Mollie Wallick Transcript

ABE LOUISE YOUNG: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today's date is January 11, 2005. This is an interview with Doctor Mollie Wallick. Doctor Wallick, can you spell your last name?

MOLLIE WALLICK: It's W-A-L-L-I-C-K.

AY: Thank you. Conducted by Abe Louise Young at Doctor Wallick's home in New Orleans, Louisiana. This is disc number one of one. All right. Let's begin. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and your upbringing?

MW: Well, I recall my childhood as a happy one, intertwined with celebration of my Jewishness. Although the elementary school that my brother and I attended had no other Jews, we had access to many Jewish peers at our Sunday school and at Shabbat services that we attended in our Orthodox community.

AY: Tell me a little bit about your parents -- if you could tell me their names and their occupations.

MW: My father's name was Bruno Marcus. He was a painter. And my mother's name was Ana Botkovsky Marcus, and she was a housewife. My parents were not activists, but they certainly exemplified a lot of traits that we consider valuable in Judaism. They were very interested in other people, they were accepting of others. They did good deeds, and they practiced tzedakah.

AY: Can you explain that?

MW: Tzedakah was giving to charity. I think that my parents exemplified their Jewishness by being active members of an Orthodox congregation and by demonstrating

to us as children their faith in Judaism. We went as a family to Friday evening services and all holiday celebrations and holiday services at our Orthodox congregation.

AY: How many siblings did you have?

MW: Only one brother, who is 13 months older than I.

AY: What about your grandparents? Can you tell me about them?

MW: I knew my maternal grandparents best because they lived in New Orleans. And my grandmother died young, but my grandfather was a very important person in my life. And as I think back, I probably became interested in human rights from my maternal grandfather. He was a very gentle, learned man, and he was the honorary gabbai at our Orthodox congregation. He was remarkably accepting of differences exemplified by people in the family and by others. He valued people as they were, and I admired that so much. I think I got my love of human rights from my grandfather.

AY: Is there any incident or example that comes to mind when you think of him?

MW: Well, I always like to think of when I was a child and attending services at Yom Kippur, which happened to be on a Saturday that particular year, that the congregation deferred to my grandfather to decide whether or not to include a prayer on Shabbat. He made the decision, which just impressed me tremendously.

AY: Were there any times when you were growing up as a child which you remember noticing your grandfather's character as it was -- as he related to other human beings? Was there anything that stands out as a story?

MW: I do remember that we visited him every Shabbat afternoon, and we wore clothes that were appropriate to our age at the time, shorts and whatever. While my grandfather really did not approve of that kind of dress himself, he certainly accepted it in us and

welcomed us warmly, and always had pears ready to share -- his favorite fruit -- to share with us.

And we loved our afternoons with this grandfather. And other people were there on occasion -- and not dressed as we knew grandfather preferred. But he was very accepting of that and willing to accept any differences in people. That really did impress me.

AY: That's amazing. That's a wonderful quality.

MW: Particularly, he was very old at the time.

AY: How did your family come to America?

MW: My grandfather came from Russia in 1900 and brought his family. And they were in New York briefly and then came down to New Orleans.

I don't know what the appeal of New Orleans was, but they settled here, and he lived here the rest of his life. He was a very important person at the Orthodox community -- at the Orthodox congregation -- from early on.

AY: What was the name of that congregation?

MW: That was Beth Israel Congregation, which was my congregation. When I married my husband, and I married very young as the teenager at 19, he belonged to another congregation -- Chevra Tillim -- and in those days, the wife went to the husband's congregation. I still continued as a member of the sisterhood at Beth Israel, but my membership in a congregation moved over to Chevra Tillim, which was at the time Orthodox.

AY: Where and when were you born?

MW: I was born in New Orleans at Baptist Hospital in August of 1926.

AY: And did you grow up in New Orleans?

MW: I grew up in New Orleans. I've never lived anywhere else. I've visited frequently and traveled a lot, but never lived anywhere but in New Orleans.

AY: What accounts for your loyalty?

MW: I'm sorry?

AY: What accounts for your loyalty to the city?

MW: It was always home to me, and I've always been comfortable here. And I love visiting other places, but I'm always happy to return to New Orleans.

AY: What schools did you attend when you were growing up?

MW: We moved frequently when I was young, and I attended a lot of elementary schools. I attended Wilson School, McDonogh Seven, McDonogh Ten, Howard Number One, which was the end of my elementary school, and then I went to McManus High School. And years later to the University of New Orleans.

AY: Where did you go to college?

MW: The University of New Orleans.

AY: Was that also where you went to medical school?

MW: I'm not a medical school graduate. I am a professor of psychiatry but not a medical school graduate. I have a Ph.D. from UNO, and all of my degrees were in early childhood and in special education because I was teaching autistic children for a long period. In sociology and psychology. So, I had a mixed bag of degrees.

AY: Can you tell me about who and when you married?

MW: Yes. I married my husband, Mervin Wallick, who was called Mayer Wallick. Mayer was his Hebrew name and the only name he ever used, although his official name --

AY: Can you spell that for me?

MW: M-A-Y-E-R is the way we spelled it. That's the only name anyone used for him. Actually, I knew his younger brother, who was my age, but I didn't know Mayer because he was in the Pacific during the years that I might have known him. But I met him when he returned to New Orleans to go to Officer's Training School, which was in New Orleans. I was 16; he was then 22. We dated and eventually became engaged. My family wanted me to wait until after the war. I think they were waiting for me to grow up. When he came back from the war, we married.

AY: What was the date of your marriage?

MW: April 7th, 1946, was the day that we married.

AY: What was his occupation?

MW: He was the vice-president of a bottling company -- of a soft drink bottling company that had been formed the year he was born. He lived in a home in Old Metairie, next to the bottling plant. So, he toddled over there as a youngster, and he knew that that was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. Before it was a bottling plant, it was a dairy. The reason they lived in Old Metairie was they had to live somewhere that had space for animals to be for them to raise, and they just stayed there when the dairy became a bottling plant. That would have been in 1921, the transformation to the bottling plant.

AY: Can you tell me the names and the ages of your children?

MW: My children are Michael Wallick, and Michael is now 54. Judith Wallick Page (sp?), who is now 52. And Jonathan Wallick, who is now 50.

AY: That was a pretty big four years for you.

MW: Yeah.

They were all born within four years to the day. The two boys are the bookends, and they had the same birthday.

AY: OK.

Do you want to refresh me on your children's ages?

MW: Yes. My son, Michael Wallick, is 55 years old. His sister, Judith Wallick Page, is 53. And our youngest son, Jonathan, is 51. The boys have the same birthday. They are four years to the day apart.

AY: That's sweet. What values did you focus on raising your children with?

MW: I was always involved in early childhood education and very interested in children, and I think they knew it. Though sometimes they resented my interest in other peoples' children. That kind of impacted the time that I had available to them. But they knew of my interest. And they knew that I was interested in human rights, *always*.

AY: Did you have Jewish family activities?

MW: We had lots of Jewish family activities. Actually, when they were very young, I was the director of a Jewish pre-school. Many activities around that, many holiday activities -- we were very active Jewishly.

When I say that we were interested in human rights -- that I was, and demonstrated that, this was the time of integration. At the very beginning of integration, when my oldest son

started school. Yet we sent all of our children to public school, which wasn't very popular in those days. But we always did. So, they knew that that was very important to me.

AY: What impact did seeing the movement for African-American civil rights have on your development as an activist and person?

MW: Well, it made me much more appreciative of differences. But I have to say, at that time, my life's work wasn't available to me. I didn't know about any differences in the area of homosexuality then. I had to learn that later from my medical students.

AY: So, we're on the category of questions around Jewish identity. Did you, as a child, celebrate Shabbat and the holidays with your grandfather's Orthodox community?

MW: Yes, I did as a child and later in my own congregation, although we visited the other congregation also. All of my children made bar and bat mitzvah. They all went to Hebrew school. We were very active.

AY: Was your family Zionist?

MW: They were, but they were not active folks. They belonged, but I don't recall them as being activists in any area at all.

AY: Have you visited Israel?

MW: I have. Two times. I wish it had been more. It was wonderful to be there.

AY: What was wonderful about it for you?

MW: It was just overwhelming to feel myself on Jewish soil. The first time I went was actually -- I presented a paper at an international meeting in Jerusalem, and it was just amazing to be there. My favorite town of all was the Old City. I loved the Old City. And later -- years later -- went with my husband, and again, that was our favorite city to visit.

AY: Has your relationship to Judaism changed over time?

MW: Well, it may have strengthened. It certainly may have strengthened, and it's changed in this way. The Orthodox congregation that I belong to with my husband became Conservative. I was very, very happy when they became Conservative because by then, I was active with gays, and I felt the ambiance for gays was much more comfortable there, and therefore it was more comfortable for me as well. I've recently also joined a Reform congregation with a *chavurah* and study group of gays. My interest in it is that they support things that I'm interested in, which is openness and support of differences. That is very appealing to me.

AY: I'm interested in the meeting between your Orthodox upbringing and your passion for human rights -- particularly the rights of gays and lesbians. What place you see gays and lesbians as having in the Orthodox communities -- how you see their role having changed in any Jewish communities at all, but specifically starting with the Orthodox community.

MW: Unfortunately, their role has not changed in the Orthodox community, and that certainly added to my discomfort with the movement. They're accepted if they don't act on their gayness and if they don't let people know about their gayness. And to me, that's not acceptable. The Conservatives do more, but they certainly don't do to the degree that the Reform congregation does. The Conservative congregation that we belong to is accepting but not as accepting as I would like them to be. Nationally in the Conservative movement, there is a lot of discussion ongoing about the role of gays in congregations. I think it's left largely up to congregations. The congregation that I go to, which is now Shir Chadash, is accepting, so I'm not uncomfortable, but I'm more comfortable in the Reform congregation -- Temple Sinai -- that I joined, and another Reform congregation here -- Touro synagogue and Gates of Prayer -- the three Reform congregations accept couples as a family, and I like that. I've known a gay man who was actually a board member and

sat on the bimah and was accepted. I've seen the children of two gay men being named in the Reform congregation, and warmly accepted by the Rabbi, and was deeply touched by that. I'm very happy to be a member of that congregation -- Temple Sinai -- as well.

AY: That was lovely. How do you see your activism as being related to Jewish values?

MW: Well, I think that -- [phone rings]

AY: How do you see your activism as being related to Jewish values -- or to your Judaism?

MW: I think that a tenet of Judaism is accepting the stranger, and I see this as a demonstration of that. I think it's very closely related to -- Judaism certainly supports human values, and this is certainly an instance of that.

AY: Can you define this? Can you define this?

MW: Can I define human values?

AY: You said, "This is an instance of that."

MW: Accepting gays is an interest -- is an incident of that -- is a demonstration of that. Mm-hmm.

AY: Thank you. What do you think that your Orthodox grandfather would say were he to learn and know of your life's work today?

MW: I think he would give me his blessing, and he would be proud of me. This is not anything that came up, ever. I wasn't really that aware. I don't know -- although he was very learned -- I don't know of any incidents at that time that he would have had anything to say about.

But I think he would be very proud of my work.

AY: What are the particular challenges or gifts of being Jewish and being an activist for gay and lesbian rights in the South?

MW: I don't think there've been any challenges in that I'm Jewish. I think we demonstrate our appreciation of differences and of values. And this certainly is an example of both. I don't -- have never felt any challenge about being Jewish. At school, I'm not sure -- at the medical school -- that my students know that I'm Jewish. I certainly don't hide it. I'm not there Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and other holidays, but there's never been any discussion of that. I'm not sure that's known.

AY: If you were to give me a definition of what you mean when you say your life's work, what would it be?

MW: Well, I was saying the work that really has occupied me for the last two decades has been working with gays. It was a very serendipitous thing in that a young man -- a young medical student came to my office because I counseled all students. He sat there, and I had a difficult time finding any problem. He was doing very well in school. He seemed very accepted and happy. I didn't know what his problem might be. So, I offered to make him tea to make him comfortable, and eventually, he told me that he was gay and that he had had a miserable first semester because he didn't know anyone with whom he could speak about this. He didn't know anyone whom he could trust to speak about it; he didn't know of any support groups. But he told me that there were some in the community. And he wanted to know if I would be a liaison to gay and lesbian medical students and residents. I told him that I was very interested in doing that. He wanted to put a note in every student's box. I said to do that, I would have to have the Dean's permission. This was very late. It was after work hours at that time. And I told him that I'd speak to the Dean the next morning. And I did. And the Dean thought it was a great idea. He supported the concept of a liaison, but he did not support my doing it because he felt that I was too valuable to him with the general medical community, and he thought

it would be diluted if I were known to be one who saw gay students.

AY: Why?

MW: I couldn't disagree with him more. I told him that, but I respected his right as the Dean. He said he would approve anyone whom I presented to him. I tried desperately speaking to straight folk with young children that no one would suspect speaking to gays who were not out, who were not comfortable. I understood that and didn't feel that they could do that. So, I didn't come up with anyone until the new Dean appeared in 1985. I met him early on and asked him about this project that I was really so interested in. And he said, "Go for it." He was a wonderful, caring psychiatrist, and he gave me his blessing to be liaison.

At the same time, I told him that I was interested in writing about our experience at LSU and of even introducing the topic for discussion at national meetings of the Association of American Medical Colleges. He said, "Go for all of it." He approved everything. He was extremely supportive, and I'm very indebted to the student who introduced the concept to me and to the Dean who approved it a year later after the first Dean -- the original Dean, had turned it down.

AY: What was the climate for gay and lesbian students at the time when your work began?

MW: I wasn't really aware of that. And I have to confess that I knew little about the topic, but I'm also indebted to my young student because he encouraged me to get the information that I needed, and I immersed myself in the literature and really studied everything that was available. I spoke to resource people in the community. That helped me greatly in the writing and research that I was doing and also helped me in the panels that I was organizing and leading of gays and lesbians to teach my medical students about homosexuality. So, I needed this young man -- and I'm so indebted to him for

introducing me to this topic that has been so interesting and rewarding for me.

AY: How did the HIV and AIDS crisis impact your life or work?

MW: Well, it did impact me because I was on the committee -- the HIV committee -- at the medical center that wrote policy of how we would be treating medical students and residents when this presented itself. And actually, we decided -- it was decided that I could counsel anyone who needed counseling, as long as I consulted medical folks that I needed to consult to work with HIV students or residents. And as long as I felt that I was uncomfortable with doing this. And I did have one HIV student -- he was finishing his third year. We were able to work together. He had medical support. He was able to graduate from medical school. We were very careful that he didn't do anything that might have been intrusive of a patient. Everything worked out very well, and he had a successful career after that. I'm still in touch with him.

AY: Were you working in the field when homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness?

MW: It was declassified before that. Yeah.

I was not active in it at the time, but I certainly benefited from that fact. Although many didn't accept it -- many physicians didn't accept it. And the first time I tried, we were given extra hours. We were offered extra hours -- all the course directors were offered extra hours in human sexuality because it was found that that was a neglected topic in medical schools, that we should address more time to that. One of the things that I was interested in introducing was homosexuality.

My first attempt was -- and you'll excuse this pun -- was a straight lecture, which was extremely disappointing to me, although the psychiatrists and I had agreed what he would talk about.

He would not talk about reparative therapy or any Freudian interpretation and would give a very balanced presentation. In fact, he did not. And he was the one presenter for me that I didn't write a thank you for because I was so disappointed. I was determined after that to have a panel and to tell each of the panelists what I wanted. Surely one of them or more would understand what I wanted, and I could get my affirming message across. I was introduced to a lesbian physician in the community who was active in the gay community but had not done anything in the straight community. She was a founding partner at the Browne McHardy Clinic, where the children -- where a lot of the students were children of fathers who were on staff with her. So, she took a big risk in coming to do this herself. She put -- helped me put the panel together, and we continued to do this annually for years after this.

It was difficult at LSU because we have, essentially, Louisiana residents, many of whom are not exposed or don't know that they're exposed to anyone who is gay. Now, we did have some students who were educated in California and in the East, and, of course, they knew, and they helped balance. But we did have trouble with the others. Sometimes, after a presentation, a student would come down and offer to save my panel -- that you can be saved. It's not too late. This was, of course, very hurtful. But we girded our loins, and we took what was thrown at us, and we came back the next year and tried again. We tried to make it more responsive to them as physicians -- as future physicians.

That was always our emphasis, because we wanted them to be more caring physicians. We felt that having a panel of gays and lesbians -- these were all gay and lesbian physicians -- would be helpful to them in their work -- in their future work -- with gay patients and would also let them know that some of the faculty at LSU with whom they interacted were gay, and they need to be aware of that. And to monitor their language in speaking of gays and lesbians. I think that was very important.

AY: What kind of risks were there for you in the work that you did?

MW: Well, there were some risks with me at LSU, although my -- the current Dean, the Dean who approved all of this, gave me tremendous support, as did the Chancellor. The new Dean, after this Dean retired, did not give me his support. In fact, when I had an incident with the PFLAG scholarship fund -- I was chair of that fund from its inception and for many, many years after that, and still am active and still serve in that role -- I let my medical students know about this availability because three of the scholarships were given in my honor, and given to premed and medical students who were gay. So, I sent a very cautious, sensitive e-mail to the class to let them know about this and ask if they knew anyone who might be interested.

Certainly, *they* were not, but they might know someone who was. I asked that they mention it to the student. I got two very hurtful responses back. One student wrote that, "This is ridiculous. Take me off your e-mail list. I believe that gays lack moral standards." That's a quote. Another student wrote quote, "As a student, I don't hate gay people, but I know the Bible calls them sinners." I should have said not as a student but as a Christian. His statement was, "As a Christian, I don't hate gay folks, but I know that the Bible considers them sinners." Then he went on to say, "Jesus loves you and died for you, and you should question your thoughts about Jesus and the things you support."

AY: He obviously didn't know you were Jewish!

MW: Obviously, didn't know and didn't care. I did not answer either student. But I went to the new Dean, and my disappointment with him was that I insisted that neither student would function well without a lot of sensitivity training. The Dean thought that this was a case of the students having a right to express themselves. He disagreed with me. I was sorely disappointed with his response. Though that was my problem with the Dean, my other problems were with some straight faculty -- medical school faculty -- who thought that I was giving disproportionate time to gay students. Not true. Some gay students

who resented the additional time given to homosexuality in the curriculum -- and, of course, resented that e-mail that I sent to the class. So, I had a little bit of difficulty.

Actually, there was some fallout from that. I lost my status as a favorite professor from that time on due to my support of the gay community. But it was well worth the work. I have to say that with the strong approval of the Chancellor and of my former Dean, I gained acceptance in the national community through articles and book chapters, discussions, workshops, and plenary sessions. So, I was happy to accept my comeuppance and do what I did.

AY: Wonderful. How has the world changed for gay and lesbian medical students from that time until today?

MW: Well, I think that we at LSU have brought an awareness to the national community and an acceptance that certainly wasn't considered two decades ago when I proposed to do this at the AAMC. At the time, they've thought that no one in medical school -- first of all, there were no gays in most medical schools, and there were no problems on any campus. We knew that not to be true, and later it was found not to be true at many campuses around the United States. So, I think that we did bring awareness.

I think there is, in general, much more acceptance now. We did a lot of surveys in our research of the way that homosexuality was taught at medical schools and found that the time that was devoted was certainly not adequate. Even at LSU, it was not adequate, but we were pioneers in this. Also, in antidiscrimination, we found there were no policies at most schools. When we did the survey, there was no policy at LSU. But later, thanks to the Chancellor, who included sexual orientation as a protected category in the catalog, there became acceptance at LSU. With the stroke of the Chancellor's pen, he impacted the lives of more than 5,000 students and 2,000 faculty and staff at six professional schools in New Orleans and Shreveport. I was very happy about that. Certainly, we made some changes in Louisiana. I think that's that around the country.

AY: What were the nuts and bolts that you had to go through to institute that change to get that approved?

MW: I tried with a previous Chancellor and was unsuccessful. But this Chancellor was so accepting that there was no problem with him at all. He also facilitated my work with the NO/AIDS task force and the NO/AIDS annual walk and allowed me to pull together all the schools at the medical center in walking as a group. Last year, we won the award as the most attendees of a professional school at the walk. So, I'm very happy that we were able to do this. All of this was with the blessing and help of this wonderful Chancellor.

AY: So first you propose it to one Chancellor who was supportive, and then you propose it to another Chancellor. Did you have to gain community support? What sort of things did you have to go through to have such a policy change of this magnitude?

MW: I actually worked straight with -- right with the Chancellor, himself. I worked directly with the Chancellor himself. That was soon on the heels of the other Chancellor leaving. There wasn't a long period that we waited.

AY: How long did you wait?

MW: Well, almost a year. Almost a year.

AY: It's a nice parallel to the original wait for a year with the first Dean.

MW: Yes, yes.

AY: How did your husband and family react to your work?

MW: My husband was always supportive of everything I did, and certainly of this work. He went with me to all gay functions that I went to and participated actively in everything. My children interacted with this in very interesting ways. My son was dating a young woman at the time whose parents wrote the first influential book written by parents about

their gay son. It was called *Beyond Acceptance*.

When my son learned about my activism in this area, he shared it with his friend's parents, and my stock with them went up very high immediately after that. They offered to come to New Orleans to speak to my medical school class. And did, and that was a wonderful treat.

They told the students about their path beyond acceptance with their gay son. So, that was very exciting to me. My daughter was a Dean at Millsaps College.

There was a homophobic incident there, and she consulted me and asked for my assistance. I offered to bring a panel of gays and lesbians to talk to her class. We did and have returned every year since, by invitation. It's important that they see gays and see a human face and get an idea about something that before then was just an abstraction to them.

So many of the students are under the impression that they know no gays, never knew any, or met any. So, this is an opportunity for them to see gay folks. I had an interesting experience there when some students asked if I was the moderator, if I was also gay. Didn't ask this out loud but asked of another student who knew me and responded to them. Although, I've never told anyone that I'm not, and many of medical students, because of my activity, think that I am.

I've never corrected that impression. I do have one favorite story to tell you about that. It took place at the Dean's party for the graduating seniors. I had greeted a young woman graduate and told her, "I'd like you to meet my husband," who was turned in conversation with another person at the time. She looked at me incredulously and said, "Doctor Wallick, you're married?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Does your husband know? I replied, "Yes." That's all I told her, and she stood there with her mouth open. I introduced her to my husband. They had a conversation, and I think to this day, she's bewildered by the

interchange.

AY: That is very funny. What was behind your choice not to confirm for people that you were heterosexual?

MW: I didn't just think there was any reason to do that. If I had been asked that while I was on the podium, I would have said, "I don't think the answer to that question is important, so I'll choose not to answer that." I would never have answered that question. But I was never asked directly.

AY: Were you involved in the women's movement or the feminist movement at all?

MW: I was involved in the women's movement -- not actively, but very supportive of everything that they did. I have to say that being a woman probably facilitated my work as an activist in gay rights. Because women are nurturing and supportive and known to be, and they're very indebted to finishing a task that they think is important. I think all of those traits were very helpful to me as an activist in the area of gay rights. I think that probably facilitated my acceptance in my role as liaison, particularly by gay students.

AY: Do you think it would have been more difficult for a man to have held your position?

MW: I think that a sensitive man -- and there are many of those -- could have done an equally fine job. The secret is availability. Being available to students, keeping an open door when you're working in your office, which indicates 'I can be disturbed, come right in.' I only closed my door when a student was with me.

AY: What is the secret to being a passionate activist?

MW: I think the secret to being a passionate activist is being a caring person who genuinely accepts differences in people. I'm reminded of something told to me by Rabbi Steven Greenberg of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Rabbi

Greenberg proposed a blessing women recite as appropriate for all men as well. And it is, I quote, "Blessed are you, Lord our God, who created me just as you wanted me to be." I love that. It was very moving to me and made me even more supportive in the movement.

AY: Beautiful. Thank you. How has your activist work affected you as a human being?

MW: I think it's made me more human, more appreciative of everyone, and I'm happier with myself. It's done wonders for me. The gay community has given me so much. The work itself has been rewarding, and I needed nothing else, but I was overwhelmed when I was chosen as the HRC --

AY: Lifetime Achievement Award recipient.

MW: When I received the Lifetime Achievement -- the HRC Lifetime Achievement Award. Now, with Women Who Dared giving me the honor, my cup runneth over for sure.

AY: How has your Jewish community responded to your activism on behalf of gays and lesbians?

MW: I've tried to impact the Jewish community, and I started with my own congregation, Shir Chadash, where I was book review chair for four years. One of the books I chose to review in the first year was one that dealt with this topic. I know there was some resistance to people coming to the review.

They told me that. But they came, and they actually thanked me at the end because they learned so much about the situation. I gave them a history of this in the Jewish community and brought them up to date of the acceptance in the various congregations in the city. I think that they were happy to get that information. I don't know that it had a great impact on the congregation. I wish that it had more. When I joined Temple Sinai

recently -- the Reform congregation -- they asked about my interests, and I mentioned this as my major interest, which was education in the area of gay rights. That's one reason why I've joined the chavurah and will be going to the study group, and I hope contributing actively to that group.

AY: If there's one thing -- one event or one encounter that really symbolizes for you the work that you've done -- the change that you've made, what would it be? Does anything come to mind?

MW: Well, one of the things of which I'm most proud is that I spoke before the New Orleans City Council when they considered voting on extending rights to gays and lesbians in the workplace, in housing, and in public accommodation. This is something that they had considered earlier, two times, and had been turned down. I was very pleased after a long day to learn that this time this was accepted. Orleans is the only parish in the state that has this stated right for gays and lesbians, and I'm very proud to have been a part of that.

AY: Who has been your role models besides your grandfather in your life? As a Jew, as an activist, as a woman, as a parent?

MW: My role model has been the wonderful people that I've met through my activism and have facilitated my activism, and that is members of the human rights campaign, HRC, members of PFLAG parents, parents, friends -- parents, family, and friends of lesbians and gays, and members of -- and the NO/AIDS task force.

AY: Let's go backwards a little bit. Before this momentous change happened for you where you woke up to the issue of gay and lesbian human rights. You were involved in many things. Can you tell me a little about your vocation early on with early childhood education and the preschool that you taught at and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

MW: I actually taught at Communal Hebrew School, was the director of that school for 17 years. My biggest thrill about that was when some of my preschool graduates came to medical school, and the other students entered the classroom and would say, "Hi Doctor Wallick," and this students would say, "Hi Miss Mollie," which is what I was known as and happy to be known as.

My work there -- after that, I was invited into a therapeutic nursery school at the medical school, which is how I got into the Department of Psychiatry. It was due to my work with a thalidomide baby at my original school. My creative work with that child was known, and I was invited to join the faculty as the educational director of the therapeutic nursery school, which was for handicapped children, and especially autistic children.

AY: What was the school called?

MW: It was called the Therapeutic Nursery School.

AY: What were some of the creative -- of the Therapeutic Nursery School of the...

MW: What were some of the creative work I did with the thalidomide baby at Communal Hebrew School was -- we accepted this child who had no arms. I actually didn't tell the parents in advance, but the first day, I sent a note home advising them that your children will tell you a story about a new child, and I would like you to believe what your child tells you, and I'd like you to call me so we can talk about it.

Because the children went home and told their parents about this boy who did things with his feet that they did with their hands. Actually fed himself with his feet. My husband had made a special easel that sat on the floor, and the young man painted a picture using his toes. The children were enthralled, and all wanted to play with him and go home with him. He was very accepted. But I think it was important for the parents to know. That was the creative work that I did at Communal Hebrew School Nursery that was later appreciated by the Therapeutic Nursery School when I was invited there.

We did do a lot of creative work -- cutting edge work in working with autistic children. I was pleased that among my first students that I worked with was the son of a Rabbi who had just moved to New Orleans when the child was three years old in 1974. I worked with the child for three years and then followed him in an autistic classroom. Then the family moved to Texas, but I kept in touch with them and received video of the young man until his 30th birthday. When he graduated from high school, I went to Texas for his graduation and was very pleased when he graduated with a normal class, walking across the stage. But when other students simply accepted their diploma and walked off, Bernie checked the diploma to be sure his name was accurate before he would move off the stage. That was a thrilling moment.

AY: That's really great.

MW: Bernie had been in a work-study program in Texas and was actually hired by a hospital because he was a very good worker and very good on the computer. One who did not like to take breaks; did not like to take a lunch break, other than a very quick lunch break. He was a very good worker. After his training, he was hired and is still working there to this day for salary. Very well accepted and liked in the department in which he works at the medical -- at the hospital.

AY: How wonderful.

MW: Our cutting-edge work with the autistic children was in teaching them sign language so that they could gain vocal language. And we were not the first to do that, but we were among the first and were very successful. In Bernie's case, the signs dropped out when he gained language. In many other students -- with many other students, the signs remained even when words entered. We had different amounts of success, but it was a success with all of our students, and we were very pleased with our work with them. I was glad that I had a Jewish student because I kind of hated getting out of the business of working with Jewish children. I've followed Bernie all these years.

AY: What does the future hold for you?

MW: My work was partially interrupted by my husband's illness. The fact that we moved into a continuing care community where I could care for him full-time until his death eight months ago. I did remain active in projects that interested me and could do many of them from my home on my computer, but always went in -- managed to go in for continuing projects like the panels that I organized at LSU and Tulane Medical Schools, where we've gone every year since being invited there more than a decade ago, and at Millsaps College, where we continue to go. I've managed to do that and to arrange the panels. I think I did say that -- to arrange the panels. I've continued to do the research and writing that we had done in our work with AAMC and national and international journals.

AY: If you had to estimate the number of articles that you've written in your lifetime, would you imagine...

MW: Well, I've written more than those about gays. But I've written, I think, a little more than a dozen about gays and probably an equal amount about the other areas combined, which would have been early childhood and autism.

AY: I saw on your CV some -- I wasn't quite sure if there -- are there two books that you've published, or were you a contributor to --

MW: We contributed -- I contributed chapters to two books. Very fine books. Edited.

AY: Besides the activism work and the education work right now, what fills your life?

MW: I'm also interested in women in medicine and have been very active in that and continue active in working with a physician at LSU. Together, we organize an all-day workshop every year that's open to the entire community on women's issues. And we recently had our 10th presentation, which was extremely well accepted. I'm very active in

that and in other projects of women in medicine.

AY: How many grandchildren do you have?

MW: I have six grandchildren.

AY: Do you see them?

MW: I see them as frequently as possible. Three -- four, actually, live in New Orleans. One currently as a third-year law student at Tulane, and she's never lived here other than now. She will be graduating and leaving in May. I'm sad about that. But my other grandchildren are in Austin, Texas, and in Gainesville, Florida -- both in graduate school.

AY: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me for the purpose of this interview -- or anything about your life or your work that we haven't touch on?

MW: This is wedding rings. My father's -- my paternal grandmother, my father, my husband, and mine. I can't wear rings or bracelets because of lymphedema following mastectomies. I wanted to wear the rings. I did something else with the stones as a drop, but I wear the rings all the time. Also hanging on this is a coat hanger, which was given to me for supporting the rights against abortion.

AY: The rights of a woman's right to choose?

MW: Right of a woman's right to choose. This was the project of the National Council of Jewish Women some 15 or 20 years ago. If you contributed enough to them, they sent you this coat hanger.

AY: "No more coat hangers," I think, is the emblem.

MW: Oh, you do know it.

AY: I do know the coat hanger.

MW: A lot of people don't recognize it and wonder what is this? They don't quite get it -- what the association is. But I wore it immediately. When I used to travel and wear it, the stewardesses wanted to take it off my neck; they loved it. They appreciated it so much, this one.

AY: For its meaning or for --

MW: Yeah, for its meaning. Yeah. They appreciated --

AY: Supporting the pro-choice movement.

MW: Yes, absolutely. OK. Let's see what I didn't say -- known as gay by his family. Are you recording this?

AY: Yes, is that all right?

MW: The young man who challenged me to be the liaison was not known as gay to his family. When I met them at his graduation, I had a poignant moment when I realized that I knew more in a meaningful way about their son than they did. The reason he had not shared it was he knew of their homophobic attitudes, and he could not risk it. I was so saddened by that but so happy that we could help him with access to support services in the community while he was at LSU.

AY: How do you propose that communities -- well, let's say in particular Jewish communities -- can change the homophobic attitudes within?

MW: I think education is the key. I don't think we have nearly as much of that. Actually, the Conservative movement recommends education in this area. So, I was fulfilling their wishes when I did that book review. I think all congregations need to do this, and I'm hoping that I can do more of this at Temple Sinai in the general community -- not just the gay chavurah, but in their general congregation. And in other congregations as well.

One of my issues was to introduce this in the Jewish community so that they would be more aware of this.

AY: Thank you. Anything else you'd like to say?

MW: I would just like to summarize for you that the gay community has expanded my worldview and has enriched my life with friendship. I am indebted to them for their contribution.

[END OF INTERVIEW]