

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Judy Benowitz Interview

Conducted by Adina Langer

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Transcribed by Elizabeth Morris

Born in Monroe, Georgia, in 1949, Judy Coker Benowitz was raised by two World War II veterans. Her mother, Ivah Ree Harris Coker, was a WAVE who served in the U.S. Navy in Washington, D.C. Her father, Daniel Coker, served in the U.S. Army, primarily in North Africa. A memoirist and actor, Benowitz discusses the ways in which she has used personal testimony and primary documents to piece together her parents' wartime stories and shares some of her preliminary research into her family's roots on a small 1825 plantation, the William Harris homestead, in Walton County, Georgia. Benowitz also discusses her experiences with the anti-war protest movement during the Vietnam War and reflects on her interfaith (Christian-Jewish) family. Benowitz recorded her Legacy Series testimony at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education on December 16, 2021.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University. Today is December 16th, 2021 and I am here at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education with Judy Benowitz for a Legacy Series Interview, during which we will remember her mother, Ivah Ree Harris, who served in the U.S. Navy as a WAVE during World War II. We will also discuss the World War II experiences of other members of her family, including her father, Daniel Coker. First, do you agree to this interview?

Benowitz: Yes.

Interviewer: And can you please state your full name?

Benowitz: Judy Marie Coker Benowitz. [laughs]

Interviewer: So, we're going to spend some time in this interview remembering your parents' wartime experiences, but we're going to start with your background. Can you please tell me when and where you were born?

Benowitz: I was born in Monroe, Georgia, in 1949.

Interviewer: And what were your parents' names?

Benowitz: My mother was Ivah Ree Harris Coker. When I wrote that article on my mother I used her maiden name, 'cause it was inside her raincoat. [laughs] And my father was Dan Bruce Coker.

Interviewer: And what did they do for a living?

Benowitz: My mother was a housewife and my father worked for the Rural Electric Corporation. He was a lineman for the county.

Interviewer: Okay, and did you have any siblings?

Benowitz: My brother, Wayne, was two years older and my sister, Valerie, was two years younger.

Interviewer: And what was your neighborhood like when you were growing up?

Benowitz: We lived in rural Georgia on Highway 11 and I wrote a memoir about Highway 11. Cousins were around and we rode bicycles everywhere and we had one car in the family. The school I walked to, Walker Park Elementary, I could walk to it, it was just down the road. Jack Queen's Grocery is where we bought groceries and I could ride my bicycle there. My cousins lived down the road so I could bicycle. They had a pond and we went swimming in their pond after supper at 5 o'clock just about every day in the summer. Our summertime job was picking cotton. It was very rural, southern living.

Interviewer: And were the houses—they were far apart from each other?

Benowitz: Well, my parents had maybe ten acres and most of them weren't—they may have been one or two acres but my cousin had fifty acres so it just depended, but there were little houses all along Highway 11. It wasn't very populated, though. It was the country.

Interviewer: And when you picked cotton, was this a field that your family owned?

(03:19) Benowitz: Well, [laughs] we do descend from the William Harris Homestead, which is on Highway 11 and which is one of the largest intact plantations remaining in Georgia. My mother's great-grandpa, William Harris, lived in the house, and then my mother's grandpa, John Lewis Harris, was the last one to live there until he died in 1929. So, yes, we have that history of slavery, which I only just became aware of—I don't know why. I lived in California for twenty years, so I was removed from that. Then, when we started going to the Harris reunions and family would gather and we've traced our history back to 1776. In the cemetery are all these Harrises who have been in this country since the beginning. The Civil War was part of that history and I'm part of that history too, which sadly slavery was part of the history of Georgia. My family I'm descended from, shamefully that part of it. At the same time that particular property, the William Harris Homestead, is a museum and an archeological site and it's educational. Children, schools, go there for events and weddings are held there. So it's a historical site, it's one of Georgia's most interesting places and it's on

the National Register of Historic Places. It has a lot of visitors and every four years the Harris family reunion takes place there. It's an interesting part of my background which I'm only just now grappling with because I'm writing a story, a collection, called *Descendants* and other stories. It's the story of my family and when I was growing up—I mean, these were very—the families had lots of children. I mean, William Harris had fifteen kids and John Lewis had thirteen. My cousin, Dottie, is the one who inherited the property and she's the one that established it with the National Register. I grew up poor. My dad was a blue collar worker. My mother made most of my clothes. For Christmas we got socks and underwear. I remember when my fourth grade teacher wrote in my record or next to my name, "poor child." I was like, "What?!" I had no idea I was a poor child. Everyone around me was the same, so that was new to me. [laughs] But that's how we grew up. So, the cotton fields that I worked in, no, my family didn't own them but other families did. Cotton was king even, of course, way back in the 1800s, but people still had cotton fields in the 1950s.

Interviewer: So, you've started to tell me a little bit about your family's roots in the area and was it only later on as an adult that you start to become really interested in your family's history?

(07:50) Benowitz: Well yeah, and especially my mother's history. When I went to Kennesaw State University for my Master's Degree in Professional Writing, one of the classes was Biography. I had this archive in my basement of my mother's collection from World War II when she was away. I had nothing of my father because my sister took it, and so I had hers and I'm like, well let's go there, it's right here. Then I began to research her and the war, World War II. You realize what our ancestors went through with each war, but that war of course was the closest to me. My war was Vietnam and I was a war protester. Then I see how my mother volunteered, went to war, relieved some of these sailors and Navy men so they could go into combat. The WAVES was a volunteer organization of women who would relieve these warriors. She was based in Washington D.C. The more I read about her—and really, the story that struck me was Denise Kiernan's story about the war, about the Manhattan Project, the building of the bomb, where—I forget exactly the name of the story, but how secretive the women had to operate.¹ When I'm looking at my mother's records, they all said that the secret you had to be secretive about was what your duties were and if you divulged anything there were consequences. So, I thought, "Okay, this was an era of very serious war" that I really never thought too much about until

¹ Denise Kiernan's book is called *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II*. <https://www.amazon.com/Girls-Atomic-City-Untold-Helped-ebook/dp/B008J4GTU4#:~:text=The%20shocking%20revelation%3A%20the%20residents,uranium%20for%20the%20atomic%20bomb.&text=In%20The%20Girls%20of%20Atomic,and%20other%20Oak%20Ridge%20residents>.

I researched my mother and found different characters that she knew. Then I researched some of them and the part they played in Pearl Harbor. I took my mother to visit Pearl Harbor because I was a flight attendant. I took her there and she became tearful standing over the Arizona memorial where the oil still bubbles up from the sea. At the time, I had no idea that she may have known someone on that, or someone who knew some of the men who died there. Then when I started to research, I began to look back and understand her a little more, and she was very different from how I knew her as a little girl when I began to research her.

Interviewer: Yeah! So we'll get into some of that and your research—.

Benowitz: I'm way ahead of you! [laughs]

Interviewer: No, that's okay! But, going back a little bit to your memories of your mother, what did she tell you about her childhood and her family growing up?

Benowitz: Well, she was poor. There were—let me think, there were six or seven of them, her siblings. She went to school, graduated, and then went to work at a pants plant. Growing up, they lived in a little house. They grew their own food and I think there were cotton fields. [laughs] But yeah, there was no money, which is interesting to me because when you think, "Well, you came from a plantation, there should be money." But, everybody was scrapping for survival and sustaining their lives. I'm trying to think what exactly—.

Interviewer: She grew up in the same neighborhood where you ended up growing up too.

Benowitz: Right, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Benowitz: She grew up in Monroe.

Interviewer: In Monroe.

Benowitz: And my dad also grew up, you know, they weren't that far apart.

Interviewer: And was religion important to your mother's family?

Benowitz: Yes. Southern Baptist, both of them were. So, yes, deeply religious woman. Given to cursing, but she still went to church every Sunday. We went, we were brought up in the faith. My dad didn't go. He sat home watching Billy Graham on T.V. He thought religion was women's work.

Interviewer: And what was the church?

Benowitz: Mountain Creek Baptist Church.

Interviewer: And is that still a part of the family that's still back in Monroe?

Benowitz: There is no family back in Monroe. I am the survivor but I believe the church is still there. But, no, no one's there. My sister's husband is there with his new wife. My sister's deceased. So, I don't know that much about what goes on there anymore. [laughs] Once in a while I'll go for Thanksgiving, maybe once every two or three years but I don't get back there too much, no.

Interviewer: So you talked about she was part of this large family that grew their own food. Did you have a sense for how the Depression may have affected the community?

Benowitz: Well, I know that my dad's mother, who had a farm, she lost her farm during the Depression. Now, as far as my mother's farm or her family, I'm not sure on that score but part of my research on my mother also led to research on my father and his time in the war. He has one surviving sister, half-sister, who filled me in on a lot of the history of the family. The story of my dad's mother, who had a mental breakdown, spent some time in Milledgeville, which was at the time, one of the largest mental health institutes in the country. She had maybe six or seven kids, her husband died of measles. She was a single woman with all these kids [laughs] and lost the farm and so she married one more time. Then, that's when Annette was born, the aunt surviving who filled me in on some of the family history. I probably know more about my dad's upbringing than my mother's so much, although I hung out with cousins from my mother's side and my dad's side. We all lived fairly close together—.

Interviewer: And what was the name of that grandmother?

Benowitz: Grandma Fred we called her, but her name was Frederica.

Interviewer: And in your discussions, with both sides of your family, did you get a sense for the role that segregation played in the community? Did they know any Black families?

Benowitz: Well, when I grew up in high school in 1965 my school was integrated. Three kids came and I have a story on that. It was segregated but the school that I went to, we were pretty progressive, I think. No one got into fights. I think we teased this gal terribly. The superintendent of schools, Clyde Pierce, hand-selected three of the smartest and most likely to

succeed in a hostile environment. Three Black kids from the school in Monroe, the all-Black school, I think it was Carver High. They integrated into Monroe Area High School. I had a gal in my class and the class clown would tease her when the teacher wasn't in the classroom, would tease her and say, "Hey, precious, you forgot to shave your legs last night." "Hey, precious..." Then she would put fuzz on her sweater and say, "This is what your armpit looks like." So, not very nice. She kept teasing her until—I forget what joke she told—but the gal finally laughed out loud and we felt like we made a connection with this girl. Just kidding around, like we all teased each other. It took her a while and we all watched to see if she was gonna smile and she laughed. So, we felt like we reached her. I had classes with them, some of them were basketball players. I was a basketball player. She was not on my team, though, when I played but I think later some of the kids came through. I remember one was in my graduating class, and years later after I left home and drove away in my little MGB sports car, and I'm at a traffic light and this pretty Black girl pulls up next to me and she's like, "Hey, Judy!" And I'm like, "Who are you?" She's like, "It's Precious!" I'm like, "Oh, my god!" I graduated with her. I'm like, "How are you doing?" So, we were friends with them, but there were only three. It was a very small, slow process. But yes, I lived during the segregation and the integration and busing. Although, everybody bused out in the country.

Interviewer: That was a really helpful story to give the full context of the community. Thinking back to the time of your parents' childhood, do you know how they got their news? Was that something that ever came up?

Benowitz: Well, that I'm not sure as far as newspapers and—. Well, I just remember asking mother how she learned about Pearl Harbor and where she was when the bomb was dropped because she didn't go to war until after that. She said it was a phone call, so they had telephones. [laughs] Newspapers, I don't know. The Walton Tribune is the newspaper in the area and it's where my story appeared and my mother wrote for them for a while. She did the church news. So, I don't know how long that paper has been around, or—we really didn't talk about that. I didn't pay attention. [laughs]

Interviewer: That's fine! Did they tell you anything about what they did for fun?

Benowitz: Well, let me think. I guess playing ball. Mother liked to swim. I'm just thinking back to comments that she made on this brochure from when she was in the WAVES in Washington D.C.—and the Sailorette Theater, she liked the theater, she liked to swim. She rode a bicycle. So, I don't know.

Interviewer: And what about her education? Where did she graduate from high school?

Benowitz: She graduated from Monroe High School. I'm not sure if the school went to twelfth grade or eleventh grade, I'm not sure, but she graduated. Now, my dad did not. My dad had a third grade education. That was when his father died and he had to drop out of school to go home and help with the farm and the family and the kids, his siblings, because he was the oldest. His mother, though, homeschooled him during that time when she wasn't in the mental health institute. He was homeschooled, so very different upbringing but yet just a sign of the times when disease, measles, could take away a family member and the rest of the family would have to pick up the slack. It was hard times in those days.

Interviewer: In your memoir of your mother, you wrote she graduated in 1936?

Benowitz: Yes, I believe I wrote that.

Interviewer: Yeah, so that's very early. Did she tell you anything about her decision to go to work after graduation?

Benowitz: Well, she probably wanted to get out of the house. [laughs] I think she wanted to buy a car. So, she went to work in the pants plant and she bought a brand new Chevy. I've got pictures of her with her car. I think she just wanted some independence. I don't think she left home. I think she still lived at home but I'm not sure, because where she worked was in Winder, which was maybe ten miles away. She worked because probably better than picking cotton. [laughs]

Interviewer: Do you remember the name of the plant?

Benowitz: I have it written in my—.

Interviewer: I have it written down—.

Benowitz: Yeah, I'm trying to think of it.

Interviewer: I have it written down as the Winder Barrow Manufacturing.

Benowitz: Winder Barrow Manufacturing, yes. I think I also put down that they manufactured pants, but then during World War II a lot of these manufacturing companies were asked to manufacture other things, war-type materials. I'm thinking maybe they manufactured uniforms. That was just a logical guess on my part. A lot of manufacturers were reconditioned to manufacture a variety of needs for the war.

Interviewer: When she was working when she had this car, did she ever get to go into the big city? Did she go to Atlanta?

Benowitz: [laughs] Yes, and Savannah. She would drive into Atlanta and go shopping with her buddies. I've got pictures of her carrying things from Rich's Department Store and with her friends and pictures of her taking buses to different places, Greyhound Bus. Her car was kind of her way to get around. She got out and she always had lovely clothes. There's pictures of her that she was dressed beautifully, so I think she really enjoyed fashion and that was her way to buy things.

Interviewer: In your memoir of her, you share this really interesting story. Would you like to talk a little bit about her relationship with Goldman Frase?

Benowitz: Well, this is the thing that I don't know, which I was totally surprised to find just going through some of her pictures and letters. I kept coming to this one letter over and over signed by "Frase" or "Goldman." I'm like "Wait a minute, this is the same guy." He wrote to her for ten years. I thought, "Okay, I like this character." So, I began to research him and see what his story was through Ancestry.com. He was a career man but he started writing to her and he was maybe ten years older than her. Then I thought, "He may have just been a penpal. I don't know." But I thought, "I'm gonna make it a more interesting story." So, I approached it as if she had met him while he was in service, maybe home on leave, and they wrote to each other. It was just cards, little cards, and some of them were written 1941 with a censored stamp on it. So it was right during, before, or right after Pearl Harbor. I never knew him or never heard her talk about him. He was just a mystery man to me but it added another dimension to that story because he was connected to Pearl Harbor. He would send her pictures of the boat and himself and some of his crew. He pointed out two men in a picture and he said, "You see the two men with the braids on? They're no longer with us." Then I began to research that ship and the battle for that ship and only two men were missing or perished, and that was those two men. I tell you, when you find things when you're researching, and you find a nugget you're like, "Woah!" It just blows your hair back. That made my story more real to me to see this connection. Whatever his connection was to her, he meant something to her so I wanted to write about it.

Interviewer: I love that. So tell me a little bit more about that phone call, your mother finding out about Pearl Harbor. What was that like?

Benowitz: Well, this was an interview that I did with her on an eight-millimeter film. It's regarding my cousin, Dottie, who inherited the Harris house. She's like, "We should take videos of our ancestors and ask them questions about what they did." So, I interviewed her about Pearl Harbor because I thought, "Well, she was around." I wasn't even thinking about her being a Navy WAVE, just that that was her war, "Where were you?" In the interview she said "Well, I was at Julia's" who is my dad's sister. She's

like, “I was at her house.” I’m like, “Well, how did you know about it?” She’s like “There was a phone call.” I’m thinking, well maybe my dad was there, too, I don’t know. He was ten years, maybe six or eight years, older than my mother. I don’t know if he was home then because he went to war after Pearl Harbor as well. So, the phone call—and I don’t know, what else was your question? I just lost a train—. [laughs]

Interviewer: No, that's okay! If she remembered Roosevelt’s speech on the radio or anything like that she told you.

(31:31) Benowitz: Well, I know that in that interview I asked her—there was a part where she was talking about when she was transcribing—I’m trying to get the chronology here. She was transcribing some of the press releases and the day the war ended, by that time she was in the WAVES. She was saying that she wrote, transcribed the press releases from President Truman and that there was a bomb. She was one of the first ones to write that the war’s ended, there was a bomb. That’s the day the war ended and everybody ran out onto the streets and started kissing each other. I remember asking her if she could’ve been one of those people kissed that ended up in *Life Magazine*, that famous kiss when the war ended. She’s like, “Any one of us could have been.” She told me that story about how the war ended and so I went back to revisit that interview with her to get some material for the story I wrote about her. This is a little bit of what I remember how she described her job as a Spec-5. She worked, I think, at the White House. I would have to look at my story again to get the details.

Interviewer: So tell me about her pathway to joining the WAVES. What did you find out about that?

Benowitz: Well, I’m not sure how she actually was recruited. They were recruiting women on farms and advertising. She wanted to be a flight attendant but at the time, you needed a nursing degree to be a flight attendant. So, she joined the WAVES. She may have seen an ad or she may have heard a radio broadcast, but she volunteered.

Interviewer: And you mentioned that she went to Savannah sometimes. So she had seen the ocean, so she maybe had at least some interest in the Navy. I’m always curious about how people find the specific unit.

Benowitz: I don’t know, because you’re right. There was an army of women. I forget, what were they, air force?

Interviewer: Yeah, so they were the WACs that was the army, and the WASPs, which were women's service pilots.

Benowitz: The WACs! Right, so there were three branches where women were volunteering. How she chose the WAVES, I don't know what would've—. But you're right, she went to the beach. I'm not sure if she [laughs] took a boat out, I don't know! I don't know that part.

Interviewer: So what about her training? What did she tell you about the training?

Benowitz: You know, she didn't really tell me too much about her training. She talked about some of the men she dated and some of the clubs she went to. [laughs]

Interviewer: So tell me, where did she train?

(34:11) Benowitz: She trained at Hunters College in the Bronx, New York. I believe the Professor McAfee, who was president of Wellesley College, they put her in charge of training the WAVES because she came from an academic setting.² So they set it up like a college and on the grounds of a college and trained these women almost academically, just because that was the method that everyone understood and it was the easy way to transition from one occupation to another. We didn't really talk too much about her training. Her uniform, she had a Navy ring and she had a high school class ring. She gave my sister the class ring and me the Navy ring, but we were teenagers, we lost both of them. [laughs] She had the raincoat and I wore the raincoat in the '60s and in several plays that I was in. *Diary of Anne Frank*, I wore it because it was a period costume. I would wear it just out and about because it was in Atlanta when we would go to these army surplus stores and find pants and stuff to wear if it fit. I had some Navy pants that I picked up and then I had this coat. It was just fun to wear this vintage outfit.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's fun. So, even if she didn't tell you much about her training, she did write some notes in some of the materials that she had.

Benowitz: Right, yes. Yes, in the brochure that describes the life of a WAVE for the two years that they were in service, two years plus six months they signed up for. She made little notations. In the front page she'd say something like —how did she describe it—. Anyway, she would get kinda cheeky about some of the stuff. “Ain't that swell?” or “Ain't that great?” or something, how they were describing the life of a WAVE. I can't remember exactly what she said.

Interviewer: Even the food, I'm trying to remember—.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1942/08/06/archives/names-dr-reynard-deputy-of-waves-admiral-jacobs-commissions-barnard.html>

Benowitz: Well, she said the Mess Halls were always crowded and the swimming pool. She loved the swimming pool. Then they would get together, they would take the bus to Fort Meade to dances at Fort Meade, and that's where the men were. She loved that. She made little notes saying, "Loved this." or "Some fun this." Something else she made a comment about that she didn't care that much about, but I can't think what it is now.

Interviewer: So she talked to you a little about the going and meeting men and going to clubs. That was in New York City?

Benowitz: And Washington D.C.

Interviewer: And Washington D.C.

Benowitz: Yeah, both places. There's pictures of her in these nightclubs with different men and I thought, "Okay, fun!" [laughs] She had a good time.

Interviewer: And what did she do when was in D.C.? What was her role?

Benowitz: She transcribed the news releases from the White House. I forget exactly -- her classification was Spec-5.³ It's in my memoir, I should take a look exactly what the title was that she did. I can't think. [laughs]

Interviewer: It's all right. Did she tell you about how she felt when the war was over?

(38:55) Benowitz: Well, let me think about that. I don't know how she felt. I write that people came back and went back to their lives, back to the factories, back to the cotton fields, and went back to that quiet life that they left during their uncertainty for the war. I think she corresponded with some of the women and she wrote letters to them and they kept up with each other for years and years and years. So I know she had a lot of friendships. In fact, one of the gals that she wrote to contacted me when Mother passed away and let me know that my dad never wrote to her the whole time he was away and she was in the WAVES. They were both—but he never wrote to her. I think he was afraid that he wouldn't come back and so he wanted her to find someone else, so he never wrote to her. Then the lady also said that her mother had been fearful for her daughter to go to the WAVES. She didn't know what kind of women would be there. You know, would there be criminals? What kind of characters would sign up for something like this? She said the women in the WAVES that she met, including my mother, were some of the most wonderful women that she'd ever known. They all had a lot of camaraderie and so those are some of the stories that I was told. Not by my mother, by another mother. [laughs] She just always kept up with these gals. They were important to her.

³ One of Judy Benowitz's memoirs about her mother says Sp(Q)3c. <https://www.womenshistory.org/ivah-ree-harris-coker>

Interviewer: So what about your father? You told me a little about his childhood and how he had to leave school and help out. Was he drafted?

Benowitz: Yes, he was drafted. The draft was in place and I think that was the first time the draft was in place. Well, in modern history. At age 30. He was the sole breadwinner for the family by this time. He appealed to the draft board to let him stay and take care of the family because he had four or five younger siblings. But the board's like, "Nope!" They needed everybody; they were bringing women into the war. He served and he never came home on leave though, because he thought it would be too painful to have to turn around and go back. Plus, during the war there wasn't a lot of leave.

Interviewer: And what unit did he serve in?

Benowitz: He was in the army.

Interviewer: And do you know where he served?

Benowitz: He was in—I know I wrote about it—he was in Africa.

Interviewer: I think you wrote—

Benowitz: Johannesburg, yes. I think basically what he did there was run telegraph lines because he was a lineman for the county before he left, so he already had this skill. He ran telegraph lines and other communication.

Interviewer: And did you have other family members who served in the military?

Benowitz: Well, both his brother's served in World War II. In my mother's family, both her brothers served. Maybe more, maybe three of them. Shoot, I don't know. Yeah, three brothers because one was at Iwojima, he was in the Marines. Another was in the Navy. Another was in the Army. So there were three brothers of my mother's. For me, my war was Vietnam. My brother served in Vietnam. I was a war protester. I was a hippie in Atlanta protesting everything. [laughs]

Interviewer: So, you talked a little bit about the family left behind on the homefront during World War II. Did you ever hear any specific stories of how they got by? You know, what they were doing with their family members away serving?

Benowitz: Well, I know that one of my aunts got married and a couple of the younger kids lived with her. Then my dad's mother went to work in one of the cotton mills. A bus would come around and pick up these ladies in town

and give them a drive to the cotton mill and so, she worked there. I think she just enjoyed getting out of the house is what my aunt told me. [laughs] So yeah, she worked after Dan left, my dad.

Interviewer: And so she would be able to bring money home to support the family?

Benowitz: Yeah. Yeah, she had a job and I think Annette was still pretty young but Julia by that time was working at the plant where my mother was. So, they were beginning to get jobs. Yes.

Interviewer: So when the war was over, how did your parents end up coming back together? They knew each other before—.

Benowitz: I think like I said, Mother was friends with Julia, his sister. So they knew each other. I think they dated before the war and then got back together after.

Interviewer: What were their hopes and dreams for the future? Do you know what they wanted their life to be like?

Benowitz: Well, Mother had a baby almost right away. [laughs] She had three kids in—let's see, we were all two years apart—in six years. So, a family. My dad worked. Mother stayed home and took care of the kids.

Interviewer: And your dad went back to work as a lineman for the—.

Benowitz: Right, for the Rural Electric Company. He was there for his entire career.

Interviewer: And what were your early memories of your parents? What kinda people were they like?

Benowitz: Well, they were real sweet. My dad liked to drink hooch and smoke cigarettes. [laughs] Mother was not much—she wanted to nag him all the time, but they had fun. They would go out to dances at the VFW⁴ and she would get all dolled up. They had a good relationship. They bickered here and there but they worked the property, raising their food. Mother would do canning and freezing everything that came out of the garden for the winter. They just worked their property pretty much.

Interviewer: And did they ever talk to you at that time about what World War II had meant to their families? Or was it sort of, “This is over and now we’re just doing our thing?”

⁴ Veterans of Foreign Wars was an organization founded in 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection founded local organizations to “secure rights and benefits for their service.” Over the years, the VFW also evolved to provide social opportunities to veterans and their families. <https://www.vfw.org/>

Benowitz: What it meant to the family?

Interviewer: What the war had meant to the family.

Benowitz: No, I don't remember them philosophizing about the war. A lot of people don't wanna talk about what they did. I don't think my dad was on the frontline of combat. Mother was stateside. It could've been kind of a romantic experience for them. I don't know, I don't remember—. My dad would make jokes about some of the characters that he would play cards with. He kept up with some of his buddies, too, and go visit them after the war. They made friendships and that's really all I was aware of.

Interviewer: So you mentioned that you experienced segregation, then integration, then the Vietnam War protests. What shaped your thinking about that? What made you decide to become a protester?

(48:52) Benowitz: Well, there was an underground newspaper called *The Great Speckled Bird*. It was written by Emory students and it was just kind of—the protest was on all the campuses. “End the War.” “Stop the war.” It was an unpopular war. I was living in Atlanta with three other girls and we would go to these meetings on campus. I was in school at Georgia State University, but we would go over to Emory because that's where the action was, and go to these rallies and student sit-ins and listen to these kids argue about the war. I was shaped by that. Plus, the whole country was beginning to—the draft was in place again and my brother was drafted. It was a war that nobody wanted. It was so far away, we weren't under attack. The kids argued, “It's a jungle. Why do we need to protect that?” That was sort of the feeling but it kept going and Nixon kept the war going. Then the students at Ohio State, the four dead at Ohio, who were shot down by the National Guard. That just inflamed everyone that the political side of this country would be fearful of student protesters to the point they would gun them down. That became sort of a cry to stop the war. The soldiers did not get the welcome that most returning soldiers got. People would call them baby killers and spit on them. My brother did not wear his uniform home but everybody recognized his Class-A haircut. So, it was just a bad time. We would go to these protests in Piedmont Park and they would shut off all the exits and then mace everybody and arrest student protesters. It was just like this ongoing battle with police and students. It was a revolution. We were trying to change the world and stop the war. That's what motivated us for years, because that war went on for a long time. To me, I kinda romanticize it when I write about it but it was a tough time.

Interviewer: Did you ever have conversations with your parents or other people from the previous generation about the differences and how they reacted to World War II and how your generation reacted to Vietnam?

Benowitz: Well, it was very different. My mother volunteered. My dad was drafted. She didn't want her son to go to war. Vietnam was just that war that nobody wanted. I mean, even the memorial is underground. Yeah, it was very different. You felt like World War II we were under attack. Vietnam, we were out there trying to change somebody else's life. So, no, they were different. I think the vast population pretty soon was like, "Stop the war. Stop the war." Businesses, everybody, but I think the student war protests were the start.

Interviewer: Changing topic slightly, do you remember learning about the Holocaust and what happened to Jewish people during World War II?

Benowitz: Well in fact, my husband is Jewish and I converted to Judaism and our three children are raised in the Jewish faith. I've been to Yad Vashem in Israel, which is the Holocaust museum. Yeah, it's pretty awful. I don't think I talked about it too much with my parents so much as with my husband. When we met in college and started dating and then we decided we wanted to get married. He's like, "We gotta talk. If we marry, I want to raise our kids in the Jewish faith. What do you think about that? Are you willing to convert and are you willing—" Because a lot of people don't, and so I was like, "Wow, okay." So, I took classes in Washington D.C. where I was a flight attendant. I was based in Washington. I went to classes at the Washington National Hebrew Congregation on Massachusetts Avenue. There were five rabbis there and I took classes for six or eight weeks and had my textbooks and did a model Seder, which is the Passover meal. It was time to graduate and I had missed three classes because I was flying. Rabbi Fink says to me, "Just live Jewishly." So I was like, "Okay." So, that was my conversion. Then, I just remember driving my little MG—I was flying out of three airports in Washington. That would be Washington National, Dulles, and Baltimore. I was driving into Baltimore and I started to think about, in 1972, the Olympics when six Israeli athletes were murdered in that Olympics.⁵ The famous swimmer, Phelps? Is that his name? No, not Phelps, that's the modern one. Anyway, I'll think of his name. Anyway, he was—Mark Spitz! He was being scurried away to protection, the U.S. swimmer Mark Spitz⁶. I was driving into the Baltimore Airport and I'm listening to this on the news. I'm like, how strong can the hatred be? Then, Bob wants me to convert to Judaism, what am I signing up for? The realization just sort of washed over me but

⁵ Benowitz is referring to the killing of eleven Israeli athletes by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Germany. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Munich-Massacre>

⁶ <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/mark-spitz>

we have been observant of the religion and we have three kids and they're all Jewish. None of them are married. They've all been to Israel. When they're in tenth grade the temple sponsors programs for kids to go and tour Israel and reenact the exodus, which is that famous ship ride when Israel became a state in, I think, 1948.⁷ All three of the kids took that journey from Cypress to Israel. Three days on a rickety boat and then they toured Israel, all the sights. Then my son, my youngest, did study abroad, spent some time on a Kibbutz, spent some time in Israel. Before he was to leave to go for his semester abroad, he was going to Beersheba, which is one of the universities there. It was being bombed, the Palestinians were lobbing it with these grad rockets. So we were like, "Okay, you're not going." But he was supposed to spend time on a Kibbutz, which was—. These grad rockets only had a 50-mile range. Well, that Kibbutz was within range. So the school changed the curriculum to the point that he wouldn't have to go to the Kibbutz. They changed it so that he would begin at Beersheba. So we were like, "Okay, you can go." Of course, the Israeli Army put down the skirmish immediately, the IDF. My son at one point wanted to join the IDF, which is the Israeli Defense Force, which is a volunteer army. But if you're an Israeli citizen, you have to serve in that for so many years. They also recruit Americans to join. My son wanted to and I'm like, "No. Sorry, you're not going over there as a warrior. You can go as a student for study abroad, but you are not fighting that war." We are very aware of the Holocaust and I think my husband has family that—. He hasn't researched it as much as some of his family members have. His ancestors come from Turkey, Istanbul. In fact, we visited Istanbul because I'm like, "You need to see where you hail from." He's like, "I hail from Nashville." I'm like, "Your grandpa was born in Izmir." He's like, "That's his problem." He's not that interested. [laughs] His grandmother was from Greece so we went to Greece because he's still got family there. Some of his cousins have sent some research for family members that were executed, not necessarily in the Holocaust but in other skirmishes all around, like *Kristallnacht*⁸ and some of these other terrible executions, for lack of a better word. Just being really hunted down. Bob has not researched that, but we are aware of some things.

Interviewer: And you mentioned that your parents, or especially your mother, were involved in the Baptist church. Was it a challenge when you first—.

Benowitz: [laughs] Slightly! Oh god. I guess that's why I'm writing my memoir because I have come from so much variety of life. His parents were like, "Okay, what are you doing with this Shiksa?⁹ Why are you interested?" They sent him to Israel on a trip so he would forget Judy, but he came

⁷ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/exodus-1947>

⁸ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht>

⁹ This term for a non-Jewish woman is often used in a derogatory fashion: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shiksa>

back and gave me a ring from Jerusalem. He's like, "This will be our wedding band." I was like, "Okay, that looks great, but could I get a diamond to go with it?" [laughs] So he brought me back this ring instead of forgetting about me, so that didn't work. Of course my parents were like, "Okay, why... This is never going to work." My mother would say things like, "Okay, your name is Judy, it may mean "Jewess"¹⁰ but you will never be a Jew." I was like, "Okay great, now that we've got that squared away..." She thought, "You would just be a hypocrite." I was like, "Alright, whatever you think. I don't know what I'm going to be but we're getting married." We eloped, we didn't have a wedding. We eloped in a justice of the peace office with a soap opera blaring in the background. We were all dressed—it was spur of the moment. I was a flight attendant. I came home because my air conditioner didn't work. I'm like, "Does your air conditioner work?" He's like, "Yeah." I'm like, "Okay, I'm coming home." So I flew in and he's like, "We're getting married on Tuesday." I'm like, "No." Everyday he said, "We're getting married." Then he was like, "Get up we're getting married." So we went downtown and we had lunch. Well, we went to get our blood tests because then you had to do that.¹¹ While we were waiting for the results, we went to The Polaris in Atlanta, that revolving restaurant on the top of the building¹². Then we went across the street to the justice of the peace and said, "We wanna get married." He called in his secretary Betsy to come in to witness. Then Bob looks down and he says, "Excuse me" and he leaves. I thought, "Okay, I'm gonna be left at the altar." Then he comes back. So the soap opera is playing and the justice never turns the soap opera down. It's blaring loudly. I'm standing there and now he and his Betsy are watching the soap opera. Then Bob comes back and I don't know what he did. I don't know, maybe he threw up, maybe he said a prayer for what he was about to do. I don't know what he did, but we got married with a soap opera blasting in the background. I was a flight attendant so then we flew to Hawaii for our honeymoon. [laughs] Went to Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Honolulu and Hilo. We were gone for two weeks for our honeymoon.

Interviewer: And you've been married how many years?

Benowitz: Forty-eight. Oh my god! I know, long time. [laughs]

Interviewer: Seems like it worked.

Benowitz: It worked! It worked! It wasn't perfect but it worked.

¹⁰ The Hebrew meaning of the name is "Woman from Judea" but it also means "praised."

<https://www.scarymommy.com/baby-names/girl-baby-names/judy/>

¹¹ <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/625984/why-states-required-blood-tests-for-marriage-licenses>

¹² <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/the-polaris-comes-full-circle/>

Interviewer: [laughs] Wrapping up the stories that you've shared—. How do you feel like your upbringing kinda influenced your life? The rural area, your parents' wartime experiences but then just kinda coming home and being themselves. Did you feel like you just kinda made a clean break from all of that?

Benowitz: Well, this is what I write about in my story *Descendants*. I grew up in the South but I couldn't wait to get as far away from that Southern lifestyle as I could get. So, I moved to California, lived there twenty years, flew to Honolulu for ten years. Got as far away as I could get. Then, Bob's business brought us back to Georgia where we married. Plus, I wanted to be here for the last seven years of my mother's life. I knew she was getting on. I wanted my kids to kinda know that side of the family because Bob's family were all out in California. So they knew those people but I thought, "Well, let's see what these Southerners—see how you like them." [laughs] I came back and—what was the question? [laughs]

Interviewer: I guess the relationship between your childhood and how you are now.

Benowitz: That was what I did, was I got away as far as I could. Then, as I'm researching more about the descendants and the Harris house and where I truly am descended from—what I learned about the slaves my first reaction was shock, horror, and shame. I always thought that, "Okay, that's just history. It's not my history." Well, now it is. Now it's my history. Now I feel like I'm really embedded in this history. I had to grapple with it a little bit. It was only when I started to research this Harris house and how Dottie has it—the plantation system was in place. I'm like, "The plantation system..." So I asked her, "Were there slaves?" She confirmed it. There were eighteen in 1850 and ten in 1860. Then of course the Civil War, 1861. Then I began to try to decide—when I came back from California and I would see these reenactments, I thought, "They're a joke! These people are still fighting that war. What a joke!" Now that I see that I have ancestors that were in that war I feel like, "Gee! We were being invaded." [laughs] So then I start to understand this whole northern aggression thing that people—which I thought was a joke. But then I'm like, "Maybe I think that, too." I don't know, it's weird.

Interviewer: Thinking about the descendants, have you or anyone else, have you started the process of trying to connect with the former—the descendants of those who were enslaved at the house?

Benowitz: Yes! That was the first thing I asked Dottie. We have the Harris cemetery, is there a Black cemetery anywhere on the grounds? Do we know any of the descendants of these people? She's like, "No, no." But it is an architectural—what's the word I'm trying to say?

Film crew: Archeological?

Benowitz: Archeological site right now where they're trying to find where the slave houses were. I don't know, there may be cemeteries. I don't know, but she doesn't have any information on that but they are doing some research there. Then I thought, "Okay, if these slaves were there in 1850 and 1860 and then they're freed—." Of course, in a lot of places even though they were freed they weren't really free. We've learned that. I thought likely they settled after living in a place for twenty years, they settled close by. Some of them may have gone up north, but maybe many of them settled right down the street or somewhere. Then I started to think about those three kids that integrated my school. I'm like, "Wow, I wonder if some of those kids were descended from the Harris slaves" because they were there. It makes me think about a lot of what my experience was growing up and learning about where I come from and if they could have been part of that group of people who integrated. Likely they were, I don't know. I don't know, a lot of time went by. Then when you think about the new research that—I forget the lady who wrote the book *1619*.¹³ That's when the slaves came over with the Europeans to settle Plymouth. The Europeans came but the slaves were brought in bondage. By the time the South had slaves, the slaves were already here for 270 years. That's how long that was the lifestyle in the South. It seemed like history but then when I see it was my family, I'm like, "Why didn't I know that? Why didn't—." Somebody forgot to put that in the classroom. So, I don't know.

Interviewer: Why do you think it's important for people to study and learn from the past?

Benowitz: Well, I think it helps you understand yourself maybe to some degree. I think you can—the future, you can maybe not make those mistakes or—like, when my kids say, "Oh, this is so terrible" when Trump had incited the riot at the White House. My kids are like, "Oh my god, everybody's going crazy. Everybody's so divided." I'm thinking, "That is nothing compared to the Vietnam War and integration and the stuff I lived through." Then I think about my mother. That is nothing compared to World War II and what she lived through. Then you think about the Civil War. You're like, "We've always been a warring kind of fighting sort of angry set of people." I don't know why. There's good people but the history that we record is battles, which is sad.

Interviewer: Is there anything I haven't asked you about today that you'd like to talk about?

¹³ The 1619 Project book was written by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones. It is a reframing of American history that places slavery and its continuing legacy at the center of the national narrative. <https://1619books.com/>

Benowitz: Oh gosh, I don't know. I can imagine I'm gonna go home and write another book. [laughs]

Interviewer: It seems like you're just at the beginning of a big research journey if you wanna take it.

Benowitz: It is, it is. Fortunately for me, my daughter is also a writer. She lives in New York, she's a travel writer and she has a MFA so she's a good editor, too. She's going to do the introduction to my book.

Interviewer: I know you've been just on the topic of the plantation and sort of tracing all these communities. There's a lot of very recent work that's being done in some really interesting places. The Whitney Plantation in Louisiana is one, the James Madison Montpelier site in Virginia. If it's something that interests you there's a lot you can probably explore.

Benowitz: There is and I know Dottie was in Washington at Mount Vernon—no wait, she was in Monticello where Jefferson was.

Interviewer: That site's changed a lot over the years and how they've interpreted it.

Benowitz: Right. I asked her, "Are you going to include in the educational portion of this Harris house, the slave portion?" They have school kids sitting on the floor learning about the spinning wheel and candle making and plants and dye, what plants color clothes. You're looking at these kids sitting on the floor and there's one little Black guy, everybody else is white and you're like, "Does anybody talk about the slaves that were here on site?" No they don't unless someone asks, then they will but it's not part of the program. So I asked Dottie, "How does Monticello treat that? Do they—." But of course, we're talking about a mansion with hundreds, hundreds of people enslaved. Not that it excuses anything, but this was a clapboard farmhouse with maybe twenty. Plus, he was a president. So yes, they're going to include—but then there's a fear of reprisal, too, when you give up too much information to people because today there's still a lot of anger about a lot of things. It's a fine line and I'm sorry I'm on it, you know?

Interviewer: You can't help being on it if that's what your family—.

Benowitz: I can't. I'm writing about it and I have to carefully choose how I present it, which that's my job and I'm working on it.

Interviewer: Best of luck to you on that project and thank you for sharing your story of your family and your life with us today. I really appreciate it.

Benowitz: Thank you, my pleasure.

Interviewer: Absolutely!