

## **Edited Speech to Text**

**AR:** This is Alexis Rivers interviewing Gilda Brower for the Auburn Oral History Project that is being conducted through the Seymour Library and Cayuga Museum in collaboration with the New York Heritage site. So Gilda, where and when were you born?

**GB:** I was born in New York City, July 9, 1945.

**AR:** Can you tell me a little bit about your family; any siblings, what your parents did for a living?

**GB:** Well, I have a brother and a sister. And my sister and I are very close in age. My brother, however, is 13 years younger than I am. And he keeps us all young. He's wonderful. And my parents... my dad was an engineer, he, an architectural engineer, he mostly built homes or helped people design...you know, things that would help mitigate flooding issues and things like that around homes and building sites. And he was just a wonderful man because he shared everything with my sister and I, and then with my brother eventually, but he taught us everything he knew; any kind of math or any interest in education. Both my mother and father were both very open and supportive that way.

**AR:** Did you have any sort of family traditions that you can remember from growing up?

**GB:** Lots of them. And we were very insulated in the family... did everything together. My father had brothers. My grandparents on my dad's side were first generation: my grandmother arrived here when she was 13 from Sicily. My grandfather was three years old when he arrived, and several of their family members lived in the same neighborhood, and we did everything together. All of my elementary and high school years: our family was almost our entire social life.

**AR:** What was your house like growing up and the neighborhood that you lived in?

**GB:** Well, my father had been injured in World War Two and he actually spent three years in a hospital. After that, he did work as an engineer, but found it very difficult to sit in one position for a very long period of time (his injury had been a back injury). So he started to work from home, and he designed custom homes. So, you know, when I was going to school in the morning, the school bus would pick us up at a construction site, where we stayed for many years because my father built one house after another in Washington Township, New Jersey, which was very open and undeveloped at the time. We were part of the suburban sprawl. So it was a beautiful time to be in northern New Jersey: very quaint, lovely village, beautiful small schools, and lots of people moving in from from all over New York City.

**AR:** Did your family follow a particular religion? And do you still follow that same religion today?

**GB:** My family was very liberal that way in the sense that my mother, in order to marry my father had to change religions from Episcopalian to Catholic. Though my grandmother was very religious, and I went with her very often to church, my father and mother did not go and ,actually, I remained very religious, personally. I had a very deep commitment to my church and then when I was in college, I joined (the) Unitarian Universalists. They are a group of people who entertain all theologies and your personal theology, therefore, has a home and I enjoy that very much. I've been extremely involved in the Unitarian Universalist community here in Auburn for 38 years.

**AR:** What was school like for you growing up. Did you enjoy it?

**GB:** Oh, I enjoyed it, but I was inhibited by the fact that I was not what I considered a great student. I studied, I was very diligent, I did all my homework. I'm very thankful for everything I learned: every vocabulary word, every bit of spelling. I had C's, B's and A's, but I would have loved to have been a straight A student. It wasn't until I was in college that an approach to studying is something that I learned and then started to be very thorough in my ability to test and regurgitate information, but it was all very, very good stuff, and I'm thankful for every minute that I've had.

**AR:** Did you have any hobbies or special interests as a child?

**GB:** Well, I love to sing, I used to sing a lot at home, and then I took (in high school) I took some lessons. My father had a fabulous voice (he belonged to the Patterson Lyric Opera Company) and he had a fabulous tenor. He always sang in a chorus. He was never a lead performer, and he wasn't trained, but he had a very powerful and very beautiful voice. I wanted to sing classical music, as well, but I did after college, start to sing. I worked with a dance band for 18 years and had a wonderful time. I was very privileged to work with some, you know, very competent musicians who are also fun to work with.

**AR:** Can you describe some of the jobs that you've had growing up?

**GB:** You mean chores around the house? Or jobs out of the house,

**AR:** Both if you'd like.

**GB:** Well, I was very good in terms of home making. My mother, when I was 10 years old, said, “Every day, you're going to make the salad and every weekend, you're going to vacuum and clean some of the bathrooms.” I made the salad and set the table for dinner every day for the rest of my life. Even when I was grown up and had my own family, when we went to visit my parents, I still made the salad and set the table and it was because I loved it. Also, on Saturdays, none of us did anything until all the house chores were done, and that was helpful for me later on when I had my own children. We really organized ourselves around our morning chores. And then in jobs, I had little jobs in retail when I was in high school, and I learned a lot in that. But also, after I went to the Fashion Institute of Technology and studied interior design for two years, I was able to work in that field. I didn't work long, because I wanted to finish my degree, so it was just like summer jobs where I would put together photoshoots of room scenes for a catalog or that kind of work. Then I went to Montclair State for another two years and studied Fine Arts and art history. So I wanted to really do graduate work in art history, but when I was in my senior year, I stumbled into a lecture on Montessori education and it just captured me. I went to visit Montessori schools and did graduate work in Montessori education, and then I stayed in that field. It was an amazing, amazing occupation for 45 years.

**AR:** What was the college experience like for you?

**GB:** Well you know, it's funny, when I was in college, civil rights legislation was passed, and prior to that, it was legal to do a lot of things that were not good. It was legal to ban African Americans from jobs. It was legal to ban women from jobs, and also from studying. Same with black Americans or minorities, becoming a lawyer or a doctor. My particular school did not allow women to study industrial arts, which is what I really would have wanted. So it was a very interesting time. Domestic violence was legal, for instance. Any kind of violence in the home towards a child or from teachers to students was legal. Not that everyone did it, but it was allowed. It was considered part of the way to handle discipline. But after civil rights legislation, we started a nice long path of deciding that some of these things really need to be put in check. Domestic violence, for instance, no. I never saw or witnessed or had to ever participate in domestic violence, but that was good fortune for me. Not everyone had that good fortune. So today, it's wonderful that pedophile behavior on the part of any person in our society, domestic violence, abuse of children, there are not only support organizations, but the conversation is open in the community. So it can be visibly addressed rather than hidden. Then also, if anyone ever did step out to say something, very often the victim was blamed no longer. I think that is a wonderful thing to celebrate in this day and age, because right now, Black Lives Matter is a movement that has to be understood in the context of history. In all the years I was growing up, blacks were not allowed to live anywhere they wanted to, they were confined to a little neighborhood in my little town, which was the worst one. They literally could not even think about living anywhere else but in that neighborhood and could not have any other jobs, other than perhaps a factory position, which is good, that's good work, but very often, the jobs that

were given to minorities and African Americans were the ones that no one else wanted. We've seen that documented, we've been able to read that a lot. So now, when I see what is happening to equalize treatment of women, and minorities, it's wonderful. I will say that my grandmother, who had a wonderful life, knew none of that. She was born in 1900. The vote was given to her when she was 20 years old, seven years after she arrived in this country. She was 20 at that time, and I think it's wonderful to think that I was 20 when we started to really apply equal rights to all peoples.

**AR:** When and why did you move to Cayuga County, to Auburn?

**GB:** Well, when I was out of college, my husband and I found a beautiful home in New Jersey that was way out in the country. We could see this New York City skyline from that property, and it was only a half an hour drive to the George Washington Bridge. Because we really couldn't purchase anything and own anything, we decided to look at property in New York State, and we found a beautiful 100 acres and purchased it, in Sempronius, and then found ourselves (we still have that (*property*) in Sempronius) but we've lived in Auburn for the past 40 years, and get to enjoy the countryside and the benefits of both the city and rural life.

**AR:** What are some of the things that you like about living here? And what are some of the things that you don't particularly like?

**GB:** Gee, it's hard to think of something I don't like, because I'm here. You know, I think people bring their choices with them from wherever. I didn't leave New Jersey because I had problems with it; I was looking for opportunity. But I was not complaining, I had wonderful friends, a job in the Montessori School, and it was great. We wanted to achieve a purpose of being able to own our own land. And we did achieve that purpose. So it has been to our advantage, very, very lovely circumstance, that at that time, there was a movement north to settle in the country and start farming and gardening and that kind of thing. So we were moved by a wave of interest in that way. And it's been amazing. My daughter has a wonderful position at the college. My son has a wonderful position in Boston, you know, it's just the time of life in our world that we're lucky. We're not, my goodness, we have a pandemic right now, but it has not affected the careers of my children because their work was needed, thank goodness. Oh, it's a very volatile time. And I work on the Tomato Fest board and on the Harriet Tubman Center for Justice and Peace board, for the sake of advocating for well being of other citizens of our community. I realize I have been very fortunate.

**AR:** How has your area changed since you moved here?

**GB:** Oh, gee, where I grew up, New York City, amazing things that happened. It was predominantly Italian. Then my family moved into northern New Jersey to be able to build

homes, as I mentioned. But then after the Italians spread out and became, you know, dispersed, incorporated, and assimilated into American culture, the entire area became populated by people from India. It's an amazing thing, then 20 or 30 years later, the children of those first Indian settlers started to be assimilated again and the community thinned out and the next wave into that area were people from China. It was interesting to see the difference in the cultures. When the Chinese people arrived, they immediately went to the library. So did a lot of us. I mean, a lot of our families came to this country for education. I know my grandparents were very focused on that. So the library's a wonderful thing waiting here for immigrants. But also, the Chinese in particular started to go to public meetings of the town councils and so forth, because as part of their growing up in China they learned to participate in local governance. And that was very evident in that particular area.

**AR:** And how has Auburn changed since you moved here?

**GB:** Well, you know, what's interesting is that, prior to civil rights legislation, it was legal to ban Catholics from...let's say the Owasco Country Club was limited and some groups were not permitted to join. Now, Auburn is much more diverse in the sense that African Americans are not only very bright and well educated, but also living everywhere in the city and a lot of walls and barriers are breaking down. I know when I speak with my African American friends, they've all experienced prejudice. You know, they've been followed in stores, they've been denied jobs when they were younger, couldn't find homes. One in particular, had to send his wife because she was white, because if he had gone he wouldn't have been given, they would not have been given the apartment. Those kinds of things have gradually changed in our community. I really feel very strongly right now that this is not Republican or Democrat, I think we are really all one in our need to share our community and see to the well being of everyone. So when I speak with my Republican friends and legislators and so forth, they are just as focused on the right minded aspects of equality and justice as any democrat that I'm also speaking with.

**AR:** Can you describe some of the significant world events you've lived through and how they sort of impacted your life?

**GB:** Yes, you know, the atom bomb was dropped in Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, when I was one month old. There were no computers. I remember my family having its first car and its first TV when I was four or five, six years old. No cell phones, of course at that time. So even through high school; yes, computers existed, but no one had any. They were the size of a giant room. There were keypunch operators, some things were mechanized, and computerized to some extent, but the personal computer and the desktop computer, were not available until after I was out of college. And look how far we've come with that. I think of my grandmother, when she came here, or when she was born. No electricity was available out in the countryside where she lived and no cars were needed. In 1900, we can go way back to a completely agrarian society

that lived off the land and was able to be self-sustaining. But throughout my lifetime, commercialized food, industry, and computers and electronics, and the role that electronics plays in our daily lives. Look at our education right now. I was out this morning, taking a walk and I said Auburn schools are starting today. There was a child outside and I asked him, "How are you going to school?" and he said he should be, but he couldn't get into the, they kept rejecting him from Google Classroom. And my heart is aching for families that need to have technical savvy in this day and age and for the children who are going to be on computer screens all day long while we wait for the pandemic...for times to be safe enough for us to be together again. So I really hope and pray and I think that our community is going to need to rally around our children and give them one on one to support our teachers, because I don't know how the teachers, especially the teachers of 80 students, how are you going to if you're only seeing 30 of them at a time? How are you going to get to the others? And I know every teacher, I, my friends and family members who are teachers are bending over backwards to address this dynamic and meet the needs of the children.

**AR:** Do you feel like there's anything missing from common knowledge, public history about Auburn?

**GB:** Absolutely. I think that history is unbelievably valuable in guiding our decisions even on a species level, you know, because right now we are well resourced, we're not struggling to provide food, thank goodness for ourselves right now. We're not struggling. If we were, and there are people all over the world who are struggling like crazy right now today just to access food. and just to provide some measure of safety for themselves. Here we're so so blessed to know the security, the safety and the wealth that we have. Food available in abundance. Not everyone is that fortunate. So forgive me, I've forgotten the question. Would you repeat it for me?

**AR:** Sure. Do you feel like there's anything missing from common knowledge, public history about Auburn?

**GB:** Right.Right. Okay. So to get to the point: the thing about history, that can pull us together is that if we realize that we are evolving. That we are evolving out of the old feudal system, which now don't get turned off by this, but my grandmother was born into a two party society: those that were born to be served, and those that were born to serve. Of course there was a middle class, but millions and millions and millions were born into their positions, that was inherited place. Now it's very important for people to understand that the right to life was not something everyone had. You didn't have the person who owned you, or, and believe me, if you were a serf, a slave, or a peasant, the Duke or Lord in the two party feudal system owned you. You didn't have self ownership. So the right to own yourself, have a voice, a vote, those things were not at all common. That was the world my grandmother knew. She was given the right to be

represented in court, the right to own land, and the right to vote when she was in her 20s. And so, we are moving from a two party, a two party system...not that a two class system, which existed for over 2000 years, over 4 centuries of slavery. We are evolving from that into self ownership and self responsibility, and the right to pursue education and occupation without bars.

**AR:** Lastly, as you mentioned, we are currently living through the covid 19 pandemic. How has that sort of changed your life, say, maybe different from a year ago? Are you not able to see as many family members or people? Things like that?

**GB:** Well, the first thing I did was start my own Zoom account because I work on the Tomato Fest board of directors and under the pandemic situation, people losing their jobs, it was even more necessary to provide food to food pantries, which is what Tomato Fest does, it raises money for pantries. So even though we were not allowed to have a festival, which would have been last weekend, by the way, September 10...not September 10, whatever it is, we couldn't do it. But we still needed more than ever to provide the support for the pantries so we've been working and meeting constantly, every week. We'll be having our third event on October 10. Also, I zoom my family, at least to be able to see them. It's temporary. We know it's only another year or so before we can start to be vaccinated and we've done some wonderful things to keep it in check. So after the initial lockdown now to be able to wear masks and distance ourselves in the stores, has been great. So yes, everything is changed. And it's, again, I feel very fortunate. If I had been a young mother, as I was for many years, my husband and I, if we had been unable to work, we would have had a very difficult situation on our hands: if our children had not been able to go to school, and then we needed to get to work. Again, we would have had a very difficult situation. Because extended family may or may not be able to supplement enough. Then you look at the technology required to function. Again, as I already mentioned for students, and if I were a grandparent, as I am trying to help my children get into Google Classroom, I don't think I have the...many people do, but I am one that in my occupation did not need to develop those skills other than kind of just word processing and things like that. I'm not an online person, and I don't do social media. I'm there but I'm really not in it. And that's my own fault. I really need to grow and get into that world.

**AR:** Well, thank you for taking your time to be a part of the project.

**GB:** Well, Alexis, I remember you because I had the privilege of being your teacher when you were two and three years old. And it's an honor to be with you today. And I appreciate your giving me the opportunity to share. Thank you.