don't remember [laughter], doing theater there, dance, working with BCO, Brown Community Outreach...

[Other party exits 7:27]

IRWIN: What else—and working, actually. I worked while I was at school.

SANTRY: Oh!

IRWIN: At first I worked at the Brown Derby. And then in the summers, I would work for Food Services during reunion and graduation, during all those activities. And I also worked as a cocktail waitress in the discos. That was a lot of fun for me too because I loved to dance, and I loved that music. And it was for me to have a foot in both worlds. That sort of idyllic campus life, but also be making money out in the world too.

SANTRY: Oh, that's great. That's good. Now was there any part that you didn't like about school? That stays with you, that you would have changed, or that you wish hadn't happened?

IRWIN: No, not really. There was one—some courses you were required to take for Pass/No Cookies, as we used to call it, Pass/NC? Did you [call it that]?

SANTRY: No, we didn't have that [laughter]

IRWIN: We called it Pass or No Cookies. And when it came close to graduating, you needed to have a certain number of credits to graduate with honors. And I was just shy a couple of points, I guess, not credits. So I went back to—had it been my choice, I would have taken all my classes for grades because that was just kind of me. So I went back to one of my teachers, and I said to her—Tannenbaum, I think her name was—I said, "This is my situation. I'm so close, is it possible for you to assign me a grade if you *would* have assigned me a grade?" And she did. And I brought that to the dean, and they allowed me to graduate *magna cum laude*.

SANTRY: Oh, that's great!

IRWIN: That's a good story!

SANTRY: That's a wonderful memory, yes.

IRWIN: You know, I remember fondly—Here was the other thing that was kind of wonderful. I got to the point at the end of my junior year where I realized that I wasn't going to go on for advanced studies in my declared major [10:00] of Psychology. And in order to complete the degree, the requirements for the degree, I would have had to take a number of courses in the lab. You know, with mice, and rats, and figuring out how my taste buds taste and how my nose smells—and those were things I just wasn't that interested in. So, given that I felt that I was in this environment, this rich environment, and I had a wonderful opportunity to kind of take whatever I wanted to—I switched my major to Semiotics, which gave me credit for many, if not most of the courses I had already taken and allowed me to take more courses in areas I was interested in. Literature, as an example. Writing. Spanish. And that was really a great... great opportunity, for me. Because I think to be forced to finish something that you know that you're not committed to, you know—to what end? Okay, so I would have had a Psychology degree, granted you never know what-ifs. And saying you have a degree in Semiotics, that has been a little bit of an albatross around my neck because nobody knows what it means, really. Not many people anyhow.

SANTRY: I had to look it up. [laughter]

IRWIN: Yeah, right! Me neither, right? But there were a lot of wonderful experiences that came out of being exposed to Semiotics, and I think it actually did speak to me and how I view the world—which is that there are lots of different ways of viewing and understanding those things we take for granted. I remember, in one of the classes we watched films, and we watched them with a critical eye to see what those classic kind of signs were—you know, the bad guys in black, the so-and-so in white. Things like that. Or how do other cultures put food on a plate, and what does that say about the culture; not in every culture do you have the meat, and the potatoes, and the vegetables spread out like that. So just having an appreciation for seeing how messages are being communicated, whether we realize it or not.

SANTRY: Mm hmm.

IRWIN: Some of my favorite courses actually were in the sciences, were in Neurology. You know, how the brain works—that's something that remains a fascinating topic for me. I think my hardest class was Statistics. I was grateful for the B minus that I got, which I think was my worst grade. But, you know, I was really grateful for it. So, anyway. Those were some of my memories around classes.

SANTRY: Now what was your social life like when you were on campus? You said it was hard getting started, being a transfer student, because you didn't have the initial *esprit de corps* of being freshmen together. But after that, well you said you were in

a theater group—did you hang out with those guys? Or just hang out with the people you lived with?

IRWIN: Yeah, people I lived with. Other friends that I made, really across fields. I've never been one to be kind of cliquey. I had friends who were dancers, friends who were in theater, friends who—one of my best friends, Russian literature was her thing. You know, I remember very fondly a boyfriend I had on campus. So I don't ever remember feeling sorry for myself like I didn't have a social life. I'm happy to say I enjoyed myself, *and* I did well in school.

SANTRY: That's good. That's good. Now, did they have a lot of rules on campus by the time you were there? I graduated in '66, and we had—you know, they were *in loco parentis*—we had all kinds of rules. Now, when you were there were there a lot of social rules or not so much?

IRWIN: I don't remember. I don't remember any. Such as what?

SANTRY: Oh, well I lived in a dorm: we had to be in by a certain time, you weren't allowed to have men in your room, all of that kind of thing.

IRWIN: I don't remember having those rules. So I was there from 1976, and I graduated in '79. [15:00] And then I spent another year living in Providence, in South Providence, after I graduated. Which is another interesting story in and of itself.

SANTRY: Yes, yes. Tell!

IRWIN: So all along I had a passion for doing theater, for acting. When I was in high school, I was doing theater at the University of Chicago. When I went to Brown, still doing more theater. And it seemed that that was going to be a difficult road to hoe. So I started to get involved with the local television stations—the network affiliates, WJAR and WPRI, I think? The ABC affiliate and the NBC affiliate. I did an internship in the news department at one. I got a job working at the NBC affiliate as a floor director. I also had my own women's public affairs radio show that they allowed me to do for a while at the NBC affiliate. So I was getting my feet more wet in those areas, thinking that would be an easier career path for me. And I always made friends with people who were kind of behind the scenes. So one night after the news—the news was over at 11:30 PM—and, you know, this was during the time of Ernie Anastos and Meredith Vieira, people who have subsequently made it quite big here in New York. So the talent went home, and I stayed—and my buddies in the control room let me get on the set. And I brought fancy clothes to wear. So I got behind the news desk, and they rolled back the teleprompter. And they recorded me reading the news, so I could create a demo, right? A demo tape. So I had this demo tape, and once I graduated I started sending it around to tiny little markets. And I got no response. And I thought very quickly, "Well of course. Why would they be interested in me? I have no background in journalism, so I don't the right cv for

this task.” And this is, mind you, after I’d graduated, and I’m living on the south side of Providence—which at the time was not a particularly pretty place to be living, but I had a fantastic apartment, and it was quite a different, like a hundred-eighty degree difference from living up on the hill. So it occurred to me that if I wanted to pursue this, I was really going to have to go to Journalism school. So I started to look into that, schools up in Boston, and I realized that I was *tired* of being in school. And I didn’t want to be in school anymore. And the other thing I realized—and this was the epiphany. And I should say first, before I tell you what the epiphany was because that’s kind of the resolution—I spent a year living in this apartment, working as a cocktail waitress in a disco that was on the river, and it was a disco of some notoriety because we were the first disco in Rhode Island to have male strippers. And that, in and of itself, was quite fascinating, not because of the male of the male strippers, but because of the women who came to see them. That to me was like a study in sociology. Who these women were, three generations, how they behaved... doing things that you just knew, once they walked out, they would never do! So that, to me, was kind of really fascinating. And I was also competing with myself every night to see how much I sold in booze. Then the owner of the club got really excited about that, and he gave me a bonus for that—and then suddenly everybody wanted to compete. And then it was a fun game: who rang up the most for the night, and you earn a bonus.

So that was what I did at night, and by day I was laying on the mattress on the floor in my apartment, staring at the ceiling through watery eyes. Crying and crying and crying because I didn’t know what I was going to do with my life. So, it was through that time period of figuring out, “Okay, nobody wants me unless I have a Journalism degree,” that I ultimately realized, and I say this a little bit tongue-in-cheek: it wasn’t the news that I cared about. It was being in front of the camera. So that was the epiphany. And when I realized that, I realized, [20:00] “Okay, I have to go to New York. And I have to pursue this dream of mine of doing theater.” And then it was clear. Then I had a mission and a goal. And I came to New York to pursue that dream.

SANTRY: Were you in theater at Brown? Were you in Sock and Buskin and whatever other theater groups there were? Or did they not have Sock and Buskin when you were there?

IRWIN: I did many shows when I was there. Does it mean I was in the theater group, I don’t know. You know, I auditioned all the time.

SANTRY: What shows were you in?

IRWIN: It’s funny, I’m remembering the ones from U of C a little bit more... I’m drawing a blank at the moment.

SANTRY: Okay, that’s alright. Glad somebody else does that besides me. Now tell me about what Brown was like back in your time. Was it as diverse as it is now? When I was there, it was like three-quarters men, one-quarter women. About three

or four black people. No Asians, no Hispanics, nothing. And then it changed radically towards the end of the 60s. How about when you were there?

IRWIN: Well, I didn't really feel any male-female disproportion—there may have been, but it wasn't like you're walking into a class, and you're the only woman, and suddenly you feel awkward. I know, just based on what the statistics are now for how diverse the populations are, that it couldn't have been even this poor back then. But my boyfriend was actually from—he was black, he was from St. Vincent. One of the islands. So I was aware of the, you know, not just African American population, but you know. And where I grew up in Chicago, on the South Side—really, my school, you could say, was segregated. I was in the minority, being a white person there. Being around people of color and diversity is... comfortable for me.

SANTRY: And that's the way Brown was too, by the time you were there.

IRWIN: Yeah. I mean, you know—massively, no. Enough, no. But obviously I found those communities anyway.[laughter]

SANTRY: Yes! You did quite well for yourself. So did you spend much time off the campus, doing other things other than studying and whatever?

IRWIN: Yes, yes. Because I had a car. So between working and going downtown, and also volunteering with BCO—the Brown Community Outreach—and we would take the minivan to South Providence. And I would tutor in some of those grammar schools over there. And also going down to Newport, and going up to Boston. So yeah, I got around.

SANTRY: I didn't know what BCO was. Brown Community Outreach? How long has that been around? Do they still have it?

IRWIN: I think they do still have it. And probably a lot more because volunteering and all is such a huge part of curricula these days. Even in middle schools and high schools. It's almost required. And actually, my youngest goes to Tulane, and it's a requirement as part of their curriculum. So, it wasn't at that time, but yeah—that was another way that I got off campus. Again, I like to explore, you know. And so I did.

SANTRY: What else does Brown Community Outreach do? They tutor, and is that it?

IRWIN: No, I think it was a wide variety of things that you could sign up for. We'll have to Google it and see. [laughter]

SANTRY: Were there any other sports, activities, clubs, anything like that that we haven't talked about yet?

IRWIN: I wasn't a sporty gal.

SANTRY: Me neither.

IRWIN: But I was a dancer, so I took a lot of dance classes. And I remember swimming, for exercise. And also running in the track some, but mostly swimming.
[25:00]

SANTRY: As fun, not as a competitive sport.

IRWIN: Yeah, not competitive. I'm not competitive when it comes to sports.
[laughter]

SANTRY: Were there any political issues that shaped your experience in college? I'm trying to think of the late seventies; there wasn't a lot of political stuff going on then.

IRWIN: Yeah, I don't think so. I never really felt like the campus was brewing, you know.

SANTRY: Like it was ten years earlier, yeah.

IRWIN: When you were there?

SANTRY: Yes. Oh yeah. Vietnam. Civil rights. Two major things going on, all the time. Now how did you feel about women versus men at Brown? Did you feel comfortable? Did you feel like you were accepted, you were appreciated academically? Nobody talked down to you? Not like business. [laughter]

IRWIN: Yeah, I did feel respected. I think some of my fond memories of teachers were women, actually.

SANTRY: That's good.

IRWIN: Yeah. It's so important to find great teachers. And as I've counseled my kids, if you can find a great teacher, it really doesn't matter what they're teaching. Because you'll learn, and you'll enjoy the learning. Because that's what great teachers do. I think they instill a love for their topic.

SANTRY: Is there anything you would change about your Brown experience? If you could do it differently now, would you have taken different courses? Would you have tried different extracurricular—

IRWIN: I think maybe if I could have gone back and gone there from the beginning, I think that that would have enriched my experience, in a way. Because I feel like I got—not that I got left out, but that that was not a part of the experience there. And

I didn't stay in touch with my freshman friends from the University of Chicago. It wasn't easy like it is now, to stay in touch with anybody and everybody. So I didn't have that, and I know people who say, "You make friends for life your freshman year." I know it's true of my husband. He went to Providence College, and he's still friends with his college buddies. And [unclear], yeah. So I missed that. But no regrets, really.

SANTRY: So, you think it was a good move to move from Chicago to Providence?

IRWIN: Definitely. Oh yeah, yeah. Definitely. I wasn't going to stay in Chicago.

SANTRY: Did you have any siblings that went to school in Chicago?

IRWIN: I have three siblings: an older brother, an older sister, and a younger brother. My sister and younger brother got their PhDs from the University of Chicago after going to Oberlin and Grinnell. My older brother had gone to the lab school there. But nobody went to Brown.

SANTRY: You struck out! On your own.

IRWIN: I did. I did. I would like to go back in time and try to remember how that all happened. You know, how did I find Brown, and what was that process like for me?

SANTRY: It is funny how it can be very random, why you end up going someplace. And when it's such a major part of your life, you know. It has such an effect on everything you do for the rest of your life. You want to grab these teenagers and say, "Look, this is really important! You've got to figure this out now. Don't do it because of like... you know, their *jackets*, or their team name or their whatever!"

IRWIN: Right.

SANTRY: Okay, is there anything else we should talk about—college experiences, have we left anything out?

IRWIN: I have very, very fond memories of being at Brown. And I say it with pride that I went there. [30:00] Certainly there's a tremendous cache that has continued to follow all of us, I think.

SANTRY: My God, yes.

IRWIN: Even when I've gone back to the campus, it's still—I'd love to do it again. Actually. I would love to do it again. And this time perhaps with the Pass/No Cookies. [laughter]

SANTRY: We've already talked about this one, did you have any specific expectations of what your future would be after school. Obviously not, you were still trying this, trying that.

IRWIN: Yeah, I was still figuring that out.

SANTRY: You had specific career plans, but you changed those as a result of your—

IRWIN: Yeah, I guess so. I guess so. I had a path that I thought was the right one until I realized it wasn't. I had some unfinished business to do, and that was to come to New York and pursue this dream of acting.

SANTRY: And how did that go for you? The acting.

IRWIN: Well, like for many other twenty-one year olds, twenty-somethings that come to the Big Apple—it was daunting. Fortunately, I have family here, relatives. My parents were originally from New York, so I had aunts and uncles here. But I found an apartment rather quickly and I spent a couple of years struggling. You know, going on those cattle calls for auditions. And I did a little bit of classical comedy with a company that performed in public spaces and also in projects. Projects—not in the projects. I did some children's theater. I had a walk-on part on *All My Children*—and it was so quick that even my mom didn't recognize me. [laughter] And by night I worked as a bartender in a disco. So that was how I made ends meet. And that was a great experience also.

And after a couple years of doing that, I realized I was ready to move on. I wanted some structure in my life, and I wanted a regular paycheck, and I wanted whatever was next. I felt like I had satiated that desire enough so that I would never wake up one morning when I'm forty with kids and saying, "Oh! Why did I never do that!?" No. I did it so I could be free of that nagging desire. So then I found a job at the Guggenheim. At the Guggenheim Museum. I worked there in public affairs. Dealing with the press, the public, we were the internal liaison also, for all the various departments. And that was wonderful. I loved being around the art, and I loved learning about the art. But after a few years there, I realized a couple of things. PR was not a passion for me. It wasn't something I wanted to continue—one. And, two, that people in the arts and/or the non-profit sector really need to be independently wealthy or married to someone who is, and I was neither.

So I had gotten to the point where I wanted to make money. And I decided to go to Wall Street then, and I became a stockbroker. I wanted to understand finance and help women, in particular, also understand finance. Because the actuarial tables show we outlive our husbands, so why not learn about it sooner than later? So I had a very successful career as a stockbroker, first at Dean Witter, then Smith Barney hired me away. So I spent five years as a broker, experienced Black Monday. And then I like to say I left Wall Street for Sesame Street when I decided to become a full-time mom. And I had one kid, two kids, three kids, and did that for many years. So between three kids, two homes, a bevy of animals, and one husband, that was a lot to juggle for many years. And I was very happy and fortunate that that was *all*,

quote unquote, I was doing. And periodically, my mom would ask me, when we would be on the phone, "Have you thought about what's next?" [35:00] And I would get so frustrated, "Mom! What do you mean what's next? I can't get through this day, never mind tomorrow and what's down the road." And this was not early on, after I'd already been into the third kid and et cetera, et cetera. But she planted a little seed, and I like to tell this story because I give her tremendous credit. I credit her with where I am today because of that nudging. That periodic, "have you thought about...?" "Have you thought about what will be next? What will you do for you?" So, over the span of easily a few years, I'd say, I thought about it in the back of my mind. What would be next? Would I want to go back and be a stockbroker again, and build that business from zero? No. I thought about maybe selling to the brokers, you know, as a possibility. And I thought... No. I can't have a nine-to-five job now. I'm still way too busy juggling everything that I'm doing with these three kids in the city. And then I thought about theater. And I thought, "Well, I can't do that. That's nights and weekends. I'm not available nights and weekends." And then what I did was I got the NYU School of Continuing Education book—back when they still produced a book, and it was easily an inch or two inches thick. And I would go through that, which to me was a library of ideas. And also the 92nd Street Y has a huge program of all different kinds of courses you could take. So it was kind of like being in a candy shop, and sorting through and looking to see what looked appetizing. And in fact, I found a course for voiceovers. And I didn't really know what voiceovers were, but it sounded interesting to me. So I decided to take the class. And within five minutes of being in the class, I knew that I had found it. I had found what it was that I was meant to do. So I like to say that I'm living my dream. I just didn't know it was going to look like this because everything I'd done up until this point has helped me to be successful at this career, which is a combination of all these other things.

SANTRY: How long have you been doing it? Been doing voiceovers?

IRWIN: I took that class ten and a half years ago.

SANTRY: Oh! So you've been doing it for a while. Wow...

IRWIN: My youngest is nineteen. I have a twenty-two year old and a twenty-four year old.

SANTRY: Wow.

IRWIN: Now my mom is eighty-four years old, and she's still working. My dad's ninety-two.

SANTRY: What does your mother do?

IRWIN: She's a family therapist. So...

SANTRY: Well no wonder she wanted you to think about what you're going to do with your life.

IRWIN: Yeah. And she—my sister did not stop working when she had her kids. And my parents were very supportive of my decision, and I felt a little bit like a salmon swimming upstream because in the nineties, it was all about doing it all, right? Being a career woman, and not getting off that ladder to success in order to have your kids. So I spend many days in the park with the nannies, you know. But I didn't want to give my kids to anybody else to raise. I wanted that job for myself.

SANTRY: And you're glad you made that choice?

IRWIN: Oh yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And I'm thrilled that I have this career now and also [am] happy that my kids were able to see me make this happen for myself. Because there's an important message in that too.

SANTRY: Sure.

IRWIN: And I remember many years ago—I don't remember how old my son was at the time, maybe he was ten or twelve or something—and he had the gall to say to me, "Well, *you* don't work." Or something like that. So you know, in the eyes of your kids, or at your home, maybe another friend's mom is home, but most of them perhaps not, and so on. [40:00] Anyway, obviously that changed. And I didn't let that comment go by without... yeah.

SANTRY: Good for you.

IRWIN: Giving him a piece of my mind. [laughter]

SANTRY: Have you done any social, or political, or religious, or anything like that activities outside of work? Interested in politics, or?

IRWIN: Um... Politics, not so much. Prior to starting my career, I did a tremendous amount of volunteering. Both in whatever schools my kids were in—and often times, that was three different schools—and also at our temple up in the Berkshires. You know, from fundraising on down to specific things in the classroom. Ultimately, our kids went to spend some time at The Churchill School and Center, which is a school for kids who have learning differences. And that journey—coping with learning about my kids and their struggles, and how to address them—became an area that is deep in my heart, that I care about a lot, and I could see myself working in at some point down the road. How kids learn. How can we change the educational system so that these specialized schools, where kids are really being offered the opportunity to learn however they learn best, can be the norm instead of the exception? I started a program at The Churchill School, about seven years ago. I started it for the high school students, called "Lunch and Learn." And in that program, we bring in adults—oftentimes parents but not necessarily parents of

students who are there—to talk about their careers, and how they got there, and what are the skills involved in what they do. In order to open these kids' minds and consciousness, really, to all the different jobs that there are out there.

And what gave me this idea was when Josh, my oldest, was looking at schools for college. So he was a junior, I guess. I remember we were at a holiday party, and you're going to get asked—generation after generation, you're going to get asked, the same kid—"Oh, what schools are you looking at?" And "What do you want to study?" "What do you want to major in?" And Josh had no idea, and he had no idea even of the "ologys." Of, you know, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology—nothing. So later I pulled him aside, I said, "You know, Josh, you have to come up with an answer. Even if it's not true. You have to have an answer because it's a conversation ender to say 'I don't know.' And does it matter really, if you say one thing and it's not true?" You know, most kids change their major seven times. Or people change their careers seven times. So at that point I realized he really had no idea what was out there. And I thought, "wouldn't it be great to expose him and other kids to all the choices?" And in the process, what's happened—and I take great pride in this—is invariably there is a spark that happens in that room between the speaker and one kid in the group who is turned on by something that they've said, or is speaking to a fear of theirs, or a dream of theirs. And I'm a big believer in serendipity, and that you just never know when something's going to happen that could change the trajectory of your life. So this program, in my mind, is an opportunity to create a fertile ground for that to possibly happen. And even though my kids have been gone from the school for a while, I continue to manage that program. Coordinate that program.

SANTRY: You still do. That's great. Where is The Churchill School?

IRWIN: It's on 29th Street, between 1st and 2nd. It's called The Churchill School and Center. It goes K through 12 now. It's been around for forty years now. It wasn't always—you know, it started as just whatever grade they started with. And the high school, [45:00] I think, is not quite a decade old.

SANTRY: That's great. That's wonderful. That's really good. Doing something with the semiotics too. As you say, people learn differently. Different symbols, different—when I was looking up semiotics, I was thinking about clothes. You know, how much clothes say about you.

IRWIN: Uh huh.

SANTRY: You know, if you wear those little hanging-down pants in the back, and what that means—that you're tough. [laughter] How you're making a statement, you know. Interesting. Interesting field.

IRWIN: Right. Right. Well, and actually it's something that I incorporate in my business. When I go out to an audition or to a job, I wear my colors—the colors that are my branded colors, that you'll find on my website, on my business card—so as to

reinforce that message about me. That I'm professional, I'm put together, that I'm not showing up in jeans, you know. I take my work seriously, and I dress the part. Present day outfit excluded. [laughter]

IRWIN: We won't tell you what I'm wearing. You'll just have to guess. Although, there are a lot of jokes about voiceover artists because we get to work at home oftentimes, you know, we're working in a booth. What *are* we wearing? Or are we wearing anything? [laughter]

SANTRY: Show up in whatever. How do you get your jobs? Do you have an agent, or do you just do it through your website, or what?

IRWIN: All of the above. I have a number of agents, and I also freelance. I get work from my website. I network. There are also casting sites, or voice bank sites, that pair job seekers with voice talent. So I'll get maybe twenty, thirty auditions in the course of a day that I can choose to audition for or not. And I do that from home. And there are hundreds of other people, so the competition is stiff. And other times I'll get calls from agents or from casting directors to go in to audition for projects where I'm auditioning live at whatever studio here in the city. Because of the internet, now you can be anywhere and book anything. But by virtue of being in a major city, it's great because there's a lot that's happening live and in person. And that doesn't happen, necessarily, for someone who's living in a tiny town. Who could still compete, but they won't be going to sessions in person. And that's a really important dynamic, you know.

SANTRY: Do you always try out for every audition that you are invited to?

IRWIN: Uh, no. I don't try out for all of them. And most jobs I have to audition for—the wonderful ones are where they call you and say, "We want you. We booked you off your reel." Or, then once you develop a relationship, people come back because they know what you're capable of. Or they know what they've hired you to do before. Maybe they're not entirely—maybe they don't know *everything* you're capable of, but you know.[laughter]

SANTRY: Yeah. The president of my company used to always smile when he answered the phone.

IRWIN: Uh huh. Oh yes.

SANTRY: He swore that people could tell if he was smiling.

IRWIN: Well they say that all the time! Put more smile in it. That's a direction that we get, and it is true. And it actually speaks to an interesting phenomenon—which is movement is necessary for emotion. When people stand at the mike and then they just kind of talk *like this*—that's just not how we talk. That's not how we

converse. And the simple act of putting a smile on your face is going to make that sound just that much sweeter. It's fascinating.

SANTRY: Yeah. I used to watch him do it.

IRWIN: Where did you work?

SANTRY: I worked on Wall Street, for a Wall Street firm. Now, a couple more things I wanted to talk about. Where there specific ways that your time at school influenced the choices that you made in the years to follow? Can you think of a specific thing at school that drove you into this, or encouraged you to do this, or not so much?

IRWIN: A metaphor just popped into my mind that I remember post-graduation. And that was that being in college is like being in a restaurant. And you're handed a menu, and you get to pick whatever you want off that menu. After college, you have to write the menu yourself. [50:00] And it's a whole other ball of wax. And that was part of the struggle of that year, for me. I didn't just knee-jerk go into whatever, you know. I know a lot of kids now, they'll knee jerk—they graduate, there's no jobs, they'll go to law school. But I knew that whatever I was going to do, I had to feel passionately about it in order to find the energy and the motivation to do it. So anyway, the menu metaphor.

SANTRY: Well, it's appropriate. And then, just wrapping up here: remembering about school, how did it change during the time that you were there? Were there any major social changes, academic changes, anything like that? Or did you feel like it was all pretty much [a] good, happy place to grow, to develop, to try all kinds of different things? I remember thinking, when I was there, I loved the fact that you could just try anything. You could take any course you wanted, you could try out for any sport or any activity. You didn't have to fit in to anything, and that's what I really liked about Brown. I think that's what people still like about Brown. But was there anything that stuck out in your mind?

IRWIN: No, you know. Again, I don't know if they're rose-colored glasses, but I just have very fond memories of living in Providence and being in school there. You know, like Goldilocks, I think that it wasn't too big, it wasn't too small—it was just right. There was enough of a city there—it wasn't a big metropolis, but you weren't in the cornfields. Yeah, it was just perfect.

SANTRY: We don't need to talk about the men's college... Have you any thoughts about staying in touch with Brown? You said your freshman year you missed that whole *esprit de corps* thing, have you stayed in touch with other—Well you obviously liked your school experience, or you wouldn't be doing the interviews. Do you still do interviews for them?

IRWIN: Yes. Yes I do, and it's fascinating. It's really incredible to talk to these kids and see how much, how accomplished they are and how bright they are—it's just daunting. You know, I didn't stay in touch. In subsequent years I've tried to locate people without success, with the exception of that boyfriend. [laughter] And that pains me, a little. Because I think there's something really precious about shared memories. And the further away I get from those memories, the harder they are to recall. And so I would like to reconnect with those people. I did go to my twenty-fifth reunion, and I brought my family. And I didn't know anybody. My kids were like, "Mom, didn't you have any friends here?!" [laughter] Like, "Yes! I think I did! I just don't see any of them!" But being in New York for the last thirty-odd years, oftentimes I'll recognize people. I have a very good visual memory—so I'll be like, "You went to Brown, didn't you?" They'll be like, "Yeah, how did you know?" I say, "Well I don't know your name, but I know your face."

SANTRY: Semiotics. Symbols. Pictures.

IRWIN: There you go.

SANTRY: Now what do you think about how popular Brown is now, you know, compared to when you were there and more so when I was there. Maybe do you think it's like... not the right way to go? My sister says, "Oh, well movie star's children go there." Which is sort of a put down.

IRWIN: Well, you know, Kate Burton was in my class. She was there when I was there. And I remember Salzburger, I think, the New York Times dynasty—their kids were there. You know, I think it has a reputation for being a place where kids are happy. And there's nothing wrong with that. [55:00]

SANTRY: Good.

IRWIN: *Au contraire*, right? [laughter]

SANTRY: Okay, is there anything else that you wanted me to ask you that I didn't?

IRWIN: No, no. You covered a lot of territory. I think maybe just reconnecting now, and trying to establish new friendships through the Brown Club. You know, I've tried to go to some of the events to meet people. Sometimes I'm shy. But I think it's a way of keeping the love alive, you know?

SANTRY: Oh yeah.

IRWIN: Do you go to them?

SANTRY: I do. And I'm retired now, and mostly it's people who want to make business connections. And so they're not really that interested. I went to that thing at Lincoln Center for the 250th party, did you go to that?

IRWIN: No, no.

SANTRY: It was very interesting. It was interesting. Generally the Brown Club things are not—they're for younger people. They're more interested in business connections.

IRWIN: Well I went to one that was wonderful. It was a private tour of the Hopper show at the Whitney.

SANTRY: Ooh, wow! Cool!

IRWIN: That was so fantastic. I really wish they would do more things like that.

SANTRY: Okay, well should we wrap it up?

IRWIN: Yeah! Definitely.

[End of interview]