Amy Rubin Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton, and I'm at the home of Amy Rubin at 9227 Ida Lane, in Morton Grove, Illinois. And this is for the Jewish Women Who Dared Project for the Jewish Women's Archive. Today is Wednesday, February 7th, and Amy, do you agree to be interviewed, and do you know that this is audio-recorded?

AMY RUBIN: Yes, I do.

RH: Thank you. Okay, let's just begin with your family background, and just talk about where your family's from and a little about your childhood.

AR: Okay. My roots go back to Russia, to Russian grandparents and an English grandmother. My parents were both born in the United States. I have two sisters, two younger sisters. We grew up in Chicago, in the middle of the city.

RH: Just about where in the city?

AR: North side of the city, at Lincoln and Foster.

RH: Oh, okay. I know that neighborhood. [laughter]

AR: Right in the heart of the city, which was very different than it is now, of course. My family was extremely poor. We lived in a very small apartment over stores. My parents were both sick – they had many illnesses as we grew up. My sister was sick. So, I had a very challenging childhood and really had a shortened childhood. When my youngest sister, who was nine and a half years younger than me, was born, my mother got very ill, so I became kind of a surrogate mother at that time. My childhood was mostly seeing my father being taken away by the ambulance, as we called it in those days, and caring for my sisters, so it was a really tough childhood. On the other hand, I had a terrific aunt and

uncle, and cousins, and a fabulous mother.

RH: Was your mother and your father – how many brothers and sisters did they have?

AR: My mother had a sister and a brother, and we were close with my mother's family. My father had two sisters, but we really weren't close with them at all.

RH: What was your mother's last name?

AR: My mother's maiden name was Duglow, D-U-G-L-O-W.

RH: And your father's name?

AR: My father's name and my name is Gusinow, G-U-S-I-N-O-W.

RH: Okay. That's good. So, tell me about this aunt and uncle, a little about them, and how they helped you.

AR: Well, my mother and my aunt Lorraine were very, very close, and Aunt Lorraine had two children, my cousins Lissie and Earl, who grew up as a sister and brother to me; that's how close we all were. Aunt Lorraine, who we called Gal her whole life, and Uncle Harry made this huge move to Skokie when we were very young. So, we, who lived on a busy street in the middle of the city, discovered the suburbs. That was an oasis. To get in the car and go to their house was – I don't know. It was the best. It took us out of our environment. They had a home, and we lived in an apartment. So, someone who had a home was really something for us. To me, it seemed like they were rich. I mean, now I know that they weren't exactly, but they were certainly far better off than we were. So, we always were surrounded by this family, which, at home, where we had illness, and we were poor and we had so many challenges at home – and then we went to Gal and Uncle Harry's house, and we could play in the pool, in the backyard, and eat these big dinners.

RH: Kind of a relief.

AR: Kind of a relief, and there was this wonderful closeness of family, and to this day, I'm still really, really close with my cousins. We formed such bonds, we were at their house every single holiday up to the time that I got married.

RH: Tell me a little about those holidays. What do you remember from those?

AR: Well, I remember that my aunt was obsessive about them being a certain way [laughter], and that they were very bountiful. She's a really good cook, and she was very – I don't know. I think her self-esteem was tied to how much you ate. She would really glare at each person and measure how much you were eating of her food. Of course, we went through the children's table, which we hated for a while, but then when we were teenagers, it was great because we got to be by ourselves. It was a time, again, looking back – that was a relief because it was always the way that I thought family should be. It was celebration, and it was Thanksgiving, and Rosh Hashanah, and just every – Fourth of July [laughter] – every holiday that there was, we were there. When I got married – my mother had passed away before I was married, and it started to transition, so I started to do the things that my aunt did and my house became sort of what her house was for the family when I was a kid.

RH: Well, since you brought up getting married, why don't you tell me your husband's name, and how many children you have?

AR: My husband's name is Michael – Mike. Everyone calls him Mike, not Michael. I have two children, Harrison and Jane.

RH: How old are they?

AR: Harrison is twenty, and Jane is seventeen. She'll be eighteen very shortly, unbelievably.

RH: Well, why don't we go back a little bit and tell me about – where did you go to school? Did you go to a synagogue? – how all that worked?

AR: Okay. I went to Budlong Grammar School in the city. Then I went to Mather High School. We moved from Lincoln and Foster to around Campbell and Catalpa. So I went to Mather High School and then went to Northern Illinois University. My family did not belong to a synagogue. In fact, the first synagogue I ever was a member of was when I was in my early thirties and had a young child. I don't know. I really grew up in a secular home. My one cousin, Earl, became a bar mitzvah because he was the only boy of all the cousins. And that's what the family thought, that the boy had to become a bar mitzvah, but none of us had any religious education or anything, although my mother, through her cancer, had a closeness to a rabbi. Now, I have no idea how she established [laughter] this relationship, but she did, and I know that it was a really important relationship to her, and it was someone who gave her a great deal of comfort.

RH: Did he come by the house, or was it when she was in the hospital?

AR: It's so hard to even remember exactly, except that I remember his presence, and I remember that he presided at her funeral and knew an extraordinary amount about her, so there must have been something.

RH: Well, how old were you when your father died?

AR: My father just died about ten years ago.

RH: And how old were you when your mother died?

AR: I was about twenty-four, twenty-five.

RH: So they were both of them sick a long time.

AR: They were sick a long time, and they died – well, my mother died way too young. This year, with my birthday, I have lived longer than she did.

RH: Oh, that's extraordinary because it's quite a milestone.

AR: It was extraordinary. It was really a milestone for me, and both my mother and grandmother, my mother's mother, died of breast cancer; it's something that runs rampant through our families. I had always known that – I had always made this kind of a target birthday, to get there, to be healthy, to break the cycle, to live past that time, but there's some kind of odd feeling about it.

RH: Well, it had to be – it's not exactly a celebration on that day, or was it? What did you do on your birthday?

AR: I don't know. I don't know if it was a celebration. In some ways, it was. In some ways, it was because, like I said, this had been something in my mind for years and years, and it was always – I want to do this. It's too young to die, when you're fifty-three, it's way too young. So, in that way, it was, "Look, Mom. Look at all the improvements. Now we do mammograms, and now we are able – now we have a better idea of nutrition and exercise, and all the things, and I don't smoke." But again, on the other hand, it's kind of an odd feeling. Odd that I'm so young, and yet, here I'm older than she ever got to be.

RH: You said you and your mother were close?

AR: Well, my mother and I were as close as we could be. I regret that I wasn't able to form a relationship with my mother as an adult because so many of the years when she was alive were those teenage years where we weren't really in sync, and she was –

RH: I remember. [laughter]

AR: – so sick, so much. As a teenager, I didn't like that at all. When I went away to college, I didn't want to come in and sit in the hospital. I think that I was angry and resentful, and it's just too bad. It's not like there are regrets because that's what it was, and I was very young. But I think it would have been really special to – I think we would have been close if she saw me achieve professionally and socially, and as a mother and a wife, and as a woman. I think she would have really enjoyed it. I always thought, because I've been so successful and because my husband and I have been so successful, that I could have taken care of her a little bit. She never really had anything through her childhood, through her life, and she was always poor. We were always poor. She was poor because she grew up in the Depression. I would have just gotten a real kick out of taking her to all the nice places for lunch and going on vacation, and all the things that I imagine we would have done. Who knows how things would have worked out, but it would have been nice.

RH: What was college like? What did you study?

AR: Well, I was an English major. [laughter] When I was a senior in high school and I sat down with my high school counselor, she asked me – first of all, going to college was extraordinary. I mean, I wasn't raised in a home where we thought we could go to college – not like my whole family went to college. My cousin, who's a little older than me, did, and she was really the first one in our family, and I followed. I really wanted to go to college, but part of me wanted to go to college just because I wanted to get away from home. I have to say that it wasn't for any great learning achievements or anything. When I sat down with my high school counselor, and she said, "What is it that you want to study," I said, "I want to study journalism, and I want to be a sports reporter," because I have always been a passionate sports fan as you can see sitting here in my family room. My high school counselor said, "Honey, that's not what girls do." And I didn't. I studied English instead of journalism with no idea of exactly what I was going to do, except I have always loved literature. I went to Northern Illinois University. I loved it. I

blossomed. I had been extraordinarily shy, scared of my own shadow, and college gave me the opportunity to really come into my own. Loved everything about it.

RH: Any particular memories you can tell me or moments that kind of capture what was going on?

AR: I remember going into my dorm, and my roommate came in. Her name was Nancy. And we sat, and we talked. I told her I was Jewish, and she was stunned. She said, "I have never met anyone Jewish before," and she actually asked me questions about stereotypes or things she had heard about Jews, including the whole horn thing. And this was, you know, 1971. [laughter]

RH: I'm getting that. [laughter]

AR: But Nancy and I were very close friends through all of college; she was terrific. I came from Mather High School, which at that time, was about ninety-seven percent Jewish. When I landed at NIU, here I had this small-town roommate who had no idea what a Jew even looked like. I stood in line to go into the cafeteria with African-Americans and people from all different races and religions, and, to me, that was fabulous. I just loved the diversity of it, and I think that that was, in so many ways, the start or the awakening of really wanting to be in the world and really wanting to do for all people, I guess. I just really love diversity and hearing about different people's backgrounds and experiences. Everything prior to that had been very homogeneous, and so, for me, just being in college – there were small-town people and big-town people and smart people and not-so-smart people, and it was just NIU. It wasn't even a big school or anything, but to me, it was all of those moments and the whole cultural thing – I loved all of the theater they brought to campus, the music, and the politics. It was really

an awakening, an opening for me in so many ways.

RH: Were you involved in sports growing up?

AR: I am the worst athlete in the world. I can't throw, I can't run. but I am a student of the games. I am especially passionate about baseball, the history of baseball. I'm an avid Chicago Cubs fan, unfortunately. And being a Cubs fan, you must have a lot of strength and character.

RH: Tell me what a student of baseball does. Do you know all the stats?

AR: I know a lot. Not so good on the numbers anymore, because numbers fly in and out of your head when you get a little older, but I know the players, the players in the Hall of Fame. Of course, I follow my team religiously. I have a goal of visiting every major-league baseball stadium in the country before I die, which is another reason that I just had to pass fifty-three because I've only been to about a third of them, so I have a whole lot more to do. And there's something about the game that I find – I love sports because on any day, anything can happen, and I find that exciting. But there's something about baseball – it is the only game that is played without a clock, and some people say that makes it boring. To me, there is something very special about that because it is driven by the action on the field, not by the ticking of the clock, and I love it. I love the sounds, the smells. I love to study it. I love to study the old players. I just love everything about it.

RH: When I was in college, I used to read Sports Illustrated, all the time. [laughter] There is a sense of, also, of accomplishment, that all of these people had that I enjoyed.

AR: It is. Like I said, on any given day, anything can happen. You just take the field, and you play, which to me is a fabulous metaphor for life. You don't have to be the so-called best, and you can still come out and be the winner. Some very ordinary players play the game and do extraordinary things.

RH: You did go to a school that was ninety-seven percent Jewish, so you had a Jewish identity. You told your roommate, "I'm Jewish." Have you ever kind of unpacked what it meant for you to be Jewish?

AR: Yeah, my high school was very – as much I loved college, I hated high school. Everyone, to me, at high school was snooty and snobby and had straight hair and was thin. That was far from anything that I was. Even though we were all Jewish, I didn't really identify with anyone there except for my very small group of friends. It was funny that when I was removed from being one of many, what I was at my roots really surfaced. And yes, I told my roommate right away that I was Jewish. I went to Hillel for services. [laughter] I had never gone to a High Holiday service, never in my life. I was eighteen years old. What compelled me to do that, I don't know, but there was a need to connect with other Jewish people. As secular as we were growing up, and the only thing I can remember about being Jewish is that we lit Hanukkah candles and had holiday dinners, but it was just dinner; there was nothing more than, "It's Rosh Hashanah; we eat brisket." But I was taught that being Jewish meant that you cared for the world. I can remember my father saying, "Because we're Jewish," in answer to why we should care about whatever it was that was happening. "Because we're Jewish." So, there was that social action sense that I did get, and then like I said, when I went to college, it just kind of blossomed a little more. When I met Mike and we got married, we were very committed to having a Jewish home. When we had children, we joined a synagogue. I'm very committed to the synagogue and to really instilling in our children a sense of Judaism and tradition. And then, to jump ahead, I began to work for a Jewish organization, and of course, I was then fully immersed into Judaism.

RH: What synagogue do you belong to?

AR: For eighteen years, we belonged to Temple Judea Mitzvah in Skokie. And then, last year, we switched to Congregation BJBE, which is B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim in Glenview.

RH: Now, you're going to have to help me here. Were they Reform?

AR: They're both Reform synagogues.

RH: Is there a reason you changed, any particular reason?

AR: Why we changed synagogues? Oh, for numerous reasons. It was kind of time to move on. We had a rabbi at Temple Judea Mitzvah who was my rabbi, my very close friend, and she left, so it was hard for me to be there.

RH: So you just moved on.

AR: It was time to move on. Time to make the change.

RH: When you say you try to make a Jewish home and give your children traditions, what's important to you about [that]? What do you do?

AR: What do we do? Well, at home, we have all those holiday celebrations here. For us, what was different than when I was growing up is we don't just do the "It's Rosh Hashanah, and we have brisket." It's Rosh Hashanah, and we have brisket, but that's after we come home from synagogue.

RH: Your children go to Hebrew school?

AR: My children both had their b'nei mitzvahs and confirmation. They were somewhat involved with the synagogues when they were younger. Of course, now they're finding their own way and their own place. I just think there's a lot of Jewish values that Mike

and I have that we really try and live and emulate for Harrison and Jane. We're a lot more overtly Jewish than my house was [growing up]. Now, my husband grew up in a house that was kosher, and they lived by synagogue, so his mother and grandmother could walk to synagogue on Shabbat. He came from a whole different background, and I think that, although we share the value of wanting to have a Jewish home, coming to a place where we were both comfortable, given that we came from different ends of the spectrum, was something we worked on. For him, being in a Reform synagogue was way different. A good portion of why we chose a Reform synagogue was because that's what felt best for me as a feminist and as someone who wasn't Jewishly educated.

RH: How did you meet your husband?

AR: On a blind date – a blind date that actually worked out. My very good friend Susie was going out with his very good friend Jerry, and they said that they each had a friend, and why don't we all get together? After I said no ten or twelve times, we went out and very quickly [laughter] got married, moved to the suburbs, and had a son.

RH: So, this was after college?

AR: This was way after college. I got married – I was thirty-one years old, so sometime in between college and marriage.

RH: You just mentioned you were a feminist. Why don't you tell me a little about that journey?

AR: It's interesting, preparing to, or just thinking about what I was going to say tonight and this whole "Women Who Dared" extraordinary honor. What was the journey? It's so hard for me to think about, was there a day, a moment, or actions that happened? Or is it just everything that my life has been that took me to this point? It's not like I was involved in anything in college, or that I was – I see so many young women that do amazing things, and I don't know that I did anything amazing, except that I just always

had these strong beliefs in what women could and should do. When I talked earlier about my high school counselor and how she said, “Honey, that’s not what women do,” again when I reflect – and I also had the opportunity to reflect a lot as I became a bat mitzvah myself at age fifty. Really, turning fifty and reading from the Torah was just really a reflective time for me. But that moment – I talked about this when I gave my bat mitzvah speech; I talked about that moment in high school with the realization that it was one of the last times that I ever let anyone tell me what I couldn’t do because I was a woman. I said “Okay,” and I just changed everything that I ever hoped and wished for, everything I wanted to be – and how horrible that is, that women did that and are still doing that – or any group. Moreover, it’s 2007, and women are still in situations where they’re doing that. I think I’ve become much more of a feminist in the last couple of decades. They say women mellow, and my kids still roll their eyes and say, “Mom, you’re going to have a cane and still be standing up there with your signs.” They get nervous that I’m going to say something somewhere since I speak out so much more than I ever did before because now, being a feminist is just every part of my being. I’m not sure about the journey; I just know that there were so many things in my life that made me what I am.

RH: Well, I’m curious about the journey, so I want to know, after you got out of college, what kind of job did you get?

AR: When I got out of college, I stayed in DeKalb, where I went to school, and I worked there for a while, working for the university. Then, I took a number of jobs in a number of places. I did some systems analysis work. I mean, how you jump from an English degree to that, who knows, except that I’m a very organized, precise thinker, so that seemed to fit. I ended up back in Chicago, working and living downtown. There is nothing better than being in your twenties, living and working in downtown Chicago and being single – had a ball. Traveled a lot with girlfriends.

RH: Where'd you travel to?

AR: Oh, gosh. We took off in the winter and went to Mexico. We went to California. We went to New York every year and saw plays, went to Arizona, dragged them to baseball spring training. We went on several cruises. Again, nothing better than being a single woman in your twenties on a cruise. You get to meet a lot of the crew members who are happy to see you. We had a really good time. I worked hard. I don't know that my work defined my life so much, except that I was independent. I got a job on my sixteenth birthday. This is probably a good part of the journey, too. I got a job on my sixteenth birthday because my father told me that there was no money to send me to college, and I really wanted to go, so I worked to pay for college. I worked a job while I was a full-time student – all through college. I remember coming home after my freshman year, and distinctly remember – I can see the entire picture sitting in the living room with both my parents and my father saying to me, "There is absolutely no more money, and you can't go back to school." I said, "I will find a way." And I worked so I could pay for my tuition. When I got out of college, I worked – I never got any money from my parents; they didn't have money. I paid my rent. I paid for my clothes. I paid for my travel and for everything. That sense of independence – and I learned very quickly that I could take care of myself, and I didn't need anyone to take care of me. That was when I met my husband. He knew that I could take care of myself, and that, I think, has strengthened our relationship all along. That feeling and that sense of independence is always – that's part of the feminist me, part of what I try to impart to my daughter, to both my kids, but certainly to my daughter.

RH: Tell me when you started to do the work that you're doing now. You got married, obviously, you had this wonderful son, and when did you start to get involved with the Jewish world? Was there any other activism that led up to the work you were doing?

AR: I got married, and then I got pregnant. When I was pregnant and driving back and forth downtown, and then when my son was born, I said, “I just can’t do this. I just can’t.” I stopped working, and that lasted for about six months. I said, “I’m going to go back to work part-time, and I’ll just get a job in the suburbs, so I’m close by,” the whole thing. I saw an ad in the paper to be the assistant to the director of B’nai B’rith Women’s Great Lakes region Regional Director. I said, “Oh, this looks like something I can do.” I like it; it’s a women’s organization, it’s Jewish, and it’s in Skokie. I did get that job. I had never been part of Jewish organizational life, [and] neither had my mother or father. I know so many people who are involved in organization life because they came up through their family, but certainly, that wasn’t true for me. I really liked my job a lot, and really liked the whole experience of being part of this organization. Because I had to work at conferences and things, I was participating in Shabbat services, and it was the first time I was part of a Havdalah service, which I loved, just loved. Sitting around and singing songs. And that B’nai B’rith Women was really dedicated to children, women, families, really struck a nerve with me. I worked for about five or six years. I had another child, my daughter, who’s walking in the door right now, and then I decided –

RH: Hi.

Jane: Hi, I’m Jane.

[END OF PART 1]

RH: Here we go.

AR: Then I stopped working – I decided to leave my job. My son has some learning disabilities, and he was having a lot of problems, so I decided to become a full-time advocate for him, another part of my whole advocacy. Shortly after that, my old boss, Joan Kerlow, called me and said, “We’re forming this little committee to look at domestic abuse in the Jewish community. Do you want to be on the committee?” I said, “Oh gosh,

Joan. What do I know about domestic abuse? I have two little kids, and my husband works nights. The only way I could come to any committee meeting is if I bring my kids with me." And she said, "Of course, you can bring your kids with you. Just come, Amy. Just come and listen. You're not doing much these days. Just come." Well, of course, everyone knows how those things go, the rest is history – the beginning of schlepping my kids to ten thousand meetings. They can tell you stories about all the places they've been and the times that I took them in Chicago or to places in Michigan and Wisconsin and all over the place. From that committee, I went on the regional board and then the national board, where I became the national program leader or national program chair. I enacted many, many programs. B'nai B'rith Women, in that time, became Jewish Women International. They changed their mission to focus specifically on domestic abuse in the Jewish community and healthy relationships. I became particularly passionate about this subject because I just believe that people should be good to each other and because, looking back, I realize that there was abuse in my own home growing up. Absolutely verbal and psychological abuse – my father was a very abusive man. I'm not sure if he ever hit my mother, but it wouldn't surprise me, and I was probably carrying that around inside of me, as well, especially since I have an extraordinarily wonderful, loving, caring husband and have had the benefit of a really healthy, strong relationship. So, about six years ago, Gail Rubinson, the executive director of JWI at the time, asked me if I wanted to come back on staff. I agreed, and for at least the last eighteen years or so, in lay leader positions and staff positions, on committees and task forces, and on all kinds of things, I've really been concentrated on building healthy, strong, safe communities.

RH: Would you say, with this group of women, you built a movement here in this part of the country?

AR: Well, people tell me I have. [laughter] I don't know, I guess, in a quiet moment when I don't want to be modest. I don't know about building a movement, but I have the great

honor of leading a collaboration in Chicago called JCARES [Jewish Community Abuse Resources Education and Solutions]. This group of now over forty-three people, that is representative of somewhere around thirty to thirty-five organizations and agencies, started very small and has grown into something amazing. We have been able, I do believe, to shift a lot of thinking and energy in the community. And certainly, we have been able to take the issue of abuse and, as my friend and colleague Laura Kaufman says, "Take it from the margins to the mainstream." I don't know about a movement, but we certainly have achieved a great deal and have really shifted the community in significant ways. The Chicagoland Jewish community and the work that we have been doing here is a model for other faiths in the community. I know because they constantly ask me to help them – as well as a model for other Jewish communities around the country.

RH: Tell me what it was like in the early days when you were first starting – what would you do?

AR: Well, in the early days, I remember a meeting where we were sitting around my dining room table because when you do this kind of work, a lot of times you're around someone's dining room or kitchen table. We decided that we were going to do this experiential thing, that we were abused women, and we needed to seek help. We would pull down the phone book, which, again, that's what you did. We didn't have computers or the Internet in those days. So pulled down the phone book, look under shelters, and see if we could find a shelter to call. In the phone book, all we found were animal shelters. That's what it was like in the early days; that there were shelters for animals, but there weren't shelters for women. Or you couldn't find those shelters, or whatever. I remember doing an interfaith conference on domestic abuse and getting more than one phone call from a rabbi who was very upset with me for leading this conference, saying things like, "We don't air our dirty laundry in public," or "But Amy, we are addressing domestic abuse. We're collecting toothbrushes for the women in shelters." [laughter] It

was really, really challenging. On the other hand, we also heard from women, from people, who were just so excited that there was some work that was being done, that the issues were – I remember speaking from the bimah at my synagogue. This just was an amazing experience. It was Friday night. Rabbi invited me to – I begged the rabbi to let me talk about abuse in the Jewish community. When we went in for the oneg, one woman after another came up to me [and said], "Thank you so much. I never thought I would hear this in my synagogue. I was in an abusive relationship for years. I got out. I'm in an abusive relationship now. Can you tell me what to do?" I remember coming home from there and crying the entire weekend because I thought, "This is my own synagogue. Oh my God, I can't believe this. I can't believe women who I've sat next to and had lunch with are telling me these stories. I don't even know how to help them or what to do." I remember feeling very inadequate. I got up there and spoke a lot based on my passion. It was then that I went back and actually studied domestic abuse and took classes so that I became more educated and knowledgeable as well as more confident that I could be out there talking and know how to help people. As all movements are, it was very difficult at the beginning, I think. I wasn't even at the very beginning; there were so many extraordinary women and others who came before me.

RH: What was your greatest challenge – can you articulate that? – in those early days.

AR: For me, I think my greatest challenge was my own inhibitions, my own lack of confidence about what I was out there doing. I said I was painfully shy when I was young, and I still am. I've been able to overcome some of those things, in some ways, outwardly, but I'm really a true introvert, and getting up and having to talk to people, or picking up the phone and having to call people, or whatever, still takes a lot of energy for me. It was scary. Boy, I remember going into the Standard Club one day for some event. I walked in. I came in the revolving door. In the lobby, there were all men, and I was so intimidated by just the men in this lobby that I thought, "I really cannot do this. I just can't even go up to that meeting that I must go to. I can't. I'm just Amy. I'm just shy

little Amy from Chicago. What am I trying to do?" So, the greatest challenge was internal. It really was internal. I had to not think about what I was doing and just plunge forward.

RH: What did you do at this meeting at the Standard Club?

AR: I don't even remember what that particular meeting was, isn't that funny? I remember distinctly, again – you know how you have all these distinct little moments of your life. I remember coming in that revolving door and wanting to just continue [laughter] out the revolving door and go home. I've had so many times like that, times when I'm on the train, and I thought, "I just want to get off at my stop. I don't need to do this. What's going to happen if I don't do this? Someone else will do it, or it won't get done. Whatever, it'll be okay." But I always get off at the stop. I always get off [laughter] the revolving door. I just do. When I'm nervous, I'm nervous, and I just swallow and keep on going. I have been blessed with energy. I'm not a great physical specimen or anything, but God has given me great energy and a lot of fortitude. [laughter] Just a lot of fortitude. Even if I'm scared or whatever, I just try to say, "Okay." I talk myself into it.

RH: What were some of the accomplishments in the early days, as a community, that you guys felt the proudest of?

AR: I find it hard to speak for the community. Again, I don't know that I was – I can think of colleagues of mine who were more centered as representatives of the community. I mean, if I speak for JWI and the work that we're doing, certainly I can do that.

RH: Well, I meant your colleagues. The things that you and your colleagues were proud of when you were working together in the early days.

AR: I think there were things that we said wouldn't happen, and we were surprised when they did – when a door that we thought would be shut in our face wasn't. There were so many small, tiny things – if someone took your phone call. I remember for us, we did an

event, and we wanted to hold it at Old Orchard Junior High School. Everyone told me, "Oh, it's the best place to have this event, but the principal, or superintendent, or whoever he is, will never agree to it because he doesn't do events like this," – blah, blah, blah, and the whole thing. I called him, and he said, "Okay." Who knows why he said okay. At that same event, I remember we wanted a police officer to speak, so I called the Skokie Police Department. I asked them if they would send someone to be a speaker; they wanted to send us the community service officer, and, I can't imagine why or how I said this, but I said, "No, sorry, we want the on-the-street officer. We want the one that's really dealing with this issue." And they did. It was just, like, "Wow, you will?" So, I know my colleagues can talk about how they wrote the Illinois domestic violence law and the moment that passed the legislature. I wasn't part of that. For me, it's been so many tiny things. There are not these huge things that I said, "Wow." It's more like the principal saying, yes, you can have it here or the police department sending someone. It's this tapestry of these tiny, little things, just ordinary events that ordinary people do.

RH: Can you describe what went into the events, how you decided to do them, and what was the purpose?

AR: Yeah. Again, thinking back, we were just so simple about things then. We always wanted a bunch of speakers. We just wanted to learn and wanted people to come and hear. We wanted to be Jewish women that were talking about something that wasn't being talked about a lot. The events were just pulling people together and all the logistical things that were so hard to do, and then, "Will anyone come?" I think that was always the thing: "Will anyone come?"

RH: Well, it's interesting to me because I think about words before the feminist movement came that weren't there, that are there now, and domestic abuse is one of those words. But churches are the last bastion, and temples, and synagogues, it seems. I'm formulating a question here. [laughter] Can you say, now, what are some of the

challenges now that you're still dealing with, that you thought you wouldn't be – maybe they should be over by now? [laughter]

AR: Well, I will say, and most particularly in the Chicagoland Jewish community, we've come such a long way. The fact that we have JCARES and all that we're doing. The fact that our Jewish Federation is funding a training initiative –

RH: What's in the training initiative? What happens in one of those?

AR: The training initiative is a series of modules that both professional and lay leaders who serve the Chicagoland Jewish community are invited to come to at no cost thanks to the funding from the Federation. We do everything from a basic understanding of domestic abuse to the domestic abuse legal issues. So we talk about custody, orders of protection, confidentiality, and mandated reporting, and all of that. To a session on self-care and compassion fatigue, and all the things that happen to anyone who's working in this field because you're seeing abuse and violence on a daily, sometimes minute-to-minute basis. There's the educational part, and there's the networking part of the trainings that a cross-section of the community attends. Rather than a training in one agency that all the people are from that agency, there's just this sharing of what's going on and the establishment of relationships. It's just been terrific. We're going into our second year now. It'll be bigger and better this year. We're just gaining steam – like everything we do, everything we're doing now, you just put the pebble in the water, and then the ripples are just huge. I also find amazing that before, you had to deal with so many barriers in the paths, and now there's just so many paths that it's, "Okay, what direction do we go on?" I think that today the greatest challenges that we face are funding and resources. We certainly have overcome awareness and belief, and not that that's not there, a little bit, here and there, but I don't think that you would find a rabbi anymore who says, "It doesn't happen here." He or she might say, "I don't know what to do," or "I don't want to do anything," but they won't say that it doesn't happen here –

again, certainly in this community. But we just don't have the funding, the resources, enough priority to really enact everything that needs to be put in place. And that's sort of frustrating. That's sort of frustrating because there are so many resources going for other things, although, again, that seems to be opening a little bit. With our Federation taking that step, that's going to help us a lot. The challenges of collaboration are mighty. We talk about what a fabulous, coordinated community we are, and the reality of it is we're sort of fabulous, and there is still a lot of work to be done until we're truly all working on the same page. For me, because I lead this coalition and have to lead it successfully, even though you have forty-three people – each of them has a different agenda. [laughter]

RH: Explain what the coalition is, exactly who it's made up of.

AR: Like I said, it's made up of, I think, thirty-plus agencies now, so it's –

RH: They're all Jewish agencies?

AR: They're Jewish and secular. The majority are Jewish, but there are secular agencies because we know that Jewish women and families walk through many different doors for help, and they don't always walk into Jewish agencies. It includes Jewish Family Services, and Council for Jewish Elderly, and all of those, and the Jewish women's organizations like Hadassah and the National Council of Jewish Women. There's our Federation and the Jewish Women's Foundation, who also funds JWI's leadership of the task force. The Chicago Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence is a very integral part. And then, there's individuals, survivors – survivors of adult domestic abuse, of child abuse, of sexual assault – researchers, an attorney. As I always say to them, the richness of the coalition is that we're so diverse, and the challenge of the coalition is that we're so diverse. I think that we're one of the very few that – we're faith-based. We address one single issue, even though it's the issue in its widest form, and we're made up of professionals and lay leaders, rabbis, mostly women, but some men. That is a

great challenge. We accomplish a lot, but it takes a lot to keep this group cohesive and strong.

RH: So, if you could tell me some of what you've accomplished recently.

AR: Well, we've accomplished the training. I mean, the fact that we're in the second year of the training, which has taken a lot of our time – our training has included sessions for synagogue leadership. We've come from "We don't air our dirty laundry" to – and I dare say the same rabbis who said that are now asking us to come in and do trainings. So, hey, that's what we like to see. Those are big things that we're doing, but then there's all the other things [such as] Project Shield that addresses child sexual abuse.

RH: I used to be a Shield volunteer. [laughter]

AR: They have gone in to train the JCC early childhood workers. There's all these other things that are happening between JCARES members that JCARES has just fostered all of these things happening. That's the networking kind of thing that's gone on and the elevating of the issue. We have Jewish Vocational Services at our table – very important part of JCARES. Now, you wouldn't think, "Now, why do you need JVS there? See, Jewish Family Services we get, but why JVS?" Well, of course, you do, because, boy, if you're looking for a job, that's a stressful time, or if you were a white-collar worker, and now you're driving a truck or something. Plus, if you're sitting across from an employment counselor, there's a whole lot of stuff that you are going to divulge. The other great richness of JCARES is that there are so many voices around the table and not just the usual suspects.

RH: How do you balance work and family? [laughter] How does that work for you?

AR: You know, some years ago, I went to a presentation that Rabbi Karyn Kedar, who's now my rabbi, was one of the presenters. It was on balancing – something that has always been totally elusive to me. When Rabbi Kedar got up there, I would go to all

these – every conference I saw on balancing, I went to because I was looking for the answer. Rabbi Kedar stood up, and she said, “You can’t. You can’t balance it; it doesn’t work.” I said, “Phew. Here all this time, I’ve been trying to balance” I don’t know how you balance it, except, again, I have a great partner in my husband. I have great kids who are proud of me and encourage and support me. I have an extraordinary group of girlfriends who I adore. And I think that when you have just good friends and good support and you try and stay centered – I mean, I will work like crazy, except I won’t go over a certain line. Like, it’s my friend’s sixtieth birthday party on a night that we have a big meeting scheduled, and I’m going to her birthday party because that’s just the line I won’t cross. My daughter has something at school tomorrow, and I will be there because that’s another line I won’t cross. So, it’s easier because my kids are older, of course, and don’t require my attention as much. It’s harder because I’m older, and I grow more tired. [laughter] But we just do what we could do. I think the other thing is because, for me, once I passed fifty, you become more aware of your own mortality, and whoa, there’s so much to do. There’s so much to do. And that’s very hard for me. Because part of me says, “Slow down.” And part of me says, “Speed up.” Because look, you’ve accomplished a lot, but there’s still so much hurt and pain in the world.

RH: How do you decide? How do you prioritize what to do, because there is so much hurt and pain in the world?

AR: I don’t know. Sometimes it’s very, very hard. Sometimes it’s very overwhelming. I’m guided by my work plan [laughter] and by my supervisor, Deborah. You have those very stringent things. You still must fulfill your work plan and please your boss and all the things that you have to do. I try and live now by the “It’s good enough” theory. That it’s okay; it doesn’t have to be perfect. It’s okay if it’s better. Something that has guided me all along is – and I don’t know how this exactly is said, but the Jewish law or whatever that says, “You’re not required to finish. You’re just required to start things.” I remember when a rabbi told me that about twenty years ago, fifteen years ago or so, and I said,

"That makes me feel so much better," that I don't have to finish everything, but if I start it, it's okay. I think that that's all you do. I have found the last two or three years to be particularly difficult, and I just think that we're so surrounded by violence everywhere. Of course, there's a war, and Katrina, and – I don't know – just everywhere, and I find that to be very burdensome – very, very much so.

RH: Do you see that type of violence – I mean, the war – does it play out in your community, or you're just more aware that it's a violent world? Just trying to understand.

AR: I think, in some ways, we're isolated from the war. It's not affecting our day-to-day lives. In that way, I'm not sure that it affects the community. On the other hand, we know that the more violence there is, the more violence there is. I just am a firm believer that everything that is unhealthy promotes unhealthy behavior. When I watch an interview with, say, two senators who are being rude to each other, I find that very painful. If two senators can't even speak to each other with respect, then why would anyone else? Every tiny little thing that's disrespectful or hurtful behavior, from the fact that tonight there were twelve more civilians killed, soldiers killed, another helicopter that went down in Iraq, to the senators on Meet the Press – it just, to me, just adds to this whole culture of disrespect, which then just promotes abuse. It may not be abuse in beating each other up, but it's just in the way that we treat each other, that we're not [laughter] nice to each other. It sounds so Pollyanna almost, but being good to each other, treating each other nicely, to me, is the foundation for everything.

RH: How, over the years, have you explained your work to your kids?

AR: Because I've schlepped them to two thousand meetings, as I said, they have experienced it firsthand. I didn't want to be gone and them wondering what I was doing, so I just took them with, so they could see it.

RH: Did they ever talk to you about it?

AR: They talked to me about it a lot. We're a very liberal household, and so where parents would wonder what they should share and if their kids were old enough, we were open and forthcoming with our kids. Not sure we needed to go into details, but they always knew the kind of work I was doing – and their friends, as well. "Mrs. Rubin, we want to ask you a question." I have heard from a number of my children's friends about what's going on in their own homes, about what's happening between other friends. My kids will sometimes – if I say something that – if I'm watching the football game, and I'll say, "Oh, come on, push him down," or something – "Tackle him hard." My kids will say, "Oh great, Mom. All you do is talk about nonviolence and look what you're doing," so they really hold me to this standard. But I hope that it's taught them a lot as well and really influenced the way that they live their lives. I think they worry about me. I know my son worries about me.

RH: How so?

AR: It's the toll that it can take. There is a toll to caring. There are days that I wish that I didn't care so much because everything can bother me, can disturb me. A colleague of mine explained it beautifully; that there are people who could sit on their couch on 9/11 and say, "Oh my God, look what's happening," and then there were those who sat on their coach and said, "I have to go there and do something." I didn't go, but I always have that feeling: "I have to go there and do something," or "I have to do something," and then I feel so sad when I don't do something – angry at myself. I think that that's been sort of tough for my kids, too, because it's, "Okay, Mom, you don't have to do everything. It's okay."

RH: How do you draw on your Jewish identity for the kind of work you're doing?

AR: Well, I think it takes me right back to what I learned in my house, which is, "because we're Jewish." If someone asked me why I do the work I do, one of the most prevalent reasons is "because I'm Jewish." As I have learned more about Judaism [and] as I have

become more involved, I feel that even more strongly that this is what Jews do. We're here to make the world better. I wish I had been able to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. Jews were very involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and I've always studied that period in history. Martin Luther King is one of my – I don't know if I would use the word mentors, but certainly, someone who I admire greatly. Jewish identity, whatever that really means, I'm not sure I know exactly what that means, but I can't separate that as a separate part. It is me. I think I learned through the years that Jewish identity doesn't necessarily mean your religious practices. For me, it doesn't mean my religious practices. It's my actions. It's my day-to-day, minute-to-minute actions. There are things that I wouldn't do because I'm Jewish, and I wouldn't do that, and it doesn't have to do with dietary laws or anything. It's the way that I would treat people. Becoming a bat mitzvah was – standing with the Torah and reading was just an amazing accomplishment for me and overwhelming. When they say you have this sense of tradition and you feel your ancestors, I did. I did, standing there. In 2000, when we made a trip to Israel, we stood at the Wall. Again, this amazing flood of history – and unexpected, unexpected that I would be that profoundly struck by that. All of those things, all of those things that go into being me.

RH: Why did you decide to become a bat mitzvah?

AR: I was coming up to my fiftieth birthday, and as many people do, I wanted to do something extraordinary for fifty. Many people do something physical. I'm not a physical person; I'm more of an intellectual person. There's a number of things that I want to do in my life, and that was one of them. My rabbi knew I wanted to do it, and she kind of pushed me into it, and then all of a sudden, I was doing it. I was incomplete without it. Plus, it really annoyed me that I sat in synagogue with a prayer book, and everything looked Greek to me. So part of it was that I just wanted to know more.

RH: So, did you study? You learned your Hebrew?

AR: I did. [laughter]

RH: And you read from the Torah in Hebrew?

AR: I did.

RH: How long did this take for you?

AR: It was a two-year program.

RH: Two-year program.

AR: It was a two-year program. We had classes every week and then a couple of times a week at the end. We had one class in Hebrew, where we studied with the cantor, and one class in Judaism, where we studied with the rabbi. I had a ton of reading homework, and learning Hebrew, one year, year fifty, was not an easy thing at all. I learned enough to be able to read my Torah portion and my haftarah portion, and now I can follow along in the prayer book.

RH: Oh, that's great. [laughter]

AR: Yeah.

RH: So, tell me about your trip to Israel. Why did you decide to do that, and who'd you go with?

AR: The four of us went, Mike and our two children. I had never been to Israel. Mike had been. He lived there for several months. He lived on a kibbutz when he was a young man, loved it, and had always wanted to go back. We just wanted to, and it was one of those "There's no time like the [present]." We had all these ideas of when we would go, and then we said, "Okay, there's no time like the present." The kids were very young, and they didn't have the kind of schedules that they already have now, so we

were able to take an extended vacation. So, we did.

RH: So, how did your kids like it?

AR: They did like it. You know, I think, for them too, it was – certainly, we would have to ask them, but I think it was profound for them. Harrison said how much he liked being someplace where everyone around him was Jewish instead of him being one of the few that was Jewish. Jane liked all the good-looking soldiers. It was very, very interesting. Then, at the end of our trip, we spent a week in Egypt, so the contrast was also very interesting, the contrast between the two countries. Since then, all those things are, thank goodness, fairly calm now. There was the intifada, and as we were leaving Israel was when things were heating up and becoming much more violent. We left with the promise of coming back soon, and we haven't been back.

RH: Has going there changed your relationship to Israel?

AR: It has because I stood in the Golan Heights, and I said, "Now I get it. Now I get why this land is Israel's land and why it has to be Israel's land." It really deepened my love and respect and connection to the country and just the sense of how small it is and how productive. Just really a sense of, great, wow, so good, so, so amazing. But I think it changed my political views. I'm a pacifist, so I could never – "Okay, if they want the land, just give them the land, and then we'll have peace." But when I actually stood on the land, my political views shifted a bit.

RH: Tell me about the Egypt part and the contrast. What do you mean by that, there was a contrast? I actually have done that too, gone to Israel, and then gone to Egypt. [laughter]

AR: Well, the first thing you notice about Egypt is how poor it is – I mean, for me, that was the first thing I noticed. We drove in from the airport, and they actually have like donkey carts on the highway and buildings that look like – I said to our guide, "I don't

remember that there was any bombing." He said, "There wasn't." But to me, it looked like things had been bombed. These buildings looked so squalid and poor and destitute. You see that all their money is into military things, and people are living so poor. We were in this gorgeous hotel, probably one of the finest hotels I've ever stayed in. I don't even remember what it was. But you have to pass through metal detectors, and everything is locked solid. Here we are in this beautiful room, but when you look out on our balcony, you just see the most horrid, poor conditions. And then, you sit at the pyramids – that was another one of my goals, was to stand at the pyramids – and they do this presentation, and they tell the story, and it's like, "This isn't quite the story that I heard." We came from being in Israel, where we felt so embraced, so safe, and so a part of things, to being in Egypt, where we felt like we stood out like a sore thumb, that we couldn't go anywhere without our guide, and this was in relatively safe times. I loved the trip to Egypt; it's not a place that I ever need to go back to.

RH: Let's shift a little bit and talk about your role models, who they are and who they've been over the years.

AR: I was thinking about this today. I mean, certainly, my mother, I have to say, is the most central and constant role model that I have. She didn't accomplish a lot in her life – certainly, she wasn't a professional woman, she was not an educated woman, but she had such strength, and I think that that's strength of – she had no physical strength, but she had such strength of character. And all the things that she taught me – her little sayings – just remember the most important thing is that every morning you can wake up and look directly in the mirror at yourself. What an important piece of advice that is, and when you have that moment, when you can't look at yourself in the mirror – and I've had one or two or three of those moments – you realize how important it is. Even when she had horrific lung cancer and couldn't breathe, and it was a snowstorm, she got up and got dressed and called a cab and went to work because she couldn't drive anymore and she couldn't clean the snow off her car, and she couldn't walk to the car and the whole

thing, but still had to go to work.

RH: Where'd she work?

AR: She just worked at – it was the North Shore Hilton here in Skokie. She worked in the restaurant for a while as a hostess. She was a Fanny May Candy lady before that for a long time. Just this sense – I mean, part of it was, "I'm on the schedule, they need me, and there's no one else there. I have to be there." But part of it was, "What am I supposed to do, sit around here and feel sorry for myself?" She told me, "If you get up and you get going, you'll always feel better." So, in that way, I think she's my most central and constant role model. Certainly, there have been some leaders in JWI that I have looked to as role models for how to be a good leader. Barbara Rabkin, who was a JWI international president and, unfortunately, died very young, right in the midst of her term, as a matter of fact. She was another incredible woman who just knew how to be a leader. And there were others, a couple others in JWI.

RH: What did she teach you about leadership?

AR: She taught me to be fair but firm. She taught me that being a leader often means that you're out in left field by yourself. Everyone wants to have input, but in the end, you're the one who's going to make the decision, and then you have to stand by that decision. She taught me that there are times that you're going to be really unpopular, and that's okay, but also to be sure to listen to everyone, to collect lots of input and lots of opinions, and it doesn't matter what rank, or what role people play; that it's as important to listen to the secretary as it is to the president. She had great faith in me and put me in really important positions, and then stood by me. She's another woman that was snatched from my life way too young before we had a chance to really deepen our friendship.

RH: That's certainly enough people. I don't know if there's anybody else you want to include.

AR: Well, you know, there's others, but I think that those are the two that I really would highlight.

RH: How has being a woman affected your activism, or how has your activism shaped [laughter] your womanhood? I guess you could go either way.

AR: How has being a woman affected my activism? Gosh.

RH: Well, have you encountered problems because you've been a woman?

AR: Of course. Of course. You get the "You're too emotional," or you're too whatever. I don't know. Again, it's like everything is part of me, and I don't know how to separate things. Even the word "activist," as I was looking on the website today, and I see "activist," and I think, "Wow, am I an activist?" I really like that, if I am, because I'm such a quiet activist, I think. I don't know how all this – I can't separate being a woman from being an activist. I think that being a woman has made me an activist for women's issues, and that's probably where I'm most vehement an activist. I mean, beyond domestic abuse, certainly for pro-choice, which has become a large cry, even more so in these last few years, as we worry about that law being changed. Certainly, for independence and financial security. The fact that women are still not paid at the same rate as men is unconscionable. I think just because I'm a woman, there's those issues that mean so very much to me and then have shaped me and everything that I do. I won't buy products if I know that they're pro-life if they're run by someone who supports the pro-life campaign. I won't buy their products, and I will tell people I know not to buy their products or why I choose not to. There's all these little things. I won't drive an SUV. That's my own personal choice, but I won't do it. Well, all those kinds of things. I will write letters. I will call my congresspeople.

RH: You're vocal about your issues. [laughter]

AR: Again, not as much as I think I should be. I try and incorporate it in my day-to-day life and then share it as much as I can without pushing it on other people.

RH: Well, what do you think your legacy is?

AR: I must be old if I'm talking about my legacy. [laughter] I was thinking about this today, too, because I was thinking how astounded my mother would be to hear that I am a Woman Who Dared. And that, in that way, I'm sort of her legacy. When I step down from my current JWI position, whenever that is, I hope that I can live in this community still and see that things are the way they are because of the work that I led. It's great to be an activist, but when you get to do it in your own community and then live in that community and experience what you've done, that's really special. So, if Chicago, my beloved hometown, is better, and if my own Jewish community is better, then that is a hell of a legacy. And again, go by the "It's good enough" theory. It doesn't have to be hugely different, but if there are women and children who are better served because of the things that we've done, that is good enough. I hope that my legacy is that I've touched my colleagues in a way and that I've opened their eyes and changed them. Certainly, just as I've said, I'm my mother's legacy. I would hope that my children in some way would also, in whatever ways they choose, would carry on, and I know that they will if they just live their lives as good people. Jackie Kennedy, who again was one of the people I really admired, said, "If we fail as parents, then nothing else matters." And that's true for me, too. In the end, I hope that I've done the best that I could with my own children.

RH: I'm just going to sit here and look at this for a second, but I think we've covered a lot of territory. What I guess I'd like to say is, is there anything you feel like you want to say? Oh, I do have one more question. I want to know why you have – there's a bat over there with "Amy Rubin" on it. Where did that come from? [laughter]

AR: My husband had it made for me. These are the kind of birthday presents I get because I'm a huge baseball fan, so getting a carved bat with my name on it was better to me than a diamond, you know? [laughter] That's why it's there.

RH: All right. [laughter] And now, I will let you close with whatever you feel like you might want to say that we may not have covered.

AR: I don't know what we didn't cover. It seemed like I have said more than I've shared my entire life, but when Laura called and told me that they were giving me this award, I was speechless. I just figure I do my work. It's just what I do. I have to say that I truly am privileged to do the work that I do, and I really want to make that point. It's not like I'm special. It's that I've been given the honor. When my good friend Faith goes to work every day, she says she puts more money in some rich guy's pocket, and when I go to work every day, I get to help people and make the world better. Even though there's challenges, and it's painful and frustrating and hard, that really is the bottom line for me. And it's the best. It's just the best. I think it's important for me to say I'm uncomfortable with honors. I'm uncomfortable with attention. I always like to sort of be under the radar. But this has been, and I hope it will continue to be, really an honor. I have really worked with tremendous people, and I am really proud to stand next to them. I'm a sports fan, so everything is about team to me. I passionately believe in collaboration and cooperation, so pulling people together to say, "Let's talk," is just what I love to do. And they come to the table, which is really great.

RH: Thank you.

AR: Thank you.

RH: I appreciate this.

[END OF INTERVIEW]