RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PEG VAN KLEEF

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

HIGHTSTOWN, NEW JERSEY
APRIL 14, 2022

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Peg--or do you prefer Margaret?

Peg Van Kleef: I prefer Peg, but Margaret is my legal name.

SI: This begins an interview with Peg Van Kleef, on April 14, 2022, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for joining me. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

PVK: I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, May 28, 1954, and then lived the first two years of my life in Hoboken. I have very little memory of that, except visiting my grandparents, and then we moved to the suburbs.

SI: Can you tell me your parents' names?

PVK: Laura Meadows is her maiden name, and my father, William Van Kleef, Sr.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, can you tell me a little bit about the family background, your grandparents, if there was an immigration story, things like that?

PVK: My father was also born in Jersey City or Hoboken, but his family is from Holland. His father died when he was nine months old. He has no recollection of that. His mother, who was Dutch and spoke Dutch, had, at that point, three children and then married another man, and that's who my father knew growing up to be the father figure. He was an alcoholic. When my father was about fourteen or fifteen, he kicked his stepfather out. Now, there were four children; there was a half-sister that he had. It was tough; he quit school when he was in eighth grade and went out to help his mother support the family. He did various jobs, working in a butcher shop, working in a textile store--I remember stories of him cutting fabric--whatever it was that could help bring some money in for his mom.

SI: What time was that roughly when he was a teenager?

PVK: That would be mid to late 1930s. He got married in 1942 in Hoboken to my mom. Do you want me to tell you more about my dad's side because I don't know that much?

SI: You do not have to go further back, but maybe tell me a little bit about your mom, and then we will pick up when they got married in 1942.

PVK: Okay. My mother was born in Liverpool, England, and she and her parents came over not by way of Ellis Island, from what she said. She told me that was what poor people did, even though they were not wealthy at all. My grandfather (her father) was in the Merchant Marines, so he was gone a lot. They went to Hoboken, which was a port city, so he could come in between his voyages. She and her three brothers settled in Hoboken, and that's how my parents met. At one time, I remember--this must have been around 1940, 1942--her three brothers and my father were all in the military, and they did an article in the newspaper on them, how this family gave so much. I think it was different branches, too. It was Army, Navy, all different branches. She arrived here when she was nine. Then, a cousin came over from England when

the cousin was about twelve, because her parents were killed in the *blitzkrieg* in England. [Editor's Note: Blitzkrieg, or "lightning war," refers to the swift military operations that German military forces used to overrun much of Europe at the beginning of World War II. The Blitz was the German bombing campaign against the United Kingdom in 1940 and 1941.]

SI: Wow. Do you know if everyone came home from the military?

PVK: They did. They did, yes. They're all passed now, but they did survive. My father never went overseas. He was trained, I believe, at Fort Dix, New Jersey-- although he was in Alabama, he was on different bases--to be a dental technician. Every time his unit got shipped overseas, they kept him because they didn't want to have to train somebody else, and he had the skills. Three times I think that happened, where his unit was shipped out, and he stayed. He was very fortunate in that respect.

SI: Did your mother go around the country with him, or did she stay in New Jersey?

PVK: Yes, I remember she went to Alabama. I remember her saying living in the South was very different than what she was used to, her experiences, "You Yankees, you Northerner." They went back to Hoboken, started a family, and I have two older brothers. They were born in Hudson County as well, in New Jersey.

SI: How soon after the war was your oldest brother born?

PVK: Let me do some math now, '54 minus six, 1948, so about six years after they were married. (My mother had two or three miscarriages before that time.) The war was over in, what, 1944, around there? [Editor's Note: Victory in Europe Day, or V-E Day, was celebrated on May 8, 1945. V-J Day, or Victory over Japan Day, was celebrated on August 15, 1945, the day that Japan unconditionally surrendered to the United States to bring World War II to an end. On September 2, 1945, the formal surrender was signed on board the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.]

SI: Yes, 1945. Right after he got out of the military, do you know if he used the GI Bill, or if he went back to work?

PVK: He did, and that's why they moved to what was then called East Paterson, which is now called Elmwood Park, in Bergen County. He used that to help buy the house that they lived in. He did not go back to school because he had a job before the war with Public Service Electric & Gas. It was a great union job. They held the job for him while he was in the military, and he went back to doing that. He worked in the gas department, repairing and installing gas appliances.

SI: Had your mother worked before she got married or during the war maybe?

PVK: Yes, my mother did graduate high school--I believe it was in Hoboken--was an excellent student, won several awards for writing, and did do secretarial work. Those were the choices for women: a nurse, a secretary, or a teacher. At one point, once we moved to East Paterson, she did

start doing some reporting. She was a journalist for different newspapers and then kind of settled into--I don't know what they would call it--the social page. If you had announcements like weddings and engagements and visitors from out of the country, they would put the written articles into boxes in the police station for different newspapers. Then, my mother would take them out. She would edit them, follow up on facts and things, and then write the stories, and submit them. When they were published, she would cut them out, and she'd get paid by the inch of what was published. But she always used her writing skills. She kept journals. She was quite the writer.

SI: Wow.

PVK: She was a very modern woman for her time. She dated a Black man, which then was considered, "You just don't do that." She was very open to new things, even working, women working and not just being a stay-at-home mom, but always having her hair done and her nails done and always wearing suits. She was quite the modern woman and open to a lot of things.

SI: Tell me about your earliest memories. You were growing up in East Paterson. What was the neighborhood like?

PVK: It was a very working-class neighborhood, smaller Cape Cod houses. I felt very safe. My childhood was roller skating, outdoor roller skating, with the key around your neck to clamp skates onto your sneakers, or riding my bike. No adult supervision, for the most part. I played school all the time. It's shocking that I became a teacher. [laughter] We would get our workbooks at the end of the year, and my girlfriends and I would erase all the answers and start from the beginning. One would play teacher, and the other would answer the questions in the books. If the streetlights came on, it was dinnertime, or we were hungry, that's when we'd go home, a very free childhood. Then, every weekend, we would go to Hoboken to visit my grandparents and take care of them.

SI: Were those your …

PVK: My mother's parents. As I said, her father was in the Merchant Marine. He had long since retired. In fact, when my parents got married, he was off in Siam, which is Thailand, and very upset that he could not be at the wedding of his only daughter. But it was wartime. It was when my father could get a pass to leave the base. They got married the day after Christmas in 1942.

SI: I'm wondering, given their English background, were there any traditions kept up in the family from England?

PVK: Yes, and I try to keep some of them up today, especially at Christmas but at other special occasions. I have Christmas crackers at everybody's plate. You would pop them open, and there'd be a joke, a little toy. Of course, we wore the silly paper crowns. We just did it this past Christmas. It's one of those traditions that everybody loves. My mother used to always have a plum pudding. When she was too old to take care of herself and she was at my house, I would get a little plum pudding, douse it with brandy or whiskey, put a little piece of a Christmas tree in

the middle, light it on fire, sing, "We wish you a Merry Christmas," and then she would eat that. Mincemeat pie, which looked horrible to me, she would always make, and then I took to making it. I've never tasted it. It is not something that does anything for me. That was the English side of tradition for the most part. Also, good manners, speaking clearly, writing beautifully and correctly.

My father's side, the Dutch side, we always put out a wooden shoe with carrots and hay for Saint Nicholas. We also got chocolate letters every Christmas. That was with our initials, so I would get a "P." That was always a treat. We got Droste apples. These are chocolate apples that you tap on the top, and the sections fall out, and you can eat a different piece of the apple. Other than that, I don't remember. Oh, my father liked *speculaas*, which I believe are the spice cookies. That's not something I've continued.

SI: I know maybe a generation before there was a big Dutch community in that area. Were there still a lot of Dutch folks?

PVK: I think in the Hawthorne area, yes. There was a Dutch bakery there I think my father would go to occasionally, yes. *Stollen*, the German-Dutch [bread], it's like a cake with raisins and you soak it in brandy for a week or a month or something like that. Yes, he would like that. I did not pick up those traditions though.

SI: Did he stay with PSE&G for the rest of his career?

PVK: Yes, thirty-eight years. He retired on disability. He had some heart issues, but he did very well. He liked the stability of that. During the winter times, of course, he was very busy. He worked probably seven days a week. We didn't see a lot of him--a lot of overtime. In a union business, when you have overtime, you're working on the weekends and holidays. My father was a saver and very frugal. Even though we lived very simply in a simple house, we always vacationed down the shore every year for two weeks. We didn't do anything fancy, but he had a good nest egg when he retired. As a social worker once told me, "Your parents always saved for a rainy day, and right now it's pouring." When they were old and infirmed, they needed to then go into a home, and he had the finances to pay for that. That was also in the veterans' home in Edison, so that was one of the benefits of being a veteran.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your early education? Before high school, where did you go to school? What did you think of the schooling?

PVK: I was fortunate; I grew up in the same house and stayed there for all my school years. I went to Gantner Avenue Elementary School, which is still there. It's in East Paterson, in Elmwood Park. I Zoom every month with my Gantner Ave girls. There are about eight of us on a Zoom. We reconnected through Facebook. Thank goodness for social media. It's been wonderful to connect what we had in common.

I could probably tell you every teacher's name through my school years. My kindergarten teacher [was] very strict. It was very scary to me. I was kind of a timid child. I had two friends, [who were] sisters, that lived down the street that I played with. Being very timid, the school

atmosphere was--there was no daycare, there was no preschool--it was a big shock for me, but you adjusted like everybody in the '50s had to adjust--or early '60s. I do remember one traumatic moment. There was a kid in my kindergarten class who died, and they had to explain to us that he was playing on one of those pieces of road equipment that seals the blacktop. It's got those round rollers. I'm sure that there's a special name for it. He was playing with it. It was parked on his street. One of the gears must have disengaged. It started rolling. He jumped off, and he was crushed by this. The fact that I still remember that, it was traumatizing, as a child, to think of another child dying. But on the upside, I remember playing in sandboxes, playing with water, and playing on the playground.

Educationally, it was good for me. First grade, learning to read. Second grade, a very kind teacher and my favorite book, *A Bear Called Paddington*. Different moments in each grade. Third grade was strict but getting your groups together. I remember Valentine's Day, sharing Valentines. Then, in fourth grade, another turn when JFK [John F. Kennedy] was assassinated. That was monumental. The principal, I think, came in and told us, "The president's been shot," and that's really all we knew. As a fourth grader, I had no concept of what that meant for the world or for our country, and they dismissed us early. I walked home, and my mother was home. She would often have part-time jobs and not be home. She was on the phone with her back to me, and I said, "Hi, Mom." She turned around, and she was crying. I had never seen my mother cry before. I realized then that this was very serious. We spent the next week watching TV and Lee Harvey Oswald and the whole subsequent horrible things that happened as a result of that.

I left my elementary school when I was in sixth grade, and then we went to the high school, which was seven through twelve. They called it a junior high for seventh and eighth. It was mostly in one area of the building, so we didn't mingle with the high schoolers. Those were probably two of my most pivotal teachers, which is why I became a middle school teacher. They were just the right people at the right time. They had a big impact on me.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? What was special about them?

PVK: Well, Mrs. Freeman was the math teacher, and I think I had her for two years. Very structured, you put your heading here, your number here, you fold your paper, very structured, which for math was perfect because you have to show your steps. I remember even my first test I got. I finished early. I sat there with my hands folded, and I felt so sure of myself. I thought, "This is a piece of cake." We got the test back, and it was a "D." I had never gotten a "D" in my life, and they were all stupid mistakes. I learned from that almost failure of, "Check your work. You subtracted wrong. You forgot to put the remainder," or whatever. Then, it was all "A's" after that. It was a good lesson to learn. Very strict but fun. We enjoyed the challenge. I was in a great class, great kids. We're coming up on our fiftieth reunion. It's going to be in October, so we're hitting the fiftieth year.

The other one was Mr. Powers, and I don't think at that point I'd had a male teacher. That was different. That was fun. He did subjects that I didn't really care for, social studies, and he made it come alive. One of the projects was you were either given a country or we picked a country, and I had Burma, which is Myanmar now. We had to study Burma and make a play about it and teach others through our reenactment of the play--we were in groups--"Wow, look at the

beautiful green grass there and then the rice fields," and give people a picture by putting on a play. I thought, as a teacher, what a creative way to learn about something and then express it and the others be entertained. That was fun. There was a lot of that, even though I didn't really like social studies that much. I was always involved in music. I always loved to sing. I joined the band. That was fun stuff for me, starting in middle school.

SI: Did you play an instrument?

PVK: I guess in fourth or fifth grade, I took up the clarinet. My father bought me a clarinet. I was a clarinet dropout. The band director, Mr. Kalman, said, "Let's try this." Because I'd taken piano lessons from the time I was seven years old, they brought out a glockenspiel. Well, that's a keyboard; I could play that. That was easy. I played the glockenspiel. Then, when I got in junior high and high school, I did that as well as the timpani, because that was a tuned drum, and I had the ear to get the notes. Yes, that was fun.

SI: I am curious. Did religion or faith play any role in your life growing up?

PVK: Interesting. I've evolved in many different ways. I was baptized Episcopalian because my parents met and married in the Episcopal Church, in Trinity Episcopal Church, in Hoboken. When we moved to East Paterson, my mother didn't drive. She would take buses everywhere. The closest walkable church was a Presbyterian Church. So, I was raised Presbyterian and stayed with that until I was a young teenager, and then, like most teenagers, I didn't even go to church. When I went to Rutgers, I met my husband-to-be, who I was going to marry, and he was Catholic. As we got serious, he was more serious about his faith than I was, so I converted to Catholicism. Fourteen years after we were married, we got divorced. He married somebody in the Episcopal faith. I kept and raised all of our children in the Catholic faith, and they got First Communion, Confirmation, and my eldest got married in the Catholic Church to a Catholic young man. My middle daughter married a Jewish guy, and they had a ceremony on the beach in St. John in the Virgin Islands that had some prayers, some breaking of the glass. It was kind of like throw it all in. Then, my youngest went to Fordham, which is a Jesuit school, and she married a Methodist, who also went to Fordham. They had a priest marry them privately on a Friday at Fordham, then an outdoor wedding the next day, but they've had two children and they haven't been baptized. There's really no religion to speak of. All my friends from Gantner Avenue School--not all of them--most of them were Jewish. I learned in high school all the words to "Hava Nagila." I went to lots of celebrations. I'm well rounded in the religion department. My faith is still important to me. I sing in my church choir. It's the one thing that gets me through when nothing makes sense.

SI: It sounds like it was a melting pot.

PVK: Yes. I think there's so many similarities between all the religions that you can't tell me one is right and one is wrong. They're just a little bit different but based on very similar ideologies.

SI: Were there favorite courses or areas of study you had growing up, going into high school?

PVK: Yes. In high school, I was a music nerd and I loved the musicals and band, but I really did love math, too. I wasn't the best in the class, but maybe that's why I liked it because it was a bit of a challenge. I loved algebra. I really did not like geometry. That was back in the day when we had to show proofs. It made sense when I went to Rutgers, and I took a logic course. It was really just like geometry, "If this, then that," to make your point. Then, calculus, not my favorite. But we also had a teacher that was out sick that year, so he was out a lot. We lost a lot educationally. I was also a good writer like my mom. I was kind of your well-rounded student. Not science and social studies and history, I wasn't the best in that. It wasn't my field, but I did write well. Even when I became a teacher, the other teachers would always come to me and ask me to proofread things and to help a student-teacher whose primary language was not English--could I help her put in her teaching certificate applications to the state--that kind of thing, because I knew how to write.

SI: You mentioned the JFK assassination was a seminal moment. As you were growing up during the '60s and into the '70s, would you say that you kept up with current events? Did you watch the news a lot or read the paper?

PVK: I guess so. I wasn't a news junkie. Of course, we didn't have CNN or anything. We had actual newspapers. The bicentennial was really huge when I graduated Rutgers in '76, and that summer, there were going to be a lot of events, especially in New Jersey, since we were one of the colonial states. I had moved to Missouri for three years. My husband, at the time, was going to medical school. I feel like I missed the heart of that and would have appreciated that. I think most of us did keep up. We weren't real political junkies, but because it affected everything you did, everything that was going on in the news, affected things from taxes to the laws, to how you drove your car. Internationally, right now, it's a very scary time and just to talk about that is helpful. I was not like you; I was not an historian, did not know all of the details, but tried to be educated somewhat.

SI: I am thinking of the Vietnam War. Did you know about that? You had older brothers. Were they affected at all?

PVK: Absolutely. My oldest [brother] had to go to the draft board, and he was 4-F; he was overweight. My middle brother, I don't know if he would've gone to college otherwise, but he went to college as a deferment because that was a deferment, at that time anyway. I do remember as a freshman at Rutgers watching the lottery on TV, as they would put the birthdates of who would be called up. "I'm number twenty-five, and we're taking the first two hundred in the next six months." Seeing the death reports, it was a horrible time. We were on the end of it, so I wasn't in any demonstrations or taking buses to Washington, D.C. But when I was, I think, a freshman in high school, we had an assembly in my high school, and that was East Paterson Memorial High School. Our postmaster's son was in Vietnam, and he was killed. They had a whole big assembly. They had a big photograph that they framed and put in what we called our Hall of Champions, and it was very frightening, very frightening that one of our peers served and died. After that, we would see *All in the Family* and the arguments about the war and whether you're being patriotic or whether you're being a hippie or going to Canada to escape the draft. It was a very scary time for me. [Editor's Note: 4-F was a Selective Service classification that meant "Registrant not qualified for military service." The episode of *All in the Family* being

referred to is entitled, "The Draft Dodger," which aired on December 25, 1976.]

I do remember very distinctly the Kent State shootings. I remember--I think I was a senior in high school, a junior or senior--saying to this one girl, "Oh, my God, did you see that? It was horrifying, and that photograph with the girl with the arms up over a dead body." She said, "Well, they shouldn't have been there." As an adult now, it's like, "Well, I guess that's the difference between a Republican and a Democrat." The one is, "You should've done this, or that wouldn't have happened," and the other is seeing the horror of it, and what are you willing to die for? The protests and Woodstock, all that stuff I was a little too young to really be involved in, but it certainly shaped my appreciation of music, of wearing bellbottom pants and hip huggers and flashing peace signs and wearing headbands. It affected everything. [It was] kind of a response to the Vietnam War. I did have a cousin that served, and he came back quite a junkie. He was really messed up. I think, if he's still alive--and I've lost touch--it would be a miracle. He was really messed up. I mean, he may have been otherwise if he hadn't gone, but I know that did not help. [Editor's Note: On May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guardsmen opened fire on anti-war protesters and bystanders at Kent State University, killing four and wounding nine.]

SI: When you were in high school, outside of the classroom, were there other things that you were interested in, like clubs, sports, or anything like that?

PVK: There were no sports for girls--let's just make that clear--until 1972. We had girls' gym, and we had boys' gym. Girls did folk dancing and boys played baseball. It was very much divided. I'm so happy that things are changing now, but it still has taken a long time, and equal funding, that's still not so equal. As I said, when I was seven, I started taking piano lessons, and that was quite a refuge for someone like me who was more quiet. I know, hard to believe now, I can't shut up. It was a solace for me. You didn't have to tell me to practice. I enjoyed practicing. It was a solitary thing.

I did have some girlfriends in the neighborhood. I would walk to their houses and play. In middle school--I'm trying to think of after-school activities--I had to come home, and if my mother was at work, I had a list of chores. I had to peel the potatoes, and I had to clean the bathroom. I don't know what my brothers were doing at this time, but that's what I was doing. It served me well because I learned a lot and I learned responsibility. Then, my mother would get home at, say, four or four-thirty, and then we'd start with dinner and homework and things like that.

In high school, it was French club, National Honor Society, band, chorus, musicals. Then, I think it was junior or senior year, I got a job in a bakery, an after-school and weekend job, to make some extra money. I quit band because that was a lot of after-school stuff and did that. My parents didn't have a lot, but they certainly could have given me whatever I needed. I was a majorette, a baton twirler, so I needed boots. I needed a summer uniform. We actually sewed the different outfits that we made. My parents would pay for some of that stuff, but I always felt a sense that I should be responsible, that they shouldn't pay for everything. When I got that job, I took on the responsibility of paying for the extras.

SI: As you were going through high school, were you always thinking about going on to college,

or did that change at any point?

PVK: What an excellent question because it was the expectation with my children, but with me, it was a different time. My father had an eighth-grade education. My mother had just graduated high school. I think it was expected but not in a, "You will go to college," but, "How exciting that you'll be able to go to college." My father was so excited that that was going to be an opportunity. They really had no concept of how to go about that process. I had a best friend whose mom and dad took us to tour a couple of campuses. Otherwise, I never would have been to visit a college campus and have any concept of what it was like. I was on my own with the application process, on my own for all of that, because they really had no idea what was involved, except to write a check for twenty-five dollars to apply to Rutgers. (I also applied to Rowan, which was Glassboro State at the time, and a few others.) Of course, none of it was online; it was all handwritten. I was kind of on my own.

My oldest brother went to a community college for two years. They called it a junior college back then. It was called Trenton Junior College, and he got kicked out--too much partying, flunked out. He got a job as a truck driver, made a fortune, helped my parents renovate the house because my grandmother was going to be moving in, and then realized, "I don't want to be driving a truck the rest of my life." Then, [he] used his money, went back to school, and he became a math teacher for his career. He just took a longer route. My middle brother dropped out of college as well. He was going to be a pharmacist. That was never happening. When he was twenty, twenty-one, he applied to become a cop, took the exam, and became a cop, and was a career cop in South Plainfield in New Jersey.

Then, for me to be accepted into Rutgers and then to graduate, I remember my father saying, "I dropped you off at this campus, I blinked my eyes, and it was time to graduate." I remember that so well because of my girls, too, going through that same experience. For them, it was like, "This is the first generation of our families to go to college," although my mother's mother was a teacher in England and I don't know what the requirements were, if they had to go to university or just pass an exam. There were a lot of teachers in my family in England.

SI: Is there anything else about high school? Did you have any classes that really stood out or teachers? The two teachers you mentioned were in junior high, right?

PVK: Junior high teachers, yes, which is why I think I'm a middle school teacher, because of their influence. I was a good student, an "A" student most of the time. I wasn't nervous in high school, but I was a more serious student. I will see on Facebook sometimes, "Oh, this was my favorite teacher, and that was my favorite teacher." I did like band because I learned a lot, different than piano, but in conjunction with it. Plus, it was really probably my first experience working with a group, a team. Like a sports team, you need to work together with a band, and I appreciated that. Those band teachers were pivotal.

Miss Ryff was my English teacher for two years, and we got a great education, from the books we read to the writing we did. When I think how she edited papers--I would hand back edited papers to students and they'd throw them in the trash, and it would be like tearing my heart out--but I would look at every comment and think, "What did she mean by that? What could I do?

How could I do it better?" As I said, I liked math. In New Jersey--what is it?--two years of history you need, two, maybe three? I don't have a great memory of those. Science, I suffered through chemistry, an excellent teacher, but I memorized, just to get [through], Avogadro's rule and all that stuff that I have no use for in my life today, but I got through. I learned the basic equipment in a lab and what to do. Slide rules, that's something you probably know nothing about. That's the pre-calculator. I got really good on that because, again, that was a math-based thing. I had excellent teachers. I didn't have any slackers. For a small school--there were about three hundred in our graduating class. They all worked hard, and I recognize even today that they were prepared. There was a lot that we got in. Nobody just phoned it in.

SI: You mentioned how you were thinking of applying to colleges. When you looked at Rutgers College, were you aware of the change, that it was going coed?

PVK: Yes. I had a boyfriend at the time who was a year older than me, and he was going to Rutgers. He would send me articles that were in *The Targum* about how they're making all of these big changes and rolling out the red carpet and trying to pivot to make it coed. I'm like, "I don't know any differently. For you, it's a change. For me, college is the change." I just checked off--when you applied at the time, you put the campuses you wanted to apply to--so I put Rutgers and Douglass, and that was that. I really wanted to go to Rutgers. I figured it was more my style having a coed situation. I love the thought of being in an experimental class. That's how it was introduced to us, "We're doing this social experiment," like it was a big deal. I'm like, "Well, I guess it is, if for over two hundred years, it was all male." The fact that Douglass was all female, I'm sure I would have done fine. I did take a class or two on the Douglass Campus, but a totally different vibe, totally different. I was glad for that. It was a big environment, a big change for me, when I went from a small town of twenty thousand people to a college campus with twenty thousand people. It was overwhelming. It was a lot. I'm sure we'll get into that as you ask me more questions.

SI: What were your first few days and weeks like on campus? What stands out about that time?

PVK: I do remember the first day, my parents bringing me, to bring my clothes in, and then we had to wait on line for our picture ID because the ID was everything. We waited on line in the old College Avenue Gym, and they ran out of film like twenty people ahead of me. My father, with the eighth-grade education, is saying, "They couldn't count and figure out, 'Okay, at the end here, we have no more film. Come back tomorrow.'" They made us keep waiting. That was just something stupid, in his head, not a great introduction. After that, you had to do so many solitary things in the beginning. Then, you had to wait on line for here and go there. Then, finally, I had to go eat. My parents left, and I'm by myself. I go to the Commons. I've got a tray, and I'm going down that ramp. I don't know if there's still a ramp there. Here's this huge cafeteria. It was kind of off-hours, and I had no idea where to sit, what to do. The Commons is a whole other explanation in itself. Then, I had these three guys say, "Come sit over here." I think they could see on my face, this was a horrible day. It was a long day. This was not what I expected of college, and they were so welcoming and so wonderful. They introduced me to the term the "RU Screw," how they'll get you, and the whole ID problem. They said, "Oh, get used to it, that's how it is." It lightened my mood from that.

There were many activities in the dorms to get us to get together and get to know each other. It was still quite an abrupt change. It was freshman week, I guess, they had different [activities]--go to the President's House, meet President Bloustein, and there were different picnics and things like that. Still, not knowing anybody was quite a shock. I didn't go there with a cadre of friends who I could meet up with, so it was basically me. My best friend went to Douglass, so she wasn't in on those activities. The RA [resident advisor] was very helpful. They had different meetings. I lived in the River Dorms. I think Campbell was my freshman year. You had your choice: did you want coed every other room? Did you want coed by floor? Did you want coed by wing? I had coed by wing. The one side was female, then we had the lounge, and then the other side was male. My freshman year, I guess--freshman or sophomore year--I met the man who turned out to be my husband. He was a sophomore. He was a year older than me. It was a lot of fun. [Editor's Note: Edward J. Bloustein served as the Rutgers University President from 1971 until his death in 1989.]

I don't know how many weeks in, but maybe halfway into the first semester freshman year, we all went to this one girl's room, and she had a single room. How a freshman got a single, we still haven't figured out. We said how miserable we were, how this is not what we expected, and we talked about joining the military. I don't know how that even entered anybody's mind. It wasn't ever drilled into us. There was no ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], but we wanted an out. We wanted a respectful out. I think we were all homesick and the transition was very difficult, which probably would have been whether we were the pioneering class or not. It was kind of special to be one of, well, four hundred or six hundred, depending on how you count them, six hundred women with thirteen times that amount of men, it was kind of special and overwhelming at the same time. The adjustment was difficult. I was used to getting "A's" without doing much work. Now, all of a sudden, I'm with all these people who got "A's," that knew how to study, that knew how to work hard, and the competition was a lot harder. My freshman year, it was pass/fail. It was very '70s, "We don't want to judge people." In my mind, I'm like, "I just have to study enough to pass." Very dangerous, very dangerous, because how much studying is that? That was dangerous. I'm glad it went back to grades after that. It was important.

SI: That changed while you were there?

PVK: Yes, I believe sophomore year, it went back to grades. Maybe it was just to help us with the transition. It didn't help. It wasn't a good idea. [laughter]

SI: Were there challenges in terms of places where Rutgers College had not really prepared well for women to be part of the student body?

PVK: There were a couple of classes where the professors made what I would call boy jokes. Was I supposed to laugh at this? I could see where the boys' club had been firmly in hand before we came, and everybody had to evolve. The students had to evolve. It wasn't the boys' club anymore. It wasn't a fraternity. It had to evolve, and it did.

I do remember I was originally a math major. That was a mistake because it really didn't prepare you to be a math teacher; it prepared you to be a mathematician, which is not the direction I was

going in. I guess it was freshman year calculus class. I think I was the only girl in the class, and I felt like I was on another planet. I did not feel connected at all. Everybody either was more prepared than me or just spoke a different language. I knew right then this was not going to work. It was math for engineering and math majors, and perhaps they had gotten more classes than I did or something, but that didn't work out. Otherwise, I feel like, for the most part, it was very welcoming, very positive.

I do have to commend whoever came up with the Big Brother/Little Sister Program, where each of us was paired with an upper-class male to help us, to meet with us, to talk about our concerns, our questions, and there were many. Just that one-on-one was very helpful. I had a wonderful guy who was my big brother, and there was no romantic thing involved. It was just to help you feel comfortable on campus, and that was wonderful. It was a relief, somebody to vent to. There was no female equivalent. There were no junior or senior women to talk to, but this was the second-best thing, so it was helpful.

SI: Would you say that it was mostly class-type concerns, like what class do I take here, or was it more student life?

PVK: It was everything. It was how to manage transportation. Maybe to try new classes on a different campus, but then how to adjust your schedule so you can get there on time. The food. The grease trucks, what you'd like to try. The entertainment. People you'd met, then people you had in common. Parties you'd like to go to. Just to have a friend, what friends would talk about. Other than the friends on your floor, I found it difficult to make friends in class because, at Rutgers, we had to take the core [curriculum], and so they were huge classes. I remember "Psychology 101," five hundred students, and how many sections of five hundred. I had never seen anything like it. Very impersonal, just go from class to class. I had nightmares for years, even past college, about not getting to class on time, about missing exams. It was pressure I put on myself that didn't go away for a long time, the school nightmares.

SI: I think they are pretty common. I still have those. Do any professors stand out in your memory, particularly from those early years?

PVK: Does it have to be positive, negative, or either?

SI: No, it can be either. You can say a name or not say a name.

PVK: Dr. Nixon, who was our education professor as well as advisor, was a very scary person, and most of us did not revere her but feared her, and yet we had to have her in the education classes. Now, you're required to have a master's. Back then, you had to start education classes from your freshman year because they all had--I forget what they called it--where you had to go out in the field, fieldwork. If I had "Communities and Schools" as a class, I had to go out into the community to a YMCA preschool or to an after-school program for a half-day once a week. Then, if I had "Math and Education," I'd have to go into a math classroom. Some of these experiences were in downtown New Brunswick, but some were in Highland Park or Edison, so you had to manage transportation as well. You had to carve out a half-day, which cut into your schedule a lot, and then you had to get evaluated by this person. As it turns out, somebody had

asked her if she was related to President Nixon, and she said, "No," but then it came out, yes, she was a distant cousin. She was quite scary.

Jackson Toby was a sociology professor who was always in the news and *The Targum*, not necessarily for good reasons. He had some, I think, racist points of view. I love the whole concept of sociology; that was fascinating. I didn't really get personal one-on-one with professors. It was such a big university that until my education classes, which got smaller and smaller, it was still this Dr. Nixon I had to contend with. I was the first one in my senior year seminar that got a job, and I think that shocked her. She didn't stop me. It maybe motivated me, despite her scariness. I'm trying to think, who else? [Editor's Note: Jackson Toby is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology and former director of the Institute for Criminological Research at Rutgers University. Toby authored a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* in March 1999 entitled, "'Racial profiling' doesn't prove cops are racist."]

My freshman year roommate, Beth, was either an art major or was very good at art, and I had no skills at all. Because I was in music, the way my school worked, I didn't have time for art and music, especially in middle school. I was fascinated by what she was learning. She said, "You should take art history; it's really fun. It'll make you a well-rounded person," which Rutgers was very big on having that large core to expose you to a lot of things. I took art history. I think second semester, it was Impressionist painters and stuff like that. I think first semester, it was architecture. To this day, I keep saying, I wish I had also taken architecture, because I have no idea, the columns, I have no idea about that. But I did learn a lot, and it was very difficult. It was a lot of memorization, but it gave me a whole new appreciation. I have no idea who the professor was, but just the concept of a freshman year art history [course] was great for someone who knew nothing about that. Learning about Pointillism and Impressionists and Renaissance, yes, that was a lot of fun.

I was shocked--I think this was one of the things I had to do in our first day or two of being at Rutgers--having to take an exam for language to see if we had to take the foreign language requirement or if we passed out of it. We were sitting in the College Avenue gym in those one-arm bandit desks with hundreds of people; some guy gets up on the podium and starts speaking in French. I'm looking around, waiting for the English translation to come, and there was none. [laughter] Everybody looks down at their tests and starts writing, and I'm like, "Oh, my gosh." Apparently, I passed the exam and didn't have to take language in college, thank God, because I would've been out of my league there for sure. Then, because we were a big bio-sci [biological sciences] year, we had to read *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler before we entered. It was supposed to be like, "This was our generation, our class," and so we had to take a science screening test to see what science classes we would be in. One of them was they would show you a lab, and then you had to draw it as if you were looking down, with the lab chairs. That was art to me; that was not science, but there were a lot of science questions. I passed that, thank God, so I didn't have to take basic science classes. A lot of those screenings made me realize how difficult this journey was going to be.

SI: What kind of social opportunities were there, particularly for the first couple of years before you could be a little more independent?

PVK: Sure. We did have dorm parties, floor parties and then, of course, quickly discovered the fraternity life on Mine Street. That was a very scary situation, putting together drinking--there were bars in the basements of all of the fraternities. It was a way to meet people, but you're not in your right mind, nobody is. There was--I don't know if it was during my four years there--somebody who died in one of the hazing rituals. I mean, that happens all the time, unfortunately. The frats were all very categorized. This is the jock frat. This is the Jewish frat. This is the prepster frat. Very different. They all had those file drawers with copies of tests from professors from years past, where they could study from. It just seemed wrong, so much of it, but it was a cheaper living experience for a lot of guys. I think guys don't care what their living environment is like at that age. If they live like slobs, they don't care. I went to a lot of those parties. I don't think some of those frats are still there. It was an experience I guess I'm glad I had to learn from.

We also had concerts. We went to basketball games. Our basketball and football teams were great when I was there. When I applied for my teaching job in Missouri, they're like, "Oh, Rutgers Football, they're really great." I would go to the games, because that was a social event. I'm not a sports fan, by any means, but it was a way to connect with other people. Basketball tickets, because they didn't have the RAC [Rutgers Athletic Center] at that time--it was the College Avenue Gym, it was very limited seating--you would wait on line to get tickets because there were only a limited number of student tickets. You'd sit up in the rafters, practically, watching those games. It was exciting because they were great. It was really wonderful to see that. We'd occasionally see a lacrosse game. What else did we do? Studied.

I did join the--there was a university chorus that met at Douglass once a week, but it met on Sunday nights. On Sunday nights, you've got to get back to business. You'd get the Sunday scaries; you've got to do your readings. I didn't last in the chorus because I just didn't have time, but it was an opportunity to try that. I was the dorm floor representative. I wrote a letter to President Bloustein to ask him if he would come visit our floor. Letter writing, we didn't have email at the time. He wrote and said he would come and when he would come. I could write the letter, I could do the invite, and as soon as he walked in, the guys went up to him, introduced themselves, and came in. I was basically the secretary and never really got to engage. That was the--I don't want to say it was the chauvinism, but it was the difference between pushing your way forward and sitting back that I learned from. You do have to push your way forward sometimes, especially if you do the groundwork to make it happen.

SI: Did you do anything with the band or any band?

PVK: No, and I'm glad I didn't. I have a friend, my best friend who went to Douglass, joined the University Marching Band, and she quit after--I guess they had band camp for a week or two, and she said, "I'm volunteering for this, and I feel like I'm in the Army." She said, "If it was fun, it would be one thing," but it was very, very rigid. You've got a lot to juggle your freshman year. She quit, unfortunately. I do have a friend that was a teaching colleague, a math teacher, who was in the Rutgers Band. We all share that experience of at least appreciating it.

SI: As you went on, did you see more women coming in, or did it stay about at that ratio of six hundred to so many more?

PVK: No, we didn't. We saw the very typical thing. The education majors were, by and large, female. That one math class that I was in, I'm sure most of those math classes were male. I'm trying to think, my roommate was an art history major, although that's completely changed now. I have a daughter who's a CPA [Certified Public Accountant] and another one that works for Google, so that has very much changed, but it was delineated. It was almost like there were two colleges still, according to majors. Writing and journalism, very female-centric. History and science, more male. My boyfriend, who became my husband, was a biochemistry major. His classes were almost entirely male. I'm hoping it's all changed by now.

SI: Yes, it has changed quite a bit. Were there what you might look back on and call women's empowerment or feminist-type activities, either clubs, reading groups, or maybe speakers that came to the campus that you recall?

PVK: I don't recall that. I do remember being a feminist. I still am a feminist and identify with feminism. Raising three women basically by myself, I still see some of the same problems and the same biases with them as I dealt with and that my mother dealt with that still really have not evolved as much as they should. I do very clearly remember Millicent Fenwick being our graduation speaker and being thrilled that this amazing representative was our speaker, although I just realized that she's Republican, which is very interesting to me. She was so forward in some areas and so conservative, I guess, fiscally conservative. But she smoked a corn cob pipe and she was just a rebel in every way, and that was wonderful. The year before, the '75 speaker, was Linus Pauling, the scientist. That, again, went with the whole science era that we were having all these bio-sci and bio-chem majors. Other than that, with women empowerment, no, just that we felt special. I think once we got there, we realized how much of a big deal it was to be the select few basically that were chosen to go there. I do remember--and I don't know if anybody else has mentioned this--there was an article in *The Targum* that was so true, called "Raquel Rutgers versus Debbie Douglass." Did you hear of that?

SI: No, I am unfamiliar.

PVK: It was a great one that really described the difference between the women at Rutgers versus women at Douglass. A lot of it was physical, in terms of we would do wash-and-wear hair and throw on a t-shirt and jeans, whereas you'd see women at Douglass [with] rollers in their hair in the cafeteria to get ready for their date that night, where they'd wear their plaid wool pants and their turtleneck and get all jazzed up. We were more natural and more empowered, I think, than Douglass students. My best friend was a home economics major. That was more women's arts and so on. It was the definite different characterization of the women at Rutgers. We felt, "All right, we're competing with the boys," but even more than competing with the boys, we had to be better than the boys in order to get in because there were so few places.

SI: Do you remember if it seemed like they made a good effort to reach out to African American women as part of this group, or were they kind of underrepresented?

PVK: I don't know. I don't know, sadly for me, that I was sensitive to that. Obviously, as a teacher all these years, I'm much more aware. I do remember going into the Commons, that the outer booths--there were booths all around the outside; I've always loved, to this day, to sit in a

booth rather than a chair--and they were all taken up by African Americans. I thought, "Why is this so segregated?" That was very interesting to me. It was to provide a club, a belongingness, and I understand that, because there were so few. Sheryl Lee Ralph, I think, was initially from our class, the actress, and she graduated in '75. I was just talking about her today. I didn't know her at the time. It was largely, I would say, a working-class, middle-class group of mostly white women that I knew at Rutgers that were accepted. There were a couple of African American women that were on my floor, on my wing of my floor, and other than that, it was not that diverse, unless they lived elsewhere.

SI: Going forward from Campbell Hall, where else did you live?

PVK: I lived in Frelinghuysen, another River Dorm. I lived in Silvers Apartments [on Busch Campus]. I think that was my senior year. I'm missing a year somewhere. Mostly River Dorms.

SI: During the summers, would you go back and work at the bakery, or did you have some other activity or job?

PVK: Let's see, what did I do? That's an excellent question. I know I worked, but it wasn't at the bakery. Maybe it was freshman year. But since I had a car, I could drive. I worked temporary secretarial work. They paid hourly, they paid well, they worked around my schedule. I think freshman year, summer, I took a course at Montclair. As teachers, we needed a lot of psychology classes, and I just didn't want to have eighteen-credit semesters, so I took a class at Montclair. I think that was a night class. My friend that went to Douglass did as well. Yes, I think it was mostly part-time secretarial work. That's all I can remember.

SI: Was there any work on campus?

PVK: Yes, I worked for *Targum* Productions. I think I got that job freshman year. They probably advertised, looking for typists, people who could type copy, which they don't even do now because the writers type it in. Because I played piano and I had taken typing, I was a very fast typist and got paid pretty well. I had to take a typing test. In those days, they had--it was like ticker tape. It was a tape. You would type into the keyboard and half of the keyboards had no screen, so you were typing blind. If you made a mistake, you had to remember, "Did I just make it? Can I back up and fix it?" because otherwise it just went out as it was. That was punched into a tape. That tape was put in another machine, where it came out as copy. In your tape, you would code in the font. You'd code in the width of the column, and then it would come out. Occasionally, you'd hear, "Who wrote this article?" or "Who typed this article?" You'd raise your hand. "Zero mistakes. Perfect," because there was a proofreader who would have to proofread it, and we'd have to fix it and literally cut and paste. If there were words or sentences that were wrong, we would type them up, and then somebody would come on to a board, cut out the sentence, paste it with--I think it was--wax, and put it on to make the correction. It was the precursor of real computers like we have now. I enjoyed that very much, and I did that for several years. I think I stopped senior year when I had student-teaching and I was off campus a lot of the time.

SI: When you got into the period where you were doing student-teaching, where did you wind

up being sent?

PVK: I was at a school called Piscatawaytown Elementary School in Edison. It is no longer there. It is an administration building, I believe. I had to drive there for my student-teaching. I originally had a fifth grade class, and I had worked with this teacher before in our field studies, and I really liked her. This was going to be great. I loved the upper grades, grammar school grades. She sat me down and she said, "I have to have surgery, and I won't be here for the rest of the semester. You're going to have to be placed somewhere else." It was devastating. I was a couple of periods in a second grade class, a couple periods in a fourth grade class. This was a year when they were, what they called, RIF-ing teachers, reduction in force, so tenured teachers were getting pink slips because they were consolidating classes due to budget cuts. A lot of them would be rehired by the fall, but they wanted to make the best impression, especially the non-tenured teachers, so they didn't want a student-teacher in there, for sure, because they needed to make their mark so they didn't get RIF-ed. It was a very tough time for education, as it is now. It wasn't my favorite thing. When I was able to do field studies in fifth grade, that was really fun--fifth and sixth grade. I really liked that. Then, I gravitated to teaching seventh grade in my career, which was my favorite.

SI: Staying with Rutgers a little bit longer, do you remember being involved in any kind of social or cultural movements or political activities?

PVK: I was on the Council for Exceptional Children, which advocated for special ed children, and that was part and parcel of--I was an elementary and special ed major. That was an advocacy group. I don't remember, it was the end of the war, so that was trickling out. Women's rights, I didn't get involved in any of that political stuff. It wasn't in my area of interest, and I didn't see anything really big. That was more when I was in high school that all of that was coming to a head, so I wasn't involved with any more of that.

SI: You mentioned you wound up going to Missouri right after you graduated.

PVK: Yes.

SI: Tell me about that series of events. Did you start your teaching career out in Missouri?

PVK: I got married at Kirkpatrick Chapel in June of '76. A week later, I just drove out to Missouri with my husband. I had gotten a job before I flew out to Missouri--I think that was my first plane trip--to Kirksville, Missouri, where he was in medical school. This little school was a very rural school that consolidated different small towns in the area, and I was hired there. As soon as I came out, I had to tell them, "I'm here. Here's my address and phone number," and taught fifth and sixth grade there. It was a huge culture shock because it was fifth and sixth grade in the same classroom. You're teaching the fifth graders while the sixth graders had seat work, and you were constantly busy, constantly. You even had to have lunch with your kids. Then, mid-year, they said to me, "Look, we need a special ed teacher, and you're certified in special ed, but not in Missouri." I had a provisional teaching certificate and had to take a course or two at the local university in order to make it a Missouri certificate. I said, "Well, I need to take three more classes for the [certification]." They were so impressed with the Rutgers degree,

first of all. But I really didn't want the job. Now, this was a different time. They did not have a teacher's union in our district. There was no pay scale like we have in New Jersey school districts. My starting salary was six thousand dollars a year, and I think we had three sick days. I negotiated. I said, "You can give me 8,500 dollars and then I would consider it, but not for six thousand dollars." Well, they met my offer. I had never negotiated anything in my life, but I didn't want it that badly. [laughter] They gave it to me. I wound up doing special ed for mostly middle school kids, at that point.

I have to tell you a really important, pivotal moment in my first-year teaching. In December of '76, mid-December, we had a high school student who asked to be let out early--his father wrote a note--to go home and help his father on the farm. It was a farming community, and in December, the harvest is done. They've got to put things up, and there's a lot of work to be done. The superintendent said, "Well, if you're cleared of all your work and it's just a study hall, fine," and he excused him. Then, the superintendent gets a phone call that the kid was seen downtown in the café. He never went home. It was all just to cut school. The superintendent, which was basically like our principal, called the father, asked him to come in, and an argument ensued, "Are you calling me and my son a liar?" The father went across the desk and started to strangle the superintendent, and the superintendent had a heart attack and died right there on the spot.

The teacher in the room next to me comes and whispers in my ear what happened, and I was like, "Oh, my God." She said, "The school board members are coming to decide what to do." I think at that point, my students went to gym. I see some of the school board members, and they called me in. They said, "What do you think we should do?" I said, "Well, first of all, it's near Christmas break. You're going to have reporters and state police and examiners here." I said, "You ought to just dismiss school to get them away from all of that." And they did. They stopped school. I think we missed four days or something. It was a huge [deal]; as with any small town, it divided who was on this side, who was on that side. But we immediately drove home because my husband was done with his classes for medical school. We drove to New Jersey. That was my "welcome to teaching" moment. Things are a little different here out in the country, although it probably would have been a gunshot had I been anywhere else. It's a great story to tell but horrifying.

SI: Were you teaching at the same school for all three years?

PVK: Yes. They're not there now. I think they consolidated with a much larger district. I took a break [from] teaching for ten years. I raised my family, and then I went through a divorce. As I applied just to substitute in the district in which I lived, they said, "Well, that school district says you were only there for two years." Well, this was ten years later, all new people. I called them. I said, "Open up your yearbook." I knew they had yearbooks. "Is my picture in there for '78-'79?" It was. I said, "Well, you're just missing the paperwork, because I was there and I got paid." They confirmed that I was there for three years. When I went to go into substitute teaching, there happened to be a position open. Somebody was leaving on maternity leave, who was not coming back, and they immediately offered me a full-time job. I had a one-year-old, a seven-year-old, and a nine-year-old. I said, "I don't know how I'm going to do this." But I figured I couldn't say no because it was in my town, it was close by, and I figured if I said no, I might not ever get the opportunity again. That's when I got back to work.

SI: What district were you in then?

PVK: Woodbridge Township, a very large district. It's the, I think, sixth largest or seventh-largest in the state, the largest suburban school district: three high schools, five middle schools, eighteen elementary schools.

SI: When you started teaching again, were you back in seventh grade math, or did you have to teach somewhere else?

PVK: Good question. I did fifth grade special ed, and that lasted one year. Then, again, they were doing RIF-ing, a lot of RIF-ing, but I was fortunate. The director of special ed came to me. They were really thrilled with how I was doing and my life experience, and they offered me about ten different positions; I could choose any one of those ten. It was elementary, it was high school, it was middle school, and I chose middle school special ed, which was, at the time, resource center. I was in regular classes, as well as the special ed rooms. I chose a school that had a really tough female principal, and she had a reputation. I said, "That's where I want to be." It wound up being a very good experience. The very next year, I think it was, I got "Teacher of the Year" for that school, so I made an impression. It was where I spent the rest of my career, at that very school.

SI: Why were you intent on going to the one with the strong female principal?

PVK: First of all, role modeling is important. To separate the wheat from the chaff, what's important, what's not important, I sometimes wasn't able to do that really well. To be respected, and I knew I would be respected. I had a vice principal once ask me if I could write his column for the newsletter for him, and I said, "Well, with my byline or with yours? Is your name going to be there? Am I ghostwriting for you?" I didn't use that term. I said, "Let me think about it." I went home, I wrote up a column, I put my name on it, and I said, "You're more than welcome to put this column in the newsletter under my name, but if it's your column, I think you need to write it." That's something that I would get with male administrators: doing the women's work, the scut work, and not getting recognized for it. I wanted a woman who would appreciate the hard work and yet expect a lot from me. My first principal in Woodbridge Township, in the fifth grade, was also a woman who became assistant superintendent, and she really encouraged me. She said, "You've got to go back and get your master's. You'd make a great principal. It would be great." She was right. I agreed with her. But with three little girls, my parents were babysitting, I had to hire a babysitter, then it would be more babysitting. My kids were involved in activities, in dance and sports. I did what was right for all of us, but it was nice to be respected in that way.

SI: Do you feel like your training and education at Rutgers held up over the years?

PVK: Oh, yes. I feel like all the field study was so important. You can only do so much in a classroom, but then when you're out in the field, you're out in different grade levels. I would have liked to have seen more middle schools. I did meet a middle school teacher who had to do student-teaching in all levels, in elementary, middle school, and high school. He was a history

teacher. I think that would've been great. Then, you know developmentally what came before, what comes after, and you hone your skills and you learn from being mentored by different teachers. I think the more out in the field you are, the better. The closest we got to really learning anything in the classroom was when we were videotaped teaching a lesson in front of our peers, and then we had to critique ourselves and our peers had to critique us. That was difficult. There were some people who had a hard time with that, but you got to see--I mean, that was cutting edge technology of the day, being videotaped--how you could improve, what could get better. I believe that the huge foundation of psychology courses was essential in a teaching job. You understood what to do, what not to do, what buttons to push, how far to push a kid, and how to comfort a kid. I took developmental psychology, adolescent psychology, child psychology. All those were really important. I think we needed like eighteen credits of psychology. It was a lot.

SI: Oh, wow. Over the course of your career there, what did you see as the major changes, both in the school, but then also within your field teaching mathematics?

PVK: Well, I just didn't teach math. I taught developmental reading. We're talking kids who couldn't read at all when they were in middle school, so we had to start from the beginning. How have things changed? I think more than anything, I learned that the more I teach something, the better I get at it, but it's still the first time that a kid has seen it, so to be cognizant of that. I see a lot of teachers getting impatient, "Well, why don't you understand this?" Yes, you taught it every year for twenty years; you'd better be good at it, but this is new for the kids. And to try to have a sense of humor. Obviously, the population has changed. I wish to God I had taken Spanish because we had so many--I mean, in the world, we have so many Spanish speakers that I can't communicate with. It would be nice to reach out on that level. A lot of them are translating for their parents when parents come in, and they have to grow up a little faster and be more responsible. That's changed.

What kids are going through or have been going through in the last ten or fifteen years is something I have never experienced. Violence in the home, drug use in the home, parents in prison, getting social workers involved, those are all very big issues. A twin sibling who had HIV, and then my student being told they have it. In middle school, you're changing so much. Your feet are getting huge, your body's changing. Learning doesn't take a nose-dive, but it kind of levels off for a while, and then you try to put all those pieces together and to put those other personal aspects into it; it makes it much, much more difficult. Growing up, we've had friends whose parents have died, but much less divorce when we were growing up. There's just a lot more trauma. Many of my conferences where the parents were divorced or single, it was always, "My boyfriend or my girlfriend doesn't get along with my child," almost in every conference. I swore I wasn't going to date, because I was divorced when my kids were in school. I was not going to date because I didn't want to hear that or to say that at a conference. There's a lot of conflict for kids. A lot of our students were known by the police. That shouldn't be. There were a lot more social issues that I don't think we had growing up.

SI: I'm curious, are the teachers left to deal with those issues as they can or see fit, or does the school try to teach people methods or ways of tackling these issues?

PVK: We always had conferences and speakers and things to help us with that. We had a parent come once with two shopping bags to the front door of the school saying, "I've just been evicted. What do I do?" They came to the school. Now, the guidance counselors had to play a huge part in that. We constantly were--I retired four years ago--giving money for a kid whose parent died or who got evicted from their apartment or who were flooded out from their house, or, "Can you bring in clothes? This kid has nothing to wear." Taking food from the cafeteria that wasn't eaten, like bananas and oranges, saving it for kids to bring home because they weren't guaranteed a meal when they got home.

I started this Thanksgiving dinner at my school because I realized--I asked my kids early on in my career, "What do you do for Thanksgiving? What are your Thanksgiving traditions?" which you could tie into any kind of language arts activity. One of the kids was like, "Well, we each get to eat from our favorite restaurant. So, we'll drive to McDonald's, and Dad will get his order. We'll go to Burger King, and I'll get mine, and Mom will get Linda's Chicken." I had never heard of anything so horrifying before. That's not really Thanksgiving. It's everybody eating a meal together around a table and people cooking, and cooking was not something that was done a lot. I said, "Let's emulate a Thanksgiving dinner, a traditional dinner." Our cafeteria services donated the food, the employees and their time for an evening activity. It was two days before the regular Thanksgiving. I volunteered to be in charge because it's my favorite holiday, and we had, the first year, three hundred. We invited the kids, parents, siblings, and it was all free, everything was free. It was the traditional turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, green beans, mashed potatoes. Then, the staff would make desserts, and we would have a dessert table. It was one of the things that made me happiest to do and to show this is what maybe a traditional dinner would be like, to get to meet some of your parents that you would never meet--they'd never come in for a conference. It was great. If we had leftover meals, we'd bring them to the police department to feed them. It was one of the happiest moments, but that was in conjunction with helping our families that were having a hard time. There were so many of them.

Thank God there is free breakfast and free lunch now, so at least they got two good meals at school. But for a lot of kids, it was a bag of Takis and a Coke for breakfast because they would pass QuickChek on the way to school. That wasn't because they were poor; that was definitely a middle school rite of passage. Definitely a lot of police presence in the school and a lot of just the social--not having enough of anything, love, parents, structure. I was a very structured teacher. "This is how we did it. This is on the board. This is what you can expect. If you do this, you'll get that." A lot of the kids found comfort in that because a lot of their lives were not structured and it was scary.

SI: Outside of school, were you involved in any community activities or professional activities, like the union or professional organizations?

PVK: Fortunately, I paid good money to have a wonderful union that represented me. I was never a union rep. That wasn't my thing. As I said, I did the Thanksgiving dinner. I was involved in my church choir as well as the diocesan choir, which is an audition-only choir for all of the Central Jersey area. I love that stuff. I play piano for my church. What else? I cantored occasionally. I substituted. I sang the psalms and led the songs. Drove my kids everywhere. They were into dance, and then my eldest was into basketball. There were basketball games

everywhere and all the time. Occasionally, I would fit in an exercise class here and there. It was very difficult. My middle daughter was a cheerleader, so going to the games and shuffling her. Plus, as a single parent, I was mowing the lawn, I was trimming the trees, I was cleaning the house, and doing the laundry and the grocery shopping. It was a lot. Thank goodness I had summers off. It was the right career for me because I could supervise my kids, take them on trips and things, and not have to pay for childcare as well, which with three kids would have been really tough.

SI: Is there any aspect of your life that I did not talk about or that you want to talk about more?

PVK: I was interviewed previously for--do you get this? [Editor's Note: Ms. Van Kleef holds up the Winter 2013 issue of *Rutgers Magazine*.] I don't know if you had seen that. [Editor's Note: *Rutgers Magazine* features the article "The Trailblazers," written by Cindy Cohen Paul, RC '81, about the first women to attend Rutgers College when the college became coed in 1972.]

SI: Yes.

PVK: This is Winter 2013. The ironic connection is Eric LeGrand, who is on the cover, went to Colonia High School, which is the high school that my girls went to, and I taught in Woodbridge Township, which Colonia is part of. I said, "There's such a Woodbridge connection in this magazine." It made me very proud, and to be one of the trailblazers, as they called it, or, as you call it, the pioneering class, was very exciting. Whenever I meet someone who either went to Rutgers or knows somebody from Rutgers, I always say, especially if it's a female, "You're welcome. I was part of the trailblazing class that broke that all-male facade and changed it." I have a Rutgers flag on my golf cart here in Florida. There's Michigan flags and whatever, but that flag gets a lot of, "Oh, you were Rutgers," and it's a source of pride, for sure. Unfortunately, it's usually for sports, but that is the one talking point that gets people started anyway.

SI: Unfortunately, that's the case at all these other schools, too.

PVK: Yes, absolutely. It's a starting point. If I could just talk about women, the evolution of women's rights has happened so slowly that it really, to this day, just angers me, that I feel myself being talked down to. I see my daughters having to push to get equal footing, seeing males promoted before them. It's like, "Things haven't changed that much." I do see so many friends' grandchildren being named non-gender specific names, and I think that's great. Charley, Harper, different names that nobody would know if it was a male or female, so you're not starting off with a prejudice right away. You get an email from somebody; you don't know who you're dealing with, so that's a great thing. It's unfortunate, but it's great trying to level the playing field somewhat. I've just seen the boys' club in education so much. That's why I've loved working for women. A lot of women will say, "I hate working for a woman." I said, "Because you're coming at it wrong; maybe you want to be where they are." I look at it as I've got so much to learn from them. How did they get there? What are they doing that they're being respected? But I still see, in my school district and many others, what we call downtown--superintendent, assistant superintendent, supervisors--so many men, even though women are predominant in elementary education. It just makes me sad.

I'm glad my oldest went into business management. She's in HR [human resources], which is very much a female field. She works for Labcorp in North Carolina. My middle one works for Google. She majored in communications at Boston College, was first in her department, second in her class, a brilliant woman, and worked for a PR [public relations] firm in New York, where they didn't get paid a lot. It was a family-owned firm. New York starting jobs are terrible. Then, she decided that she would get a job in the Hilton, because she wanted to pursue acting, so she said, "I can work different shifts." She spoke Spanish fluently, so that was very helpful in the city. She took a circuitous path and then decided she wanted to get a graduate degree at Harvard, but she didn't want to pay for it, because I didn't have the money for that. She figured out if she got a job at Harvard, she could get a free degree at Harvard. She got a job in the Graduate School of Education in the Admissions Department, worked for a year or two, and then was able to be released during work hours to go to classes. I don't know how she did it. She juggled a lot and worked with people whose textbooks I had read, *Multiple Intelligences*, by Howard Gardner, and all these people that she met, famous authors. She met the Dalai Lama, author Jodi Picoult, and other very well-known speakers that came to the campus. It was wonderful, but she couldn't stand it because it was a seven-day-a-week job, whenever you were needed, morning, night. Again, it was education; it didn't pay great.

She was able to translate that into a job for Google, who was looking for somebody who worked in higher ed (she got her degree in higher ed management) to recruit non-traditional learners into Google; they didn't want a Cornell graduate because there were plenty of them. They wanted somebody who was maybe even just in high school or a community college that they could get. She started this whole program and was able to recruit, got algorithms that would get non-traditional learners, and did really well. She worked in California. She worked in New Jersey, and now she's out of the Boston office and she's creating online learning programs for non-traditional learners. She made a program for learning IT through a six-month program that you could do at home, and Google is marketing it toward Salvation Army and community colleges and libraries and they're giving out scholarships, so that if you can't even afford that, you can do it. With starting salaries of 58,000 dollars, for somebody who had nothing, didn't have a job, she's doing a lot of good in the world. My youngest is a CPA. She's mostly working from home. She's not in taxes; she's in audit, so she doesn't even do my taxes, unfortunately.

My oldest went to The College of New Jersey. None of them went to Rutgers, interestingly. The middle one went to Boston College, then Harvard. Then, the oldest one went to Fordham and then got her master's at Rutgers. There you go, I forgot she went to Rutgers to get her master's in financial accountancy for her CPA, because she needed that, mostly online classes. But to them, Rutgers was like, "I'm too good for Rutgers," which killed me. [laughter] It just killed me, but they know how special my class is. That's all that counts.

SI: Great. You have answered all my questions. I really appreciate it. If there is more that comes to mind, sometimes memories come up, we can either have a shorter follow-up interview, or you can write them into the transcript when you see it.

PVK: I don't know if I mentioned this. I had done an oral interview before; I thought it was the Alexander Library ...

SI: It could have been.

PVK: … In the archives there. [Editor's Note: Peg Van Kleef was interviewed by Kirsten M. VanMeenan on February 19, 1994 for "Rutgers Women: A Living History."]

SI: There are a number of projects that have come up. Usually, oral history projects have a certain lifespan. People in Special Collections and University Archives may do them; other schools may do them. So far, I have not been able to find the interview that you are referring to. I think you mentioned that in the meeting where we spoke.

PVK: Right.

SI: I have not seen it. They are also cataloging a lot of their material more thoroughly now. Whereas before you would see a record for this series of oral histories, now they're putting in the names and stuff, so you can search more effectively.

PVK: I just thought of two other things. Did you interview Melanie Willoughby?

SI: No, my colleague did.

PVK: Okay. She was on my floor freshman year. A total character, a hoot. I mean, there are stories about Melanie that are legendary. Well, let me just tell it to you and then you can decide what it was. She ran for Student Government Association President and she won. It was a huge deal because she was a woman, even though, really, we couldn't have cared less about student government, except if you were in student government, that was your thing. She was a history major and all that. She lived in an off-campus apartment. The guys who lived in the upstairs apartment from her were also Rutgers students. One of them was my fiancé. I don't know if we were engaged at the time. They had managed to write a telegram to send to her that appeared to be from the governor. It was a joke, congratulating her on this. Now, I thought it was horrible because what an honor it would have been to have received that in reality, but they were really mocking the whole situation and sent it to her. I thought, "Here's the boys' club again. A woman achieved something and it's a joke."

Another thing that came to mind, another story, is when I was a freshman, we were in the lounge freshman year, and the guys and the girls were there. We were watching on a little TV the Billie Jean King-Bobby Riggs tennis match. Now, that was huge when it comes to women's rights, men are better, women are better. Billie Jean King killed him, and it was momentous. We were thrilled and excited, and then it was a movie that came out not that long ago that reminded me of that and was so empowering about how women can do a lot and get very little credit and certainly a lot less money for it. [Editor's Note: Billie Jean King is a retired professional tennis player who competed from 1959 to 1990. In 1973, she defeated Bobby Riggs in a tennis match known as the "Battle of the Sexes."]

I translated that in the classroom. I was doing an in-class support history class with a group of seventh graders, and I said something about, "What do you think about a group of people making one-third less salary than others?" "Oh, that's not fair. That's unequal. Who is that?" I said,

"Half this class here." "Who? Who?" "The women." They had no idea, and they were horrified. There were many Hispanic women in the class, so statistically they will make less money as well. It's just heartbreaking because it's got to change. It's got to change. I feel like there are so many things that remind me of back in my Rutgers days that have changed a little but haven't changed a lot and hopefully will change. I have one granddaughter and five grandsons, and I'm hoping for my granddaughter that things will change and it won't be as much of a fight as it seems to be and has been for so many decades. Did you see *Mrs. America*?

SI: No, not yet. The television series.

PVK: Very important to see that because that was our timeframe, definitely relates to a lot of our time at Rutgers. Even just watching Ruth Bader Ginsburg's documentary, her movie about how she couldn't get a job anywhere. She was brilliant. She was top of her class. She had to settle for a Rutgers professorship in their law school. The whole fight, just the constant fight. But I would definitely recommend *Mrs. America* because it just hit home in so many spots of history relating to what I lived through growing up in my high school and college years.

SI: You touched on earlier that professors would make inappropriate jokes, things like that. Were there any that were more openly hostile to women being in the classroom?

PVK: I think more students were hostile, male students. They liked it the way it was. They went to Rutgers because it was all male. A lot of them had gone to prep schools or all-male high schools, so they didn't want women there. It was going to ruin the experience. As I said, I wasn't close to any professors. Our classes were very large. I had a couple of just very kind professors, but I didn't really feel that so much. With the students, it was definitely an "us-and-them" situation. Others may feel differently. When I got into Rutgers--and we know it was difficult to get into Rutgers College--I had a boy who was very involved in my class, and he became an attorney, so very smart and successful, turned around in our English class and said to me, "You know, you took my space," because he didn't get into Rutgers. I was the reason he didn't get in because I was a woman taking a man's spot, and I was like, "Whoa, that's pretty hostile. It wasn't a personal attack on you." It's kind of like, if I were a man, I would have taken your spot, too.

Several women shared that others were very happy for them, it was great, but it was very competitive. It made me a better person because I had to work so hard and rise to the level of the water. I started out slowly and then felt like I fit in after a time. Probably, one of the pivotal things is taking that pipe at graduation, that clay pipe--I don't know if they still do that--and gathering on the Queens Campus and breaking it over the cannon that's in cement and then walking through the gates as an adult. That was very moving because of the history involved with that. [Editor's Note: At Rutgers, there are two traditions that graduating seniors can carry out on the historic Queens Campus. One is to break a clay pipe over the Class of 1877 Cannon, which commemorates the Rutgers-Princeton Cannon Wars. Second is to walk through the Class of 1902 Memorial Gateway on the west side of the Queens Campus.]

SI: I am not sure if they still do that. I went to Rutgers, too. They did it in 2001 when I did it, and then I know for a few years after, but I am not quite sure.

PVK: Is it all just a University graduation now?

SI: They have been trying to emphasize that, but each school has a ceremony as well. The School of Arts and Sciences, which is like the …

PVK: Rutgers College.

SI: … Rutgers College, Douglass College, all that, they have a ceremony on Voorhees Mall, and I think they do the same types of ceremonial things, such as the pipes and the ivy.

PVK: Voorhees Mall, is that on Douglass?

SI: No, Voorhees Mall is the one with Willie the Silent on it and the buildings around it.

PVK: Oh, right, right. I forgot the name. Yes, that's where I had my graduation. There was a University-wide one as well. I don't think I went to it. When my daughter graduated from Harvard, it was the big university-wide and then everybody separated and went to their college, like her Graduate School of Ed graduation, where they actually called your name and not just the whole class stood up. Yes, that tradition was awesome. Even Kirkpatrick Chapel was so sacred, that whole area there. I think I went to--was it Rutgers Day or something where they had people dressed up?

SI: Yes, at Rutgers Day and usually around this time of year.

PVK: By the mall. What do they call where Kirkpatrick Chapel is? Was that Queens?

SI: Yes, Old Queens Campus.

PVK: Old Queens Campus, yes. That was very moving to see people of yore dressed up and making you think of the history of the college. There's a lot to be said for the traditions and the old times. Did they change the alma mater, or is it still, "My father sent me to old Rutgers"?

SI: No, they changed it.

PVK: I'm almost disappointed in that because it was funny. They didn't change it for our graduation. We just proudly stood up and said, "My father sent me to old Rutgers, and resolved that I should be a man." Sure, why not? [Editor's Note: The lyrics of the Rutgers alma mater, "On the Banks of the Old Raritan," have been changed several times. In 1989, seventeen years after Rutgers became coed, the phrase "my boys" in the first line of the chorus became "my friends." In 2013, the lyrics were revised again. The first verse now reads: "From far and near we came to Rutgers /And resolved to learn all that we can," instead of: "My father sent me to old Rutgers /And resolv'd that I should be a man" ("On the Banks of the Raritan: Music at Rutgers and New Brunswick," Rutgers University Libraries exhibit, 2013-2014).]

SI: Did you have any interaction with any deans or deans of students, people who were

administrators?

PVK: Not personally, but I remember we had the dean, he was the history professor, History Department chair.

SI: Dr. Richard McCormick?

PVK: McCormick, Dean McCormick. He was quite beloved, as I recall. I think there was some scandal involved there in more recent history, but my recollection was it was all good. But a little scandal makes for remembering those people. Just probably spending my time in Milledoler Hall, trying to get my schedule changed, is what nightmares are made of. I did take some Graduate School of Education courses with a Dr. Edward Fry, who wrote several books that were seminal in his field about reading. That was all important to me. He was very impressed that I worked for *Targum* and used the knowledge of teaching and writing, because I bumped into him coming out, because we worked nights at *Targum* Productions. It was like six o'clock at night until two, three, four in the morning, which was fun walking home from the basement of either Milledoler Hall or one of the halls there, one of the buildings there on that side, where the Graduate School of Ed was, very scary.

SI: Was it mostly women that did that job?

PVK: No.

SI: It was a mixture?

PVK: Mostly men.

SI: Mostly men, okay.

PVK: But I loved it because it was a business. We were on deadlines, and we were staying there until it got done and got perfectly done. I was a night person anyway. I felt it was important. Is *Targum* still a morning daily?

SI: Yes.

PVK: Yes, that was a long tradition as well.

SI: Well, if you think of anything else later, you can put it in, or if you have anything else now, we can talk about it. It is interesting just to hear, in addition to these major changes of being part of the first women in the class, how little things were done, like how you would type the articles of *The Targum* and the system that people don't know about.

PVK: It was the olden days, that's for sure. Computers have changed our lives. Even just owning a calculator when I was in high school was a huge deal. If you had a calculator when you were in college, they were like a hundred dollars. That was a fortune. You can get one for five or ten bucks now. Yes, big change. But if you're able to pivot and go from pencil and paper

to a slide rule to a calculator to your phone, that'll keep you young. That's why I try to communicate with my children and grandchildren, to see what they're doing and how that's changed. I see my granddaughter playing flag football. I'm like, "Really? Flag football?" It's a big thing. My grandson plays it, too, but to know that females are playing football. Now, they're learning the rules of the game. For me, I just played in the band or twirled a baton in high school and watched the game, but really, other than somebody crossing the goalpost, I really didn't know the rules of the game. It's all changed. But sports did lead the social activities from high school through to college. Even now, what do people talk about when they see my Rutgers flag? It's the same thing. It kills me, all the money that's put into that, whereas, as a teacher, I had to pay for half of my students' school supplies. But there's always embroidered shirts provided for the intramural sports team. What we find money for makes me crazy, but that'll be a fight I think I'm going to fight to the finish. Anyway, it was great to talk to you.

SI: Yes, my wife is a high school history teacher. I have a lot of teachers in my family. Unfortunately, that part does not change.

PVK: No, no. Now, they're begging for teachers. Gee, I wonder why. But I did see--and I don't know if it was made law yet--in New Jersey, they're rehiring teachers who are on their pension, and they don't lose their pension. If I wanted to come out of retirement and teach in New Jersey, before, I'd have to put my pension on hold. Now, you can collect your pension and go back to teaching because they need teachers so badly. That's an awesome thing. I wouldn't mind that. I would consider that. One other thing before I forget--also, because I played the piano, I used to go to the Ledge. Now, I don't know if the Ledge is still there. It was, I think, a commuter lounge more than anything.

SI: Yes, the building is there. It is called the Student Activities Center. It is not the same type of facility, but it is still a lounge.

PVK: Because we were in the River Dorms, it was a close place to go get a snack or whatever. I would bring my valise with my music in it, my piano music, because they had a grand piano and I would play piano there just as a solitary fun thing to do to break away and to express myself. That was nice. Is it used for classes? What is it used for?

SI: It is a place where student activities can have offices. It is a study lounge. There are some other accounting offices there. There used to be a convenience store, but that has closed, I think even before the pandemic. Yes, for a long time, that was the student center until the College Avenue one opened. A lot of people have memories of the Ledge and even having concerts there.

PVK: I remember streaking, guys streaking down George Street. That was always going on. I think at a football game, occasionally, there'd be streakers. Just one of the things of the time.

SI: Would you go into New Brunswick much, or would you just mostly stay on campus?

PVK: I did some volunteering. I went down to the Y that was on George Street, I think--no, Livingston Avenue--and I'd do some after-school help with kids, teach them how to twirl a

baton, and just different things like that. We'd go down to George Street to do some theater, George Street Playhouse. Tumulty's, of course, everybody went to Tumulty's. That was a big deal date place. It wasn't where it is now. It was more towards the train tracks, by J&J [Johnson & Johnson]. What else did we do downtown? You were always hearing about somebody getting mugged, so you had to be careful when you went and who you were with and not be alone. It was dangerous then. I don't know what it's like now, but New Brunswick, in general, I wouldn't go to at night unless I was accompanied by friends. I did have a George Street Playhouse subscription for a couple of years and State Theatre. My daughter performed in the State Theatre and in the George Street Playhouse, so I've been there quite a bit. When I was a student, yes, you'd have to go to a drug store to get prescriptions filled and do banking. I don't know if there is a bank on Rutgers campus, but there wasn't at the time. You had to go to a bank downtown, but it was always done during the day because that's when they were open.

SI: Thank you very much. I really appreciate all your memories. It was a pleasure talking with you.

PVK: Okay, Shaun. Nice to talk to you too. You take care.

SI: You too.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 6/28/2022
Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 7/8/2022
Reviewed by Kathryn T. Rizzi 7/19/2022
Reviewed by Peg Van Kleef 8/29/2022