

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

ARTHUR LEVIN

By Sarah Dzedzic

New York, NY

July 11, 2018

Oral History Interview with Arthur Levin, July 11, 2018

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Arthur Levin, Photo by Sarah Dzedzic

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Arthur Levin

Sound-bite

“I’m Art Levin. I’m President of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, been a trustee for probably around two decades, but president for the last seven years now, actually. And I’ve lived in the Village most of my adult life. I grew up in New York, born in Lenox Hill Hospital, but I grew up on the Upper West Side. And then, at the beginning of World War II, we moved to Central Park West, where I lived the rest of my young years in New York. I bought this house that I live in now in 1969, ’70. And I’ve lived on this block ever since...

So how did I get to the Village from the Upper West Side? So when I was in high school, maybe junior or senior year, a classmate who lived down here...invited me and another kid down for overnight, spend the day. [01:14:55] And in the day we went to Washington Square Park and played handball against the Arch, and that experience somehow cemented—was really indelibly was in my head. I mean, I didn’t even see that much of the Village. But obviously something in me said, ‘This is where you want to live.’ And so, I always tell people that story... And I remember having a hell of a good time, and really having memories of Washington Square Park and that day we spent. And, so I go back to that and say that’s sort of the genesis of sort of being curious about down here and wanting to live here.”

Additional Quotes

“What I came to rest on was sort of, it was all about how people treated other people in their community, and how they served their community. So it was, as you can hear, it is not different from what people say about religion. It was about service, about caring about other people, about treating them with respect, and about ethical behavior. So all those are important, but I didn’t see them in the rubric of being religious, I saw them as being a good citizen.” (Levin p. 12)

“...what it developed in it me was a pretty competent, keen imagination and curiosity, the ability to take apart complicated things and parse them so that you understand really what’s

going on, the ability to be analytic, the ability to write analytically and critically, and then eventually through the things I did in my work, the ability to convene people, to lead people in certain ways around reaching consensus on whatever they're doing. It's really that foundation that I lay everything on. I just think that's what gave me the tools that are valuable in anything you do in life. And giving me a firm foundation with those tools was a blessing, because then I could do what I wanted to do, and do well at it. I mean, well at it in the sense of, my own sense of doing well at it. Sometimes maybe other people's sense of doing well at it." (Levin p. 12)

"...I got involved [with the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation] through a friend, who said please and assured me things were different. They were a little different, but not much. And then I was in there, and then we had these tough times with losing the executive director, and being on the ropes financially, and I kept preaching: gotta get more, gotta get out there, gotta give people a reason to want to support you. And you've gotta do real—you've gotta be activist. And eventually, thanks to Andrew coming—we hired Andrew and that's what Andrew was about. Worked out very well." (Levin p. 28)

"...But I think the atmosphere was that this is ok, and we don't have to say, "Oh, we can't do this because we have to be absolutely sure we don't offend anybody out there. Otherwise we'll be in trouble." And that's—if you're not offending people, you're not being effective. [laughing] Whatever you do, you going to offend somebody. I'm not the one who moves the organization in that direction. It's Andrew who does that. And it's our success in doing that that carries us along. But I certainly support it, and do everything possible to make it clear.

I'm now in the middle of a rebranding, which I started—I mean, it was raised at our first board retreat two years ago. I brought it back on the table and Andrew and I have talked, and board has talked—you know, we're different now. First of all, we're not just Greenwich Village; we're the East Village, and South Village, the Far West Village, number one. Secondly, culture is of much more importance to us. We talk about cultural history and preservation, continuing. And small business. We're different. Our mission is exactly the same. You don't have to change a word. But how we approach it is different. It's much more multi-faceted. So we're not telling stories out of school, but we're looking at a rebranding. Not a major—we're not talking changing mission. But how do we better convey to the public that we cover a lot more territory, in every

way? You know, it's not just bricks and mortar. It's a lot of other things that make our community our unique community, and need to be preserved." (Levin p. 29)

"I'm an advocate, I mean, that's what I do." (Levin p. 30)

"It's my appreciation of community and the importance of community, and I say that writ large. It can be a big community, it can be a small community, different communities. And that my moral compass is that I am a responsible member of my community, and that I give as well as get. And I don't think the work of the Society is inherently that, but I think it is that, it's become that. It could be just all about bricks and mortar, but it's become more than that. I think the realization that our communities are not composed of just one fact, or factor—yes, the Village is in part defined by red brick and by low rise, and it's also defined by a rich cultural history, by a rich artistic history. A lot of things go into making this place what it is. And those are eroded. We have evidence—you see the effect, which is that it's not the same. Does it make it bad? No, but it's not the same. And some things that people hold dear are gone and they're missed. You got to consciously preserve that stuff." (Levin p. 36–37)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Arthur Levin

Arthur Levin was born in New York City and grew up on the Upper West Side, then a middle-class neighborhood. He attended the Ethical Culture School and Fieldston School, and travelled across the country to attend Reed College in Oregon. At Reed, he ultimately majored in philosophy, which fed his interests in ethics and social responsibility.

He served in the Army for two years, and worked in the family business of importing light fixtures with his father until his father retired and the business was sold. Levin chose to live in the Village and became involved with progressive politics. By 1969, he had bought a house on West 11th Street where he continues to live. Incidentally, his house was damaged by the explosion of a bomb constructed by members of the Weather Underground, which exploded accidentally in a neighboring townhouse on March 6, 1970.

Through Levin's involvement in progressive politics, he met Harold Moody, senior minister at Judson Church. Following the sale of his family's business, Levin approached Moody about working together on social programs. Out of this partnership came a number of public health programs serving runaway teenagers who were living on the streets near the Church; these programs included Judson Arts Workshop, a free medical clinic (that would eventually become Betances Health Center), and a runaway house. Another area of focus was advocating for reproductive rights and, in particular, access to safe abortion services, which was then illegal throughout the United States. When such advocacy led to the legalization of abortion in New York State in 1970, Levin and Moody established the first abortion clinic licensed by the city and the state. Levin and Moody also established the Center for Medical Consumers in 1976, a free medical library with information on health care and treatments enabling patients to be more proactive and knowledgeable about medical care.

Levin became involved with the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation on the recommendation of a friend, where he was a part of a shift in the organization to increase its advocacy and to become more politically active with regard to issues affecting change in the neighborhood, which led to the appointment of the Society's current Executive Director, Andrew Berman, in 2002.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU!

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: All right, today's July 11, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Art Levin for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. Can you start just by saying your name and introducing yourself?

Levin: Sure. I'm Art Levin. I'm President of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, been a trustee for probably around two decades, but president for the last seven years now, actually. And I've lived in the Village most of my adult life. I grew up in New York—do you want this much detail?

Dziedzic: Yes! Yes, yes.

Levin: Ok. I grew up in New York, born in Lenox Hill Hospital, but I grew up on the Upper West Side, in the 90s, in the West End, Riverside area. And then, at the beginning of World War II, we moved to Central Park West, where I lived the rest of my young years in New York. I walked to Ethical Culture School on 64th Street. I took the subway up to the Fieldston School, up at the end of the city, and so I lived there until I went to college in Oregon. I went to Reed College, and came back, worked a little bit with my father, and then had to go into the Army. Those were the days of the draft, still, and I went in the Army for two years, came back. And before I went in the Army, I had rented a small apartment on 12th Street and Sixth Avenue, in a new, red brick six-story building, and I had to give that up when I went in the Army. Then came back and found a small place on Charles Street, where I lived for a couple years, and then finally moved to Butterfield House, which was a new co-op on 12th Street between Fifth and Sixth. And then I left there and bought this house that I live in now in 1969, '70. And I've lived on this block ever since.

Dziedzic: I want to spend a little bit more time talking about where you were—the neighborhood where you grew up—

Levin: Yes, sure.

Dziedzic: —when you were young. Can you tell me about how your parents came to live in New York?

Levin: My father emigrated with his siblings and his mother in dribs and drabs from Russia, and he was born in 1894, and I think he probably—I can't remember the exact year he came here, but he would have been probably, ten, twelve years old, something like that, fourteen years old. And the whole family lived in Brooklyn. Not quite sure how he migrated across the bridge, but he did eventually. And my mother was born here. Her mother was born in Warsaw, and they lived on the Upper West Side, in 106th Street, off of Riverside. So really, in terms of birth, an Upper West Sider.

Dziedzic: And what was the neighborhood like when you were growing up there?

Levin: Well, it was a middle-class neighborhood. I don't think there were co-ops and condos at all, it was all rental. The side streets, as we know now, were mostly brownstones, and rather nice side streets. I don't remember the brownstones. I remember bits and pieces of—I guess I'm told it was the second, last building we lived in up in that neighborhood, which was, I think—I'm trying to remember—91st off of West End. It was a typical older, West Side apartment building, very big, sprawling apartments. I don't recollect really—I mean, I don't know what other people do, but I have very isolated and separated memories of those early years. Not very consistent. I mean, I sort of remember being outside [laughs] but I don't remember it in detail. I do when I get a little older, and then moved downtown, further and further downtown.

But yes, it was a very middle-class neighborhood. We continued to shop—I remember where I got my shoes as a kid was always up in the 80s, and on Broadway. That strip on Broadway was pretty influenced from the European migration, during the [19]30s. [00:05:09] There were some memorable sort of European-style big restaurants, and bakeries. Tip Toe Inn, C&L. And because they were not that far away from us when we moved to Central Park West, we continued to patronize them. My aunt, when she came to visit, would always bring black and white cookies from Schrafft's [laughs] you know, so I have a black and white cookie thing. It was, again, a sort of very middle-class—none of the, either deterioration of the '50s and '60s, the post-war period, or the gentrification that came after that. It was, I think, truly a middle-class neighborhood.

Dziedzic: And what did your parents do for a living?

Levin: My father had a business importing light fixtures and Leer's lamp parts and so forth. It grew to a fairly robust business. I worked in the business for seven or eight years, at one point. My mother was a housewife, took care of the kids. I had one sibling, a sister who's five and a half years older, so I followed her in Ethical, I followed her at Fieldston. She didn't go to Reed, so I didn't—she went to Oberlin. Anyway, they, we had a lot of relatives here. As I said, my aunt, again, very typical family situation. She was a maiden aunt and took of my grandmother, her mother, and my mother's mother. They lived on 106th between Riverside and West End. And we used to go there and visit. I remember it as a typical immigrant apartment, with heavy wood, very heavy, clunky wood furniture, dark furnishings. The rest of that side of the family, cousins, mostly lived in the Bronx. And on my father's side, everybody lived in Brooklyn. Where he had originally lived as a child, a young man.

Dziedzic: You know the neighborhood in Brooklyn?

Levin: Well, the closest part of that family, an uncle who actually worked with my father, and an aunt, and two cousins, lived in Prospect Park West, so along the west side of the park. And we used to visit them fairly regularly. That was probably the closest. But my father's mother and other sisters, one brother, all lived—I can't remember what neighborhood. I think all different neighborhoods. But I do remember Prospect Park West. Driving past Grand Army Plaza, the whole trip. So that's where everybody lived, and some of my mother's family ended up in Manhattan, Upper West Side, but not many. It was really Bronx and Brooklyn.

Dziedzic: Now, the elementary school that you went to, was that in your neighborhood?

Levin: Yes. But it was a private school, Ethical Culture. There's an actually an Ethical Culture Society, and it was founded by Felix Adler, and it was a progressive, co-ed, primary school. I went there kindergarten through sixth grade, and then it had a high school, Fieldston School, up in Riverdale, and it had another primary school called Fieldston Lower. So two primary schools, and one high school.

Dziedzic: I didn't realize that was connected to Fieldston.

Levin: Yes.

Dziedzic: That makes sense.

Levin: It was interesting. It was smaller, and I think more of a community than Ethical. I mean, Ethical was great, but I think, Fieldston Lower, because it was smaller and it was on the campus, or up in the upper reaches of New York City. It was a little closer, but much smaller.

Dziedzic: And you commuted up to Riverdale?

Levin: I commuted by subway. I would walk over to 72nd Street, take the number 1 train to the end of the line, and walk up the hill, and did the same thing coming back. So I was a commuter, basically. I'd go off early in the morning, we'd have gym and sports in the afternoon, come home around five, have an early dinner, and three or four hours of homework, and I vowed I'd never be a commuter again. [00:10:02]

Dziedzic: [laughs] You got it over when you were a teenager!

Levin: I had my fill.

Dziedzic: What were some of the subjects that you were interested in when you were in school?

Levin: Well, Fieldston was a pretty interesting place in terms of curricula and faculty, and some really outstanding faculty. I was sort of a wise-ass kid, and my report card: "Arthur needs to apply himself blah blah blah." I was very thin, probably would have been diagnosed as hyperactive today—thank god they didn't do it then so no medication—but I was a hyperactive, always on the go kid. And my concentration levels left something to be desired. That said, I did ok. I wasn't really in trouble ever.

In high school, I think I sort of discovered myself, probably, maybe sophomore year, a little bit. And a lot of that was due to really interesting, dedicated good faculty. So I started to enjoy science—I was terrible at math, I always had a problem with math—but I got to enjoy science, I enjoyed chemistry and physics, biology. We had a great English department, for junior and senior years, and that really sort of captured me immediately. I was always a reader, from the time I was little, and so I enjoyed reading, that was not a stretch for me. And it was a challenging experience. I liked English, I liked writing, I liked reading. The only subject that really gave me a hard time was math. I was not good at it. In high school years we had four levels of classes, which was smart, because to make everybody go at the same pace would either be too slow or

too fast. So I was in the third level—there was first, second, third and fourth. Wasn't the worst, but I had trouble.

Dziedzic: Can you maybe find a way to describe how the teachers were good, or were able to make the subjects interesting to you?

Levin: Yes. One is I think they really liked teaching. I mean, the really good teachers really liked doing what they did. They had a really good rapport with the students, and a love of subject, and a more adult or more college-level way of teaching. So we were reading things, I mean in sixth grade—sixth grade, sixth form—we had forms, so, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, were forms one through six. And, I don't know why that wasn't, we had forms. And the senior English class was taught by somebody who actually had taught in college, an elder gentleman, really interesting guy, taught at The New School, taught English at The New School.

I think we also had some—there was one class that was almost like a seminar class. I wasn't in that class, but I think my sister was when she went there. But we were assigned great—I mean, the reading list was great. We read the Bible, as literature, stuff like that. Stuff that's usually reserved for freshman and sophomore college kids. It wasn't just the usual pat typical stories—the same, in fifth form, English teacher was also very, very good, was also the college counselor, and another very dedicated bright guy. Fourth form, I can't quite remember the English teacher, but it really, as you sort of moved up, the level of teaching got way beyond what would be normally expected in high school. And, in some other classes—history, American history, which was a senior class—we had a fairly new teacher, who was English, and again, taught in an amazing style and enthralled everybody. So I think what Fieldston offered—and I'll tell you what else it offered—was really a sort of higher level of faculty, not across the board, but in a way that was, I think, remarkable, and made the experience really exciting. [00:15:15]

It was also a very progressive school, always co-ed. It, I think, comes out of a progressive social tradition. We had ethics class. We had an ethics course every year that we had to take. You know, that said, compared to today, its efforts to be diverse were miniscule. It was mostly middle-class, upper middle-class Jewish kids, because those were the people who, one, could afford it, and also believed in really good education. It had one or two African-American kids in each class, one or two non-Jewish—I mean, it wasn't very diverse. But if you grow up in New York and don't buy into that too much, you were always surrounded by diversity, you know. Not

with African-Americans, because in those days, the only African-American people you saw in Manhattan, downtown, were maids and stuff. Even in the '40s. But the school was a progressive school. And there were one or two settlement camps they were associated with, and they encouraged kids to work a summer in the settlement camp, that kind of stuff. It was different than an ordinary high school experience, and it wasn't a prep school. It wasn't that other end, of being preppy.

Dziedzic: Well, commuting on the 1 train, you would have gone through a few different neighborhoods before—

Levin: Oh, absolutely, so [laughs] it took—one of the things that happened is going through either upper Manhattan or lower Bronx, I can't remember which, one day, maybe the first year I commuted, or second, I saw all these people getting on the subway with dirty foreheads. And I said, "What is this?" Well, it was Ash Wednesday! But I had never seen dozens of people with ashes on their forehead. So I said, "Why, what is this? Why does everybody have ash on their forehead?" And I don't remember how I discovered the answer, but I did. So yes, you went through very different neighborhoods.

Dziedzic: And so how did, was the fact that it was progressive the other thing that you wanted to mention about Fieldston?

Levin: Yes.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about deciding to go to Reed? And what, I guess—

Levin: Yes—

Dziedzic: —how that decision came about, and—

Levin: —so here, I became much more of a scholar my last two years at Fieldston. But it was a very competitive place. And my sister had wanted to go to Reed, but it was too far away and my father said no, so she ended up at Oberlin. And the fifth form English teacher, who was the college counselor, really wanted to send kids to Reed. I mean, he thought it was a great school—he knew it was a great school. And of course, not many New York Jewish parents wanted to see their kids almost three thousand miles away from home. So not many went. Strangely enough, a

kid I grew up with, who lived three blocks away from me on Central Park West, who went to Ethical, went to Fieldston, without consulting, we ended up both going to Reed.

I knew I obviously wasn't going to get into Harvard or Yale because I had to compete against my own classmates, and the schools would only take so many from each school. And the counselor, if you didn't realize it, the counselor would say, "Look, I don't think you have a very good chance given the competition from your classmates." Who may have had their nose to the grindstone for four years, instead of two. So I was ok with that. I can't remember where else I applied to, but I applied to Reed, and I was happy to get in actually, so, that was it. Then I discovered that Vic was also going to Reed, so we both went there. Although we were not necessarily that close there—it wasn't like we were ex-Fieldston classmate pals. But part of that was, it was also a progressive tradition, it also prided itself on scholarship and the quality of faculty, because it was all undergraduate, there were no TA's. And the faculty were quite extraordinary, a lot of them, and all dedicated to undergraduate education. [00:20:05] It was sort of a continuation in that sense.

Dziedzic: How did you get across the country?

Levin: The first year—oh, so I had bought a car that summer after I graduated. They snuck me into kindergarten, because my birthday's the end of November, and they agreed to let me in before my birthday, when I would have been six, or whatever. So I was always half a year ahead of myself, not because of my brilliance, but just by the happenstance of the calendar, and my birthday. So I think that summer I said to my dad, "I'd really like to have a car." I'd learned how—he had taught me how to drive. I knew how to drive, and there was—I'm trying to get this right—there was a car in the garage he used in New York that was for sale, an old Chevy, and he said, "Ok." So he bought me a car. I had a car for the summer, and then I said, "I'd like to drive it out." Ahh. [laughs] "Nope, you're not gonna do that." Blah blah blah, you haven't been driving long enough, it's a long trip. Ok, so I sold the car. I went out, I flew DC6, United Airlines, New York, Chicago, Denver, Portland. Stopped, ran off the plane, got something to eat—you know, it was the old days. And so that my first year.

Then I flew back at Christmas, hungry for New York. Portland was not the Portland of now, it was the Portland then. About a third of the size. Really a cow town. Very unsophisticated. Seattle was sort of the more—well, San Francisco, of course—but in the

Northwest, Seattle was more sophisticated than Portland was. So I was very glad to come back, go to theater, go to concerts, that stuff. Which I did, I flew back and forth. Then I flew home, I guess, the end of that year, and then I said, “I gotta have a car out there.” I said, “it’s really hard not to have a car in Portland, public transportation’s not very good. And where the college is—” This is for dad. So my father’s car from 1947, when the war ended, had ended up in the hands of a cousin, who had migrated to San Francisco with his wife, in the public health services, a dentist. He wanted to be a dentist. And it was a big, old Buick, gobbled gas like a—and he wanted to get rid of it. So I inherited that car, and I had that for my sophomore year, barely afford to put gas in it. It was a boat.

And then I started, not with that car but when I sold that car to another classmate, I then bought a reasonable car, which I could afford to put gas in, and I actually started driving back and forth. But not at Christmas—I always flew at Christmas—but beginning and end of the year I would drive.

Dziedzic: So this would be the early ‘60s, that you were driving across?

Levin: Early, no—I started Reed in ’53, and graduated in ’57. And the only turnpike was as far as the Pennsylvania/Ohio border, and then you were on road. And the further west you got, you had a two-lane road, US 40, US 30. It was a trip, it was an adventure. And I didn’t drive straight through, and I always drove with somebody, but we always stopped at night. It was an adventure, you know.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Levin: Ok. Yes, so I, one year—let’s see when this would have been. I guess, going now for my sophomore year, a good friend that I had made there, who was from Idaho, was working construction for the summer on building the Jackson—not Yellowstone, but in Jackson Hole? No, not Jackson Hole—Jenny Lake? Rockefeller would build these resorts in various places, in National Parks that he was associated with, and so he worked on that, and I stopped off and picked him up and then we drove together. [00:24:59] And other years, I took other people back and forth, we shared the trip. Part of the adventure.

Dziedzic: I know driving across the country the first time for me was really eye-opening, in terms of how different things were between what I knew at the time, which was New York City, and then rural Pennsylvania. But I guess, how did that experience of driving across the country—

Levin: Well, I mean, it was even more exaggerated in those days. Now you've got stores that are everywhere, there are familiar sites that are almost everywhere. I used to gauge it by—coffee ice cream was my gauge. I loved coffee ice cream. The further west you got, the more puzzled the waiter or waitress would look when you said, "Do you have coffee ice cream?" They said, "Well, we have vanilla, strawberry and chocolate, and we could put real coffee on the ice cream." Not a bad thought but that was one of my indicators, is where the awareness of [laughing] coffee ice cream stopped, and where the ice cream selection got really small. The other thing was, when coffee was served. So when you sat down, they'd say, "You want coffee?" No matter what meal it was. You want your coffee now, or with your meal? So coffee now meant that before anything else, you had coffee in front of you. Breakfast I understood, but lunch and dinner I didn't understand at all. That was another marker of the difference in how people ate. Of course, the portions were much bigger as you got out, and the selections were not as broad. Even then, New York was a gourmet town, relatively speaking, you know. By today's standards, no, but—so there were those indicators.

And we never spent any time anywhere. Basically you drive till you couldn't drive anymore, find a motel, sleep, get a meal, sleep, get up early, get on the road. So it was really those kind of experiences that sort of marked the passage. And, again, the roads got to be—I think the last place there was sort of divided highway that I remember was Ohio, and then you ended up in Chicago, or driving around Chicago. And then past Chicago, you pretty much were on two-lane roads. No divided highways, two lanes, and that was part of the challenge, was you're driving a lot of miles on narrow two-lane roads. I can remember Iowa, because they had lips on the side of roads, and it was very easy to bounce off. It was precarious. I also hit a hog once. Not my fault, it was out. I felt terrible, I said to the woman, "Can I pay you?" She said "No shouldn't have been out on the road." But it was that was a new experience.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Levin: And then, when you got further out west you had logging trucks, you had all these different road experiences. I'm gonna take a cough drop. This is all allergies. [clears throat] It makes me nuts.

Dziedzic: Yes, this city is, it's tough. It's a tough place to breath in.

Levin: Yes, well, country's not too much better.

Dziedzic: It's a good point.

Levin: So I mean, part of that college experience was really getting to and from, and when I was there, I had good friends in LA, so we'd drive up and down, and my sister and brother-in-law had moved to San Francisco, I think the year before or the year after I started college. So I would go up and down, a lot, to San Francisco. Everybody did, there was a lot of back and forth to San Francisco and LA. That became the travel.

Dziedzic: And what were you studying at Reed?

Levin: You know, when I arrived at Reed my father told me, "You should do this." He was a very practical guy, so he said, "Why don't you—engineering would be a good profession, you could be a professional." Ok. [00:30:05] So I signed up for physics. It was an early morning class, and my math was just, it caught up with me. It was like, not only was I battling physics, I was battling the math. After about six weeks, I said, "This is not gonna work." Went to see the dean, we went through it all, and she looked at my math scores, and she said, "Yes, you should probably drop it." I did, and I took a drama course instead.

But Reed had—it was the originator of the mandatory master humanities required course. It's where that course originated. The guy who set it up at Reed did it at Harvard. It was Humanities 101. That was half your credits. The beauty of that course was, again, no TA's. And each subject was taught by a professor in that subject, so it wasn't—there were no "humanities" professors teaching "humanities"; it was an art class, for music it was a music guy, the art guy—it was an amazing, amazing experience. And it got replicated in a lot of places all over the country, eventually. So that took half of your credits. The theater course was not many credits, and I can't remember what the hell else I took.

And, so my freshman year ends, I still don't know what I want to do. But I do well in humanities and I enjoy it, but it's a broad course so it doesn't serve to focus. Come sophomore year, I take humanities the second year, which is more modern—not mandatory, but six credits. Not quite as many credits, but almost. And I enjoy that a lot. And I get interested in philosophy not as subject, but as discipline. The discipline of logic and argument and all that stuff. Learning how to understand what you're reading, learning how to take it apart, learning how to critique it, and all that stuff. So I decided—now, at Reed, you had a compulsory thesis in your senior year. It was compulsory, it wasn't an honor program. You had a junior qualifying exam at the end of your junior year in your major, which got you to be a senior, or not. So it was really modeled on a graduate education. And so, I had to make up my mind. I said, "I better figure it out."

So my sophomore year I took the humanities second year program. We had a new professor of literature, quite interesting guy, and he was teaching an American literature course. I took that. It was hard for me. He was very demanding. Modern American literature—it was so tough. But I got through it. I took economics, basic economics. I didn't really like it, and so I struggled with it, but I got through it. I can't remember if I did anything else. That might have been it: humanities, American literature, and this massive modern humanities course. But towards the end of sophomore year, I decided I would major in philosophy, which I did. And I actually, even though I had struggled with economics, I minored in economics. Because there was some interesting upper class courses. And so that's what I did.

I wrote my thesis—I got very interested—as I say, I wasn't particularly interested in philosophy as a subject [laughs] but more the analytic process, and it served me well for many decades. I wrote my thesis basically on—what the hell was it called—it was about the language of ethical, how people talk about ethics or relative goodness of things. So it was about language and logic. [00:35:06] I wasn't a logician, but language interested me, and logic without the numbers and without the signs. I wasn't interested in that, the mathematics. And so that's what I did, and I became a scholar. And I just missed Phi Beta, which would have been pretty spectacular. But, again, it was like my high school years: my first two years I didn't quite maximize that, so, and then we had a wonderful senior seminar, which was taught by three or four faculty members. I mean, it was different—there were maybe three or four sections. We had great faculty. We'd meet at a faculty member's house in the evening, and read a lot of great stuff, and talked about a lot of—it was wonderful. And—

Dziedzic: Was your interest in, I guess, ethics and how people talk about the good? What was the connection to religion, or was it really separate from that?

Levin: There really wasn't much. One should never say anything a hundred percent, but I do not have, in the traditional sense, a religious bone in my body. I don't have any religious feeling. I know people—clergymen I have worked with—say, "You're the most religious person we know." But I'm a different level. I have no interest in organized religion. I don't fight it. I don't oppose it, but it doesn't touch me. And I say to people, "I know you'll find it hard to believe, but I don't remember ever in my life wondering if there's a god or not." Because to me, it's sort of like, ok, you want ask the question, you want search for an answer, fine with me. I don't understand the relevancy of it to the life I live and the community I live in. It just serves no purpose in my calculus of life, and what I think is important and what I like in terms of community and so forth. And that, it's true. I'm going to say, one needs to be careful about other stuff, but—so religion was never part.

What I came to rest on was sort of, it was all about how people treated other people in their community, and how they served their community. So it was, as you can hear, it is not different from what people say about religion. It was about service, about caring about other people, about treating them with respect, and about ethical behavior. So all those are important, but I didn't see them in the rubric of being religious, I saw them as being a good citizen.

Dziedzic: You said that focusing on this field of study, these methods, served you well for many years. Can you explain that?

Levin: Sure. Well, what it developed in it me was a pretty competent, keen imagination and curiosity, the ability to take apart complicated things and parse them so that you understand really what's going on, the ability to be analytic, the ability to write analytically and critically, and then eventually through the things I did in my work, the ability to convene people, to lead people in certain ways around reaching consensus on whatever they're doing. It's really that foundation that I lay everything on. I just think that's what gave me the tools that are valuable in anything you do in life. And giving me a firm foundation with those tools was a blessing, because then I could do what I wanted to do, and do well at it. I mean, well at it in the sense of, my own sense of doing well at it. Sometimes maybe other people's sense of doing well at it.

[00:40:03]

Dziedzic: And what did you do after you left Reed?

Levin: After I left Reed, I went into the Army for two years. And then I came out of the Army. I worked briefly for my father, called my draft board. In those days if you dropped out of college or you graduated, they loved to draft you, because you were intelligent enough to do stuff, you were probably not a difficult acting out type person, you followed orders well. So you went from 2S to 1A in a snap. So I, when I got here, in about a month, I got my new classification. I called the draft board and said, “Can you tell me when I’ll be drafted?” And I said, “I’m just hanging around, just waiting for it.” So they said “No, it’ll be some time in the next six months to a year, but we don’t know.” So that sort of bummed me out. Then I did some reading of some book on the draft, and I discovered you could actually—oh, wait, I’m getting ahead of myself.

When I was a junior at Reed I said, “Well, maybe what I should do instead of waiting to be drafted is go into Naval OCS and become a naval officer and learn all about the sea. That’d be fun.” So I applied, and I was in Europe for the summer studying and I got a telegram that I’d been accepted for about three years and four months. So I declined.

Then I came back here, and I went to work for my father, until I discovered that I could actually enlist for two years. There was a program. And they didn’t like it at the enlistment center downtown, because they didn’t get a bonus for you. The recruiting sergeants got bonuses. So I went downtown to see what the story was, and they said, “Well, what do you want to do?” “I want to enlist for two years.” “You can’t do that.” And I said, “Yes I can.” I had the chapter and verse. They said, “Well—” But I said to them, “Look, if you can guarantee me the Army language school, in Monterrey—not because it’s Monterrey—I will go in for three years. You can get your bonus, your credit, whatever you get.” They said, “Well, we can’t do that. We can guarantee you”—I forget what branch it was, one of the branches—but then you have to take a competitive test once you’re in to get into the Army language school. It was the Army Security Agency, that’s what it was. So I said, “No, I don’t think so, because I don’t know if I’m gonna pass the test or not. Then I’ll be in for three years. No, I’m not gonna do that.”

But I would have done it, because they there’s probably no better intensive language program in the country to learn Chinese, or Russian, or whatever. What they do is you—first of all you’re in Monterrey, not bad. Second of all, it’s intensive, so you live in a unit which only deals with that language. All of the reading material, everything is in that language. So it was really intensive. And I think, it might have been in a little over a year, or a little under a year,

you'll be fluent enough to translate Mandarin Chinese, Russian, pretty spectacular. But I couldn't get that, so I said, "All right, I want to see the Captain." I went to him. He was a jerk, said, "What do you want?" I said, "Well, there's this provision that I know of that says I can enlist for two years. And that's all I wanna do. I wanna do what the law says I can do, period, nothing else. I don't want anything special." "Ok."

So I enlisted for two years, went to Fort Dix, then I went over to Europe, and then I came back. And then I went to work in the family business for about five, six years. And got an apartment in the Village again, and got involved in Village politics—reformed Democratic politics—which was just starting up, because the reform movement in New York was really born out of the Adlai Stevenson campaign for President. Because Tammany Hall and Sapio, all those characters, would not support him. [00:45:04] And so, Senator Robert Lehman, and a few other progressive Democrats and others organized the reform movement. But it really it's birth was out of the fact that the regular Tammany Hall Democrats did not throw any support behind Stevenson. So I got involved in the Village Independent Democrats. Through that, I met Howard Moody, who was a senior minister at Judson Church, that I went on to be involved with. And increasingly became sort of antsy working in the business.

But, before I left, about a year before, my father wasn't well and we decided to sell the business. So we got a broker, sold the business. And my father retired. And of course they wanted me to stay on for a year or two, which I did, a two-year contract. I did what I had to do, but I really had no heart for it anymore. I really wanted to do other stuff. And they, they figured that out, and after about a year, we sort of parted company, amicably.

Dziedzic: Was there a storefront for the business?

Levin: Pardon me?

Dziedzic: Was there a storefront for the business?

Levin: No, it was wholesale manufacturing. But there was a storefront because we converted a storefront to office space on 23rd Street. We were in an old loft building on 23rd off Sixth, between 23rd and 22nd. When my father went and we needed to expand the offices, which were on 22nd, we rented a storefront and then converted it into office space. It looked like a storefront, but it wasn't a storefront.

So that's what I did, and then I left that. And I went down to see Howard at Judson, and I said, "Howard, I'm retired. [laughter] But there are things I'd like to do. Is there anything we can think of here that I might be interested in?" So we actually together thought of a program, which was—at that point, there was a lot of concern about a huge number of teenagers hanging out on Bleecker Street at night. They never really came down. This was, what, probably mid to late '60s. And Judson, they had a vigorous arts program, dance, theater, art. And we said, "Well, why don't we make a place for the kids to hang out and do art? And music and stuff?" So we rented a little storefront, I put in a little money, and we used Judson artists. We had maybe two or three nights a week with stuff. It went on for six months, and then I couldn't keep funding it. And we tried to raise money from the city and stuff but it didn't work.

Dziedzic: What was it called?

Levin: I think it was called Judson Arts Workshop, maybe?¹ So that got my feet wet doing that kind of thing. Next thing that happened was I helped Howard out at Judson with a lot of stuff, and I got involved in Judson Dance Theater, got very friendly with a number of dancers, [unclear] and with Judson's Poets' Theater. So I really spent about two years doing stuff with Judson, I think two.

And then—I'm trying to remember the sequencing here. Yes, then I think a group of very progressive foundation came to Howard and to me. To Howard, but to me through Howard [laughs] and said, "You know, we want to give money to Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin and everything that's happening on the Lower East Side. We can't trust them to—would Judson be willing to take this on? Do the programs but it would all go through Judson?" So we talked about it, and we said yes. We developed proposals for a free medical clinic. The second house for runaway kids in the country—the first one was in San Francisco. And one or two other programs. And we got the money, and we started the programs.

I set up the runaway house. I ran it for about a year, I hired people. [00:50:04] Then we did the medical clinic. I set that up. But I'm trying to remember when the hell I got my public health degree, whether it might have been between the runaway house and doing the free medical trailer. Anyway, at some point I went to Columbia and got a public health degree.

¹ Judson Arts Workshop, 1966

So we had the runaway clinic—ran for maybe three years, four years. I didn't direct it that whole time, other people took it on. It was at Judson House, which had been a student residence part of the program at the church. Right behind the church. That kept me close to stuff at Judson, so I stayed involved with that. The free medical clinic was in a construction trailer that we'd pull around every, not daily, but every couple months, and we set that up, and that actually went on for many years, and morphed into—it still exists, in permanent form. It went on to become, I forget what the program was. It was a city program that funded clinics on the Lower East Side, and it became Betances Health Center in a permanent—but by that time, Judson and I had nothing to do with it. That went on for a while, and then—I'm trying to remember the chronology here—

Then I did a lot of reading in public health and I became converted, with Howard, who also did the reading, to a less is more [laughs] kind of attitude. We read Ivan Illich, who wrote books on education. He had a book, *Medical Nemesis*, which was published in the UK. We heard about it, we got it. It was finally published here. And we—not anti-medicine as a science, but anti-medicalizing life, and how we approached illness. There were other similar things going on. I got sort of turned around on that whole thing, and so did Howard. And that was just sort of interesting.

Those years, Howard became very involved in women's reproductive rights, particularly abortion. And took a leadership role, and started something called the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, in New York. Which are a small group of clergy, one or two rabbis and a bunch of ministers, who are willing to counsel women on abortion. And also, Howard, a woman who worked with him and I for a long time located abortion facilities—they were all out of the country. Or maybe there was one in Louisiana, but they were in the UK—but they would make sure that they were on the up-and-up, and high quality. They would counsel women, and then they could recommend them to places. It became clear that that was not going to benefit a lot of women. It was expensive, so poor women could not avail themselves of it at all. And we began to try to really figure out, how can we get abortion legalized? Didn't seem very possible, and we thought that was what we had to do.

We were working with a couple New York doctors who were pro-abortion to try to figure out how to use the loophole in the law, which said if two doctors certify that a woman needs an abortion, that she can seek it—she doesn't have to go to the UK. We were still dealing with that

when the New York legislature shocked us all by passing, by one vote, legalized abortion. We knew there was a bill, but we never thought it would pass. And one legislator got up and said, “This is going to cost me my seat, but my daughter and my family convinced me this is the right thing to do.” So then it was legal in New York! [00:54:56]

Then we had another issue, which is, by that time there were Clergy Consultation Services springing up around the country modeled on the one here. Plus, people knew it was legal in New York, so there was a big migration of woman who wanted abortions in New York. It was, because of supply and demand and its recent legalization, either extremely expensive—even in hospitals, outrageously expensive—or the danger of women finding their way to really bad docs, and bad experiences. So one of the stateside abortionists was down in New Orleans, and he and a young woman at Tulane who worked with him came up to Howard, said, “Look, we’re willing to come up here and set up an abortion clinic.” And so, we did. We went through that whole thing. We were the first clinic to be licensed by the city and the state.

Then ultimately, the city said, “Wait a minute.” I mean, they were operating. They were piling up money—not putting it anybody’s pockets, but we kept pushing the price down. Quality was important, counseling was important. Eventually, the city said—or the state said—“Wait, wait a minute, your medical doctor doesn’t have a New York license.” He wasn’t doing procedures. He was the guy from New Orleans. Said, “Can’t operate a clinic without a medical director that’s licensed in the state.” So we consulted with everybody at the clinic, and we said, “Look, if you’re willing to do it, let’s create a 501(c)3, not for profit. You’ll give us all the money so we can set this clinic up. It’ll be a state-of-the-art clinic.” They were willing to do that.

We got a really interesting board. We got a VP from Rockefeller Foundation, who was President of the Board. I represented the church on the board. An interesting board of people with a history of reproductive rights. We became the largest first trimester abortion clinic in the country. Because all the women from across the country were coming to New York by clergy referral. We didn’t take them off the street, but by clergy referral. Kept the price down, kept driving it down. We kept the quality up. So that got my feet wet, really, in terms of providing medical care, and health care.

And then, when *Roe v. Wade* occurred, you didn’t have to come to New York anymore. So the church wanted to keep the clinic going, primarily for Medicaid women. We could have closed it up, but that kept going. I actually agreed to stay on and represent the church but also to

be the administrator. Much smaller operation. We also started doing some well women care, and through our lead—through working with Howard—they had gotten involved in service to working women in Times Square, to that population. It was really interesting. And we had a clinic for working women once a week, a lot free or minimal cost. We had well women care, and continued to do abortions for Medicaid women. Maybe two a days instead of seven days a week—much smaller population. And then eventually, it sort of became, ok, we don't want to do this anymore, enough. So somebody took it over, and continued it, but we were no longer involved.

By that time, I had gotten really interested in health care. And, trying to think, what did I do next?

Dziedzic: Well, let me ask you a question about this, actually.

Levin: Sure.

Dziedzic: What kind of activities were you and Howard doing to get the law passed in New York? So was it really like a quiet organizing, or was it—

Levin: Yes, it was quiet. I mean, nobody thought it could happen. In New York's history, New York is traditionally—working on lots of other things, over the years, right to die, all this stuff—the Catholic church in New York is the worst. The archdiocese is the most conservative. You get stuff going on in Boston before you get it here. [00:59:57] So this was amazing. I don't think any of us—I don't think it was a lot of lobbying because I don't think anybody thought it would happen. So while this was going on, we were saying, how do we set up? Get two doctors? How do we do this sort of using the loophole? And it won't be perfect, but it's better than what we have now. Everybody was shocked. I don't remember who introduced the bill, I mean, that's an interesting artifact, just I'm blanking on².

Certainly Howard and Clergy Consultation of New York spoke a lot, did interviews a lot, argued a lot on panels. Howard basically saying for a long time—it was true, till they got smarter—that it was only men who liked appearing as against abortion and reproductive rights. Eventually, of course, they realized that there were women spokespeople too. So that's what was going on. Howard and the more articulate members of the Clergy Consultation Service did a lot

² Constance Cook and Franz Leichter co-sponsored a bill in the New York State Assembly. The bill was co-sponsored in the New York State Senate by D. Clinton Dominick III and Roy Goodman.

of talking, and doing stuff, trying to educate. I don't remember that we were actively lobbying in Albany for this. Again, I don't think anybody thought it had a damn—a thinker's chance of getting anywhere. So it was really about trying to change public opinion and therefore create some pressure. But it was really the family pressure on one legislator³ that made it happen. And, yes, he was not re-elected.

Dziedzic: And the runaway kids house—

Levin: Yes.

Dziedzic: —that you started. I'm curious to know what kind of relationship you saw between the people who were running away to the streets of New York and the medical clinic. What—

Levin: Well, yes, I mean—

Dziedzic: —was bringing people there?

Levin: —certainly, before we had the medical clinic, we had to establish a relationship with Bellevue pediatrics, when the kids needed care. We certainly knew that they were probably avoiding care even if they needed it because they were afraid they'd be sent back home. So you were dealing with a population that didn't particularly want to risk discovery by authority—anybody—an authority, what that would mean. We started out really wanting to be like an emergency room. We had beds, but we said that might be for one or two nights. But we sort of morphed into a longer-term stay situation. As well as doing this crisis intervention. And then, when I moved onto the medical thing, somebody else took that over for a while, so. That was interesting.

I had a bunch of hippie conscientious objectors working there—probably too permissive. I think we did some good. I think we probably did some not so good. But on balance, it filled a need. Then a few others sprung up, organizations started stuff. But certainly the health issues of those kids may have led me to being interested in health as well. But it was really the fact that foundations came and said, “Look—” But we set up the projects. They didn't come and say, “Do this.” They said, “This is a community to serve, and you think up, and then we'll look at it. We'll tell you if it's ok.” And it was ok.

³ Assemblyman George M. Michaels

Dziedzic: What was the foundation?

Levin: One of them was the New York Foundation—there were a couple of them. And they were not huge, and they were foundations that had rather progressive—liked to do innovative stuff. Problem is they wouldn't give you money forever because that's not what they did, they were sort of, "Whoopee. Let's do the exciting thing and move on."

Dziedzic: That's still a problem. And then, one more part of this—

Levin: Sure.

Dziedzic: —you'd said that there was kind of a problem of teenagers hanging out on Bleecker Street, and I think it would be helpful to hear you describe the problem from the health perspective.

Levin: Well, I think the problem was in the eye of the beholder. What it was was a massive influx of kids, who hung out on the street. And so, that's why you have to sort of take everything that people complain about with a grain of salt. [01:04:56] It's like, historically, people complain about the same thing over and over again through decades. It's just different circumstance. So the kids would hang out. They'd be crying, they'd be noisy. I don't think there was too much overt weed smoking at that point. I'm sure kids smoked weed, but I don't think they were on the street. But it was noisy, crowded, fooling around, upsetting the adult population. The rest of us—after all, this was still mostly Little Italy. And here are these hippie kids, playing loud music, wearing strange clothes. Although the heroin addicts of the time, because Judson at one point ran a drug addiction treatment program in the '50s, maybe early '60s, they were all the Italian kids from the South Village. But, in the eyes of the remaining Italian American population, when the '60s came along, it was all the other kids.

Dziedzic: Bringing problems?

Levin: Yes, bringing problems. So it's the eye of the beholder. I mean, the kids really didn't do terrible things. I think our concern was for the kids, that the backlash was we didn't want to see kids arrested, and sent home—

Dziedzic: And in some cases there really were legitimate—

Levin: Well, I expect—I don't exactly remember, but I'm sure there were Italian kids that were arrested. So and it was like a war zone. It was a war between the community and these kids on the weekend, who had really nothing to do. Couldn't go to the clubs, so they hung out on the street. They were a very visible, palpable presence.

Dziedzic: And you were—I made you go backwards when you were trying to remember what was next—

Levin: That's all right. Don't worry about it. The memory will kick in at some point.

So got through with all these projects. It may be then that I actually got my public health degree. Somewhere around the end of all this stuff. And got turned around on attitudes towards health care in America and stuff, medicine. And what did I do next? Who knows!

Dziedzic: Well, this, you mentioned the *Medical Nemesis*—

Levin: Yes, I mean, so it was really Howard and I talking about this stuff. We agreed. I'm just trying to think what the next jump-off point was. It's really interesting. I certainly stayed involved in the Independent Democratic stuff, but that wasn't full-time, that was now and then. And—

Dziedzic: Where were you living at the time?

Levin: Well, when we had the medical trailer, I was living here already. I think, I moved in here in '69, so maybe a little of runaway house? And all of the trailer, I was living here—the medical unit. I may not remember what the hell I did next, this is interesting. [Dziedzic laughs] Oh, ok, I know what it is. I know what I did next.

So Howard and I, out of all of our talking, then decided to do something about it. So we set up, in 1976, we set up the Center for Medical Consumers. The idea was that we would have a place, a free medical library. We would write about medical things from this other perspective, which was very questioning. It wasn't—we weren't luddite, we weren't anti-, but we were saying: what's the evidence? What's the proof? And much more open to non-medical intervention, like diet, stuff like that. But not with any particular agenda. We weren't saying eat grapefruit, or—so we started that in '76 when we had lots of empty space at the abortion clinic uptown, because it had shrunk in size. So I was able to manage that, and we used that to create

the Center. [01:09:55] We started a library, we started a newsletter. There was a woman who discovered us and was thinking of the same thing, and invited her on board, so we were really sort of co-founders eventually. And that went on, so from '76, actively till [sighs] it still exists as a corporation, as a not-for-profit.

Dziedzic: I think I have some of those details here, actually.

Levin: Yes, yes. But I can't remember when we—it wasn't ten years ago that we, MaryAnn [Napoli] decided it was time to retire.

Dziedzic: [reading] "July, 2009 was our last hard copy of *Health Facts*—

Levin: Ok, that was—

Dziedzic: —we went went digital after that."

Levin: —2009. Not so long ago. So that kept me busy, and through that I got involved and interested in issues at the state and national level. And therefore eventually was asked to be part of things that were happening. Committees of the Institute of Medicine. I got involved in some other national organizations that work on healthcare measurement. And also got very involved at the state level. And the focus primarily was on, to put it broadly: patient rights, safety of care, the quality of care, the science behind the care.

There were plenty of advocates—and it was very important—around access issues. I was not an access person. I wasn't against access, but—access to what? I'm concerned about what people have access to. So I got gradually a reputation, and was asked to be part of some very big things that happened. And spent a number of years doing that. As a national—I'm not a member of the academy. I'm not science-based enough. But I was on a couple of very, very, very major committees of import. And I was asked to be on others.

I was involved with the National Quality Forum, which is a quality measurement group, nationally. Sort of establishes what measures, and what they consist of. And then the National Committee for Quality Assurance, which was evolved in, what year? Probably the '80s. It was a way of getting quality measures for health plans, because employers who bought insurance for their employees wanted them. And so did that. Chaired a big committee for them, till I stopped

doing it. Chaired a couple committees at QF. Did a lot of stuff at the state level, as I say. Legislation and other stuff. And that's what I did.

Dziedzic: It's sounding like the trajectory that you're describing is kind of starting out working one-on-one, with some individuals, and then thinking more broadly—

Levin: Right.

Dziedzic: —about the sort of systemization of medical care.

Levin: Right, saying look, if I think there are problems with the quality of care, or a lack of evidence that these things work, be part of the solution. You can't do it all. I got interested in state stuff, and there was a period in the state when we had a really good health department, some good people that didn't last long, but some sort of residual stuff went on for a while.

I'm still involved in something at the state level, and I'm still, and I do the—GVSHIP was interesting because it was really—it was quite different. And I mean, I always cared about this neighborhood, I always told people how I—well, I should tell you this story.

So how did I get to the Village from the Upper West Side? So when I was in high school, maybe junior or senior year, a classmate who lived down here, Bobby Haft, lived at, strangely enough, 10th Street across Fifth Avenue. And he invited me and another kid down for overnight, spend the day. [01:14:55] And in the day we went to Washington Square Park and played handball against the Arch, and that experience somehow cemented—was really indelibly was in my head. I mean, I didn't even see that much of the Village. But obviously something in me said, "This is where you want to live." It was very different from the Upper West Side, although that building across the way is similar. They're similar buildings but the park—the whole thing was different. And so, I always tell people that story, because I say, otherwise, I don't know why I chose to live here. You know? That's the only thing I can remember. And I remember having a hell of a good time, and really having memories of Washington Square Park and that day we spent. And, so I go back to that and say that's sort of the genesis of sort of being curious about down here and wanting to live here.

Dziedzic: And as far as choosing this house goes?

Levin: Well, what happened is, I lived in a rental apartment before I went in the Army. Came out of the Army, I lived in a rental apartment—small rental apartment on Charles Street in the West Village. And then, I said, I think I want to live here, and there was a new co-op that was being built on 12th Street, Butterfield House, which is award-winning—AIA—for fitting into the neighborhood. Although there was no landmarking yet in the district yet. So I told my father and he said, “Eh, it’s too expensive.” But it was really cheap, by any standard. So I went ahead and I bought an apartment in the building. And about forty of us had bought apartments, there were 102 apartments, and the building was broke! And so I became the representative of the tenants, and with representatives of the contractors and the builder, we sold the rest of the apartments and rescued the whole thing. And I was president there from ’62 to ’68.

I always wanted a brownstone. I really liked the idea. And I would see brownstones for sale, and my father was very conservative, we’d talk about it, he’d say, “Too much money,” I’d make an offer for less, never got it. And finally this came on the market. It had been on the market a few times, but it came on the market again. And I knew the real estate agent really well, and it was around the corner from where I lived, and I said, “I’ll meet you there after work. And I’ll bring a check.” Because I said, “This is really relatively inexpensive, considering what block it’s on.” And I hadn’t even seen the building.

So I came over, saw the building. It was a duplex and two rental apartments, in terrible shape. A crazy family that lived here, bunch of kids who were all wacko, and the mother was a little wacko—wrote Keats and other poetry in red magic marker on the walls. The kids were destroying the house. They were out of control. The father was a straight, conservative guy in the coal industry who couldn’t stand—he was going nuts. And I guess he had tried to get them out of here, a couple times, and couldn’t get them out of here, the wife, “Eh, I’m not going.” Somehow, finally, he made it stick so it was for sale. Came over, saw it. I said, “This is amazing, but it’s in terrible shape.” And I wrote a five thousand dollar check or something, said, “Here, good faith deposit, let’s go.” That was how I got here.

Dziedzic: Was it typical for new co-op buildings to have trouble selling all of their—

Levin: No—

Dziedzic: —units?

Levin: —it was a recession. '62 was a recession, and it had cost overruns with Minetta Creek, water. So everything cost way more than expected. The builder was a young guy with very little experience. He had built PS 41. This and a rental on the Upper East Side were his first two major projects. He somehow found his way to a very good architectural firm for both buildings—Mayer, Whittlesey & Glass. I forgot which of the architects he is, but they were very good. And built a rather amazingly attractive building that was comported with its environment even though it wasn't a district yet. [01:20:07] But he was in deep trouble and we didn't know it until they said, "You can move in. The plan is non-operative. You pay a dollar a month in rent, but you can get into your apartment" because people had given up where they lived! And we could see things were not finishing. The finishing stuff was really—so we hired a lawyer, found out what was going on. That was the story.

There weren't that many co-ops being built. New York—I mean, there were a lot of older buildings that had been converted, on Central Park West and stuff, on the Upper West Side. But there weren't a lot of new co-ops being built. And it just was happenstance. One, the guy didn't know, really, what he was doing. Had cost overruns, some of which were his fault, some of which were not his fault, and hit square in the middle of the recession. And the usual pace of purchase just wasn't happening. So you owed all this money when no money was coming in. He had seventy-five percent of our money, and twenty-five percent of our money was in escrow, and part of the deal was, when we worked everything out, is the forty people who had bought, he agreed to turn their twenty-five percent over to the pot. Ok. Anyway, that was another adventure.

Dziedzic: Were you aware, I guess at the time that you were looking at this place, about the movement to designate the Village as a historic district?

Levin: No, I don't think so. And, timing, I'm trying to think of when the district was finalized.

Dziedzic: I think '69.

Levin: '69. So I bought this in '69, I was on the cusp of all that happening. I probably did some things I shouldn't have done.

Dziedzic: Yes, I'm wondering, because if you're saying this place needed enormous renovations—

Levin: Yes, I mean, I didn't do that much. The apartments, one was rent controlled from the 1940s and paid nothing, and we sort of had an agreement that they would take their—you know. And he had a studio, the guy, Ken, had a studio on top. There was an atelier that had been built. When he bought the building, it was one of the buildings that had an atelier attached. And he was a commercial artist. So he bought it. He rented it, I think, first in '43, and he was solid rent controlled. And then there was no stabilization yet. I think it was a de-controlled apartment in the middle. Most of the work I did here, but by today's standards, it was nothing. I didn't go nuts. I put in the kitchen here—there was a bathroom here. This had been split, like all of these houses, into four apartments.

Dziedzic: This? This here? This floor?

Levin: No, this was one apartment.

Dziedzic: Ok.

Levin: But every floor was an apartment, basically. It was owned by an old lady, and the coal mine crazy family had bought it from her. I forgot how many years they owned it, but not many. So there was a powder room, bathroom here, because it was an apartment. A tiny kitchen. So I reversed it and built a big kitchen, stuff like that. I put new floors in, I patched the walls. By today's standards it was not a big deal.

Dziedzic: And the façade was in tact?

Levin: Façade was pretty in tact. I think in those days you could actually steam clean it and it didn't do any damage. They wouldn't let you do that today. I had a reputable firm steam clean. I had some other minor work done, but nothing big—it was a big deal for me because I spent a lot of money buying it and then I had to do all this work. But it wasn't, "Whoopee!" Yes.

Dziedzic: And then a year later, right, there's an explosion next door?

Levin: Yes, I'm about to go out of the house, do an interview over at the medical clinic, and boom. We were blown out of the house, my partner and I, for six to eight months. What happened is the city condemned both buildings on either side because there'd been so much core damage—for this building, when they went looking for survivors, or bodies, with a crane, they

pulled out the pier bricks. [01:24:53] There was damage, a hole in the basement, stuff like that. And it was a lot of damage, but not so much structural damage. But they pulled out the pier bricks, so the front façade started to go. So condemned both buildings. They had more damage on the side, and had to get out. So we were out of here for six to eight months. While they were working on it.

Dziedzic: Wow. And where did you go?

Levin: Luckily my insurance policy had coverage for alternate living. Just had enough to get us through at 1 Fifth Avenue, which was still NYU and a hotel in those days. So we stayed there with our little puppy, who survived.

Dziedzic: I mean, were you able to get out on your own?

Levin: Oh yes, I got out. Ran out. I didn't know—I was standing downstairs, where you came in, and I said, "Well, it sounds like a boiler explosion but it can't be my boiler because I'm standing over the boiler, and there's nothing happening in the floor." I ran outside and saw what was happening. And then there were a few more explosions. I had called 911 already—I don't know if it was 911 or Operator in those days. Got the dog out, went looking for the cat who had disappeared. My partner was having breakfast somewhere around here. He came up the street, I said, "Well, they said get out what you absolutely need." We did, and I went up to my parents, who still lived on the Upper West Side, for the night. And then we ended up settling, after a couple days, in 1 Fifth Avenue. And that was it. So an adventure!

Dziedzic: Wow. Well, glad everybody was ok.

Levin: Yes.

Dziedzic: So let's see. I guess I want to ask about your first introduction to the Society.

Levin: Right. So interestingly enough, one of the original people that started the Society lived on this block. Jack Meserole. And I knew Jack. So I knew him at the beginning. It did not interest me one whit. As it developed, I knew a lot of the people who were involved, and I saw it was a bunch of old people—like old, blue-haired people, gray-haired people. I thought, yes, it's important, but it didn't appeal to my advocacy instincts at all. And they certainly weren't

advocates, and they certainly avoided any sniff of anything political. I could say, ok, I know about them but I have no interest.

And then, fast forward and some friends of mine got involved on the board. The board had morphed, with different people, new people. And so I knew a little more about it. Then one good friend who's on the board said, "I've got to get you involved." So I said, "Well, look, I'm not interested in sitting around the table with a lot of old ladies talking about preservation. It's not what interests me." And my belief is the only way you can make an organization strong is to be an advocate, so it has to change its willingness to get involved at a more political. I know it can't be "political," but in a more advocacy kind of fashion. And he said, "Yes, we can do that." So I agreed to go on the board.

It had morphed a little bit, but not too much. It was absolutely dying financially. And then we had to find a new executive director. I was involved in that search and that's when we found Andrew. Andrew had my—and it wasn't just my—but I said to the other people, "This organization will not survive. It will not grow, unless it becomes advocates." Because people respond to people who are advocating on their behalf, and they'll support that. [01:29:57] But you're not just about preservation, and making sure the Landmark people pay attention to Landmarks—people will support it, but they're not really going support it. They want to know what are you really doing out there, what difference are you making. Andrew was an advocate. He was, and that theory proved true. I mean, the organization is very different, very successful, and it's because people say, "You've done something that I care about." Now, we're a 501(c)3, we can't be too political. But we're out there, and we're organized, and we're organizing. It made a big difference.

So that's really the history. I got involved through a friend, who said please and assured me things were different. They were a little different, but not much. And then I was in there, and then we had these tough times with losing the executive director, and being on the ropes financially, and I kept preaching: gotta get more, gotta get out there, gotta give people a reason to want to support you. And you've gotta do real—you've gotta be activist. And eventually, thanks to Andrew coming—we hired Andrew and that's what Andrew was about. Worked out very well.

Dziedzic: I did notice that when you—I guess to fast forward a little bit—when you started as president of the organization, that the layout of the newsletter changed, and the first section after the letter from the president was: Advocacy.

Levin: Yes.

Dziedzic: [laughs] So—

Levin: Well, I think I gave—that’s Andrew. But I think the atmosphere was that this is ok, and we don’t have to say, “Oh, we can’t do this because we have to be absolutely sure we don’t offend anybody out there. Otherwise we’ll be in trouble.” And that’s—if you’re not offending people, you’re not being effective. [laughing] Whatever you do, you going to offend somebody. I’m not the one who moves the organization in that direction. It’s Andrew who does that. And it’s our success in doing that that carries us along. But I certainly support it, and do everything possible to make it clear.

I’m now in the middle of a rebranding, which I started—I mean, it was raised at our first board retreat two years ago. I brought it back on the table and Andrew and I have talked, and board has talked—you know, we’re different now. First of all, we’re not just Greenwich Village; we’re the East Village, and South Village, the Far West Village, number one. Secondly, culture is of much more importance to us. We talk about cultural history and preservation, continuing. And small business. We’re different. Our mission is exactly the same. You don’t have to change a word. But how we approach it is different. It’s much more multi-faceted. So we’re not telling stories out of school, but we’re looking at a rebranding. Not a major—we’re not talking changing mission. But how do we better convey to the public that we cover a lot more territory, in every way? You know, it’s not just bricks and mortar. It’s a lot of other things that make our community our unique community, and need to be preserved.

If you have bricks and mortar, even if they’re preserved as façade, and people are building fifty million dollar mega mansions behind the wall—already the community has suffered, by change in the economic structure of this community. It’s changed! And if we don’t do something to preserve some of that stuff, it’s not going to be recognizable. So that’s what we’re doing. We’re looking at that, and what I said to everybody is, “Look, we’ve been very successful, but we will not be successful in the future if we don’t position ourselves for the next five to ten years. What do we think the issues are?” And we have a hint of what those issues are.

We're fighting some of those battles now. And we need to be relevant to those emerging issues, and we need to communicate to our supporters and people who we need as supporters that we're doing this stuff. [01:35:04] So we're up for—again, it's not a major—we're not saying we're not historic preservation anymore, no. We are. But it's not really the most important thing in what we do. I don't think. I think it's very important. It's probably the core, but we've got to do all this other stuff now. So yes. I'm an advocate, I mean, that's what I do.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about when you first joined the board—

Levin: Yes.

Dziedzic: —I guess I'm interested to know if the attitude of everybody was kind of already in line with your approach?

Levin: I think people's feet were fairly still in the—I mean, they were open, but I think there was a certain nervousness about how strong positions should be. And we had a very sweet preservationist director—I'm trying to think of a way to put this tactfully. So the organization was sort of building itself around the board knowing people in the Village who owned houses, who would support it, it's kind of that social stuff. I don't mean that in a bad way, but just, it was very limited, to me. But that's what I saw. And I said, a few times, "Guys, we're not gonna get out of this doldrums here unless we really change how we deal with—" So it became—again, I want to choose my words carefully because I don't want to be censorious when I don't mean to be. It became more like a typical, small non-profit whose members and governance were upper middle-class, upper class, white people of substance. I don't mean rich rich people, I just mean people who had money to own a house. And that was really—so building an organization was building your connections with people, convincing them to become members, that kind of stuff. But it was on that social level. You weren't convincing them because they were said, "Oh my god, you're out there fighting the tech hub," or whatever.

Dziedzic: So everyone is circulating within their particular social circle, but—

Levin: Right, and—

Dziedzic: —not necessarily—

Levin: —building that circle, and not taking advantage of new people who came in. And then, we had a lovely executive director, who was sort of like more appropriate for that mode of operation. But again, we weren't raising much money, and we were really in trouble money-wise. So I knew there were people on the board who wanted to see this change for the better, and I stuck with it. And landing Andrew made a big difference.

Dziedzic: Yes, I think I read that maybe around 2005 or so, it became the biggest preservation association in the city, or something like that. The biggest membership.

Levin: Yes, we are now, by far, the biggest, there's no question. And we're very, very successful, both in terms of our ability to sustain ourselves, and in terms of what we accomplish. I mean, we don't get everything we want, but pretty effective. And the more members that are more effective, the more you can influence decision-making. So that's all been good.

Dziedzic: Yes. And the people who have the most power in the neighborhood aren't always the people who are the most prominent economically.

Levin: And that's exactly right. We have people who own businesses in the neighborhood on the board. We have, I think, a very strong board, a very roll up your sleeves board for the most part. People don't get on the board cause they have a lot of money, or give a lot of money. They expect board members to give a certain amount, but not—we've kept it for not—maybe it'll change in the future, but we've purposely kept it so it's what the individual brings to the board in our mission. [01:39:55] Rather than, but not in dollars. I mean, we expect a certain level because it's very important for raising money for foundation so that they see that the board not only is active but supports the organization.

So anyway, so we've got a more diverse board, not racially, but more diverse in terms of where people are coming from and what they do. And we have a very active committee system, and I think we're in very good shape. But we are looking at being in better shape, getting in better shape.

Dziedzic: Can you talk a little bit about the changes that you've seen, in terms of the issues that are coming up for GVSHP to respond to, maybe since you've been involved since 2000 or so?

Levin: Yes, I think a couple things: I think it's probably, at its core, the same sorts of issues under a generic label. Just more of it. The development pressure is much greater. It's not just residential now, it's also commercial, which it probably wasn't decades ago. It was more residential pressure—I mean, developers were usually more interested in building residential buildings. And so the stakes are higher. One thing is we've lost—well, “lost”—there's been a lot of development already. With Landmarks, with fights, there's still development. Things are bigger, smaller things have disappeared—low rise, in certain communities. The neighborhood has changed demographically, there's no question about it.

And a lot of services have disappeared, and that's why we feel it's critical to try to figure out how to keep small businesses, and do what we can to keep them viable. Just in this immediate neighborhood, we've gone from having three or four supermarkets to having one, Gristedes. In ten years. So the pressure is—so it's really just, I think it's not that it's different, except from a nuance of things like the tech hub—is commercial pressure. There's more commercial stuff, hotels, whatever. There's more competition for available space because there's less available space. And a booming economy, unfortunately, creates even more development pressure. So I think what's changing—it's not change, it's sort of a matter of degree. I think all these pressures are escalating. We've got a city administration that one way, understandably, is very jobs conscious, talks about affordable housing but doesn't really do much with it. And is, as every administration in this city, is beholden to the real estate industry. But in this case seems to be, they're drinking the Kool Aid this time, on real estate.

Dziedzic: Yes, I saw pointing that out a little bit in the annual reports, the antagonism by the real estate industry, towards the concept and the practice of preservation.

Levin: Yes. I mean, they're claiming it's the enemy of affordable housing. There's no evidence to support that.

Dziedzic: Can you kind of trace out that argument?

Levin: Well, the argument, what they would say is by not allowing increasing density—because you say you can't destroy that building or it's too big, you are denying the market housing units. And developers would be willing to build some “affordable” housing, if they can build what the hell they want to build in terms of market price. Not very convincing, and not very historically

supported. But that's the argument: so the preservationists, by having Landmarking, preservation, by zoning issues, you're really hurting people and denying them affordable housing. [01:45:07] It's the argument. There's no evidence; in fact, there's evidence to the contrary. But, that's the argument, and the city administration has bought the Kool Aid on this. Because they're their big thing was affordable housing—they haven't come through with much, and they've decided this is it.

And then, jobs, so, the tech hub. And there are tech hubs popping up all over the city, so why here? Just because you want to? It's not as if there isn't a tech hub. There's stuff everywhere! You keep reading in the paper that this building is being converted, whatever. But they've decided this is—and who knows what the story behind the story is here, but they've decided the PC Richards building on 14th—putting people on 14th Street, which is already unnavigable with people, is ridiculous. Asking them to commute to the 14th Street subway stop on the East Side subway is ridiculous. I mean, it's just not the right place for enlarging the working population, frankly. Why? Nothing good about it. Just gonna make workers' life miserable. So anyway. So that's what I see that's really the challenge of—just more of the same, but heightened. More pressure, more reason for developers to try to influence the political process to their advantage. Get more aggressive in combating, fighting back against preservation, and so forth.

Dziedzic: Do you see a connection to the focus on building new affordable housing—do you see a connection between that and the development that, under Bloomberg's administration, kind of started, I suppose?

Levin: Right.

Dziedzic: I mean, I live on the Brooklyn waterfront, so I think about it every day. But I hadn't really ever thought about: is maybe some aftermath of Bloomberg's policy around development just kind of continued under a different name.

Levin: Well, I happen to think Bloomberg was a pretty good mayor, but, yes, he certainly didn't fight this stuff. But he also didn't get elected talking about affordable housing all the time. That wasn't a major platform. With de Blasio, what stings is the pretense that this administration cares about affordable housing, and the doing things that really don't benefit affordable housing, and

maybe quite the opposite. And drinking the Kool Aid of the industry. And saying, “We’ve got to build this thing. It’s really important for jobs in New York.” I mean, employment is fine in New York. I mean, it could be better I suppose, but it could be better among the population that ain’t gonna be working in tech hub. Unless we really do something about education and I don’t see that. If de Blasio said, “I’m going to spend ten billion dollars on a tech hub university for people with incomes below whatever so they can have jobs,” that’d be interesting. But if you don’t do that, you’re not benefitting the people who need help. You know? All they can do is fall into the same old crappy service jobs.

And fifteen dollar mandatory—well, it’s not the—minimum wage has unintended consequences. I’m not against it, but we already see unintended consequences. Food service is going to be automated, basically. Apparently Shake Shack already—and I like Danny Meyer, he’s a good guy—apparently their stock is rebounding. They went through a period where there was no growth, prices are too high. Well, apparently now—there’s an article—it’s rebounding. And two of their new—I forgot where they are—have kiosks for ordering and stuff. Eliminated people behind the counter taking your order. [01:50:05] Computerized, and then people still make your order. But that’s going to happen.

It’s like Uber, and I say to people, “Look, Uber saved my life.” Not literally. I say, “When I got out of the hospital, I didn’t know about Uber. If I wanted to go to a meeting, I’d have to call 777 or something, a pain in the ass. Then I’d have to wait til the meeting was over, call them, maybe I’d get a car, maybe they’d hang up on me, maybe I’d call back. So my upstairs neighbor said, “Why don’t you try Uber?” I was outside, said, “What’s that?” So I got the app, started using it. It was very early on. Now I use Lyft because the drivers—same drivers, and they make more money. [laughs] Uber turned out to be a horror but the principle is incredible, and yes, I know it’s hurting the taxi business but it’s just so convenient and so efficient at its core. And so much more comfortable so—taxis are just not competitive. They are in a certain way, but not in other ways. So understand what’s going on here. This is a seismic shift in the retail industry that’s going to spread across everything. It’s going to be computerized, you’re going to go from the kiosk to an app on your phone for Shake Shack, and you’re five minutes away, and you say blah blah blah, here’s my order, here’s my name. I mean, that’s what it’s going to be. And people who have grown up with that kind of thing are not going to settle for less.

My view is, you need an administration that's really hip to this. Bloomberg would have been because of his business. They really understood computers and computerization. So to me, I just say, why don't you figure out how to take people and re-train them in a real way? And make their life better? Give them a better job? Driving a cab isn't fun in the best of circumstances. Driving an Uber these days isn't fun either. The only way you change it is to create meaningful, decent-paying jobs, humane jobs that we need. And a lot of the people who need jobs the most are in no way ready to take those jobs. So if you don't want them slinging hash somewhere, or hamburgers, you better train them. And there seems to be no interest. And everybody knows that. It's not a secret. But there's really no interest. Just lip service, little programs, meaningless.

Dziedzic: Let me ask you about, from your background working around the health care industry, to this kind of gig economy.

Levin: Right.

Dziedzic: So I hear what you're saying about certain jobs are just—that's what people are going to be doing. And this sort of job where you can pick up work here and there and have flexibility, what tends to be excluded from that is benefits.

Levin: Right

Dziedzic: The benefits of being your own boss versus the benefits an employer would give you, big among that being health care. You mentioned something about access is a separate thing—

Levin: Right.

Dziedzic: —but given that we're kind of talking about what's going on today, what are your thoughts about this?

Levin: I think there should probably be Medicare for all. I don't think it solves all the problems because, again, there's the quality stuff that interests me. But I think to have to live with a system that is an artifact of the Second World War is ridiculous. But the problem is, the largest sector of our economy's maybe three and a half, or three and a third trillion dollars. The largest employer, they're not going to go away very easily. But as long as that's the fact, we're never gonna have affordable health care. And that's the problem with Medicare for all—it's not affordable if we

don't improve—it's really improving value, so it's improving quality, and at least holding down costs, and not reducing it. [01:55:06] But delivering high quality care for less money, because we know what we're doing, and we do what we need to do. The system is unaffordable. So I don't agree with the "Health Care for All" people who argue that you don't have all those administrative overheads that go to insurance companies—right. That's a one-time saving. So the first year, you save umpteen hundreds of millions of dollars. What happens the next year? You've done that already. And if the system continues to operate without value, without producing value, services of value, it will be that you'll be in the same position. You won't be able to keep it going. Or you'll begin to cut back on what people can get. Or both, probably.

So we're living with the artifact of employer-based health care for the majority of the population. Most people have health care through employment. A lot of people don't, but the biggest percent do. And that's an artifact of the shipyards in the Second World War and Kaiser. And the government's saying you can't increase wages—wage control. And so the only way to attract workers was to give benefits, and health care was a biggie. And it was cheap as hell then. That's what the legacy is, ridiculous.

But I don't agree—because there are some very intelligent people I know and I just don't understand why they don't get the fact that if we do—yes, you get a one-time saving, but then you're right back in that shit pile again of uncontrolled cost, low value, a lot of money. Who's going to pay for it? There's no responsible economist who wouldn't argue if tomorrow we say, "Medicare for All," there wouldn't be a huge bump in the expense. And we're already at three and a half trillion dollars. I mean, it's a lot of money. So I think we have to do something. It's hard to imagine. Those people who benefit from an industry that employs a lot of people at fairly decent wages, and fairly decent situations, and where companies make a hell of a lot of money—all over the line—whether they're selling drugs or they're selling hospital beds or they're selling disposable thermometers, there's a lot of money flowing out of that business.

Dziedzic: You're already doing this in a lot of ways, but I'd be interested to hear you connect your interest in public health care with the kind of preservation work and cultural history work that's part of—

Levin: I think it's an interesting—it's the community, I think. It's my appreciation of community and the importance of community, and I say that writ large. It can be a big community, it can be

a small community, different communities. And that my moral compass is that I am a responsible member of my community, and that I give as well as get. And I don't think the work of the Society is inherently that, but I think it is that, it's become that. It could be just all about bricks and mortar, but it's become more than that. I think the realization that our communities are not composed of just one fact, or factor—yes, the Village is in part defined by red brick and by low rise, and it's also defined by a rich cultural history, by a rich artistic history. A lot of things go into making this place what it is. And those are eroded. We have evidence—you see the effect, which is that it's not the same. Does it make it bad? No, but it's not the same. And some things that people hold dear are gone and they're missed. You got to consciously preserve that stuff. [01:59:55]

To me, the public health stuff is all about, again—well, it has a slightly different nuance: it's about community, but it's about the rights of individuals—not to health care—I mean, I believe in that, but to me it's about a democratic process in the health care sector. About patients having the rights to make their own decisions, having the right to information, it's accurate, etcetera, etcetera. I always say, at the core, I'm talking about establishing a democracy in the relationship between the health care system and the people it serves. And it's not a democracy. It's an autocracy of professionals.

Dziedzic: Is there anything—any campaigns that you've been part of, whether they're issues with Landmark designation, or zoning that you want to bring up here and talk about, or are particularly memorable?

Levin: Not so much in preservation, more in health care. I mean, there are bills I helped pass on, again, around this general theme. A lot of reporting requirements. Turns out people don't pay much attention, but that's besides the point. The point is that data is available. It should be made public. It is made public in a way that gets the most people the way it should. But it's, again, part of the democratic process. I just say, look, the keystone of democracy politically is freedom of information. Why is it any different in health care? We don't have free access to all the information about something that you should, you're not gonna make the best decision.

So in the present, I've been involved in a lot of efforts by the Society, but nothing particular. Certainly the NYU thing, I think struck a chord a lot because they're so bad. And I thought that was a noble if unsuccessful effort. I think the tech hub, only because—and I was

saying to Andrew—in a way, the building of more tall buildings in a low-rise community is the antithesis of what my experience was in Washington Square Park. Of a low-rise community, seeing the sky.

Dziedzic: What made you want to live here, you mean.

Levin: Yes. Would I move because of tall buildings? There's tall buildings everywhere now! Well, maybe not everywhere, but I do think it diminishes the uniqueness of the community, and I think it's totally unnecessary. I think jobs are necessary, but I don't get it. I don't know where all these tech companies are gonna come from. But. That's it.

Dziedzic: That's it. All right, well thank you so much.

Levin: Oh, you're welcome, and if you think of anything else when we look at this thing [laughs]—

END OF INTERVIEW