Miriam Waltzer Transcript

Abrielle Young: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today's date is January 12th, 2005. This is an interview with Miriam Waltzer. Ms. Waltzer, can you spell your last name for me, please?

Miriam Waltzer: W-A-L-T-Z-E-R.

AY: Thank you. The interview is conducted by Abrielle Young (sp?) at Ms. Waltzer's home in New Orleans, Louisiana. This is disk number one of one. Can you tell me briefly about your family background?

MW: Well, I [was] born in Europe; I'm from Germany originally. I have two sisters. They are six and five years older than I am. I am 70 years old now. My father was one of seven children, and he's the only one who made a success. My mother was one of seven children. She was a very, very sweet person and a great believer. She was not Jewish. I like to call her a saint. I really believe so. She's responsible for a lot of the good characteristics that I have. She was ill all her life, and my two older sisters took care of her, literally, because my father, who made the success, had left during the war, was in Switzerland, and my mother had to fend with us three children by herself.

He never had even gone to high school. He stopped school at age 14, and he was literally self-taught. Spoke seven languages, made inventions as he sat at a table, and was, in my opinion, one of the most brilliant people I've ever met and with the right education might have gotten a Nobel Peace Prize, I thought. But --

AY: What kind of inventions did he make?

MW: Well, my father had a tremendous ability to absorb knowledge. To give you an example, all my life after the war, my father had a lab. In that lab, people were blowing glass and making fluorescent lights and things like that.

For many of these things that were done in the lab, you needed chemical knowledge. For example, you needed to have very pure mercury. My father invented a process to purify mercury in this lab, among other things. He invented processes for rare gases to be collected. It was just incredible, arcane stuff, but he did it.

I also remember that he wanted to invent a dishwasher, persuaded my mother to give him all the dishes to put in it, and they all came out in pieces, which did not make my mother very happy. He had the ability to tell people how to arrange their factories so that -- place this here, and place this there, and organize things. I don't know what you call that, but it was sort of an inventor ad hoc.

I remember as a child, my father saying to me, "I'll show you just once, and you better know how to do it when I'm done. Steal with your eyes," that was his thing. "Steal with your eyes. Whatever you see, put it into your head." I was very impatient. I never had a doll. I remember my sisters having a Morse Code that they learned; of course, I was so small I couldn't learn it yet. We had these things that if you rubbed something, it would stand up, or it would turn blue, or it would turn red, and if he had conversations with us, he would talk about the stars and where they were. At very early age, he told us about reproduction, told us about not how children are made but how not to have children. (laughter) If you necessarily didn't want them. He had picked all of this up. He read incessantly. He read and traveled incessantly. That's about all. He had no religion. He was an atheist.

He thought that my interest in Judaism and my mother's interest in believing in God was totally and utterly ridiculous, and he made fun of it. Of course, since he made fun of it, I did it anyway. (laughter) I was probably the least talented daughter that he had. My

sisters were just as brilliant as he was, and they were constantly being in the same class because they were jumping grades, and they finished high school at a very early age, which the high school in Europe is a little different from here. I never finished high school. I was a dropout; I wasn't interested. I felt like everything was boring. The only thing that interested me during my middle school -- I should say, because in Europe, when you're ten, you go into what's called middle school, but you make up your mind already at that time, and you're tested already whether you want to go to the university or just want to finish the thing -- and the only thing that really interested me were foreign languages, at which I did very well. I was a complete dud in math, and I was full of mischief.

AY: Tell me about your ensuing education and how it happened.

MW: Well, I married my husband in Europe, we had the civil ceremony there, and we had the Jewish ceremony here.

AY: How old were you?

MW: I was 22. I met him when I was 18. I met him in a synagogue. I had to convert because I did not have a Jewish mother, which was sort of ironic, you know, the Nuremberg laws said if you had one Jewish grandparent, you were gone, and I couldn't get married in a Jewish ceremony because I didn't have a Jewish mother. All during the war, it wasn't very comfortable. So, in any event, I came to this country at age 22. I was fully converted here by an Orthodox *beit din*, and I promised to raise my children Jewish. I promised to be a good Jew, and I've been trying to do that ever since -- I mean, in the traditional fashion. I did not keep kosher then. My husband didn't want it, I offered it, but I have been keeping kosher for the last 12 years, I would think.

AY: How does being a good Jew relate to the work that you're doing in New Orleans?

MW: Well, you see, I have my own interpretation. I thought always that my learning about Judaism completely and utterly was in accord what I thought about life. I thought that every person mattered; I thought that if you had to see an injustice, you would have to talk about it, you couldn't just stand there, and you should not ever hide who you are. If it had to be in your face, it had to be in your face. Look, this is what I am, and what you are saying is inappropriate, and you calling this person a fag or something, I don't appreciate that.

You don't give women rights, you think women can't do this, let me tell you something about this. You think that Jews are no good and they are the scum of the earth, let me tell you something else about that. You can't say these things to me. You abuse children, or you don't treat children right, you have to put up with me because I'm not going to take it. Also, the fact that I've had many kind people in my life that helped me, I thought I owed, I still think I owe a million dollars, to be exact. So, no, it can't really be put into a monetary value. I mean, I owe to give back. That's it. So, that's what I thought a good Jew did. I thought that all the teachings that, choose life, and be kind, and help other people, and the world is given to us, we are stewards of it, we have to preserve it, and if we save a human life, we have done the most wonderful thing that we could possibly do. That we have an obligation, we have an obligation to do good deeds. It's not just charity, it's just something that we are obliged to do, and I have always believed that. So, it wasn't anything new to me, although I learned all about Judaism in the traditional sense, and how the Bible works, and all that kind of good stuff, so.

AY: When you say your mother was a saint, and she wasn't Jewish, can you explain that a little bit more?

MW: My mother was the most loving, the most giving person I've ever met in my life, in spite of the fact that she was ill. I mean, she had --

AY: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MW: -- she had every imaginable illness. She had only one kidney. She lost her eyesight in one eye and her hearing in one ear when I was born, which I found out much later. She came out of a family where she had to have responsibilities that were just enormous for a young woman and enormous for a person of her capability. She could only see out of one eye; she couldn't hear out of one ear, she continuously had stomach problems. She had all kinds of diseases that couldn't really be cured, but she carried on, and she died at a very young age. She died at 57. In her short period of life, she really affected some people. I remember as a child, there were members of the family from her branch as well as my father's branch, they didn't have a whole lot of money.

My mother would hear about it, that they were really in a jam, and she would put our money in an envelope and tell me to go and put it under their door, and there would be no name on it.

And we had neighbors that didn't have much to eat, and so this is the way it went: she would send me over with this big pot of soup that she had made, and she would say tell Mrs. So-and-so that we have all this soup left and that it would really be a pleasure if she would help us because she wouldn't want to throw it away. It was always -- she never wanted to shame the people.

The gypsies came to the door and wanted to sell us earthenware or something -- I still have some, I brought it to the United States, I was so attached to it -- anyway, so they would come and want to sell earthenware, and they would beg. She would say, "I will buy your earthenware, and if you're really very hungry, I will make you lunch or something like that, but I am not just going to give you money. That's not right. You should feel like, to the best of your ability, you have made a sale." I don't know where all this wisdom came from.

So, to me, I just don't understand how she did this because my two sisters and I -- we were a handful. We were really something else, I mean, and we were not easy.

(laughter) So, she had this saintly way about her. When she died, people would tell me stories of what she had done for them. I didn't have any idea that this happened. People were always welcome; we can always put another plate up, no, sure we can. She would, during wartime, when there was no food, and we were practically almost starving to death, she would say to me, she'd say, "Your sister, Ruth Irene, and your sister, Aviva, they are now growing up, and so I'll give them more so that they should have what they need." And I know she didn't eat very much, and sometimes I would get something else to eat. It's just amazing to me what my mother did and how kind she was about it.

Never heard a word about it, never complained, and one of the most extraordinary things that happened, actually the last time she came time to visit me, didn't speak a word of English, that didn't deter my mother. My mother thought if she spoke louder, they would understand her. She talked to all the Black people, we had segregation here, and she sat down in the wrong section of the bus. I had given her a slip of paper that if anything was the matter to call my number, they were about to arrest her, and I told them that my mom didn't read English and didn't speak English, please not to arrest her.

She was outraged. When she was here, one of the last things that she said before she left was, she said, you know, we're having an election in Germany, she said, and for the first time, she said, "I'm going to vote for someone different than your dad told me to, and he's not going to know, is he?" And I said, "No." You go. I said, "I don't understand why you even ask about that." "Well," she said, "I just don't agree with who he wants to vote for, and he always tells me what to do, and I always do it. This time I'm not going to do it."

I said, "Yes!" (laughter) Because she was very old-fashioned. In a way, I was brought up very old-fashioned. I came to this country, I curtsied. To this day, I have certain things about me that are very European that I've just never lost, and it's because of my upbringing.

AY: Can you tell me what your mother was outraged about on the bus?

MW: She was outraged about the fact that number one, she couldn't sit where she wanted, and number two, why was it so horrible to sit where she sat and what was the matter with these people? Didn't we just have horrible incidents in Europe? Didn't we just know that six million people were killed?

Didn't we know that this kind of, she called it, who do they think they are? They think they're so much better? I mean, you know what I'm saying? What's the purpose? She just couldn't understand, and my mother was not a political person, so she was just outraged. She thought that having left my life behind the way it was, why would I have to come to a place where this is happening, because I didn't explain to her because my husband was civil rights lawyer. I explained to her, this is worse. You can't drink from the water fountain and be very careful, and you can't do this and that. Of course, we lived in the French Quarter, and across from us, there lived all these people with brown skins of various shades, and my mom would have wonderful conversations with them, she told me -- of course, I don't think they understood a word and neither did she -- but she just couldn't understand that. It was beyond her in this day and age.

AY: Two questions together, when and where were you born, and when and why did you leave Europe?

MW: I was born on the sixth of January 1935, and I was born in Frankfurt, Germany. That's the Frankfurt that's in the west. I left Germany -- first of all, I've lived in other places. I've lived in Paris, I've lived in London, I've lived in Greece, I lived in Spain, but I left Germany because I married my husband, who was stationed there. He was a Korean War soldier, actually not a soldier; he was a Lieutenant. We met in a synagogue, and he claimed the minute he saw me, he knew he was going to marry me. I didn't think that at all. As a matter of fact, I thought I didn't care for him too much. But that changed over the next three years.

AY: How did you go from growing up in a secular home --

MW: That's an understatement. An anti-religious home.

AY: -- to being the Jew that you are today?

MW: Well, first of all, I had made a commitment when I converted and when I married. I took that very seriously. I learned Hebrew, I mean, to read Hebrew. I learned all the customs, I learned all about the holidays, we joined a synagogue. All of this, in my case, was done almost like a historical review, what do Jews do? Now, why is it that Jews are hated? Because I was a little child when all of this happened.

AY: Were any of your family members Jewish?

MW: Yes.

AY: Your father --

MW: My father's side. So, and to the extent that they were because my grandparents were Socialists. They protested whatever they protested, with me in the buggy -- railroad strikes, and this, and that, and the other thing. They were some tough characters, you know. Religion had nothing to do with it, I assure you. So, to call this secular is charitable. But be that as it may, I mean, I learned all of this from sort of a historical point of view, and what pleased me was that there really was nobody that was telling me that I had to believe in this God or that God, or that I have to accept this as the truth and that as the truth, and what charmed me was that I could ask any question without harm (laughter) coming to me. I could say the most outrageous things.

AY: To whom?

MW: Well, to Orthodox Rabbis, to anybody else. Now, somebody -- they would say to me, “Well, that's the way it is, it's written.” Well, so, that's supposed to be an answer?

(laughter) I could challenge Rabbis, I could challenge people who claimed to be very religious or thought that I wasn't religious enough. I could doubt things, I could be angry at God, and I could sometimes think that God's a woman. It's really true. What do they know? I could read the Bible and say, look, you constantly talk about Moses and about Aaron, nothing about Miriam, no big thing, you know. Gets leprosy, gets put outside of the tent; she's punished because she makes a remark about Moses' wife. Here she is, without her, Moses wouldn't have even lived. She had a tremendous part to play, and she never got any credit for it. Maybe somebody rewrote this book, I don't know. But I could say these things. In my first political campaign, I was the first woman in New Orleans Parish to be elected to the Criminal Court, which was the bastion of male dominance. It was almost like the papacy. There were male jurors. Until 1974 we had male jurors; we had no women on the jury.

We had male prosecutors; we had male police officers; we had male judges, who weren't very happy that I got there. But during my election campaign, I would go to many churches and campaign. I would say, you know, there was a woman judge in the Bible, and her name was Deborah, and she was given this responsibility that was equal to that of all the judges that Moses appointed and Aaron appointed, and so you can with confidence vote for me because I'm the first and she was the first and only, so don't let her be the only one. My knowledge of the Bible has always helped me in coming back to people and saying, wait a minute, it says here that each life is valuable, that we should feel like we were at Sinai when the law was given, we should feel like we were in the Exodus. Well, if that's really true, then all of this stuff that you're saying really doesn't count because what counts is the individual. I'm now in a leadership training course where there is a segment of the training where you learn about the Bible, and I am just amazed of how Hadassah has integrated all of these teachings from the Bible into what they are doing, their advocacy, their knowing that there has to be medical treatment for everyone, whether it's Arab, Christian, whatever, in their hospitals, the emphasis they put on the young, the emphasis they put on women's rights, on reproductive freedom, on all

of those things they can connect it always to something in the Bible. Well, you know, there are lots of people who say segregation comes from the Bible, God told us to do this and that, and I mean, I think you can interpret this any which way you want, which is kind of nice. But I interpret it the way I interpret it.

AY: Has God helped you to connect with the African-American community in New Orleans?

MW: Tremendously. First of all, my husband was in the civil rights movement, so I have always been connected with them. The first time I was elected, I was elected as if I were Black. I don't know by how many percentage point in the black community I was elected. First of all, they knew of my husband; they knew of our work.

AY: What's your husband's name?

MW: Bruce. He had been arrested in 1963 for his civil rights activities and went to jail. We ultimately won the case in the United States Supreme Court. It was a landmark decision, and if my husband had been convicted, this was under state law, he might have spent 25 years at hard labor. It was not a very good thought. It also was not a very good thought that we had just gotten custody of my son, who was not yet fully adopted, and they threatened to take him away. The Black community knew about us, and they knew that in our home, people were coming in and out like, you know, Schwerner and Goodman, they had been at our house, and they went to Mississippi after that, they got killed. People were in and out, and we would participate in marches and all this kind of stuff. But beyond that, my knowledge of the Bible, as I say, if I would go to the African-American churches, it helps to know the Bible, and I don't make any pretense that I'm one of those holy rollers or something like that, but I can discuss it with the best by now, and I could then because I really made a study of it. I wanted to know what this was about. Nowadays, what I do is, before I go to synagogue and they read the parsha, I only go to the service when they take the Torah out; everything else doesn't really

interest me. What I do is I read the thing up in my book, and then I get on the computer, and I read Haaretz in the Jerusalem Post. They have interpretations of the parsha.

AY: Just the parsha?

MW: Yeah.

AY: How do you spell it, and what does it mean?

MW: It means the portion that's going to be read in every synagogue that reads the Torah.

AY: How is it spelled?

MW: Just say it's the portion of the Bible that's read. By the time I get there, I'll see what the Rabbi has to say about it. That's how I've gone about learning about things.

AY: Can you explain that to me again? You get ready for synagogue --

MW: No, that when I have time, Friday before Shabbat -- in Israel, Shabbat is earlier, they're eight hours ahead -- I get on the computer, I get up the newspaper, Jerusalem Post and Haaretz, those are two different views entirely. In it is always an explanation of the portion that's going to be read, interpreted by some Rabbi, one of them very right-wing, the other one differently. They interpret the portion, they cite the portion, they say we read this, this, this, and this. Right now, we're reading Exodus. The portion that was read last Saturday was about Moses never seeing the Promised Land and why, and who is with him, and where he is. In the newspaper in Israel, they discuss that, and they give an interpretation of it. What I do is first I read it in my own book right here, then I go and see what they say, and then if I go to services, I want to see what they say so that I can really grasp it. Our prayer book, which has the Torah in it, has wonderful explanations and footnotes, and is very modern, and has been very nicely amended to point out some

of the failings that they do in terms of women and other things.

AY: Is the entire Orthodox community --

MW: It's not Orthodox.

AY: -- reading the same?

MW: I don't know. I cannot answer that.

AY: The Torah portion, is the entire Jewish community reading the same Torah portion?

MW: Every Jewish community in the world, in the whole world, that has a Torah, if they read the Torah, should be at the same place. OK? Now, Orthodox synagogues read the Torah three times a week because you should never go without reading Torah, they believe, for too long. You know, so one day you read it, next time you don't, next time you read it, next time you don't. Now, I think they read it Mondays, and Thursdays, Mondays, whatever it is. But you should always be at the same place.

So, no matter whether you're Reform, and I don't know whether reformed even read the Torah in the open, I've never noticed it. I guess they do. Wherever you go, you should be on the same place. It's a unifying thing in every Jewish community. It's the same thing with Passover, and it's the same thing with the New Year, it is on a certain date of the Jewish months, and that's it. I mean, Jews kosher time. Everything is always in time.

AY: We do what with time?

MW: We kosher; we make time holy. We say, OK, world was created in six days; therefore, we rest. So, we make that day holy. OK?

AY: (inaudible)

MW: Huh?

AY: How do you interpret this in your life, making your own time holy?

MW: Well, it's special time, it's very special time. It's a time that you don't work; you don't necessarily purchase things, you have your family with you, you read, you sleep, you relax, you just don't want to be bothered anymore. Or if you make time holy because you have lost a loved one, you're supposed to say Kaddish the first 30 days, every day, morning and night, so you make that time holy. You say this is the time that you set aside. No matter how busy you are, no matter what you do, this comes first.

Then, if you have the New Year, it starts at sundown, and the belief is, at least, that it's the birthday of the world. Nothing small after all. You give this holy time because of this enormous thing that the world was created, whoever created it, or however it was created, this is what we set aside for it.

There always all of these time periods, you know? You have to wait seven hours, some people say, between eating milk and meat. And so what you really do is you make time holy in that you are ethical, you say, OK, you don't want to mix the milk and the meat because we respect the life of the mother and there should not be a mixing of the milk that the mother gave with that. There are all of these when you really look at all of these time things, whether you obey them or not, time is made holy. And so --

AY: I really like the -- I never heard the connection, the explanation for kosher as honoring the mother.

MW: Well, honoring the mother of the animal.

AY: See I, understand it as --

MW: Yeah, and it's also an ethical thing. I mean, it's having compassion for the animal. The highest form of kosher is being a vegetarian, which doesn't do too well for me because I need protein. But --

AY: Do you find that, or do you create feminism in or honoring of the mother, the female principle, in your experience of your own Judaism?

MW: Absolutely.

AY: Can you explain that to me?

MW: Well, first of all, at our Seder table, we have what's probably a Seder that (laughter) would make some people shudder. We read the most necessary. We have my grandchildren there; we have my grandchildren's friends there. I don't want my grandchildren to be so bored that they fall asleep at the table. It's for them that this is done. They are incorporated into the service, and every service, every Seder that we have, we discuss a topic. A topic: death penalty, Russian Jewry, the Intifada, whatever is the topic. All the time, I insist that there is going to be something said about the women and the children because some of the things that we are discussing are so male-driven, in my opinion, maybe not in somebody else's opinion, but they're so male-driven, and so politically driven, and so power-hungry driven, and what is lost in the shuffle is, you know, they're really families, and they're really women, and they're really women who worry about their children, and who worry about where the next dollar comes from, and where the next meal comes from, and there are people who don't have a paycheck that covers everything, and there are people that are on welfare, and there are people that need medical treatment, and it always falls on the women. And the decisions are usually made by men. For example, when I worked in my court, in the Court of Appeal where I was for ten years, there wasn't a man that sat with me on the bench that had any idea what a quart of milk cost. When we reviewed decisions about child support, and some judge in the Juvenile Court thought $400 was enough for four children per month, and

when the appeal came up, and it was said, well, we know he could have paid 1,200, this is his income, and all my colleagues thought that the 400 was perfectly adequate. I wrote a dissent. They said, "You can't write this dissent." I said, "Oh yes, I can. My signature's as good as yours." I had statistics about poverty in the state of Louisiana, and I said, "What is the price of milk? What is the price of electricity? How many pair of pants children go through when they are teenagers?" I asked all of them, "Do you have any idea what all this costs?" "No. Well, I sent my wife to go shopping." I said, "Well, you know, it's going to come to haunt you at election time because I'm going to put some stuff in here that you are not thinking about the children, which you claim are our most valuable asset." After a while, they came and said, "We can't publish this opinion." I said, "Well, you affirmed what the trial judge did, I'm just writing a dissent, but I have a right to publish my dissent without you." "Oh, you can't do that." "Oh, yes, I can. Here's the rule that says that I can."

Long story short, they sent the case back and said to the judge that he had to consider the man's income in order to come to a proper determination, and that there were federal guidelines which he had ignored, and that $400 was inadequate. After that, you know, male judges usually, when they have a triumph, they go and have a drink. I don't drink, so I went across the street to Macy's and bought myself an ice cream.

(laughter) So, I'm always aware of those things. It's gotten a lot better, but there should be much more done for people who do not have a profession and who do not enjoy a style of life that I think women have become poorer in this country, I mean financially.

I think children have become poorer, and I think medical care should not be denied people the way it has been denied, and I think research should not be curtailed the way it has been curtailed. I'm speaking specifically about stem cell research and genetic research, things like that. We're such a rich country, and most of these things fall on women, who are the caretakers, who are the people who have to live with that, who have

babies, and who have genetic abnormalities that they're carrying on and those things like that.

AY: I very much appreciate all that you've just said. I wonder if you could talk to me more about your work and express some of the nuts and bolts involved in both your participation in the Civil Rights Movement in the '60s and the creation of the innovative programs for juveniles.

MW: Well, I was on the bench, first woman, as I say, and everybody said, "Well, it's a dead end." I said, "That's what you think." What happened, I had young people appear before me that plead guilty to minor offenses, let's say, for argument's sake, stealing razor blades or something like that. In order for them to plead guilty, they had to read a waiver, and they had to give up their constitutional rights. Well, I wanted to make sure for the record that they knew what they were doing. So, I said, "Why don't you read the waiver," and they couldn't. They couldn't, and even if they understood the word waiver, they thought it was waving with a hand.

AY: Can you say why they couldn't understand it?

MW: They just couldn't understand it. They didn't know what they were doing. Couldn't read and write. It seemed to me that that was ridiculous, and I had the power to do something about it. What I did was I said, "OK, look. You're pleading guilty here, and I'm going to put you on probation, or I'm going to suspend your sentence, but this is what you're going to do. You haven't finished high school, you claim you've gone to the 11th grade, you claim you dropped out when you were in the 9th grade, you can't read and write, it's very plain to me, if you enroll in a program that I'm going to have at my court, every Tuesday from 3:00 to 7:00, and you get yourself evaluated from the adult education program so that we know where you are, I'm going to get you evaluated from a doctor to see whether you're healthy. If you make a contract with me that you're going to participate in this program to the best of your ability, I'm going to get volunteers to help.

Another thing you have to commit to is that you are going to go with me to the state penitentiary once a year; you will help pay for it because we're going to have a garage sale right in front of the court and a carwash, and we're going to make enough money to pay for the bus, I'm not paying for it. If you miss one of the sessions and you have an excuse, OK. If you miss two of the sessions and you haven't had an excuse for the first one and for the second one, I'm going to put you a weekend in jail, and you can think about it. If you don't participate altogether, well, then you'll do your jail time, your probation is over. How's that?"

Well, you know, and so, anyway, I got about 30 people to sign up, and I got a grant from the Council of Jewish Women to pay for a master teacher. I'm not a teacher. And I got a blackboard donated, volunteers, middle management people from the telephone company came. Unbelievably no mothers came to this thing, although I always thought that maybe the parents would help. In any event, this was all going along, and what was amazing was that out of the 30, none of them could read better than the 3rd-grade level, and none of them could do math better, same level also. That they had dropped out, and then, of course, I found out their lives, and I have to tell you, if I had had their life, I most probably would have taken a machine gun and mowed everybody down from anger. But they were not angry, they just thought that's the way it was, just like I used to think when I was a kid, well, it's just the way it is. Everybody lives like that. So, there were young people who lived under boxcars. There were young people who watched people overdose on a constant basis. There were young people who lived with an auntie and then with a grandmother, and then with somebody else, and finally with nobody. There were young people who had been brutalized; almost all of them had been beaten and abused by somebody in the family. Once I found out where they were coming from, just to go to school, they were running through an obstacle course. They lived in a housing development, and they would hear all this stuff, and the police would be coming, and a murder would be happening, and they would walk over somebody who would just lay there drunk or on drugs.

It's just an unbelievable background. What was gratifying was that it didn't take very long for them to come up various grades in reading ability. That didn't come without some learning on my part because I thought, if it were me, I'd come to this thing, get my GED, I would help them find a job, and I would be out of there. It wasn't that easy. Just to show up on time was incredible. Just to show up at all was incredible. But then, once they got the idea, they showed up. Then, I figured out that they have to be taught differently. For example, I asked one of them, "What would you like to do if you could read?" He said, "You know, I have" -- he was singing, had a very nice singing voice -- he said, "I'd like to be able to read the lyrics when I sing." So, we taught him the lyrics. One of them said he would like to learn how to get a driver's license, but because he couldn't read, he had never really gotten it. So, we practiced the driver's license from morning to night with him. Then one of them said he would really like to know how to read things on boxes that he uses in construction, and he'd like to learn how to measure because everybody on the job was helping him, but he really -- and I said, "I'm a little afraid what you're building. I mean, it might just collapse on you," so. One of them said he would like to learn how to read the Bible. I said, "Well, that'll take a little longer. Can you pick something else?" So, some of them got their GED, others I was able to find jobs, and the greatest joy for me is when I run, when I'm on the street now, after a long time after this all has gone down, somebody comes up to me says, "Remember me?" I say, oh my God, this is somebody that I gave ten years or 20 years in prison, and he's just coming out, now he's going to really let me have it. He says, "I was in your program." Then I say, "Tell me your name," and then they tell me the name, and it comes back to me. They tell me, "I am now a manager of so and so, I'm the banquet head waiter, and I have no problem at all ever to get the best seat in any hotel where there is a dinner because somebody was in my program and works there." Other people have gone on to become very law-abiding, beautiful people.

I just got a letter from a woman who actually had a life sentence imposed on her for distribution of heroin illegally, and with all the wrangling that went on, I released her from

her sentence. She had already spent, I don't know how many years. I just got a letter from her, she writes me every Christmas, that she and another guy that also had been in my court are now in California and working with young people that are on drugs, and how grateful she is. Aside from the fact that I think I saved the state of Louisiana $250,000 a piece of these young people, we were pretty successful with this thing. That was the one program. The other program that I had, which I also run into people all the time, called the Juvenile Jury Program. What I designed was a booklet that had in it what happens to people from the time they get arrested to the time they get either indicted or charged, and what happens in the courts, and how the jury system works, and how many people have to agree for a verdict, and what the role of the prosecutor is. It was a little booklet that I made up.

I called the school board up, and I said, "Look, in your civics course, I really would like the young people to learn about the courts. I make a suggestion to you, you can, but you have to plan it with me every Friday. I hear misdemeanors, and I hear motions. If you send me 12 people, or 14 people, from your school, I will impanel them as a jury, and they will hear the case. I will get permission from the defendant and the defense lawyer that they will be able to sit there. I'm not going to be persuaded by their decision, but they will announce the decision to me after they deliberate, and then I will make my decision and send a written judgment to their class so they can see my legal reasons for what I'm doing." Well, this program became so popular, I never got to eat lunch on a Friday. I had young people come from the inner city school, Booker T. Washington, which is a real tough school, all black, and McGehee (sp?), which is a little girls' where they had, you know, topless dresses on and little silver chains and all this kind of stuff, they got all mixed into juries, and they all behaved. I took the opportunity to show them what happens when you get into the system because it's like a railroad coming down once you're in it.

I always explained to them that they should strive to be court reporters, they should strive to be lawyers, police officers, sheriffs, judges if they wanted to be, and they should never come in as a defendant, wouldn't be a good idea. Well, the program was so popular that the police sat around and waited until the young people gave their verdict. Then all -- the entire system, whether it was sheriffs, a court reporter, whether it was the police, anybody that had anything to do with the system, just was more than willing to tell the young people what they did. I'll never forget the court reporter, you know, who has this little machine where they have these holes that are whole sentences -- I've never understood it -- they would go up to the court reporter and say, "Can you write my name?" She would beem, beem, beem, beem, beem, and give them the piece of paper and say, "That's my name?" Then they would ask her, "How long did you train, what did you" -- and said, "Yeah, you have to finish high school, you know. You have to know how to spell." She got the idea of what was going on. So, it was absolutely a success, and the biggest triumph came when the jury commissioner, that's the person who impanels the juries, she had like 350 people sitting there every month, she said, judge, "Can I use your booklet for my jury indoctrination?" I said, "Well, you know, it's written on a rather pedestrian level." She said, "That's about the level (laughter) of intelligence that they have." So, until recently, they used my booklet.

AY: Do you have a copy of that booklet that I could take?

MW: No, I have to look in my stuff. I have boxes and boxes and boxes, and I threw a lot of stuff away. I could most probably find it. I'm going to try. I can't swear.

AY: That's fine. How many students do you think have passed through your programs? (Overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MW: It's hard to tell, but I did the thing for close to eight, nine years. They finally didn't just come from Orleans parish, which bothered me, they came from St. Bernard, and Plaquemines, and Jefferson. People would call up and say, can I bring my kids? I said,

look, I mean, a jury was deliberating in this corner, and a jury was deliberating in that corner, and I mean, it got a little bit of a circus.

Then we also filmed a whole movie, we got permission from the Supreme Court to do that, and that was used as a training program. Then, of course, going to Angola with my probationers, I met prisoners. One of them, in particular, is being retried now -- that's the one where I have to testify -- he was permitted to come to New Orleans and talk to them about prison life. He always would talk to them there, and I also was permitted to take him through the school system and talk to, after all, the man's been now in jail for 44 years.

In any event, I got a lot of mileage out of my connection with the criminal justice system, which nobody had ever thought. As a matter of fact, my program was written up with the young people, and money was sent to me from all over the United States. It was on "60 Minutes", it was on "20/20", I forget what it was.

But in any event, I hadn't intended that. That wasn't my intention. My intention was, maybe somebody's salvageable. Maybe somebody's -- and I have to say something that disappointed me about my work with the young probationers, I never did well with women except one. The women had been used as prostitutes, as mules for the drug trade, and they came in, they were flirting, and everything, and they disturbed the whole purpose of the thing. But I had one young woman, my pride and joy. She lived across the river in a housing development. No one in her family had ever graduated from high school.

She was there because she had carried the drugs for her boyfriend and he left her hanging there, and he disappeared, you know, and she was arrested. Now, she had children, of course, and very little money, and I found out when she came into the program we tested her, and same old thing, you know, third grade, this, that, and the other. When I tell you that within maybe nine months or ten months, this girl took her GED and passed it, and then I said to her, "What do you want to do now?" She said, "I

want to be a doctor." I said, "Well, you can't get to be a doctor because you have a felony conviction on your record, but how's about a nurse's aide or something like that?" "Well, I don't have the money." There was a program where she could go and study nursing and become a nurse's aide, and we raised some money for her for books and stuff like that, and she completed her course, and I swore all those nurses in, and she was, of course, the only one with a conviction. Of course, I --

[END FILE ONE]

MW: -- books and all of that. I have to tell you, I was more proud of her graduating than my kids because my kids, that was expected. I mean, there was no way that they were not going to graduate from something. She did. She got a job. She had more than five offers of a job. Now, the most difficult thing for her was, of course, what is she going to do with her kids?

What is she going to do about transportation? The two biggest items for women in poverty are children, what do they do with the kids if they have a runny nose, and they have this, and they have that, and they don't know where to leave them, and how do they get there. OK? I know that she did real well, and I just saw her in the elevator last year, and I didn't feel good about the way she looked. I said, "Are you still doing nursing?" She said, "Yes." I said, "You must be doing really well." She had one of these, you know, unbelievable hairdos that costs, like, $50 or something like that. I said, "How are your children?" She said, "Oh, doing fine." I had a feeling that something wasn't right, and I found out that her brother -- had a different name from her -- that her brother had been convicted of murder, and she had testified in the case. Part of her testimony was, well, if anybody had ever given my brother a break like I had, maybe things would have been different, and she was singing my praises. Somebody sent me the transcript of it. Then I said, "Well, maybe things didn't work out that well, I know, but it did work out for (inaudible)."

When she graduated, we had a graduation in my court from high school when she got the GED, and the Council of Jewish Women was there, and they took pictures and all this kind of stuff because they paid for the teacher. When I left the bench, everybody said they would take over my programs; they never did.

It died. I was furious. All the African-American judges who said to me, "Why are you doing that? You're white, you're this, you're that." I said, "What does that have to do with it?" It was almost like I was putting them down by doing that. I said, "Well, why don't you do it. You know, you have all these connections and all this kind of stuff." Yeah, well, and then they would run for office, and they would promise to do it, and then they never did it. It was really one of the most painful things.

AY: Have your programs been adopted by any other cities or any other courts that you know?

MW: I do not know about it. I sent the booklet and everything to so many people, and I mean, I didn't really have the time to do it. I didn't even have a secretary. But what I did last year, actually I did it for a whole year, the Sheriff, the former Sheriff for the Parish of Orleans, had a program where he had, these were not convicted kids, but they were just so on the border of being really in trouble, they had either been expelled or something like that, and what he had -- he had a fabulous program that he had done in conjunction with the School of Social Work and Psychiatry. What he did was he had these young people come in, either after school or he had them come in, if they had been expelled, they came in at 12:00 o'clock because if they were expelled, all they did was watch television or run the streets, or something, so he said, "No, you can bring them here." So, I had offered to help with teaching them reading. He said, "No, I'd like you to establish an honor court." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "Well, you have to develop some rules, and you have to see to it." So, I wrote up 63 rules, together with the young people of what they couldn't do and what the punishment would be if they did it. Then I

taught them about the jury system. We made them into juries. One of them was a prosecutor the other was a defense lawyer. We notified the parents, the parents had to show up for the meeting -- for the hearing. I was the presiding judge, and various penalties could be imposed depending on what they did. So, for example, if it was stealing something, they had to come on a Saturday, under the supervision of a sheriff, and clean out gutters, or go to old age homes, or something like that. The most minor was probably to write an essay. The essay was usually assigned if somebody called the other one the n-word, and then I would say, "I would like you to write an essay about Martin Luther King, about Rosa Parks. Who is that?" Anyway, so, that kind of stuff, and I would read it up. One of them swore falsely, and I told her she could never again be a witness, and I made her look up false swearing, and so I would get these reports in. Unfortunately, we got a new sheriff, and the program was disbanded, the story of my life. It was very successful. Everybody wanted to be Johnnie Cochran.

What was the most remarkable thing about -- I was no longer on the bench; I was retired for two years -- that they learn how to think. I had made up a list of questions. State your name, please, for the record. How old are you? Where were you on such and such a date? What did you observe? All this kind of stuff. All of a sudden, they started to think. My husband came one evening and told me, why don't you ask this, and this, and this, about their grades, and about what are they doing, are they sorry and have they apologized, and all this kind of stuff. All of a sudden, these kids are starting to think. The most remarkable thing is one of the kids came up and said to me, "Judge, I'm supposed to tell you hi from my dad." I said, "Well, who's he?" "Well," he said, "you really were very nice to him one time. He was picked up on something he didn't do, and you chewed out the prosecutor, and you really helped him to get out of there, and he's really grateful." I said, "Well, tell him hi, too." So, then the father came in, and the father was helping, and that's my last attempt in the field. The program is set up. It's in a folder back there, and it was just incredible. They really learned a lot. Each one of them had a computer, which was donated by a Jew -- it's always Jews who do this kind of stuff.

AY: Say more about that.

MW: Well, if you want to set up a program, you either have to get it from the government -- federal government or the state government. I hate that, can't stand it, because you have to fill out these forms, and you have to do this and that, and the auditor comes, and by the time I do all this, the problem is already so big that I don't know what to do. So, I have always decided that if I want anything, I'll just go to my sources. I walk in, and I'll say, "All I need is $1,000. Or all I need is a computer. Or if you don't need your computers anymore, you think you could give them to us?" "Well, how much is it going to cost to get a new computer?" "Well, I wouldn't know of that."

One of the first rules of fundraising is you never ask -- you never get more than you ask for. So, you have to do your research, and unfortunately, I don't know of many Muslims that I could ask. I certainly can't ask the community that's been dear to my heart, the African-American community is by and large poor. So, it's very difficult to ask anybody else but Jews. Of course, when I was on the bench, I had a lot of strokes, I was ethically not permitted to do that. So, I would always -- you can't solicit -- I would always say, I wished I could solicit. If I could solicit, I would ask you for $1,000, but I can't do that.

I said, "It really is painful to me. All it would take is" -- my brother-in-law, for example, manufactures children's clothes -- I said, "All it would take is for you to send me clothes so I could give it to the school that I have adopted their kids for Easter. They need new dresses, they have never had a new dress. Do you have any chubby sizes? I know I can't ask you for it, but do you have any sizes for big children?"

These big, fat boxes arrive, and the clothes come out. This is how I have to go about it. Now that I'm no longer on the bench and I don't have the strokes, now I can come straight out, and now, of course, they're not going to give me that much.

AY: What are the rules of fundraising? What are the secrets? What are your secrets and rules?

MW: I want to tell you something, that for my own campaign, for my own campaigns, I hate the telephone with a passion. I hate to ask people for money. I discovered that I am a very good salesperson. At my synagogue, we have a sale twice a year that's called the nearly new sale. We're selling all these *shmatas*, and it supports the religious school. And I --

AY: What are *shmatas*?

MW: A *shmata* is a used thing that isn't very valuable to you anymore but may be very valuable to someone else. It's Yiddish. So anyway, so I help with the sale. I found out that I can sell anything. My greatest achievement, I sold a pot without a bottom. Lady said, "What am I going to do with this pot? It's very pretty." I said, "You know, you stick it in the ground, and you have flowers grow out of it. And you know it's only a dollar." I found out that I have regular customers that come to me because -- I even had a marriage proposal. First of all, I'm not going to commit bigamy, and the guy's not so nice anyway. But I found out that I have a talent. I never could raise funds for my synagogue while I was on the bench, which was 20 years. So, I was off the bench, and they had this capital campaign. I said, "I'm making up for my loss. I'm going to be responsible only for a million." I did it; I'm doing it. For myself, I most probably couldn't ask for a nickel, but for the others. My husband, of course, says, "You're still asking it for yourself. You're just fooling yourself saying it's not for yourself." But it's not a personal need. It's not money for me.

AY: I have a few questions that I want to get to because I'm conscious of our time. You've spoken -- and so I want to cover, you're a wonderful talker, and I know you can expound of these, so I'm going to give you a couple of questions at once and then just let you find the connections. You've spoken a little bit to how your work has challenged

traditional roles by the fact that you were the first woman in the Criminal Court in Louisiana. If you could talk a little bit more about how you've challenged traditional roles for women? Also, if you participated in the feminist movement or the movement for women's rights in anything. Then I'm very interested in what you were honored for by HRC and the Forum for Equality.

MW: OK, let me tell you about my involvement with women. I'm the generation that went to law school where my class was five women.

That was the biggest women's class that had ever existed in the state of Louisiana. Today the women in law school are better than half, OK, same thing in medical school.

So, at the time, I went to law school, I had two children, three jobs, I ran my butt off to get there, I was a stellar student, if I say so myself, and I didn't have time to monkey around. I just had to do my time and budget it and study like all hell. Being one of these five women and being taught by young people who tried to evade the draft for Vietnam, which God bless them, was an initiation into realizing that even being a good student didn't really matter. I was the blond in the first row. They couldn't even say my name.

I had these locks and all this kind of stuff. When I got out of law school, I was on the top of my class, I was Law Review, I was everything. I was foreign-born. I had juggled time. I had done so many things that if anybody would look to employ somebody, I would have been it. I would have been reliable. I would have been smart. I would have been all that. Do you know what these guys asked me? I go to a firm downtown, didn't even get it. They asked me, "So, you have two children. Is your husband allowing you to work?" Well, after all of this. "Are you planning to have more children?" "No, my children are adopted." What am I going to say? Then finally, "Would I mind if I did collections for the firm." That means dunning people to pay. "No, I wouldn't." Well, would I mind if they put my name on the letterhead M. Waltzer? Of course, I was so stupid I didn't even understand that that meant they didn't want to write down Miriam. OK? So, I never got a

job. Now, whether it had to do with my being a woman or whether it had to do with my being Jewish, I have no idea, but I really don't care. I was furious.

I finally found a job in the court where I finally became a judge, with the chief judge, and I became his law clerk, and that was a year of sheer bliss. I could research to the end of the world, and then came, of course, the question of I was the first female prosecutor in the state of Louisiana, I mean, in Orleans Parish. I was actually in court prosecuting cases, and while I was there, people would say to me, after I had concluded a rape trial, the man got the death penalty. At the time we had the death penalty, I was upset that the jury came back with the death penalty. They asked the foreman of the jury, only men on the jury, says to me, are you the secretary here? It was just incredible. It didn't get much better. So, they were all over the country. By the time I got on the bench, all over the country, there was research done whether women are disadvantaged or how women are treated in the legal system.

AY: What time period is this?

MW: This is, well, I was elected in '82, which was in and of itself a triumph, so between '82 and '85, I would think. There was a real movement in the country -- and it was spearheaded in New Jersey, by a Jewish judge, of course, why not -- to do research on a state basis to find out what happens to women judges -- if there are any, there were very few then -- what happens to women jurors, what happens to women experts, what happens to women litigants, what happens to women prosecutors, what happens to women who are litigants, what happens to people in the domestic field? After years, and years, and years of planning and kicking around, see, we needed permission from the Supreme Court to do this, and the Supreme Court had only men on it. They weren't very friendly to this. After years, and years, and years, finally, the Chief Judge of the Supreme Court said, OK, we will sanction the fact that you do it.

You will have a limited amount of money -- and I was the head of the task force. He said, "I don't want you to start out with a proposition that there is bias," because it was called the Gender Bias Task Force in many other places, I didn't call it that. I called it Women in the Courts; God forbid I should say something else. So, what we did was, with a court reporter, my court reporter from the court, who donated his time, with, we had a whole board who were on this task force. They were, I put my friend Max on, also a Jew, so I would have a man, and he's very sensitive to women. There were people from the community that were appointed by the Supreme Court, some of them I could have done without, but in any event, we were like 12 people. We started hearings, and we started hearings in Orleans Parish. We did the dog and pony show all over the state. We took hearings, and there were women that testified to what had happened to them in the court, and how they were treated, and how they were treated as victims of domestic violence. How they were treated as lawyers, where the Judge would say, in a jury trial, "Oh honey," you know, "Oh honey, come on, sit down." Things like that, and make derogatory remarks, where a Judge would address an expert who was a doctor, absolutely *the* expert on child abuse and wouldn't qualify her to testify. Would refer to her as "miss, miss, miss" all the time. It was stuff revealed. What was the worst of it all, we finally had to cut it down to two minutes a piece. Some of the people who testified did not want to give their name because they were so afraid. They came out of parishes where there were only two judges --

(Break in audio)

AY: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today's date is January 12th, 2005. This is an interview of Miriam Waltzer, W-A-L-T-Z-E-R, conducted by Abrielle Young in her home in New Orleans, Louisiana, that's Mrs. Waltzer's home. This is disk number two of two. OK, so we were talking about women in the courts.

MW: Women in the courts. Well, the report was finally written up. We had gone to New Orleans. We had hearings for a day at a hospital, so it always go, not to a court or something threatening -- we would go to a venue where women could come, some of them brought their children. We went to New Orleans, we went to Monroe, to Shreveport, to Lake Charles, to Baton Rouge, to all the bigger towns, and the story was everywhere the same, that women were truly disadvantaged. Most probably, the only area where they weren't disadvantaged was if they were arrested for prostitution, they got very lenient sentences sometimes, or if they were arrested for something because they were women, they got more lenient sentences. But if they were convicted of hard crimes, like armed robbery, it came down on them like worse than on men. We got actually statistics from the Department of Corrections and all of that, and so you could see the disparity. We also saw the disparity in jail. The men, as it is, jail isn't very good, but they at least had the opportunity to learn some trades. The only thing that they could learn in the women's jail was either furniture making or being a beautician, and that was about it. There was a lack of opportunity for the women to visit with their children, and it's just awful. We pointed all of that out, and we made recommendations to the Supreme Court. It took, like, almost nine months for the Supreme Court to accept that the report, I was almost going out of my mind, and then the recommendations that I made were not implemented. Then they hired a special person on the Supreme Court who was responsible for seeing that some things would be done and some things they did. But I was very disappointed. We had produced a very good piece of work that was sound; we were objective about it. We used professionals to evaluate things. True, a lot of these things were historical tellings. On the other hand, everything could be backed up; we had proof of it. We had sworn testimony, and it is a lot better now. We have many African-American judges now. We have many women judges now, but some problems in the countryside still persist.

AY: What qualities did you draw on to deal with that kind of misogyny and not have your spirit be crushed?

MW: Well, first of all, my father was always disappointed that I wasn't a boy. So, I was raised like a boy. I knew how to chop wood, I knew how to fix, not iron, knew how to do all this kind of stuff. I never was this girly-girly cliquish kind of person. I just said to myself, well, do you want to treat me like that? Why? I'm capable. I'll show you. I'll beat you with my brain. I can't beat you up, I can't take my fist, but I'm going to outsmart you. I always said, "I'm going to outwork you, I'm going to outthink you, and I'm going to outsmart you." That has always been my idea of doing that. That's not to say that I would not sometimes be in a rage about the things that people did, or said, or tried. That's not to say that. But I would always say if I were a man, I'd knock them, you know, in the teeth.

AY: Can you tell me the lipstick story? The story of your best-dressed woman award?

MW: Well, when I first -- I don't know how you know about that, but I guess my daughter -- when I first got married, we lived on $156 of the GI Bill, and we lived in barracks, and I had a dowry coming from Europe, and I had never lived in a barracks. My parents weren't rich, but they would have been shocked if they had seen my barracks that we lived in students lived in. If they mowed the lawn the whole thing shook from left to right. The question was, would I get an allowance? Yes, I got an allowance, $7. So now the big thing was, is a lipstick a necessity that is going to be paid out of the household budget, or is it a luxury and being paid out of my allowance? My husband and I had the very first big fight about it, and I said it was a necessity because I was going to work. He proceeded to call his mother long-distance, and, God bless her, Francis Waltzer said, "It is a necessity." It was a necessity.

AY: (inaudible)

MW: The best dressed? That was really a surprise to me. See, I had never anything new. I would wear what my --

AY: You would purchase used clothes, you mean?

MW: No. I had two sisters, and they were dressed exactly like I was. My aunt made the clothes out of some scraps. So, when I was out of mine, I would get the middle sister's one, and when she was finished, I got the bigger sister's one, and I never had anything new.

The shoes I would inherit from them, and if they didn't fit, they would stuff something in the toe, and so, I just looked horrible. So, when I had the opportunity to make some of my own money -- I made my own clothes too -- there was nothing more wonderful than having something brand new that was all mine. I am sure the reason that I love shoes the way I do, I'm Imelda Marcos. I am the centipede with all the shoes. I like clothes, but I'm a very good shopper, and I have them for a long time. The secret is to fit into it. So, I was invited to dance over some stage or something, with clothes on, and these people were going to vote whether I was going to be one of the ten best dressed. By God, I was selected. That was a laugh to me. I have the silver platter in there, and you have to shine it, it's (inaudible).

AY: (inaudible)

MW: To talk about the Human Rights Campaign?

AY: Let's talk about the Human Rights Campaign and the Forum for Equality.

MW: Well, actually, they didn't exist when I was first becoming a judge, but I had the support of the gay community when I was running for office. They just thought it was wonderful that a woman was going to be elected. But as I was elected and they were being harassed by the police and all, I would always be able to sort of ameliorate that a little bit. But then, when the AIDS things hit, I was keenly aware of the fact that there were maybe ten different organizations that dealt with AIDS. I kept saying, "Look, everybody is spending money, and everybody is spending time on this terrible problem,

what you really ought to have is one umbrella."

So, we would meet at Charity Hospital, doctors, lawyers, whoever, and me, the Judge, and we would figure out how are we going to establish this overarching thing. They wanted to have a hotline, an 800 number or something like that, and the city had said, you can have this little building here, we give this to you to use, but you're going to have to install the hotline, and you have to give information about where people can go.

Dutch Morreale, who was the first African-American Mayor in town -- and parenthetically, he and I, we integrated the Lafayette Hotel Coffee Shop. He was so light-skinned nobody knew he was Black and was a little disappointed -- but in any event, he had let them use this, the powers that be, had let them use this particular building in the French Quarter, and they finally got an 800 line, and now was the question, how are we going to man it? It's now the No AIDS Task Force. Well, in my efforts to run for office, I also found out that nuns were real feminists, especially the Marianites. I always called upon my friends, and I said to the Marianites, "Look, you minister to the poor and the sick. You think you could staff the telephones?" So, my friend said, "Sure, I'll find five or six of them, and we'll do it." I got back to the gay community, and I said, "I found these nuns." (Gasp) "Miriam, the kind of language they will be hearing! These people will talk about their sex acts and everything else, and they will be cursing." I said, "Well, I didn't think about that." I said, "Let me go back to the nuns." So I went back to the nuns, and I said, "You know, if you were going to man this telephone, you're going to hear some rather earthy things." The nuns said, "We've heard that before. It's all right, the Lord will understand." So, they manned the telephones. Then, of course, finally, we got the No AIDS Task Force, and then AIDS marches and all this kind of stuff, and I always identified myself with them.

AY: Why?

MW: I really think, because it seemed to me that this was discrimination all over again. I believe to this day, as I sit here, that it is the last big civil rights battle that has to be resolved in this country. Hmm?

AY: Can you name it?

MW: What?

AY: Can you say that again but say gay and lesbian --

MW: Gay and lesbian, other gendered people, cross-gendered people, I really think that is the last big civil rights issue that we have to resolve on a government level. On a private level, I don't think we can turn people's lives around. Although many people have gay people in their family and know someone who's died of AIDS or knows someone who has been discriminated against, and it's been very educational for some people to see the terrible discrimination. But on the government's side, and on the lawmaking side, that's where really the battle has to rage. And --

AY: How do you address this in your Jewish community, in your Judaism?

MW: Oh, first of all, we have gay members in my synagogue, and nobody bats an eyelash. We have two men who have a baby that they got from a surrogate mother, and they had the baby naming at the synagogue, and there was no dry eye. It was just wonderful. I will always speak out on that. My husband is the President-Elect of the Forum for Equality. He is not gay, although he is an honorary gay man, they have told me. I'm an honorary lesbian, I suppose. He was very much involved in the background, in the challenge to the constitutional amendment that was just passed in this state forbidding whatever it forbade because it's really not clear.

AY: Civil unions?

MW: No. It forbade any kind of union where people weren't married, which also means people who live together. It was really poorly done. It was a knee-jerk election type kind of a thing. So, he was very much involved in that.

I wrote an op-ed that came out in Baton Rouge, and I participated -- fourteen years ago, I was in a campaign that came out at Christmas, there's a Christmas tree, and here there are black people, and white people, and kids, and a dog, and the caption underneath it says, can you really tell who's gay? Fourteen years ago, that was on the streetcar on the side, blown up. I was still on the Bench. This year, they did it again. When I did it 14 years ago, there were people that were really upset.

You can't do that. You can't do any kind of political advertising. I said, "This is not political. This is the only thing. See the Christmas tree?" This year we didn't have it in this newspaper; we had it in Baton Rouge in the newspaper. So, the powers that be just thought that all over the years, I had been faithfully championing the cause one way or the other, either monetarily or whatever.

I have to tell you, when I was elected, I was elected by blacks, by Jews, and by gays. My sister, who, when she heard about this mélange of voters, said, "Very inelegant people." (laughter) And I said, "You got it." You know, she was joking because she's very liberal. But she said, "all these inelegant people." She said, "You know, the only thing that wasn't wrong with you is that you weren't crippled." (laughter) I thought that was rather funny.

AY: That's hilarious. That's wonderful. I'm going to take one more picture of you if you don't mind. It's (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MW: Should I --

AY: Oh, do you want to get --

MW: Yeah, let me get my thing on so that it isn't so washed out looking.

AY: OK.

(Break in audio)

AY: Start over.

MW: All right, should I start?

AY: Yes, your proudest achievement.

MW: My proudest achievement is that a group of people that went with me to the Soviet Union in 1977 were able to get the release of one family from Vilna, where my husband's family is from. He is now in Canada, and he is a scientist of some renown. That was a very gratifying mission, and I really felt like I was worth something after I've done that. Before that, I always thought, well, you know, but when I got that together I thought, I can really do anything, within limits. (laughter) So, the million dollars is nothing in comparison to that.

AY: You just told me that when you were running for election --

MW: Yeah, for the Court of Appeal.

AY: OK, so start over. Tell me, why is 18 a lucky number, and why was it great for you to get it?

MW: Well, I always thought everybody knew this, Hebrew letters have numerical value. And people wear around their neck the Hebrew letter "chai," which is a "hey" with a "yud" attached to it. "Chai" means life, which is the most valuable thing that Jews have, or that anybody has, for that matter. The corresponding number is 18. The letter "chai" it translates to number 18. So, 18 has always been a very special number for Jews, so

when I got number 18 for the Court of Appeal, I knew I would win. I let out a shriek, like crazy, and said, "That's it. I'm number 18. I'm going to win." Of course, it wasn't all that easy, but that's what happened.

AY: That's great. When you go fundraising, what do you say?

MW: I say at least you could give me a "chai!" If somebody is really poor, $18 isn't so bad. But something, somebody's a little more pecunious, then I'll say, well, how about ten chais or 100 chais or so on and so forth, and I really have had success with it -- people believe in that stuff.

[END OF INTERVIEW]