

Ruth Calkin Neham

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by

JonLee Joseph

Ruth Culkin Neham

Interviewed by: JonLee Joseph

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1st Oral Interview

JonLee: I'll be interviewing Ruth Calkin Neham at her home in North Seattle. Ruth would you tell me, please, what brought you and your family to High Point Housing?

Ruth: Well, Arthur came back from the Navy and was going to back to the University. And the University housing was full. There was no housing. I think we went to a place in, on the Eastside, Kirkland. But, it was, we didn't have a car at that time. It was too far. And, so, we found out about High Point and came here and lived here. There were quite a number of students.

JonLee: Now, this was in the 40's after the War, wasn't it?

Ruth: What year would that be? [pause] Hmm, '46, '47, somewhere in there, yeah.

JonLee: And, when you were there, did you already have two small children?

Ruth: No, no. Dale, Dale was, how old was Dale? Maybe two, something like that, yeah.

JonLee: And Kathy came later?

Ruth: Kathy was five years younger than Dale.

JonLee: So, while you were living at High Point, Arthur, your husband, commuted to the University of Washington, in engineering?

Ruth: Yeah, yeah.

JonLee: And with your mobility limited to taking the buses or getting rides?

Ruth: He took the buses when he had to and then later on we had a car, so that was better.

JonLee: Now, did you say that you were part of starting a pre-school with the schools? Would you talk about that please?

Ruth: Yeah, well, the schools at that time had, they had parent pre-schools and parents participated in pre-schools. And they started one here. I was the teacher of the one that they started in High Point. First teacher there.

JonLee: So, what was that like?

Ruth: Well--

JonLee: Was it run as a cooperative?

Ruth: Co-Op, cooperative, yeah. Couple of things that were, I found most interesting. And something came up the other night and I recalled it. I

was the first pre-school teacher that took in handicapped children, or other than Caucasian, children. And all other schools just, you know, started doing it. But I was the first school, the first pre-school that did it. So I had--

JonLee: Did you have expert help, to help you with the management of the--

Ruth: No, 'cause mothers, other mothers participated, that's where the help came from.

JonLee: What made you decide to change that? There must have been an existing policy.

Ruth: Regarding?

JonLee: Regarding other races and--

Ruth: No, I don't think so. It was just the way things were done, you know. But, it started in our, in the pre-school that we had. One of the mothers had a handicapped child. Do you remember Jean Huntley(?) and her son, what was her son's name? That beautiful young guy. Well, whatever it was, it was a difficult name, at any rate. Aaron(?). Was profoundly handicapped. All he could do was move a finger, one finger, the pointing finger on his right hand, that's all he could move. Totally disabled child. Bright, beautiful. And her son was in pre-school. And one day, I went by the wheelchair where he sat and I felt a flicker on my leg. I wondered where that came from. And I went back again, a flicker on my leg. I looked at Jean Huntley and said, "Did he do that?!" She said, "Yeah." That one little finger, he flicked. Now, up until then I didn't know whether he was paying attention to me or knew me or

liked what he was doing. But he liked it and he was part of it and he, I adored that little boy right from the very beginning. And he was very much a part of coming to the school. His mother was very active in it. And he was a darling little, bright little boy. Totally unable to do anything. Not talk, not swallow, not eat by himself, not do a thing except move that one finger. And as years went by, what he did with that one finger! Unbelievable.

JonLee: What? What are some of the things he did?

Ruth: He learned to type with that one finger. And, which gave him, he could communicate. Now, years later, I had gone, I came back to Seattle and he was living at this handicapped home, not far from here. And he was going to school. And I was going to walk him through school. (University) I was going to push him, you know, from class to class. And, so I used to go there, to the house there, and read to him and talk about his classes and do whatever was necessary. And he would type, with that one finger, he would type. And when I came in, he would lift his eyes. Oh, he could move his eyes, right to left, and up. He'd indicate that there was something up above, there was, pinned up on the bulletin board. And it would be a note, a typed note, that I would know what he wanted to talk about or what he wanted to do, or whatever was going on in his mind. And that's how, you know. Then, then I was learning Morse Code because he used his eyes, to use, he could use, had learned Morse Code. To the left was, was, you know, to the right and end of sentence, he'd look up. And I was learning to speak, to, you know, Morse Code, so I could communicate with him. And his mother had learned some. And [laughs] his mother had a, she used a shortcut. He'd spell out a word and she'd stop, you know, she knew, maybe it was a word that you could stop him in the middle, you

know, and she'd come up. And I tried doing that but I wasn't nearly as good as she was. And if I did it wrong, that guy would [laughs]. You knew, you knew!! That it was wrong and he gave you such a look! He was a wonderful young man.

JonLee: He had Cerebral Palsy?

Ruth: Cerebral Palsy.

JonLee: Is he still alive?

Ruth: No, unfortunately, he died.

JonLee: This is recent isn't it?

Ruth: No, no, he died quite a few years ago. Heartbreaking. Heartbreaking, heartbreaking. He got a, his folks were back East and I was in charge of him. So I would you know, go over to the school, make sure everything was taken care of for him. And one day I came there and he was not well. He had a cold. And he really was not well. You know, he had no chest, his chest, there was nothing to him. It was [inaudible] certainly in his chest. And I didn't know whether to phone his folks or to get in touch with them or what, what to do. Well, if it was my child, I'd want to know. So I phoned his folks and I told him what happened. And they said, "Well, if he isn't too bad, we'll, you know, we'll stay till we plan to come back. You'll be in charge and you'll let us know." So we did that. At any rate. He got better. And they came home when they planned. But, unfortunately a year or two later he got a cold. And because he had, his chest was you know draughty(?) and he had, you

know, nothing there. They could not save him. There was nothing they could do for him. It was tragic.

JonLee: I want to take you back to High Point. That is where you met my mother. Can you describe how you met Betsy Jensen Detroit?

Ruth: Yes. Just a minute. You kids weren't in the play group were you?

JonLee: No. We were older.

Ruth: I think I met Betsy because we both belonged to the very first Great Books in Seattle. And we went downtown, Betsy and I, we met downtown and then later on I think they had a branch in, I'm not positive. Did they have a branch in High Point? That's how I met Betsy.

JonLee: So, you went to the book discussion group.

Ruth: Yeah. And then you kids were old--

JonLee: We were in elementary school.

Ruth: Yeah, you were young, but you weren't pre-schoolers.

JonLee: I want to ask you what you remember about High Point in terms of social organization. Did people, were people cooperative? Since I was there as a child, I don't have a lot of memory of what the adults were like. I remember the adults of the children. How would you characterize the--

Ruth: Yeah, people, those homes were close together, and people were [laughs]. I remember I had a next door neighbor, who was a great borrower [laughs]. She borrowed everything! She used to, she had a baby who, and, she just ate the yolks and she would have these whites. And when she got a dozen whites she'd make a, make a cake. What do you make?

JonLee: Angel Food Cake.

Ruth: Angel Food Cake. Now, the Angel Food Cake had everything of mine in it except the egg whites. Absolutely! The Cake pan, the sugar, you name it and she had it, she would come over and borrow from me. She never once offered me a piece of cake. [laughs] Not once! In all those years!

JonLee: Did you keep loaning to her then?

Ruth: I loaned her till I was blue in the teeth! I didn't know how to say "No," you know. You name it and she borrowed it. My pots, my pans, a this, a that. Oh! What a borrower. And I don't borrow things very much, you know, it's a rare thing for me to borrow. But, she did. She was the worst. I've never come across anybody like her.

JonLee: Now, I want to ask you something because, where my family lived, at the end of Cycle Lane, it was over the hill from where you lived. And there was a point in time then, when Joel and I were older, and we had a baby-sitter who belonged to an Evangelical kind of Christian church, Bethel Temple, which is downtown at Second and Virginia. So we used to go down to church there. And I wanted to ask you was there

any place for you to meet with your faith, if you had wanted to go to Temple or have fellowship with anyone?

Ruth: You know something. I haven't the foggiest notion. It wasn't anything that we ever thought about or was ever interested in. No. I'm Jewish. Arthur was Jewish. But what I knew about being Jewish was so slight that I never would have thought in those terms.

JonLee: Were there other Jewish people around?

Ruth: There, you know something, I'm trying to think about it. I think there was another family, and I think maybe it was in the pre-school that I met the family. I'm trying to remember. And they were, you know, quite religious, Jews But I don't know of any others, actually.

JonLee: Did you ever have any experience of people expressing any ideas about you because you were Jewish? Was anything of that nature going on in your experience in High Point?

Ruth: No. I don't think so. Because I don't look really very Jewish, and I don't know anything, you know, and I don't have, you know some of the mannerisms, what have you. I've never been taken for Jewish. In fact, people have said, "You!? Jewish! I don't believe it!" You know. But, I've always, you know, made sure, that if the subject came up. So, I didn't have any of that. But I am quite sure there was, there, because there was anti-Black there. And I can relate a little anti-Black story if you're interested. I'd just come there. We'd just come to High Point. And these people, a woman down the street came and said that a Black, there was a commotion going on because I was brand new, I didn't know what the commotion was about. But finally, one woman

came down she says, "You know," she says, "there, a Black couple want to move in across the street." And she had a petition, you see. And it was full of names. And, she came to me. And I said, "You know," I said "This place is for veterans and students. And the students are all veterans." I said, "These people, these Black people will be veterans. The husband will have been in the War," I said. "And I assure you that they belong here like all the rest of the veterans. And I don't care what color they are. If they're not nice, I would not like to have them live here. But if they're nice, there's no reason why not." And you know, the crazy thing? That petition stopped right there. It was not taken around any more. That ended it.

JonLee: Why do you think that was? Because you had them recognize that--

Ruth: Yeah!!!

JonLee: --was probably a veteran.

Ruth: Yeah!!

JonLee: --and that the war had ended--

Ruth: He was a human being and he was a veteran!!

JonLee: So, did they move in?

Ruth: Yes. They, turned out that they weren't very nice and they moved right out. But the point is that they were veterans and they had the right to live there like anybody else. Because of their color for God's sake? No!
[laughs]

JonLee: And now when you drive through there, it's large numbers of new immigrants, the Ethiopians.

Ruth: Well, where else? I haven't been there in all these years, you know. We moved out and never went back. I don't think I ever went back. But-

JonLee: I want to ask you now because you've had your two small children there and started the pre-school. How was it as a community to raise children in?

Ruth: Well, I don't know, you know. I didn't know, actually, at that time, didn't know any other. Dale turned out to be *the* popular little kid in the area. Very popular, you know. And so, that was nice, you know. Everybody liked. And then Kathy, you know, was an infant baby there. A very allergic baby and very ill. And so I didn't have much time for neighbors or anything else, I really didn't have any. And so, and I'm not very neighborly, you know, I don't coffee clutch or anything else. And so, those things didn't bother me, you see. If we wanted to do something in our family we did it. We got up and we did it. We, our life wasn't in the projects. It wasn't, not. It wasn't our life there at all.

JonLee: Okay, because as a child what I remember, for me as a child, with my brother, is my folks had a wonderful garden. In fact, my father, Nyles, grew dahlias in back. And then there was a section of woods for building camps and two very large rocks and one had a bench on it and all the kids would climb on that big rock and that was our stagecoach rock--

Ruth: Of course!

JonLee: -- that we rode for hours.

Ruth: Of course!

JonLee: And you baby-sat my brother and I and you had woods--

Ruth: We were the last building there and then went steep down to, you know, to a ravine at the bottom. Yes, and it was woodsy. It was very pretty.

JonLee: It was a wonderful place to play.

Ruth: Beautiful spot. Yeah. We had a lot of room around.

JonLee: As a child, that's what I remember there was a--

Ruth: --trees and--

JonLee: --High Point playground area nearby and the library and community center. It was a good place.

Ruth: Yeah, yeah, it had all of that.

JonLee: And I lived there until I was in --

Ruth: And good school. I had a lot to do with the school because the nursery school, the pre-school was right in school, in the school area, part of the school area. And that's, I got to know the teachers, the principal,

you know, it was part of that school. And it was very nice. And it, as you say, a library and other things. They, and, you know, they had things for children. Sunday school, there, for kids that went to Sunday school.

JonLee: When you were the pre-school teacher, were your children then in kindergarten?

Ruth: Dale would be in kindergarten and Kathy, yeah, yeah.

JonLee: How did you go grocery shopping?

Ruth: Well, there were stores, you know.

JonLee: But they were quite a ways a way.

Ruth: Yeah, well, you know, Jack had a car, Dale, Arthur, had a car then and we would shop, you know.

JonLee: So then, I remember him sitting in the living room of your house with a goose neck lamp, his desk faced the wall. And that's how, that's where he studied.

Ruth: No. He studied in the bedroom. He, he studied, that bedroom was where he studied. And he would come home, have dinner and go to the bedroom and you didn't see him until midnight. And he was a smoker, like nobody else in the world was a smoker, and I, [laughs] think of all that second hand smoke that I slept in all the time, you know! But we didn't know about it in those days. No, he went to the bedroom where it was quiet and peaceful and he studied his head off.

JonLee: Now, when he finished with school he was an engineer and then did he work at Boeing?

Ruth: No. No.

JonLee: Then, when he finished with school, were you able to move out of the projects?

Ruth: We moved out and we went to California.

JonLee: That's that. And then that was about '50's.

Ruth: Now, when was it that we went to California. '50, '56.

JonLee: So how would you characterize the years? You must have lived there a good ten years. How would you characterize those years, because you saw a lot of changes from the end of the War and Arthur being in school, and two small babies to raise.

Ruth: Well, see the War was over then. Well, Dale wasn't a baby, you know, he was five when Kathy was born, or just about five. And, [pause] oh, Kathy was such a, I had to pour so much into Kathy, because, as I say, she was born so allergic and I didn't want to lose her, you know, so it was a twenty-four hour job for the first year of her life to keep her alive. Because she couldn't eat food and couldn't drink milk and couldn't, you know, it was very, brought up on meat. So it was very difficult, so that was what I concentrated on there. And I remember Dale saying, "All we have to worry about is--" [pauses to think] "All we have to worry about is cooperating and the formula." [laughs] I must have said to him,

"We've got to cooperate." And, you know, I was always changing her formula, trying, in the first years of her life, her formula, oh god, you know, trying to keep her alive, to feed her.

JonLee: For myself and my relationship with you, I want to thank you for the kindness with, how you treated my brother and I.

Ruth: Oh, you were good--

JonLee: It was lovely.

Ruth: You were good kids. And you know, I adored kids. Absolutely adored kids.

JonLee: It was lovely thank you.

Ruth: You were good, you were swell kids, I liked you.

JonLee: Oh, thank you. I don't have any other questions, do you?

Ruth: No!

JonLee: Okay, then I thank you very much.

Ruth: Yeah, well you're very welcome. [laughs] That was easy. [laughs] But you know, I think, people may have had a life there, you know, but it wasn't exactly, what, you know, Jack, Arthur and I had our life in other areas, you know, school, you know, if we had a social life it was at the University, you know, or what have you. Or, I spent, I was in

Vancouver, B.C. with my family, whenever, Christmas and Holidays
and that sort of thing. So my life was not in High Point. No, no.

End of Interview.