SWE GRASSROOTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Alexis Jetter Interview

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TROY ELLER: Okay, today is October 25, 2013. This is a SWE Grassroots Oral History Project interview with Alexis Jetter. The interviewer is Troy Eller. We are at the Society of Women Engineers Annual Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. Alexis is a journalist and teaches at Dartmouth College. She is in the process of writing a memoir about her mother, Evelyn Jetter, who was a founding member of the Society of Women Engineers. Thank you for being here today.

ALEXIS JETTER: Oh, it's my pleasure.

TE: So, to begin with, can you tell me a bit about where and when your mother was born.

AJ: Sure. My mother was born in the Bronx in 1927, in a neighborhood that's now called the South Bronx. At the time it was just a working class neighborhood, largely immigrant Jews and Italians. And she was the first of two daughters to my grandparents, Joseph and Emma [Speter?]. They were Hungarian-Jewish émigrés. [00:01:00] Actually, they were Transylvanian, so which ever year it was, it's either Romania or Hungary. And my mother was raised in a fairly conventional immigrant Jewish home, not terribly religious. My grandparents were garment workers, although my grandfather was actually fairly educated. And they came to this country before the Holocaust. They ended up both working in the garment district in New York City, so they commuted.

And my mother was raised in the Bronx of that era, which was socialist and political. And she lived near Bronx Park and did a lot of roller skating, and biking, and wandering through the waterfalls. And even though it was a highly urban environment my mother always found beautiful places that seemed of nature, and that was something that was always important to her in her life.

TE: Okay. [00:02:00] Do you know how she became interested in physics, and math, and science?

AJ: That's a good question, and I only have part of that. She was very interested in math, she was always good at it. And initially she went to Hunter High, and then to Hunter College. And at some point one of her friends said, "You know, you're so good—." And she was going, I believe, at night because there was no money. And one of her friends said, "You know, if you go to Cooper [The Cooper Union], it's really much better for people who are interested in math, and science, and engineering, and if you pass the test it's free."

Now that was a big battle in my family's house, or apartment, because my grandfather was convinced that if my mother went to Cooper she would marry a non-Jew. And he was mad at my grandmother for, you know, giving my mother any ideas. The truth is my grandfather was very—he was a traditional, European male, was the first son in this large family—most of which was decimated in the Holocaust. But he was actually proud of my mother, and you could always work around him. [00:03:00] And my grandmother said, "Look, she'll probably fail the test. Don't worry. Just give her a shot."

Well, my mother was brilliant and she did not fail the test. She aced the test, and she ended up going to Cooper. I'd have to look here [checks notes] at the first year she was there. She started Cooper in 1945. Okay, so in September of 1945 she started Cooper, after having gone for the better part of two years to Hunter College. And she was part of that group of people who—she was the only woman, I believe, in her class. She certainly was the first woman to graduate from the night engineering school. If I'm getting ahead of your questions I can stop.

TE: No, go ahead.

AJ: But, they were the generation where the men were gone for several years in the war. And I need to look at my father's story better to know if he had even been at Cooper before he enlisted and went off to war, but he came back. [00:04:00] So there were all these men who were trying to catch up on their lives. They were older. They had seen terrible things. They were also very ambitious and idealistic, I would say. And so there was this moment in time at Cooper—which is a really important part of my parents' mythology, but also their coming of age—where the men were anxious to start life, to get married, to start families. The women were younger. The women at Cooper—I don't know if you know Cooper very well. There's an engineering school, there's an architecture school, and there's an art school. By and large, the only women at Cooper were in the art school. Occasionally they were in the architecture school. There were not very many in the engineering school, particularly at night. So my mother was the object of a lot of attention, and my father loved to tell stories about how, you know, he had to sort of claw his way in, you know, to get any attention at all. [00:05:00]

But they met, and they married, and they—my mother actually started working at the Atomic Energy Commission while she was an undergraduate at Cooper. So they got married in '47. And when did she start at the AEC? Let's see—

TE: Forty-eight?

AJ: Forty-eight. That's right. And she didn't graduate from Cooper until '50. So that's what she was doing during the day, she was monitoring [nuclear] fallout. And then at night she was—. So the idea for my mom was that, here she was on the cutting edge of this new transformative science, while she was learning about it at night. So, you get a sense of just a very exciting time for people. The world was opening up. There was the sense that they were on the cutting edge of this moving science. It was very exciting. They were young, and they wanted to just try everything, you know? And my parents were seekers, for lack of a better word.

TE: Right, right. Did they ever tell you stories about the work that they did during that time period? [00:06:00]

AJ: My father's work was always less interesting to me. He at that time, I think, was working for the New York City Transit Authority, working on some kind of things having to do with, you know, train circuitry. In my family this was the mythology: my mother was brilliant one. You know that song from Porgy and Bess, "Your daddy is rich and your momma's good looking?" (laughs) In my family we always sang it, "Your momma's rich and your daddy's good looking." Which actually was not true. Neither of them were rich, and he was sort of moderately good looking. (laughs) But she was the pedestal, she was the one who we all adored and looked up to and idolized. And it was her work that was of most interest to us, because it was really sort of the exciting stuff. Not that kids pay attention that much to their parents' work anyway. But my mother, you know, she was the only mom on the block who worked as a professional. You know, she was the only mom on the block who used a slide rule. [00:07:00] When kids needed to know how to use a slide rule they'd come to my mother.

You know, we were on a block in Scotch Plains [New Jersey] of Italian, Polish families—working class, you know. And it gave me some interesting insights into class in this country, because we didn't have any more money than they did. But my parents were college educated. They played classical music, you know. We had tons of books. And when kids needed help with the slide rule they came to my mother. (laughs)

I didn't know until I really started researching this part of my mother's story how much work she was doing in our basement in Scotch Plains—at 324 Jackson Avenue, in this little red house—until relatively recently. I mean, I remember my mom being at home, and I came home from kindergarten and my peanut butter and jelly sandwich would be on the little plate on the piano bench, in front of this

TV show that very few people have ever seen called “Fun at One,” which was a WNET show. And my friends call it, "Fun with One," because they don’t believe I actually—. (laughs) [00:08:00] But anyway, my mother—and yet she was going to school at night. And I don’t want to get too far ahead of your questions, but this was our reality, right? We had a mother who was at home, but she was often in the basement working on stuff. We didn’t know what. We’d always say, “Mom, when are you coming up?” I know this, because I was the one saying it and my children now say it to me— “Mom, when are you coming up?”—because my office is in my basement, too. (laughs) I have this sort of parallel universe where I’m paralleling my mother. But I’m the daughter and the mother now, so I have insights into that.

But my mother went to night school, okay. So my father would make dinner, and it was always—. You know, my father had this sort of survivalist—. He fancied himself a time and motion study guy, but all it meant was that there was numbing repetition to what we ate, you know. So he had these green metal shelves in the basement, and we had tuna fish, spaghetti with ketchup, and pickles, I think. [00:09:00] And then as we sort of went up the socioeconomic ladder we’d have hamburgers, macaroni and potato salad, and pickles, and spaghetti with ketchup. I still—I don’t eat it, but I have to admit it is familiar food. And then we knew we’d arrived when my dad made sliced London broil on the griddle—and potato salad, and macaroni salad, and pickles. But he made dinner for us at night when my mom ran off to school. So I was raised in a pretty unconventional household. And that was great.

TE: Did your friends ever say anything? Did your friends ever notice or—?

AJ: Oh yes. Oh yes. Well, later in life my mom worked for regular—"regular firms." I mean, they're not normal. I mean, Lionel Electric and then RCA. My mother, you know, invented things that made the television better, even though she hated TV. That was kind of ironic.

Yeah, I mean, people loved to come to my house because it just was so weird to them. [00:10:00] For one thing we ate, like, whole wheat bread and Grape-Nuts, and—. (laughs) You know, my mother liked to have—she was ahead of the curve a little bit. We didn't eat organic food, but we ate pretty healthy food, never had soda. That wasn't why kids like to come to my house. They came to my house because my parents were never there. We had complete freedom, but it was flipped. So, you know, you'd think we would have been hellions running, throwing wild parties. (laughs) We were so well behaved. I mean, we'd call up my mother and say, "Mom, when are you coming home? We'll have dinner on the table."

And she was a swimmer, she was a very strong swimmer. And, you know, we'd be on the beach, all four of us kids, and complaining to my father. We'd say, "Mom's swimming out too far." (laughs) She was the adventurer. You know, and there's good things and bad things about that.

TE: Okay, okay. Jumping back—so, she had to quit when she had her family? [00:11:00]

AJ: She was working at the Atomic Energy Commission well into 1953. When she had my brother in November of '53, her colleagues tell me—I'm just looking here at her resume. Yes, okay. (laughs) She stopped in November of 1953. Well, in November of 1953 she was out to here [gestures to suggest late pregnancy] with my brother Paul. And she was moving these huge helium or nitrogen tanks around the Atomic Energy Commission, and people would say, "Evelyn, you know, let me help you."

Now, I want to give you an image of my mother, also. My mother was very tall—taller in my memory than she actually was, but she was 5'8.5" or 5'9". And she had beautiful bearing. She didn't wear high heels, but she was very tall and had sort of a commanding presence. I mean, you heard from some of the women this morning [at the SWE conference]. She was actually quite reserved, but you'd notice her. [00:12:00] And she spoke beautifully. And she wrote beautifully, which

is great because I have all of her sort of journals and unsent letters, and things that she—. In the middle of huge lab reports you'll find, you know—. That's just why I kept—I just go through page by page, when I'd be tempted to sort of boot whole boxes, because I find amazing things.

But yes, your question was she had to stop in 1953. She waited until the last possible moment. And, you know, I'll go through her sort of journals—which calling them journals is giving them more order than they actually possess—but, you know, lists of things. And there's this project, and this project. And she was working on a very important project for the Atomic Energy Commission right up to the day that she had to leave there and go to the hospital. My brother was actually born in New York City. And then she came home to the little red house at 324 Jackson Avenue, Scotch Plains.

It was a really hard transition for her. And she was still trying to finish this project for the AEC, which I believe she never quite finished. [00:13:00] It was an analysis of precipitate matter that came down, the dust particles that came down—because these [nuclear test] explosions out West sometimes were called dirty explosions. You know, they would be done too close to the ground. They knew they were doing it, but it would take up a whole lot of dust, which would then go up into the atmosphere, travel across the country and fall as either rain or snow. And there was a famous incident in Rochester and Troy, New York sometime—I'm forgetting the date, it was in the '50s—where it fell. They called it hot snow, and they were ferrying stuff back in ice cream containers. They hired drivers to go up to Troy with ice cream containers, bring down snow, and bring it to the labs, the health and safety labs at what is now Lincoln Center. That was the AEC health and safety—. And my mom would analyze it for level of radioactivity, in what was called the counting room or the calibration room. [00:14:00] And so she was doing this. And what she was trying to do was figure out how you—I don't understand it well enough to explain it now, but it was some way of screening the precipitate to understand how much radioactivity was in it

and how dangerous it was. Because, by the way, most radiation will not penetrate your skin, but if you ingest it it's really bad. (laughs) And she knew that because she had done the radium dials painters' study, which is a famous study.

At any rate, yes, she waited until the very last minute to leave work, and she continued doing work from home. And you can read in her journals the sense of trying to be excited about it all. You know, she was going to bring to her motherhood, and to this house, and to cooking, and cleaning, and reading—she was going to do all this reading. She was going to learn to play the piano. She was reading—. You know, she'd have these sort of time and motion studies of puréeing pears for my brother, and then in the middle she was reading Emmanuel Kant. You know, the philosopher. [00:15:00]

She just thought she could do it all, but you could feel her deflating and feeling trapped. There was a moment—she was trying to wax the kitchen floor and she couldn't. She really wasn't very good at this. I should also add that she was not very good at these things. (laughs) She was brilliant, but she was sort of clumsy. And it was very difficult for her to organize a meal where everything finished at the same time, and she'd get frustrated. Even though she was brilliant. I mean, people used to talk about just watching her. The ideas would flow from her brain, through her pencil, and she would just write page after page of beautiful mathematical notation. People would just like to watch her, and these are colleagues who understand it. So she had that, but she was easily flustered by other things. And there was a time when she was trying to wax the floor—and of course my father was off at work, and I don't know whether anyone was born but my brother at that point—and she just sat in a corner and just wept.

And the escape was to run to the city [New York City], see her friends from the AEC, see her friends from SWE. And she'd get—there was a bus that literally stopped on our corner in Scotch Plains and would take you all the way in to Port Authority. And often she would jump on that bus, and she needed that. I think she had a sense of—and I've had it myself—"Where did my life go? What

happened? I had this brilliant career." And that's why it was so essential—and I'm really just putting the pieces together now—so essential when Bea [Beatrice] Hicks threw her that lifeline. Now, they needed each other. Bea Hicks was not being altruistic. Bea needed my mother, and my mother needed Bea. And together my mother gave Bea a brilliant collaborative partner in designing some of the key equipment and solving a lot of the most intractable problems that Bea was facing in her new business. [00:17:00] She was the chief engineer and then she took over, and she needed my mother's mind.

And the letters back and forth are wonderful, because not only are they mathematical formulas and, "Would you look up this issue, and check this out," but they're also—. Bea would send her this clipping from *The New Yorker* and she said, "You remember the other day we were trying to remember what this was? It was *The Informer*. It was this play, and we should—." And then on the back it said, We should go see this play, and this concert. So it was—. Bea was older than my mom. She was more worldly than my mom. But my mom was very—became a very well-educated person in terms of, you know, culture. My father was never interested in that, unfortunately. But if you look at my mother's journals through the '50s and early '60s, she was trying to balance all this in ways that I think young women today would completely relate to. [00:18:00]

TE: Can you tell me about some of the projects she worked on for Bea Hicks during that time?

AJ: For Bea? Yeah, well of course I'm not a science person, so I'm going to be a big phony here. But they were working on the gas density switch—which Bea has a patent for, but in fact, if you look at some of the publications my mom and she published together on some of that stuff—and they were expanding the use of that. Basically they were designing what's called atmospheric or environmental sensing equipment. So they were trying to deal with vibration, pressure, speed—things that would allow satellites, missiles, planes, rockets to stay on course as they picked up velocity, ran into some, you know, friction. And this was all basic,

elemental physics. But it was employed in what became NASA, right? [00:19:00] So they had classified projects for what became NASA—I forget what it was called before that. And that's what they were working on together. And ultimately my mother was no longer working for Bea when the lunar module landed, but my understanding was that some of those same devices just became more and more streamlined, and that's what NASA used to—. You know, you had to really pinpoint that navigation to get the lunar module there and back. And this atmospheric sensing equipment was what they worked on—

TE: Okay, okay.

AJ: —for big defense firms. I mean, my mother's longhand accounts of, like, "This is for Raytheon. This is for—." And so on, you know. Which is ironic, because my mother was really politically quite progressive. But this is, you know, this is what paid the bills.

TE: Yeah. Your mother was featured in a lot of newspaper articles. [00:20:00] Did she ever show you those, or talk about them at the time?

AJ: No.

TE: No?

AJ: For one thing, they way predated my adult awareness. There were a lot of dusty files in our basement, and sometimes just through sort of geologic drifts [laughs] something would come to the top, you know? So I remember the *Charm* magazine article. And I always told my friends, "I was in *Charm* magazine when I was two!" You know, I never really paid attention to what it was about. I knew she was in *Mademoiselle* because—again, these were just dusty volumes on our shelves, and nothing was ever thrown away at our house. It was never organized. To call it an archive is really a nice word. It was a mess. As I said earlier, you know, every bike that had ever been run over, every—. You know, it

was like—it was horrendous. But it was all there, and we were often downstairs looking for things, and you would just stumble across something. [00:21:00]

But no, I really had no real understanding. I mean, my real moment of truth about my mother's work at the Atomic Energy Commission, or anywhere, was many years later. I mean, I knew my mother had worked at RCA and made a better TV set, because she was always talking about the irony of that. You know, that here she really hated TV and—. You know, she'd come home and we'd be watching *F Troop* and all these stupid things, and we wouldn't even pay attention to her.

My parents were also workaholics, you know. They'd work late hours. My father had his own company. My mother worked for RCA. I knew other people who lived in our town who worked for RCA. They came home at five and six at night. My mother would stay long hours. She would put runs of—she was designing transistors, and she would put through runs [tests] herself because she wanted to see what happened. And she'd come home with these horrible burns on her hands[?]—because there are skilled people who are supposed to be doing this, you know, but my mom would—. You know, she had to get the answers. And we felt—. You know, she was conflicted, but we were mad at her a lot because she wasn't home. And I was going [00:22:00] somewhere with that, but I can't remember—. You'll have to help me. Oh, what she did—.

But years and years later, after she died, I was working as a fact-checker at *Mother Jones* magazine in San Francisco—it was an internship, actually—and I was fact checking an article about some of the early U.S. government experiments with radiation, often on people who didn't know they were being experimented on. And I saw a reference to the radium dial painters. I was sitting in this office, and I remembered my mother telling me that when she was working at the AEC she had gone to this park in New Jersey. She had found this woman, and she'd put this mask on her—and she was worried that a police officer was going to come and arrest her, because it looked like she was up to no good. [00:23:00] And I remember her telling me something about these women who

had painted the faces of watches with this phosphorescent—you know, glow-in-the-dark, right? It's probably what I would have thought—material, which had made them radioactive. And to me that was just—you know, that was just an interesting, weird story as a kid. Well, here I am reading in this book, which I now own—it wasn't fun. It was scary. These women had ingested radium, which is highly radioactive, and it caused necrosis of the jaw that ate away at their faces, and they died horrible deaths. And then even in their graves they were so radioactive that they set off Geiger counters to this day.

Suddenly I realized what my mom was doing. Although it took me much longer to understand that why she was taking their breath samples so many years later was because they were trying to figure out ways to test people's occupational exposure. [00:24:00] And so they actually could tell, by analyzing the breath of these people, how much radiation they'd been exposed to. They were trying to figure out a way to set safety levels for occupational exposure. But that was the first time I realized, "Oh, that's what was going on." And gradually I started to wonder whether my mom had died from radiation exposure. And I knew she'd worked for the Atomic Energy Commission, and she died young of ovarian cancer.

And so when I went to Columbia Journalism School—and they told us we've got to pick a topic that you don't mind working on in the middle of the night and writing three or four times over. And I thought, you know—. Well, I had gone back that summer to live at home in preparation for Columbia Journalism School, and I started to go through her files. I turned on the bulb over the ironing board, and I started going back through the papers, and suddenly there were things there I had never known about. For one thing, there was the [00:25:00] radium dial painter studies. But there was also stuff that Lionel—which was weird to me because I remember her bringing back these [Lionel brand] trains, you know, that would click and steam, and had little light beams on front, and the electric track, and these little boats. And it was all very cool, but that's not what she was doing

at Lionel. She was working on a Geiger counter for the Army, you know, and she was testing it using Cesium—which I didn't know very much about, but I'm learning. And suddenly—and I wrote about this in my master's thesis—all these things that had been sort of fun and imaginative, and "My mom worked for Lionel," well, you know —. And then I found out as I did my research that she worked in what's called the "hot lab," and the hot lab leaked.

You know, I never found the smoking gun, but it was a journey for me to find out. Initially my question was, "Did my mom die of radiation exposure?" [00:26:00] I wasn't ever able to answer that question. But what I was able to open up was this whole new vista, this whole new window into my mother's life. Now, she had died—you know, she died young. I was young when she died. You know, twenty-two isn't that young, but relatively. And I had been living at college far away, and I realized I wanted to get to know who my mother was. And part of the answer was there. Plus, it turned out she was a secret writer. Not only were there these journals from the 1940s and '50s, but my mother would just write to herself, wherever she was and whatever scrap of paper she had. And nothing was ever thrown out. And so gradually I was able to just start by just going through boxes—some of them very moldy—piecing together the story of my mother's life.

TE: Okay. You mentioned Lionel. Was that—that was her first job returning to the workforce? [00:27:00]

AJ: That's right, and she always regretted it. For one thing, it was going out of business and there were bad vibes. And I've seen some of the directives coming down. What had happened was—and I don't have the whole story now—but Lionel Cowen was the founder of Lionel and he ran this toy company. Which people, collectors still are very— you know, these grown men are very serious about this, magazines and organizations devoted to Lionel trains. Lionel Cowen's great nephew was Roy Cohn, a very sinister political figure in American history. (laughs) He took over the company in the early sixties, I believe, and purchased

another company called Anton Electrics [Electronics] and turned it into Lionel Electric [Lionel Electronic Laboratories]. And he brought a couple of his buddies from the Pentagon with him, because he had sort of—he had a relationship with the Army. [00:28:00] And they were trying to turn it into a big defense contractor overnight, and it wasn't working. But he did expose a lot of people to radiation because—I mean, he had these people who had been building little Lionel trains were now working with these radioactive devices, and they were—. There were these ovens that were used to cook these radioactive devices. They were warming up their pizza in it, you know. I have a—what was it, NRC at that point? The federal agencies kept changing—but there was an inspection done and they were just like, Stop cooking your pizza in the radiation ovens, okay?

At any rate, she felt—she told my father that she thought that their handling of radioactive issues was poor. I kept looking for badges. People who work with radiation were supposed to wear badges that would be—dosimeters they were called—that were supposed to give you a sense of how much radiation you were exposed to. And those were all gone. [00:29:00] And she said to my father at one point, "I don't think they're as careful as they should be." Which is my only clue into whether she thought she was being exposed. And I don't know what the answer is.

But yes, Lionel was her first job back, and it didn't last that long. But she went from Lionel to RCA, which was a very, very successful and happy place of work for her. I mean, if you think about it, it's pretty amazing. I mean, she went from nuclear physics—I mean, electrical engineering, nuclear physics, out of work for twelve years—although getting her, never quite her Ph.D., but almost Ph.D.—then jumps back into the workplace and becomes a cutting-edge solid-state engineer, to the point where she designed the transistor for the first solid state ignition system. Of course, I mean that would be commendable if that's what she started at and continued. I mean, to have been able to—. It's just mind-boggling to me that she was able to basically be out of the field, change fields, and then

go straight to the top of that. [00:30:10] And who knows what more she might have done had she lived, but I think professionally she had to have been pretty happy.

And I think she felt haunted by projects left unfinished, and I think she was haunted by how much time she didn't spend with us, you know. Which is—you know, we were always so proud of my mother, but she also wasn't around that much. Neither was my father. And I feel like that's something I've —. You know, most women of my generation had stay-at-home moms, and girls of my generation were bursting out and wanting to do it very differently—as did I. But the truth is I've made some more conventional choices than my mother. I mean, as a freelance writer I'm able to be home more. It's really important for me to be home with my kids. Now my mother of course was home for twelve years. [00:31:00] She goes, "You kids don't remember that." Well, of course we weren't alive for all those years. She was a little mad that we didn't remember things like that—you know, some of her sacrifices.

And I don't know where I was going with that, but yes, Lionel was her first job back. And if she were exposed to radiation that caused her death—I have never been able to prove it—that's where it would have been.

TE: Okay. Do you know what led to her decision, for the timing to go back to, you know, a nine-to-five industry-type job?

AJ: She was desperate to get back into the work world. She really had wanted three kids, and she was ready to go back after that. My father wanted a fourth, and I think they made an agreement that (laughs) if she had Daniel—and we're all glad she did, especially Daniel—that my father would take over a larger share of responsibility. So Daniel was the first daycare kid and for better or worse, (laughs) poor guy, he had my father's tender mercies. [00:32:08] So he'd come home from daycare—and not come home, go to my father's plant and then come

home. So, my mother was able to make the transition because my father supposedly stepped in a bit more.

TE: Do you think that he really did step in more, or—?

AJ: For a man of my father's generation—which is how all these sentences have to start (laughs)—yes. Okay, my father would make breakfast on Sunday mornings. My father would pick us up from Hebrew School or whatever. Of course, he was his own boss and my mother wasn't, so he had freedom of movement during the day. Never on time, (laughs) let's put it that way. Funny and bad memories of being left hours and hours places. But yes, my father was unconventional in many of the same ways that my mother was. Although, it was she who had to stay home for those—. [00:33:00] "Had to stay home," right? I mean, it makes it sound like a prison sentence. But she was the one who had to juggle everything, and not him. When my mother got a raise at work, my father gave himself a raise. They always made the exact same amount of money. There was a—. And he was very proud of her.

TE: Okay. Can you tell me about your mother's work at RCA? I know that you've gotten to talk to some of her co-workers at the time.

AJ: Yeah, and I was older. So I knew that she was designing transistors. Now, what that meant to us as kids was—. I don't remember why I thought of it, but she would have these expressions. She'd say, "I must get to my boron." (laughs) And I remember I drew her a card once—a mother's day card, a birthday card—where she's running into the arms of this boron that—you know, lover. And of course I kind of got boron confused with Boraxo, which was a cleaner. You know, people used it to clean toilets and sinks. [00:34:00] And, so it's actually, it's kind of the cartoon character on the Boraxo container [on the card]. And she'd say she'd have "juicy data" she wanted to get to, and she was just —. I'd have [picture] her, like, cutting up this steak that's just, you know, oozing. And there was another thing that she used to say that I can't remember.

But we understood that it made televisions and radios, because we had—I still have—you know, when I was thirteen my mom gave me this beautiful RCA radio, you know? And we had the RCA radio. We had —. So we understood that she was making devices for consumer appliances. And she chose that, you know. She had the opportunity to work at the David Sarnoff labs in Princeton—there's a name for that place, the Center for something-or-other—which was pure research. And she chose not to do that. [00:35:00] She wanted to see the fruits of her labor. She wanted to feel useful, I think. Even if she wasn't always crazy about what her stuff went for. Because actually, later in life, I know that—she came to see me. I was going to school on the West Coast and she was flown out to Long Beach to take a look at—I think they were cruise missiles on the Trident submarines. I mean, I was busy getting myself arrested in anti-nuclear demonstrations, right? She was getting to come see me because, you know, she was being given a guided tour. And my mother was very anti-war, a very strong environmentalist, you know, very liberal. My father was more right-wing. I never had the chance to discuss this with her, the fact that the fruits of her labor were things that she probably didn't approve of, or in fact was very opposed to.

But she—at the same time she didn't want to be in the pure research. She liked to be in applied research, and I remember we had the conversation about that once. [00:36:00] This idea that engineers create things was very strong in both my parents. And I remember when I first talked to her about wanting—I had thought I was going to be a lawyer, and then I told her I was thinking of becoming a journalist. And she was puzzled. She said, "Well, Lex, why would you want to write about what other people do?" (laughs) This idea that a journalist was just kind of running behind the productive, creative people—sort of the scribe, you know.

But she was someone who loved writing, could write—. She always—at night she'd fall asleep with her data, and *Saturday Review*, and plays by George

Bernard Shaw. She was a very literary person, and she wrote beautifully, too. Which is a gift to me, because what I hope to do in this book that I'm writing is not only capture her life—and mine, actually, now that I have a daughter—sort of looking at these lessons. But I want to use her voice, because she wrote so wonderfully and that's a gift. [00:37:00] To stumble across that —. I still find, every time I go into a box, I find something new. It's so wonderful. I feel her, the person I knew and also the person I didn't know. What can I tell you, it's very emotional. It's very emotional, and very rewarding.

TE: I'm trying to think where I want to go next with this interview. (laughter) You talked about—in our panel today [at the SWE conference] you talked about the sisterhood. And, you know, we've focused so far on her family life and her professional life, but a lot of her professional life was surrounded by these other women engineers who were hard to find at that time. So I'm wondering if you can tell me about some of your memories of her friends, [00:38:00] because your mother was a founding member of SWE and very involved in the Society.

AJ: Yeah, she was for the early years. Less so after that. And I want to just fine-tune something. My mother didn't work with other women engineers. The only person [woman] she worked with was Bea Hicks, and that was because Bea Hicks had this company and my mother was a consulting engineer physicist, is what she was called on the masthead. I don't think she ever worked with women. The only women she worked with, (laughs) and this is going to sound bad, but she called them the hourly workers. They were the people who made the products that my mother designed, or she designed the transistors for. It never occurred to me that that was derogatory term, because my mother was very friendly with them. And in fact, that's what she did. You know, the other male engineers—I don't know how they well they knew those workers. My mother knew them. She socialized with them. They came to my house. If you want to know the truth, I didn't know the male engineers from RCA. I knew the men and women who worked with my mother, who made the transistors, you know. [00:39:00] And every Christmas—

even though we're Jewish we celebrated Christmas. We celebrated everything. You know, she would make up lists of presents for each of them. And the men would give her money for it, but we would wrap them, you know. So she was a bridge to those people. But those were the women I knew. They were Adelaide, Madeline, and Jenny, you know. (laughs)

But you asked me a different question, really, which was about the early founding members and how I knew them. Bea I knew not very well. She was a somewhat remote character. I know more about her second-hand, than I know —. I think my father and Rod Chipp, her husband, used to play tennis together. We had Rod Chipp's tennis rackets. We inherited them. He died young. I don't remember him. My older brother and sister remember him, and they probably remember Bea better than I do. [00:40:00] But I met Bea on several occasions. And my mother went to Europe with Bea in the seventies, and went from country to country. And that was my mom's chance to see Europe. She would never have gone, otherwise. My father was not a traveler.

But let me tell me tell you about the women I do remember. So, I spoke briefly this morning, and later with some of—at the over-the-hill suite [at the SWE conference] about these picnics. It's not really a picnic. It was a sort of a barbecue that Evelyn Fowler—one of the founding members, was just a lovely woman. Funny, funny, funny. Very dry sense of humor. Warm. And she's the woman who created the design—the cog—the green cog that the S-W-E still uses [in its logo]. You know, my mother always said S-W-E. [00:41:00] SWE [pronounced "swee"] is new for me, and I'm really glad to discover it because it's so much easier to say. (laughs) As of today it's SWE, but my siblings know it as S-W-E.

So, we would go every summer—late summer I think it was—to Evelyn Fowler's house in Stamford, Connecticut. And it was a great house. It had a Frank Lloyd Wright kind of feel. I went to it more recently, and I realized it was much more modestly sized. I remembered it being, like, this expanse of slate roof and, you

know, sunken fireplace and all this. It was very well designed, but it was not that big. And I remember they had a brick fireplace outside in the back. It all sort of—or maybe it was a grill, or a combined grill. Anyway, and they had slate floors. And to me it was wonderful. I used to love going there. And there were four of us kids. And so it was Evelyn Fowler and her husband, Alex Fowler—it might have been Alec. [00:42:00] And they had—they were older. Their kids were older, and they were older.

Then it was Mickey and Morty Gerla, both engineers. Very close friends to my parents. In fact, they called them—what did they call them? MoMa? No, MiMo! In all of my mother's references to them on calendars, it was MiMo. The MiMos are coming. It took me a while to figure out who that was. They had two children who were adopted. They had Harry Gerla, who went on to become an immigration judge, and they adopted him as a fairly—as an adolescent. That was unusual then. And then they also adopted Lisa who was hard of hearing.

Also, they were unusual people. They had the first Subarus. Mickey—. Okay, Morty. Morty was short, and he was into photography. He was kind of a nerdy guy. But he was always into the—sort of experiencing spirituality. [00:43:00] And my parents were interested in this, too. He would always stand on his head. He'd come to our house and just stand on his head. You know, he'd get one of our little pillows from the couch and just —. We would just watch him. And he had—he always wore glasses on the, you know, strings and they would sort of go down. He was a little bit of a chubby guy.

And they—I learned this later—but they and my parents were very interested in, as they said, things that science cannot explain. And they explored Edgar Cayce, who—I don't know if you know anything about him. He was a —. There was a whole movement about Edgar Cayce. He was a moderately educated—not much—Southern guy who would go hold these sort of—go into a trance and he would diagnose people. He had no medical training. He would diagnose what was wrong with them and suggest cures. (laughs) And he had a pretty good track

record. I mean, I've never really explored this. My parents did Ouija board sessions with Mickey and Morty. I have the transcripts. I was raised knowing that. [00:44:00]

My parents were interesting in that they weren't embarrassed —. I think they actually were a little embarrassed later, but they would go wherever their minds and interests took them. They came up through the Depression, through the Holocaust, through World War II—which could have made them very pessimistic. It had the opposite effect. I think they felt like they were on the brink of a new world, and they weren't afraid of asking questions that might have seemed ridiculous or silly to other people. And I mean, I can tell you more about that but, you know, they were very interested in all of that. And that stopped at a certain point. But it was Mickey and Morty—the fact that it was these four engineers sort of looking into the occult I find very interesting. And these are people who are very rational, supreme rationalists, right? Nothing touchy-feely about them, but they did some pretty out there things. (laughs) [00:45:00] So that's Mickey and Morty.

Evelyn Fowler worked with her husband. He had an engineering firm. Who else was there? Roz [Roslyn] Gitlin, who was an engineer—who had been Roz Keller. And she was part of the CUNY [City University of New York] crowd, and she had at least two or three kids. And there was a woman named Mildred Paret and her husband, and I don't remember anything about their kids. Truthfully, we knew the Fowlers and we knew Mickey and Morty. Mickey and Morty would come to our house pretty regularly, even though they lived in Cleveland (laughs) or Cincinnati.

So I was raised thinking that women were engineers, that they were often brighter than their husbands, that women could do anything, that having children was a creative—demanding, but a creative choice, [00:46:00] and that an ideal life was one where these were integrated. Pulling it off? That's another

question. (laughter) But,that was a very good thing to be raised with—that there was nothing you couldn't do, except maybe be organized and on time. (laughs)

TE: Did your parents ever encourage you or your siblings to pursue engineering? Did they—?

AJ: Not me, because I don't have any abilities in that regard. Nor does my older brother. My older sister and my little brother were more math-science oriented, although my sister, ultimately, did not pursue engineering. She's sort of a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none, but she was trained as a geologist. She never really pursued that, but she has that math-science mind, as does my little brother. [00:47:00] I call him little—he's now—I forget how old he is. Oh, he's fifty this year, so he's not so little. He, I think, was thinking of going to engineering school for a while, and he may even have taken a class or two there at Rutgers, but that didn't turn out to be his interest. But he is a math-science tutor now, and he does work—he was a teacher for a while, he's a tutor now. No, none of us followed, although my father had an engineering firm and my sister worked there for a long time. I worked there briefly. I claim I quit, he claims he fired me. (laughs) That was not a match made in heaven. My parents didn't push us to be anything. They wanted us to be whatever we wanted to be.

TE: I wonder, have you and your siblings ever discussed about, [00:48:00] you know, sort of the extraordinary view that you got through your parents? And having not realized at the time what exactly they were doing, I wonder if you've ever sat down and hashed it out later.

AJ: We knew what my father was doing, because we all worked there. He made these control panels for sprinkler systems and plumbing systems in skyscrapers in New York City and sewage treatment plants. So we would always be schlepping along the streets of Manhattan, and he'd say, "I have equipment in that building. You know, I service there." So there was no mystique about my dad's work.

Have we talked about it? I've talked about it a lot. (laughs) Have I talked about it with my siblings? I think we all felt lucky to have a mother like my mom, who was interested in us and talked to us always like we were adults—which is kind of funny because when we were little [00:49:00]—and always treated us with respect, and was always curious about us.

It just was, my mother often said that —. This isn't exactly an answer to your question but, my mother often said that she—I'll have to paraphrase this—that she felt like she was selfish. But she said that in a positive way, that she did what she wanted to do. But a lot of my friends' parents, or mothers in particular, I felt were a little bit resentful, you know. That they hadn't gotten to do what they wanted to do. They didn't even know what they wanted to do. And then suddenly here they were with kids. And then kids were gone, or whatever, and what were they going to do? And you know, my mother never felt that. She did take twelve years out of her life to raise us, but she always said she did what she wanted to do. And I always felt like that made it cleaner, you know. [00:50:00] That she could—. I'm revisiting this now, but I always used to feel like because she did the work she wanted—even though she was running back and forth with us, and doing shopping, and cooking, and everything—because she gave to herself what she wanted and needed in some large part, that she could love us in a cleaner way. That she wasn't living through us, you know, the way unfortunately a lot of women are forced to. That she hadn't sacrificed essential things in her life for us. And so she could give to us in a much cleaner way.

And we did great things together, you know? We drove across the country together. We hiked across the Grand Canyon together. She and I used to go on canoeing trips together. We never took the bike trips I hoped we'd take but —. And there was a lot of things that I thought we would have time for, and then she died so suddenly and so young. And I didn't get to know her as an adult. I mean, I was young and I was away at school. And all those years I thought we'd have, we never had. Which is, in part, why I'm motivated to do this now. [00:51:00]

But, I know—well, I haven't answered your question though. Did we talk? Yeah, we talked a lot, I think, about that it was great to be my mom's kids. At the same time, I think we didn't get as much of her time as a lot of my friends—you know, contemporaries—did. So I have regrets about that, and I think she did, too. She told a friend of hers—and I only know this because I interviewed her friend, this is a friend from Cooper Union, but who was on the Arts side—that she regretted that she chose her career over us. That she felt forced to make a choice, and she made the choice, and she felt haunted by it. But she'd made it, she'd gone back to work. [00:52:00]

You know, it raises this whole issue—can women have it all? And I don't know that they can. I really don't. And I always thought my mother did have it all. But now I'm not so sure. She was always running, and haunted. And I think haunted that she wasn't spending enough time with us, haunted that she wasn't spending enough time at work—even though she spent a lot of time at work. And I know when she and I drove across country —. It was toward the end of her life. I didn't know she was sick, but she told her friend that it was the trip she'd always wanted. She got everything out. She knew she was dying and she didn't tell me, and didn't tell us. She told her friend it was the trip she'd always wanted. She got the time with me she'd always wanted. You know, which I didn't realize at the time. To hear that twenty, thirty years later is kind of painful, you know.

So ultimately I don't have easy answers about my mom. I think I used to have easy answers. I used to have much easier answers. It was great, you know? She was this fabulous engineer. She was brilliant. [00:53:00] She was beautiful. She had four kids. She raised them. You know, she was very—brilliant inventor, had it all. You know, when you start scratching that surface a little bit, or you start reading the private scribblings of people, you realize—for one thing, it's a moving target. There are moments where you feel like you're doing it all, and then there's moments where you feel like you're really not. And I think it's a disservice to young women today to say, "Here's your foremother. She did it all." She came

close, and I think that's the best you can do. And we used to talk a lot. We had, you know—she would talk to us like equals, which is really pretty remarkable. She was always interested in what we thought. And we had a freedom. We were not in conventional—my parents were not conventional parents. [00:54:00] It freed us up as kids, I think, to be unconventional in ways. And we never retreated into stereotypical gender and parent-child roles.

There's downsides to that, right? All the good smells on my street, on Jackson Avenue, were coming from other houses, you know? (laughs) All the Italians were making their stuffed [meat]balls. And you know, our house—there weren't any smells coming from it, unless we [children] were making it. But there was a freedom in seeing each other as people, that I think a lot of parents and children don't have. And I think that was my mom.

TE: I know that you started really researching your mom's career and her life while you were in journalism school.

AJ: Yeah, yeah.

TE: Can you talk a bit about the evolution of your research from a class project to where you want this memoir to go? [00:55:00]

AJ: (laughs) Talk about a moving —.

TE: Or where you think it's heading, you know, currently. (laughs)

AJ: (laughs) Yeah. Talk about a moving target. I'm just glad that it's moving again. It's a project that started out of a thirst to know if my mother had died from exposure to radiation. Now, I wrote that piece in 1985, '86. The historical context was, everything was busting loose right then. Hazel O'Leary was Carter's—I believe Carter's—. No, couldn't have been Carter. Had to have been Clinton. You know, I can't even remember. She was the first Black Secretary of Energy [from 1993-1997]. She was declassifying decades of secret U.S. government experiments on

people with radiation, some of it well-intentioned, (laughs) some of it not. All this stuff was coming out. The down-winders were coming forward. These were people who were in Utah and Nevada who'd been exposed to nuclear blasts, and had very high levels of cancer. [00:56:00] You know, this was disputed, but this was —. The vets who had been ordered to watch the atomic tests, they were coming down with all kind of stuff. And there were hearings in Washington. You know, there had been—the anti-nuclear movement was probably in its zenith, okay.

And I had an entrée to the "atomic brotherhood"—the people who set safety standards and who remembered my mother very, very fondly. You know, I'd call up some bureaucrat out of the blue and I'd say, you know, "Can you tell me about this, this, this, and this?" And, you know, he'd say, "Well, sure." You know, or he would call me right back with information. And I'd say, "Well, boy, thanks for getting back to me." I didn't expect this from a government, you know. He said, "Well, for one thing, you know, I'm a government—" he didn't say bureaucrat, but whatever, you know, "—and you're officially my boss." And then he got kind of quiet and he said, "For another thing I remember Evelyn." [00:57:00] I mean, it was just really pretty amazing, you know. And here I was studying investigative journalism, and this was the hottest topic. You know, so it was —. I was trying to figure out—and of course I was coming from my own place, which was like fiercely anti-nuclear. I'd been living in Washington state. We were shutting down, you know, the Satsop nuclear plant. Dixie Lee Radiation—who actually had been involved in SWE—Dixie Lee Ray had been the governor, you know. (laughs). This was the topic, and I felt like I had this amazing access to it, and I really wanted to know.

So my burning question was, had my mother's pursuit of this science killed her? There was something romantic about that, too, and—I don't know. It was very compelling, terrifically compelling. Plus I was devastated by my mother's death. I mean, "plus." Let me start with that. (laughs) Let me establish that I was

devastated by my mother's death. I still am. [00:58:00] And I just wanted to know if anything had caused it. The truth is I never found that out, and for a whole host of reasons it's probably unknowable. And ovarian cancer is not one of the cancers that jumps up when you look at either cataclysmic Hiroshima-levels of one-strike exposure, or occupational exposure. However, they haven't done that many studies of occupational exposure of women. When they start them, they don't finish them. They say, "Oh, because they get married and change their names—." You know, blah blah blah. There's no studies, yes. That doesn't mean it's not true, okay? (laughs) But anyway, I was never—and the [radiation exposure] badges. The badge data is all gone.

So that was my first impulse, but that got me into talking to all these people who were my mother's friends. Like my mother was still very friendly with this guy, Jim Fresco, who is now a retired chemistry professor at McGill [University], but he had worked with my mom. And their memories of this time were so fresh because they were all young together, and so I was able—I started doing all these oral histories. [00:59:00] It was wonderful. It just jumped off the page, and it turned into a very, I have to say a really good piece of writing, because it was a personal look at a political issue. And that taught me a lot. I teach my own students this now. If you can take a personal slice on a larger issue, if you can bring the human stories up and make them real and believable, and the reader can sort of walk through their worlds, it's just a much more effective way of telling a story. So that's what I learned from that. That became my master's thesis at Columbia. (laughs)

Through a dear friend of mine who was my advisor at Columbia, who was an editor at *Newsday*, it became a cover magazine story. And it became a little bit of a big deal. I won a big award, the Front Page Award from the Newswomen's Club of New York. It really launched my career. And I remember the day it came out. [01:00:00] It was the gay pride day in New York City, and I was covering it for New York *Newsday*. And back then the newsstands were much more—there

were many more newsstands. And the gay pride parade was going up and down Fifth Avenue. And you know, there are sort of canyons on Fifth Avenue, and it goes up and down, but there's also long straightaways. And I just remember as the crowds filtered out and it was sort of the end, I could walk—I looked out down a whole stretch of Fifth Avenue and there was my mother's face on what seemed like every corner. And it just—God, it just got me.

But I didn't come up with the title. The title they came up with is, "Did Radiation Kill Evelyn Jetter, A Daughter's Inquiry." I was, like, Whoa! That was already ready to go before I had any say about it. And you know, if I had had any say about it, I wouldn't have called it that. But it was just so amazing. That was a picture my father had taken four months before my mother died. She looked really very good. You couldn't tell that she was dying of cancer. She didn't look like that at the end. She looked much worse, but—. [01:01:00]

So that was my first take on my mother's story. And I felt like she kind of gave it to me, you know. It's like, "Here's my story, Lex." Although she was a very private person. You heard that this morning [from early SWE members at the conference]. I mean she—you know, people admired her, were in awe of her, but they didn't know her privately. And so it's been difficult for me in some ways to justify prying into the very private life of this very private person. And I still have to deal with some of those issues. There's some parts of my mom's story I have to think about whether it's my right to tell. There's no public right to know here. It's not—there's nothing easy like that.

But as I've grown older—I'm fifty-five now. I'm three years older than my mom was when she died. I'll be fifty-six next month. And as I have children, and as I wrestle with some of the same issues that my mother wrestled with—with far more resources. [01:02:00] I have far more resources and far more choices—I've come to look at her story differently. I'm also a mother. I was always the daughter, right? That was very static. And now I'm the mother, and now my kids sit at my elbow—or did—and say, "Mom, when are you coming upstairs?"

(laughs) You know, because my office is also in my basement. Although I look out on this beautiful bucolic Vermont scene out my basement window and, you know, my mom was just looking at the laundry. But I not only have more compassion for my mother—and I had never really lacked compassion—but I have a sense of the struggle. I mean, I struggle with it and, my God, I have so many advantages and privileges. What she must have felt like, I can only imagine. And I don't have to imagine. That's the thing—is that she wrote it all down. I just have to find it all and race ahead of the mold. (laughs) [01:03:00]

My story now is less a biography. You know, the panel today [at the SWE conference] was called "biographers," and clearly Dick [Bourgeois-Doyle] is a biographer. And help me—

TE: Jane [Lancaster].

AJ: Jane is a biographer, and Margaret [Rossiter] in her own way is this sort of the ultimate biographer. I'm not writing a biography of my mother. I think I might have started with that. I'm writing a memoir—which is very different—in which my mother and I are separate but meshed. And I'm trying to learn something about her as I'm learning something about myself, and it's refracted through the fact that I'm not only a daughter, but I'm a mother. And I have a daughter who has her own ideas, who is named after my mother. All three of us are writers. My daughter is only 17, but she's a pretty wonderful little writer. And I'm just left to—what interests me now is memory and what you do with it. [01:04:00] I'm interested in what actually happened, to whatever extent I can nail that. I'm still that much of a journalist, I want to know that. But ultimately I'm more interested about what we remember, or how we remember, and how it shapes us. And that's what I'm left with in my mother's story.

TE: Okay. Is there anything else you would like to add?

AJ: I think my mother's story is rooted in SWE. I think there's many years in which my mom's story—because she was part of the founding group. She was part of that group that met at that restaurant wherever it was [in New York City in 1949]. And she was excited and, you know, she spoke to high school kids, and she spoke to all kinds of groups. And she had that sort of missionary zeal that they all had. [01:05:00] I mean, my mother was totally not religious, but I would say she brought a missionary zeal, as these women did, to—. Because, my God. I mean, there were so few of them [women engineers], but they knew that there was this hunger out there and they wanted to feed it. And they knew that there were wrong things happening. And, you know, my mother wrote this letter to the *Scientific American* saying, "You know, you're forgetting a very big part of the missing engineers, and there's women, you know." It's like, how could people write whole big things and not even mention that? She had a great sense of humor, and she had a wonderful warm manner. Not confrontational, but direct, you know. As people who worked with her at the AEC said, if you were sloppy with your measurements she'd let you know it, you know? Very high standards.

So the S-W-E—the women she met through that, and men, were really an important part of what formed her, I think. [01:06:00] And to feel that there were these other women who were also so excited about this new world, the scientific world, this rational world. And I think because it was a world that hadn't included women, I think they felt a real responsibility for representing women, in a way. And I think they did a really good job with it, a really, really good job with it. I'm interested in some of the untold stories about that, you know. We heard a little bit of that today, how you had to dress a certain way, you had to wear a certain pin. You know, there's untold stories.

Then my mother's story diverged from SWE, and no longer contributes to the SWE sort of story. But what was important to us as kids, and continues to be important—I mean my siblings are thrilled that I'm at this conference. They want me to sop up everything. Like, "There's still SWE? What are they doing?" I'm

going to go home and tell them there are these women there—there's like, what is it, six thousand [attendees]?

TE: Over sixty-five hundred this year, easily. [01:07:00]

AJ: Here at the conference?

TE: Here at the conference.

AJ: I mean it is amazing. It's like waking up in this other world and suddenly —. And they're all wearing these SWE things [branded items], and —. (laughs) You know, it's like being in a parallel universe. I mean SWE was just these few women, you know, these pioneers. And you know, we were always so proud, but it's so disconnected for us. It's not in my mother's life, and she's been gone for thirty-three years, or something like that. Thirty-four this year. But it was from an early time in her life. And to suddenly see all these young, beautiful, vibrant women, you know—all with their little whatever, their [SWE-branded] paraphernalia, and their little placards running around. It's like, Oh my God, if my mother could see this she would be [with emotion] really happy. It's what she wanted. I don't think she could ever imagine this. [01:08:00] And it's what they wanted. They didn't want girls to be discouraged, you know.

And I don't think my mother was actually ever discouraged. She never claimed she was. But to see this whole world of people, of women, is just—I don't know if they take it for granted. I mean, my mother would like them to take it for granted. I mean, I think my mother wouldn't be one of those people who'd say, you know, "You should be thankful for what we did." I think she just—she always expected to be treated fairly. And I think she was treated fairly, by and large. And so she'd be thrilled that there's all these women running around with no chip on their shoulders. (laughs) I mean, which is sort of the tension for me with the Matilda Effect—which is absolutely true, absolutely true, no doubt about it. My mother was probably an anomaly. But it's really great to be the daughter of an anomaly,

not to have been raised on the sense of opportunities denied, you know. [01:09:00] Awards or—my mother didn't care about awards, by the way—but you know, recognition denied or overlooked.

I mean, it's really great to be raised by someone who lives a life. My parents always said, "Whatever you do, do creative work." Whatever that means. That work should be something that's creative and fun. Now, they went too far with that. They worked way too hard, and they worked way too many hours, and there was some basic stuff that, you know, I wish they had done differently. But that's a real gift. And to get it from a father is a nice thing. To get it from your mother—you know, that's liberating, really liberating. And I feel like that's a gift, that she didn't even have to say. We just watched her. We just watched her. We didn't become engineers, but that wasn't ultimately the message. [01:10:00] The message was, Go where your heart takes you. Go where your mind and imagination take you. And if you can, have kids because they're fun, you know.

TE: Alright. Well thank you very much.

AJ: Oh, you're welcome. I'm sorry I'm all worked up. (laughs)

TE: I want to thank you so much for doing this interview —

AJ: Oh, sure.

TE: — for sharing more about your mother's story. And I look forward to your book—

AJ: Oh, thank you.

TE: —when it makes it to press.

AJ: Okay well thank you. I think it will. And I want to thank SWE. I want to thank you, Troy, because it just—it's easy to feel alone with this story. And to have been in touch with you, and your saying, "Oh, well there's this, and there's this [in SWE's archives]." And I was like, Oh my God, you know. I'm not off on some, like, lonely

planet. (laughs) You know, there's a whole world that, for one thing still exists, and exists in a much more vitality than I could have imagined. [01:11:00] But that there's a home for my mother's story, and that you kept giving me stuff about Bea and other people. I mean, it didn't have to be that much. It was just enough for me to have a context, and that was mother's milk, you know. It just enabled me to go, Oh, that's where that belongs, or that's what that's from. Or, you know these names. You saw me this morning just running these names past these people [at the conference]. I imagine that's what people do who are really old. I mean, I'm not that old, but to feel like, Oh, yeah, I know who Lillian Murad was. Or, Oh yeah, I knew who Dot Merrill was. I mean, they don't even have to know that much. Just to feel like—it must be what war veterans feel like. Not to compare my experience to that, but just to know that other people know what you're talking about. For us it was always semi-mystical, you know. This lodges it in time and place and makes it real. [01:12:00] And as a journalist and as a storyteller it just rounds out the picture so much for me. And it helps me write my book.

TE: I'm glad that SWE's archives can help do that. And I think that your mother's story—and the stories of a lot different SWE members—they help to round out SWE's history. Because these are the people who created the Society, who formed it, who help set its direction. And sometimes that story doesn't come through completely in, you know, in the meeting minutes. (laughs) So —

AJ: Oh, well, not at all. I have a lot of those meeting minutes, but I have some other stuff. And you know, this doesn't need to be on tape—.

END OF INTERVIEW