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Interview of Patricia S. Levinson by Arthur Aufses, Jr., MD

11/17/98

AUFSES: Today is Tuesday, 11-17-98. This is Arthur Aufses. I am sitting with Mrs. Levinson, who is a member of our Board of Trustees and who has been the President of the Auxiliary Board in the past and we are here to talk about her reminiscences and how she came other Mount Sinai and the Auxiliary Board. So, Pat, why don't you just go ahead and start.

LEVINSON: Well, in 1961 I got a telephone call from Marty Herman, asking me if I would be interested in joining the Auxiliary Board and learning more about the hospital and all of those welcoming, nice things one says. And I remember that I had two and a half children at that time-I had a third later one- and my biggest concern was that if this board met on Tuesdays, what would I do if my nanny didn't show up, and I couldn't come? And today, that seems such an unreasonable question. But in those days, when you joined the Auxiliary Board, you were expected to be there on Tuesdays. So I joined the Auxiliary Board.

AUFSES: Let me interrupt you, as I will from time to time, to go back. Had you ever had any involvement with any health care facility other than perhaps as a patient and having children?

LEVINSON: In 1960, Marty Herman had asked me if I would be interested on going on the Blythedale Children's Hospital Board. And that was the only other board activity that I knew anything about. I did join the Blythedale Children's Hospital Board. I certainly grew up in a family where service to one's community was rated a very high priority, and so it just seemed to be of a piece of it, that I would do that.

AUFSES: However, from your answer, you never were involved in the health care industry in any way?

LEVINSON: That is absolutely true.

AUFSES: What was your background?

LEVINSON: Well, I grew up in New York City, went to school in New York City, briefly went to college in Connecticut, then came back to New York City to finish some schooling, got married, had three children and the rest is history.

AUFSES: How did Marty know about you or know of you, or know you?

LEVINSON: Well, I guess I grew up on Marty's knee. Marty and her husband were my parents' closest friends, and so when she was casting a net for Mount Sinai, and I guess for Blythedale, it was obvious to ask the children of friends.

AUFSES: I heard before that one does not ask to get on the Auxiliary Board; one is asked to join the Board. It sounds as though that statement is correct.

LEVINSON: Oh, in those days, that definitely was true and certainly I was young and wouldn't even have thought about it. As a matter of fact, I went for my interview with the chairman of the Nominating Committee, Mrs. Arthur Cohen, Nellie, in her apartment, which coincidentally was across the hall from the apartment that I came home to from having been born at Doctors Hospital. So that seemed like a nice circle.

AUFSES: Small world.

LEVINSON: Exactly.

AUFSES: And what year did you join the Board?

LEVINSON: I joined it in 1961.

AUFSES: So you have been on it for 37 years.

LEVINSON: My goodness, yes.

AUFSES: When you first joined the Board, what were the activities that the other members of the Board participated in, and what did you get into specifically?

LEVINSON: Well, it is an interesting question because, in fact, initially, it was a struggle for me to find a niche. The Board meetings were interesting and very well attended. And parenthetically, I have to say that not only did people smoke at the Board meetings, but in fact they did needlepoint and knitting. And when I think back on that now, I think it is quite amazing. It wasn't easy in the beginning. There were one or two people of my age. It grew a little bit in terms of having a cohort of people my age. But, in fact, I floundered. And it was really Doris Siegel, who then was director of the Department of Social Work Services and therefore the liaison or the consultant advisor to the Auxiliary Board, that took all of us in hand and started to give us a real in-depth education on health care, social services, and what the Auxiliary Board had the potential to do. But it took even longer and it didn't really happen until Helen Rehr succeeded Doris that we began -or I began - to find activities that were really engrossing. So, in the beginning I did things like United Hospital fund raising, which was an expectation at that time for the Auxiliary Board members to do. And babies alumnae. As a matter of fact, eventually I rose high up in the ranks so that I found myself taking babies alumnae material home on weekends and summers and doing it all by hand myself. So, I am being facetious, of course; it wasn't engrossing work really until Helen came along and we found lots of ways to get engaged.

AUFSES: Such as?

LEVINSON: Although there had been a nascent Legislative Committee chaired by Sue Cullman - and I have to say, I have been more reminded of that than I think I was aware of - Helen asked me if I wanted to start up a Legislative Committee and that became a big involvement. We had a committee. We had staff. We did education. We did information. We did some lobbying. We eventually developed some really amazing programs that our representative in Washington helped us design. And we had a number of Legislative Aides Days here in New York City, based here in New York City at Mount Sinai, that involved not only the President of the Hospital, Sam Davis at the time, and the Dean of the medical school, and I guess President of the Medical Center, Tom Chalmers, but a number of physicians and professionals that enabled legislative aides to understand the complexity of providing health care by bringing them to an on site provider and spending an intense day with them.

AUFSES: Were you able to see any tangible benefits from that?

LEVINSON: I don't know that I could describe them, but there was no doubt that the Medical Center found it so successful that they encouraged us to continue sponsoring and organizing; and in those days, although staff was involved, we rolled up our own sleeves and did all the work ourselves. There was a time in the late 1970's where we had maybe six or seven members of the Board who were very interested in pursuing; I will call it,

cerebral, intellectual kinds of activities. And so it wasn't difficult to get volunteers from the Board to work on these different activities.

AUFSES: When you joined the Board in 1961, how many members were there, roughly?

LEVINSON: Gee, I don't have any idea. Maybe thirty, maybe forty; I'm not really sure. I've got great mental pictures of what Edith Sachs looked like with her rakish cigarette dangling from her mouth, and her great pride in the Green Box, which was an offshoot of the rehabilitation workshop. When I came on, I guess Henrietta Wile was President. I had just missed Helen Benjamin in her tenure. However, I was really fortunate, because I grew to know Helen Benjamin somewhat. She was a very private woman, but a very engaging human being. So, although she wasn't President during the time that I have been on the Board, I certainly benefited, I hope, from her wisdom and her demeanor.

AUFSES: I think you couldn't help but meet her, and to meet her was to know her.

LEVINSON: You got it.

AUFSES: At some point, though, you got into and got involved with issues regarding patient care. Tell me about that.

LEVINSON: Well, the strength of the Auxiliary Board has always been, and I hope it always will be, its close relationship with the Department of Social Work Services. In the old days, we had a monthly case presentation by the Social Work Service Department. And, as a matter of fact, initially you had to be on the committee in order to hear these presentations. And I remember asking if I could join that committee and I was told no way, that I wasn't seasoned enough, nor ready, nor sensitive enough to join that committee. So I put my tail between my legs and I left the table, and I had to wait until either it was open to the full Board or I eventually got invited onto the Committee.

So, certainly there have been 36 years - maybe 34 years, 30 years, whatever - of being sensitized to patient care problems via the Department of Social Work Services. It was also [] I guess during Doris Segal's time, but in fact I don't think I would have been on that committee, but I did join it during Helen Rehr's time. Then Gary [Rosenberg] ran it for a while, where once a month on Mondays, what was considered the leadership of the Board spent at least an hour with Helen and then later on with Gary getting some greater insight into the problems of the Hospital, and really how they related to patient care by the Department of Social Work Services.

AUFSES: Tell me a little bit about your climb up the corporate ladder of the Auxiliary Board League, culminating in your becoming the President.

LEVINSON: Well, we had an interesting track. I think everybody has either been a secretary or a treasurer, then a Vice President and a President. I was treasurer for four years, which astonishes me, given my lack of financial understanding. I can do a checkbook very well, but the rest is all a mystery to me. Nevertheless, I was treasurer at a time when, under Ruth Klein's Presidency and Helen Rehr's being Director of the Department and therefore our advisor, we brought to the full Auxiliary Board a greater understanding of what our finances were comprised of. And there was a major overhaul on how we worked with the Department of Finance and how we took ownership of our own funds. It wasn't so much that we watched the daily investment, but we certainly set policy on how we wanted to be invested. We took some of our funds out of the Hospital pool in order to invest them in ways that were more beneficial to us. And by and large, we charged ourselves with a great responsibility for watching our funds and we had considerable funds. We have considerable funds.

AUFSES: What were the years that, when you were the treasurer, roughly ... ?

LEVINSON: Well, let's see. I became President in 1981. Then there were four years where I was Vice President, and then there were four years when I was treasurer.

AUFSES: So that was in the middle seventies, from 1973 through 1977.

LEVINSON: Thank you, Arthur.

AUFSES: OK. When you were asked to become Vice President, knowing that you would then become President, what were your thoughts about how you would change or take, or direct the Board that might have been a little different or unique from what it had been?

LEVINSON: Well, it is an interesting question, but I am not sure that I know how to answer that. I certainly was concerned that I be able to carry a very high standard. Jane Aron, who I haven't even mentioned, was certainly a major mentor of mine. I had known Jane's family all of my life, so that there was a very close, easy relationship.

And, as a matter of fact, if I can go back a little bit, I have to tell you that some of my colleagues and I misbehaved dreadfully at Board meetings. If I talked about knitting and smoking, what I didn't mention was an absolute mail service of notes that got passed around the table. And some of those notes brought on fits of laughter and there were a number of us who really misbehaved. And one day, Jane Aron came to me and said she wanted to talk to me and another Board member who I don't want to mention. I think the three of us went out together, and she asked us if we were a) going to take it seriously and b) if we were going to grow up. Well, that did it. She was light of touch but she was very serious. This Hospital meant a great deal to her, and she wasn't going to see the future leadership dissipate the responsibility and really, the standard of the Auxiliary Board. Anyway, so I guess that we did grow up.

And you asked me how I felt about it. I was concerned because Jane had done a very good job and Ruth Klein really put us on the map. And then Mary Wolf was President and did a remarkable job of leadership and bringing intellectual clarity to the Board. So, I followed in the footsteps of people who had really left quite a footprint. As I alluded to earlier, I was very lucky. During my presidency, I had a core of women who I respected tremendously, who certainly could have been President as easily as I, but who had not either had the time nor quite the interest that I had in devoting as much time as the presidency takes, but nevertheless who supported me. I call them the Halcyon days of the Board.

AUFSES: Who were some of those people?

LEVINSON: There was a remarkable young woman who now lives in Texas by the name of Susie Greenman. Bright, intellectually curious and extreme capable. Ann Israel, who today has returned to New Orleans, and is President of Tulane Medical Center, was a dynamic worker and a thorough researcher. There was a woman And I am not really giving Ann her full due. Because really, as a group, we were all able to produce products that we were very proud of. There was a woman by the name of Ellen Davidowitz, who left the Board to take a full time position in a travel agency. Ellen, again, intellectually curious, able to produce a great product and delightful to work with. It was Mary Wolf and I may be leaving some out.

AUFSES: You mentioned the issue of time. How much time does the President have to spend on activities of the Board?

LEVINSON: Well, I would say easily three days a week, and it could have been more, just really depending on what was going on, and what we were trying to either present or write up, or produce. It was flexible. But it was easily three days a week.

AUFSES: What were some of the programs that you instituted while you were President?

LEVINSON: Well, again I'm not sure if I was President or responsible for producing them. But we, during Social Work Care rounds, learned about the need for home care. Now, home care in those days, and again I am not quite sure of the time frame, although I think it was... I guess I wasn't President. Anyway, whether or not I was ... A group of us became very interested in what is now called the "continuum of care", and we were aware that home care was somewhat of a stepchild but still nevertheless important for patient care, and a small part of the hospital operation. And we went to Sam Davis, a group of us and asked if we could put on a program, and look at the possibilities for the development of home care. And he said he wasn't eager for us to do that because it would raise consciousness and expectations, and if we promised that we would do it in a low keyed fashion, okay, he would give us his blessing. We interviewed all the people who played a role in home care from the small, maybe then called the department, but I am not sure that it was, to members of nursing and finance and Social Services, and they all looked at us blankly and said, "Yes we participate, but we have never talked to each other about it. We are all separate pieces."

So we put on a round table, which in fact was the first and only time at that moment where all the different elements of home care got together and talked to each other, to a public audience, and discovered many ways that they would like to work more together and could work better together, and we produced a paper from that round table called "Home Health Care Comes Home" or "Health Care Comes Home" - I have forgotten exactly the title - and we dispensed that paper broadly, and I think may very well had had to do a lot with the growth of the department.

AUFSES: Home care is now a very major part of Mount Sinai and its patient care activities. Was that paper published? Was it in a journal?

LEVINSON: I don't think so. I believe that a social worker who then worked with home care used this event and our activity and our involvement with home care in a paper that she did have published around issues of lay and professional staff working together.

AUFSES: Sound to me like the Auxiliary Board was rather prescient in coming up with something long ahead of its time.

LEVINSON: We had another very interesting event that took placecertainly more than once. Whether they happened more than twice, I don't remember. Dr. Pomrinse, David, when he was President and you, Arthur, will know the years, I don't remember them [Director of MSH, 1969-75],... either agreed or sought us out as an avenue to educate the community, and I say that very broadly, on Medicaid coverage. So I am now talking late Sixties. And we ran for David, I am sure working with Barbara Brenner, because Barbara joined the Legislative Committee at the time she was a student from Hunter, or maybe it was Columbia, but I think it was Hunter and then stayed with the Committee for many, many years, and guided us, and she was an extraordinary advisor. But we set up and ran public forums, which included everything from getting out onto the street and advertising it, a forum at the hospital in the old Guggenheim Pavilion [Blumenthal Auditorium]; I think there was a large stage. And speakers, of course David Pomrinse, but others who addressed Medicaid coverage, not only for in-hospital people - doctors and administrators - but members of the community, in order to enroll them.

The other thing that I didn't say in my earlier comments about our Legislative Aides Day, but what comes to mind when I described these forums around Medicaid coverage, was that the Auxiliary Board had an opportunity and seized it to be the sponsor of programs that were technically run by lay people, and therefore did not involve the Hospital in lobbying. And that was, and I think remains, a very important issue.

So the more knowledgeable we became, and the more interested we became, it was an easy segue into running different programs, and that was very key in our inviting legislative aides from Washington and then later doing days for legislative aides from Albany, that we, as a lay group, were inviting, and it gave enough of an arm's length for the Hospital to feel comfortable.

I think another thing that I probably didn't emphasize was that, when you asked me about patient care, and that is that I think working with the Department of Social Work Services gave any of us who wanted it a window onto the community and the community's problems. There was a very active committee chaired by a member of the Department of Social Work Services, Annette Daniels, and I think she was responsible for outpatient services for the department. And she set up an East Harlem coordinating committee which any number of us joined. We eventually had assignments and I worked on eye screening program up at 108th Street. It is now a movie studio, but at that time it was a public school. It may very well be a public school again, I am not sure. But, again, it gave me an opportunity to work with members of the Harlem community and providers from Mount Sinai and lay people like me, to work together to accomplish something that the Hospital thought was needed for the community, in this case eye screening, and other members of the Auxiliary Board worked on different aspects of this program. What I wanted to emphasize is that it is very easy for us on the Auxiliary Board to be familiar with problems of health care for "the carriage trade", but working on the Auxiliary Board, being a member of the Auxiliary Board, gives us a remarkable opportunity to understand and be appreciative of the problems of access for members of the various communities that we served.

AUFSES: You are not the first person who has said that into this microphone.

LEVINSON: I am gladly to hear it. I am not surprised.

AUFSES: You were President, therefore, from about 1981 to 1985.

LEVINSON: Exactly.

AUFSES: During that time, you sat on the Board of Trustees as the liaison and now you are still on the Board of Trustees. When did you make the switch from the representative from the Auxiliary Board to full Trustee?

LEVINSON: Well, in 1985 when I finished my term of office, I was invited to stay on the Board of Trustees, and I was very pleased and very honored to be asked, and I have been on ever since. But I have to say that Alfred Stern, who was President at the time that I went on ex officio, was very interested in building up committees of the Board, and he not only put me onto the Patient Care Committee, but what was then called the Quality Assurance Committee, which has gone through many iterations. But he also asked if I would chair a Government Relations committee. Well, to say that that made me nervous is an understatement. But, in fact, it was very easy to do. Not only was I fabulously staffed, but Alfred asked other people to join the committee who were really more sophisticated and involved in government liaison work with either Washington or Albany. And, in fact, this committee really provided Alfred and others to convene around issues of concern for the Medical Center, and I was just able there to chair meetings. Eventually, I guess... maybe at the same time, I am not sure.... [I was] asked if I would be on the Government Community Relations Committee and then many, many years later was asked if I would chair the Student Affairs Committee.

Now, one reason for all of this explanation is that as an ex officio member of the Board of Trustees representing the Auxiliary Board, I was invited and was a full member of the Executive Committee. At that time, and up until just recently, anyone who, if you chaired a committee, you were automatically on the Executive Committee. Once I stepped down, and then had Government Relations, or maybe I didn't then, I can't remember But I did chair the Government Community Relations Committee and stayed on the Executive Committee. I can't remember what happened next, but I remember Fred Klingenstein calling and telling me I had to step down from some committee chair because my five years were up, and at that time there was a real emphasis to keep it moving. And he asked me if I would - he assumed I would like to stay on the Executive Committee, which I appreciated, and asked if I would chair the Student Affairs Committee, and I said, 'Well, fine but I am not even a member of it and I don't know anything about it.' And I would just summarize it by saying that my involvement with the Student Affairs Committee has been, as it has for others, a joy having the opportunity to talk and get to know students and get a sense of what that experience is like, and interface with people like Terry Krulwich and others has just been a joy.

AUFSES: Does that committee involve itself with house staff also, or is there a House Staff Affairs Committee on the Board?

LEVINSON: No, I don't think that there is.

AUFSES: It sounds to me that there is a need here, that there is a gap, and I have heard this before also, that students get taken care of, doctors get taken care of, everybody gets taken care of, but there is nobody looking after the house staff at the Board level, and it is something that you might want to take back to the Board, because they are one of our most important products. They are transient guests at Mount Sinai, but so are the students.

LEVINSON: Absolutely.

AUFSES: And actually, I was talking with Jean Crystal about that also that she was talking about where some of the Board's funds might go, and I said to the support of house staff in terms of developing a support system for them. There really is none; there is no formalized support system, whereas there is for the students.

LEVINSON: I think it is interesting and I am sure that Barry Stimmel would be very pleased to hear this, or interested in working on it.

AUFSES: Let's come back to the Auxiliary Board. You gave up the Presidency in 1985. Who succeeded you?

LEVINSON: Edie Schur.

AUFSES: She is on my list also.

LEVINSON: I am sure she is. And then after Edie, of course, Karen. And now Jean Crystal.

AUFSES: What are you involved with now with the Auxiliary Board?

LEVINSON: Well, I think for a period of time, I went back to being treasurer. I was treasurer again, starting another cycle. And, subsequently, I have been chairing what we now call a Health Care Policy Committee. And it is different than it had been in the old days. We are much more into simply informing Auxiliary Board members of issues that we think need more in-depth discussion than we have time for at the Board meeting. We haven't had any roll up the sleeve activity. The Board has changed over the years, and it is very

interesting, because I find the Board members today just as involved in the Hospital but in a different way. And many of them, most of them, have really their own areas that they spend time on, rather than on putting together a Medicaid information thing. But it works very well, although I think Jean is looking for activities that we could coalesce around. I think they are cyclical.

AUFSES: Well, I think if you look at the history of the Board, which is now almost 85 years old I think it started as The Ladies Auxiliary Society or something like that [the Social Service Auxiliary] It has gone through several different cycles of evolution, which is perfectly normal. But let me put that question to you: Where do you see the Board going over the next ten years or fifteen years into the 21st century?

LEVINSON: Well, I don't know that my answer really addresses your question, but I would hope certainly that we stay forever sensitive and aware of the needs around access to health care, and I think that it will be more encompassing than what I refer to as "the community". I think everyone is going to have problems accessing [health care], and I think this is a body of people who are knowledgeable, and if they aren't knowledgeable, they can become so, and [they] will be more able to be, really, the spokesmen around these issues, which are very complicated.

AUFSES: And not getting any easier.

LEVINSON: Not getting any easier.

AUFSES: At the very beginning, you were invited to join the Board. Who had you invited to join the Board, or is the whole process somewhat different now?

LEVINSON: I don't think it is very different actually. But the whole issue around inviting people to join the Board is done through the Nominating Committee.

AUFSES: Who are some of the people that you would take pride in having recruited? Let's put it that way.

LEVINSON: Arthur, I don't know that I recruited anyone other than maybe very recently, Ann Herman [?]. But I would say that I have taken great pleasure in working with new Board members and engaging them and giving them a feeling of comfort on the Board.

AUFSES: You have been a mentor to many. If you had to do it all over again, would you join this Board, somebody else's board, or no board at all?

LEVINSON: Oh, no. This is a great Board. It is stimulating. When people talk to me about Mount Sinai, and this goes beyond the Auxiliary Board except that it is such an important kernel on the whole issue, this is the most stimulating environment to work in. It is challenging and gosh knows, it can be stressful, but it is really an exciting environment, and I consider myself really blessed and fortunate to have this environment to learn, live and grow up in.

AUFSES: This might be a good place to stop. Thank you very much for taking the time to be with us.

LEVINSON: Thank you, Arthur.